

*Investigating Chinese Kindergarten Teachers' Emotions and Identities Through
Activity System Analysis*

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Abstract

Over the past decade, a growing number of qualitative studies have emphasized the importance of contextualizing teachers' experiences to understand their emotions and identities. However, despite the prevalence of emotional behaviours in the profession, there has been only limited research on kindergarten teachers, with most studies focusing on primary or secondary schools. This study aimed to address this gap by using the third generation of the cultural–historical activity theory (CHAT) framework to uncover contextual factors that influence Chinese kindergarten teachers' emotional experiences and identity construction. The study utilized individual semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. The findings revealed two activity systems that described situational factors in teachers' identity formation processes: the classroom activity system and the non-teaching-related activity system. By shedding light on the complex interplay of factors that shape teachers' emotions and identities, this study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that teachers face in their professional roles.

Keywords: Teacher Identity, Teacher Emotion, Kindergarten Teacher Education, Cultural–Historical Activity Theory

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Introduction

Emotion plays a vital role in understanding teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Yin et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2013). As stated by Holland and Lachicotte (2007), identities encompass intricate collections of thoughts, emotions, memories, and experiences that individuals can draw upon as foundations for their actions and responses. From a sociocultural perspective, identity and emotion can be understood as being more than cognitive aspects within individual minds and bodies. Instead, they represent human beings' self-conceptions, with which individuals form emotional connections, influencing their behaviours and interpretations (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007).

In fact, many scholars have highlighted how teachers frequently perceive themselves as individuals dedicated to promoting their students' progress and constantly strive to validate this aspect as part of their teacher identity (Tsang, 2014; Zembylas, 2011). Emotions play a pivotal role in this process of identity validation, as teachers' positive emotions serve as affirmations that they are effective teachers. Conversely, teachers' negative emotions may arise, leading to perceptions of being inadequate in terms of their teaching abilities (Tsang, 2018, p. 45). Drawing on poststructuralist views, emotions can be seen as subjective experiences and as practical strategies for integrating individuals into society, and they develop through a person's active interactions with others (Zembylas, 2011). Hence, to comprehend teacher emotions, it is essential to explore the dynamic interactions and social processes through which individuals develop and negotiate their emotional responses.

Due to predominant stereotypes, such as low salary and lack of professionalism, kindergarten teachers have long been placed in a marginal position in the field of education (Moloney, 2010; Zhang & Jiang, 2023). These negative stereotypes have become an obstacle that can prevent kindergarten teachers from recognizing their professional identities (Moloney, 2010). While there is no lack of research discussing teacher identity and emotion, most of the contexts studied have been primary and secondary schools. There is shockingly little research seeking to discover kindergarten teachers' emotional experiences in terms of their identity formation. Moreover, even fewer studies have examined teacher emotion and identity in a Confucian cultural context. To fill these gaps, this research aimed to: (1) understand how Chinese kindergarten teachers perceive their identities and emotions; (2) investigate what kinds of Chinese kindergarten teachers face in forming their identities and emotions based on the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)?

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) offers a comprehensive framework for analysing learning activities by considering the interconnectedness of multiple components (Engeström, 1987). This theory embraces a non-dualistic ontology and recognizes the intricate nature of human activity within real-life contexts (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The CHAT framework has undergone several waves of evolution, and this research employed the third generation, which identified seven components and four levels of contradictions that mediate collaborative learning. Engeström argued that contradictions in professional activities arise from conflicts between intended goals and actual outcomes. These contradictions serve as catalysts for development, as they generate tensions that necessitate resolution (Engeström, 2015). Hence, the tensions present in each activity can serve as a valuable mediator for uncovering teachers' emotional experiences during their processes of identity formation. Identifying the specific

tensions encountered by teachers in their professional activities becomes an invaluable resource for promoting the development of teachers and their professional growth.

A Pilot Study

The research was conducted in two public kindergartens in Mainland China in 2021. Public kindergartens in China refer to government-run organizations that provide 3–6-year-old children with formal education. Adopting a qualitative research approach, interviews have been used as the data collection method. The research questions were formulated to specifically explore the teachers' identities and the emotions they experienced during interactions with various stakeholders in their work environment, including children, parents, principals, and colleagues.

The data analysis process was divided into two stages. In the initial stage, using the NVivo 12 platform, a coding scheme was developed based on the CHAT framework, classifying six elements (subject, tool, object, rule, division of labour, and community). Subsequently, in the second stage, we conducted a thematic analysis. In this stage, we considered the teachers' emotion-related identities as an outcome element of their activities, and our focus was on identifying different themes related to the teachers' emotion-related identities. To ensure data reliability, a peer check strategy (Thomas, 2016) was implemented. Following the first researcher's development of a set of codes, the second researcher and the first researcher engaged in discussions regarding the coding results and reviewed the original transcripts to confirm the accuracy of each theme. Once the final themes were confirmed, we translated the themes and original quotes into English.

