

Study of Preschool Teachers' Psychological Well-Being in Nanjing: A Developmental Psychology Perspective

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Abstract Purpose: This article is expected to bridge the gap in the recent researches on early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) where most researches were centred on children and teaching, in which case, the article attempts to investigate after the COVID-19 pandemic, how to improve the psychological well-being of teachers, a critical component in childhood education, to ensure sustainability in this field from a developmental psychology perspective. **Design:** Interviews are given to volunteered early childhood teachers from Jiangsu, China to gather information regarding the facts that negatively influenced their psychological well-being and collected data is analysed through thematic analysis to identify the potential factors which might worsen preschool educators' psychological well-being and explore the possible solutions to improve their status. Member checking is employed to enhance validity. **Findings:** Several detected factors have significant effects on early childhood teachers' psychological well-being: work-life balance, teaching efficacy, classroom evolution and career insecurity, which suggests that their psychological well-being is greatly influenced by such aspects and further actions and plans should be designed and carried out to improve their mental well-being. **Originality:** The article demonstrates the factors that negatively influence early childhood teachers' psychological well-being and suggests the possible measures to make improvements from a developmental psychology perspective.

Keywords Early Childhood Teachers' Psychological Well-being, Developmental Psychology, Thematic

Analysis

1. Introduction

Internationally, the research topic about teachers' psychological well-being in education sector remains trendy, and various research on the given topic has been successfully conducted with countless insightful findings provided. It is globally acknowledged the severe destruction caused by COVID-19 pandemic had greatly altered the teaching method: During the peak phase of the outbreak, most nations temporarily shut down educational institutions, necessitating a transition to virtual instruction for educators [1]. This shift in instructional approaches and learning environments, along with emerging job responsibilities, has induced stress among teaching professionals, some of whom have reported symptoms of anxiety.

In the field of childhood education, the psychological well-being of teachers plays a crucial role in children's development, as it directly impacts the educators' capacity to establish and sustain environments that are conducive to high-quality early care and education [2]. The chain reactions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as city lockdowns or school closures, have had a significant impact on early childhood education and created widespread anxiety and fear [3]. As key participants in early childhood education, kindergarten teachers are the

primary caregivers and educators of children. The many changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have brought them more psychological distress and pressure. Notably, empirical studies indicate that teachers in China have reported elevated levels of psychological distress, manifested through symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, and somatic complaints [4].

Regrettably, current research predominantly centres on factors that adversely impact the psychological well-being of preschool teachers, for example, teaching efficacy and the quality of work environments have been generally linked to various indicators of teachers' mental well-being, including depressive symptoms, overall stress levels, and job-related emotional exhaustion [5]; burnout adversely impacts teachers' instructional efficacy [6] and has detrimental effects on their physical health. Additionally, it elevates the risk of teachers experiencing depression. Generally, the mental well-being of preschool teachers has been shown to be strongly correlated with several factors: an imbalanced effort-reward system, the level of social support they receive, their economic standing, and their individual mindsets, as indicated by studies from Yaginuma-Sakurai et al. [7], Peele and Wolf [8] and Kim et al [9].

This paper aims to conduct a qualitative interview with preschool teachers in Nanjing, China, to identify the factors with regional characteristics that affect the mental health of them, and to explore feasible intervention or improvement measures based on the classic theories of developmental psychology.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Sampling

To gather insightful and rich data especially in Nanjing, China, the research applied qualitative research method solely. Semi-structured interviews were designed and developed to analyse participants' experiences deeply. The application of semi-structured interview (open-ended questions) allows participants to share their inner thoughts and opinions in a more flexible manner. The design of semi-structured interviews aims to investigate factors that negatively affect preschool teachers' mental wellness in Nanjing.