Preliminary Findings

This research discovered two activity systems that the kindergarten teachers engaged in: classroom activity and non-teaching-related activity. The research identified six elements for each activity system. Classroom activity refers to a list of activities that teachers initiate, and the purpose of these activities is to support children's learning in the classroom setting. The classroom setting in early childhood education does not just refer to the physical classroom, as there are many outdoor activities. Thus, in this research, classroom activities referred to activities that were scheduled and initiated by the teachers. These activities indicated the teachers' active roles as leaders in the classroom. By contrast, the non-teaching-related activities encompassed a variety of tasks, including administrative duties, involvement in teacher training programmes, addressing parental concerns, and engaging in community services. These activities often required the teachers to assume more passive positions, following instructions from other parties.

Regarding the outcome component, this study revealed five emotion-related identities, then we categorized each outcome in relation to the distinct activity systems. Through a comparison of these two activity systems, we found that the teachers had rather contrasting emotions regarding them. The teachers were most likely to have positive emotions when they interacted with young children, but they had rather negative emotions when they interacted with principals and parents. Although we cannot make the absolute judgement that teachers are always happy with children and unhappy with principals and parents, by looking at the activities that the teachers engaged in with these parties, we discovered a positive correlation between the teachers' positive emotions, their associated identities, and object alignment.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Many studies on teacher identity have highlighted the significance of the *ideal self* and its impact on the formation of teachers' identities. According to Boyatzis and Dhar (2021), the ideal self is defined as an aspirational target that individuals set for themselves. It is dynamic and evolves as teachers develop their situational understandings (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2021). While there is no direct research indicating that attaining the ideal self leads to positive emotions in teachers, there is evidence suggesting a positive association between teachers' job satisfaction and their pursuit of the ideal self (Evans, 2002). Based on studies of the ideal self, Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005) provided a framework consisting of three dimensions of self: the actual self (representing the current state), the ought self (reflecting the societal or external group-defined goal), and the ideal self (representing the individual's self-defined target for achievement). It is acknowledged that these three dimensions of self-interact dynamically with each other. By adapting this concept of self, the current research adopts the term *ideal professional self*, which describes the agreement that teachers make between the ideal self and societal expectations (the *ought self*).

In situations where the teachers actively participated in activities that aligned with their visions of their ideal professional selves, they were more likely to discover purpose in their work and undergo positive processes of identity formation. Conversely, tasks that deviated from their ideal professional selves, such as administrative duties and handling parent-related matters, might occasionally evoke negative emotions among the teachers, as these tasks were not at the core of their professional objectives. In terms of relationships, this study revealed that teachers' emotions can serve as indicators reflecting the extent to which the desired professional identities of kindergarten teachers are acknowledged and embraced by various stakeholders, such as children, parents, and kindergarten principals. Sociological studies on teacher emotions have pointed out that adults with different social lives can have different opinions on the qualities of a profession, and these disagreements can result in tensions between teachers and different societal groups (e.g., principals and parents; (Hargreaves, 2001). Understanding the social cultures in different groups is essential for understanding the tensions between different stakeholders.

The high-stress examination-oriented curricula implemented in secondary schools in Mainland China have had cascading effects, exerting top-down pressures on primary schools and kindergartens. The emphasis placed by parents on children's academic achievements has diminished the importance of play in early childhood education, further creating a divide between teachers and parents in terms of their perspectives on children's education (Wai-Yan Wan & Leung, 2022). In addition, the relationships between teachers and principals lie beneath the bureaucratic nature of the school system. In teacher education research, scholars have highlighted the importance of teachers being researchers in their own classrooms and emphasized teachers' exercise of agency in their professional development (Elliott, 2011). However, teachers often cannot avoid the feeling that they are school employees. Under the above background, this research found that emotions had a mediating role in the teachers' identity formation. However, the relation between emotion and identity was not as straightforward as positive emotion resulting in positive teacher identity and negative emotion leading to negative teacher identity. Instead, the teachers had a mechanism of utilizing self-reflection to manage their emotions. In our interviews, many teachers, especially experienced teachers, reported that they self-reflected and evaluated their teaching practices and social interactions, especially when conflicts occurred. The reason why this

reflection process happened was connected to the teachers' self-identification with their professionalism.

Conclusion

By addressing the two activity systems, this research has revealed a positive correlation between kindergarten teachers' emotion-related identity and the alignment between their *ideal professional self* and the desired objectives. Consequently, gaining a deeper understanding of the *ideal professional self* holds promise as a potential avenue for fostering teacher emotions and cultivating job commitment. The present study contributes by highlighting how self-reflection on emotions can also generate positive self-conscious emotions, such as pride and confidence. This process significantly strengthened the kindergarten teachers' commitment to their professional identities and fostered a deeper understanding of what it means to be a kindergarten teacher. In addition, regarding the teacher–principal relationship, it is crucial for schools and districts to recognize the power dynamics and emotional rules placed upon teachers in both their classroom and non-teaching activities. By fostering a positive emotional climate and prioritizing teacher well-being, an environment can be created that supports and enhances the emotional experiences of teachers.

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