In this study, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select suitable participants. This method was chosen to ensure that the participants had relevant characteristics and experiences required to gain a deep understanding of the research topic. The research sample included preschool teachers in Nanjing, China, who had a teaching background of at least three years. The participants were selected based on their willingness to share insights on the psychological stress they experienced. The purposive sampling technique allowed the researcher to collect in-depth and detailed data from

individuals who were directly affected by the research topic, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the research.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

2.2.1. Informed Consent

All participants in the study were fully informed of the intentions, procedures, possible risks, and potential benefits of the study. They were clearly informed that participation was completely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any time without any form of negative consequences. Participants' responses will be treated anonymously and kept confidential to ensure that their personal and professional identities are not revealed. In this study, the real names of the participants will not be recorded but will be replaced with appropriate pseudonyms to further protect their privacy.

2.2.2. Support during Data Collection

Given that discussing personal and professional challenges could be emotionally stressful for participants, the research team established a range of support measures. Participants were able to utilize psychological support services, including contacting their school counsellor during and after the interview. In addition, participants were provided with details about local mental health resources and emergency hotlines. Interviews were conducted online in an environment that ensured privacy and comfort, and participants were encouraged to take breaks when needed.

2.2.3. Support after Data Collection

After the interview, the researcher followed up with the participant to ensure they were satisfied and to address any immediate concerns. This process included a brief review of the interview, re-emphasizing the confidentiality of the information, and providing the participant with an opportunity to ask questions or express any concerns. The researcher contacted the participant again within one week of the interview to assess their overall well-being and provide further support if needed.

2.3. Participants

After communicating with kindergartens in the Nanjing area and obtaining approval from the leaders of the competent institutions, recruitment information was posted in a structured manner through online forums, mainly through the Tencent Meeting platform. After familiarising the relevant information of the study in detail, a total of 20 preschool teachers from different kindergartens in Nanjing, China voluntarily participated in this study. The recruitment of these teachers followed specific criteria to ensure the diversity of the research sample in terms of experience and background.

Participants were selected based on the following conditions: (1) being a regular staff member of a kindergarten; (2) having at least three years of teaching experience; and (3) having provided informed consent and voluntarily participated in the study. All participants signed the informed consent form, indicating that they understood the purpose of the study and confirmed that they had the right to participate voluntarily.

It is important to point out that in this study, all participants were female teachers from Jiangsu Province, China. This focus was chosen because women constitute the majority of early childhood education workers in China, particularly in Jiangsu. The majority of teachers and staff in kindergartens in China are female. According to data from the Ministry of Education, in 2020, there were 4.8025 million female teachers and staff in kindergartens, representing 92.39% of the total kindergarten workforce across China [10], which makes this group highly representative of the study population. However, it is also notable that this limitation may affect the generalizability of the research findings. Future research should aim to include more diverse samples, such as male teachers and participants from different geographical locations and educational settings, to enhance the global applicability of the findings.

2.4. Procedures

2.4.1. Interview Setting

Considering the current technological advancements and the need to ensure the safety and comfort of the participants, all interviews were conducted online. The Tencent Meeting platform, a widely used and reliable virtual communication tool, was chosen as the medium for these interactions. To enhance the validity and reliability of interview data, 3 pilot studies were conducted to refine the questions. For instance, in this case, the responses of the participants revealed that teachers employed within the institutional framework exhibited higher levels of job satisfaction. Conversely, teachers operating outside of this framework commonly experienced anxiety regarding their career prospects. This suggests that the employment status of staff members significantly influences their sources of stress. Consequently, drawing inspiration from these findings, one of the questions in the interview was meticulously revised to incorporate an additional query: "Are you a teacher employed within the institutional framework?", followed by the original designed question: "How would you describe your current level of job satisfaction?" Below is the structured framework for the interview:

- (1) Are you a teacher employed within the institutional framework? How would you describe your current level of job satisfaction? (revised)
- (2) Have there been any changes in your work environment after the pandemic? How have these changes affected you?

- (3) How do you maintain a work-life balance, especially after the pandemic?
- (4) Have you experienced symptoms of burnout? If so, what do you think contributed to it?
- (5) What kind of support have you received from your institution to improve your psychological well-being?
- (6) What strategies or resources have you used to cope with stress or improve your well-being?
- (7) Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences during this challenging period?

2.4.2. Data Collection

Once the participants were onboarded, a schedule was established for the interviews. Each session lasted between 45-60 minutes. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to speak freely and share their experiences, insights, and suggestions about the factors that negatively influenced their psychological well-being and possible solutions to make improvement. To ensure data accuracy, interviews were recorded with participants' permission. These recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure a smooth and effective procedure, participants were provided with technical assistance for the Tencent Meeting platform when necessary. Additionally, a brief orientation about the flow of the interview was given at the beginning of each session to set the context and make the participants comfortable.

2.4.3. Data Analysis

In the present investigation, the qualitative data was methodically processed using the thematic analysis framework as delineated by Braun and Clarke [11]. This technique facilitates a multifaceted examination and interpretation of the data. Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework is a prevalent methodology in qualitative research for executing thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework is a widely used method for conducting thematic analysis in qualitative research. It offers a systematic approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. To be precise, the framework consists of the following six phases: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report [11]. It provides a structured procedure for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within data. In this research, every interview was accurately transcribed within two days following the interview session. Following Creswell's [12] recommendation, participants were then asked to review the transcripts to confirm their alignment with their actual opinions. All interview transcripts were subsequently compiled into a Word document for analysis and summarization.

2.4.4. Results

Four themes were carefully identified based on the

thematic analysis: (1) work-life balance, (2) teaching efficacy, (3) career insecurity, (4) restrictions arising from classroom evaluation. All the names (Xiaohua, for

example) which occurred in this study are pseudonyms to guarantee participants' confidentiality (see Figures 1-4).

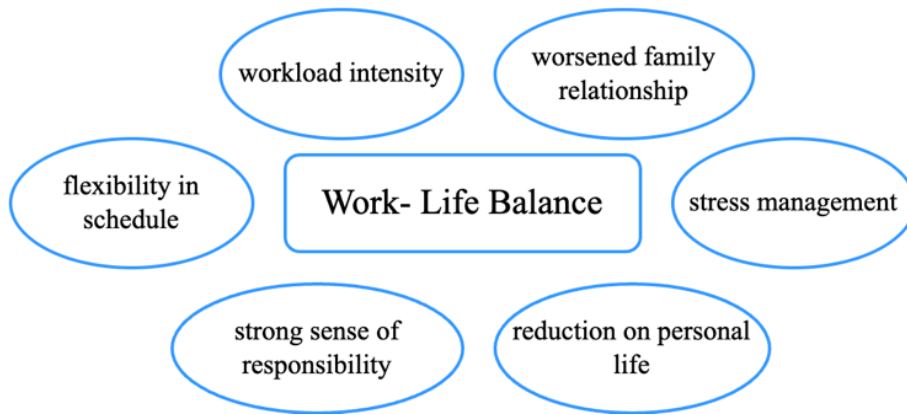


Figure 1. Work-Life Balance

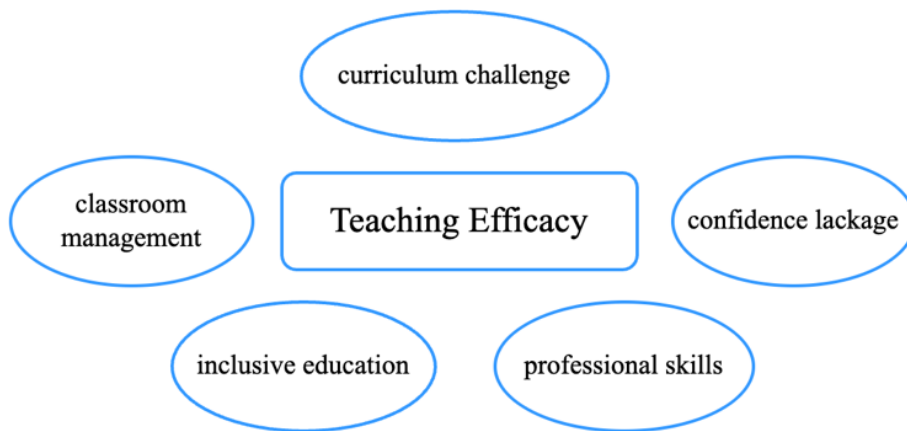


Figure 2. Teaching Efficacy

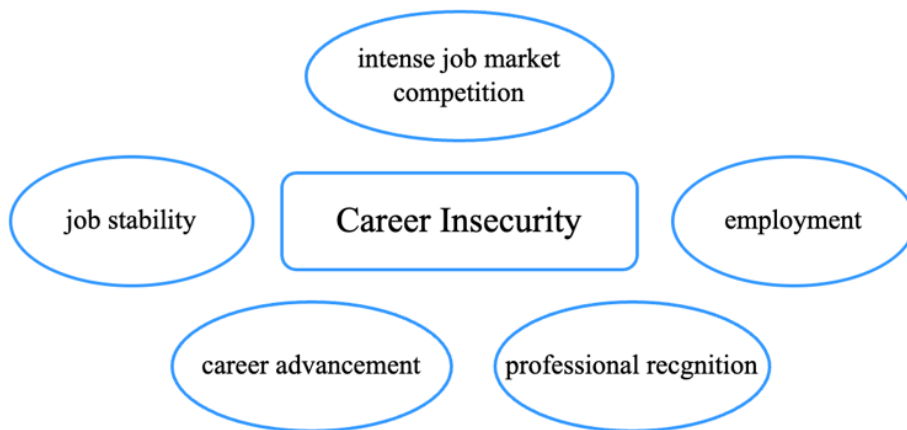


Figure 3. Career Insecurity

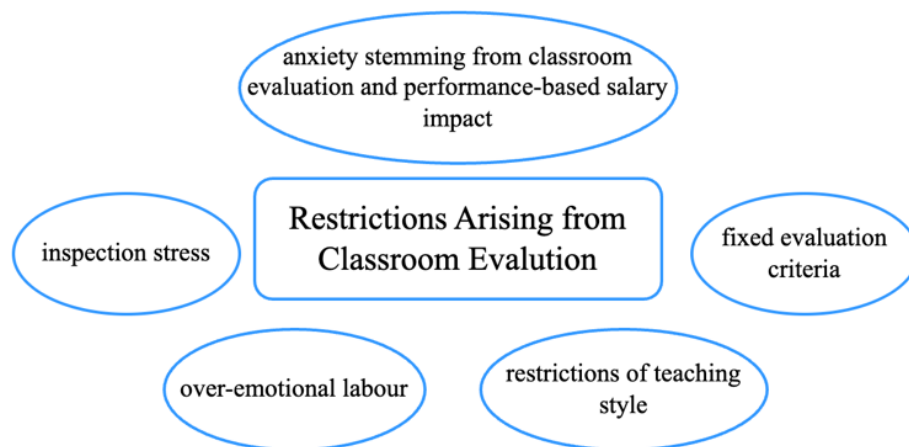


Figure 4. Restrictions Arising from Classroom Evaluation

Each educator interviewed in this study strongly emphasized the following point: achieving a balance between personal life and professional responsibilities is unfeasible. This assertion holds particularly true in the context of the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically regarding the evolving nature of kindergarten teachers' roles. A significant majority of the participants, accounting for more than half (12 individuals), reported an increase in their workload compared to pre-pandemic levels. This escalation is attributed to the slow-paced development within kindergarten environments during the pandemic. In response to this, numerous additional responsibilities have been introduced, encompassing educational reforms and enhancements to the learning environment. The educators highlighted the consequent imbalance between the augmented professional demands and personal life, noting an increase in work-related tasks and frequent instances of overtime. This, they reported, has led to a compression of their personal time and has had detrimental effects on their life quality, manifesting in issues such as diminished familial bonds (e.g., alienation from their children) and marital discord. For example, Xiaohua (33 years old, preschool teacher within the institutional framework) mentioned her feelings about work-life balance in this way "After the COVID-19 pandemic, the workload at our school has increased even more than before the outbreak. We've added many new tasks, such as improving the campus teaching environment, which involves everything from remodelling the decor to revising and enhancing the curriculum. Overtime has become the norm in order to complete these tasks. I typically work late until 10 PM on three days within a week, and sometimes continue working overtime on weekends. Moreover, all this extra work comes without any additional compensation." It is important to address that every participant expressed the viewpoint that their workload has escalated, albeit to varying degrees. Consequently, preschool educators have found it increasingly challenging to maintain a balance between their professional responsibilities and personal life. This issue is especially pronounced among teachers who have

familial obligations to fulfil. For example, teachers without familial obligations most claim their personal life has been compressed and commonly failed to socialise with friends and have entertainment. Nini, as one of the participants without family obligations pointed out that "Frequent overtime work prevents me from enjoying my personal life. I often can't spend time with my friends, leading to a somewhat strained relationship with them. I even lack time to watch movies or engage in other leisure activities. The excessive workload leaves me exhausted and my life monotonous, often leading to anxiety" while Xuxu, teacher with family to support, claimed "While I understand that such work can be demanding, the long hours of overtime have increasingly alienated me from my daughter. I struggle to find time to be with her, and I have missed several parent-teacher meetings, which fills me with guilt. Often, I feel a lot of emotion and regret regarding my family situation, but I feel helpless and hopeless to change it."

To sum up, following the COVID-19 pandemic, a notable escalation in workload has been perceived in the early childhood education sector. This upsurge presents significant challenges for educators in maintaining a harmonious work-life balance. A predominant majority of early childhood teachers (12 out of 20 participants) reported placing a high priority on their professional responsibilities. The collective perspective of the participants can be summarized as follows: children are born innocent and deserve meticulous care; this inherent passion and commitment to the profession is their driving force for early childhood education and inspires their sense of responsibility for each child. However, the other eight participants, although they tend to prioritize their personal lives, also recognize the special nature of their role in early childhood education. Interaction with students' parents is an integral part of their work, which often takes up a lot of time and sometimes takes up their personal time. This situation suggests that regardless of whether individuals tend to prioritize work or personal life, the increased workload and pressure after the epidemic may prevent educators from effectively balancing work

and personal life. This imbalance may lead to a range of negative emotional reactions among teachers.

This section focuses on exploring the association between negative emotional experiences and the level of professional competencies among preschool educators, emphasizing the role of professional skill support in this context. Within the cohort of participants, 14 kindergarten educators distinctly expressed a requirement for professional support and guidance. This necessity was particularly pronounced in aspects such as classroom management and parent-teacher communication, domains where educators frequently experience feelings of helplessness and inundation. The articulated responses of these teachers illuminate a considerable deficiency in existing support mechanisms, thereby accentuating the critical need for bespoke professional assistance tailored to meet these identified challenges. Teacher Xu claimed, "Now classes are integrated (the concept of "integrated classroom" will be further elaborated in the Discussion section), and every class will be assigned 1-2 special children. When these children start to fight or cause a commotion in class for no apparent reason, I feel very helpless. I feel like my heart can't take it anymore, it's like I'm physically and mentally exhausted."

Besides, the data from 16 participants revealed a striking pattern, indicating an inverse relationship between professional competencies (such as curriculum development, classroom management, childcare, and parent engagement) and the manifestation of negative emotions in the workplace. This observation infers that an enhanced level of professional expertise correlates with a decrease in adverse emotional experiences, and the reverse is also true. Such a correlation underscores the significance of skill advancement in alleviating emotional turmoil among educators. "Of course, enhancing professional skills is absolutely necessary. In our work, we often face scrutiny from educational authorities, and a higher level of professional skills can give us more confidence when dealing with complex issues. Once a person is confident, they don't get unhappy easily, right? Moreover, work efficiency also improves as a result, saving time. When I first entered this field, the difficulties in my work were quite overwhelming for me and made me frustrated." Xuanzi stated.

The consensus among all participants was that the augmentation of professional skills substantially reinforces educators' self-assurance. This heightened sense of confidence, in turn, is posited to significantly mitigate negative emotional states. For example, Yanyan pointed, "The training and enhancement of professional skills can undoubtedly boost teachers' confidence, as it enables them to solve work-related problems more smoothly. Often, negative emotions in the workplace manifest as difficulties in resolving issues, whether in teaching or in communicating with parents. When work progresses smoothly, there is a greater sense of inner comfort, and negative emotions tend to diminish." The

collected data suggest that professional growth serves a dual purpose: it not only endows teachers with essential skills but also acts as a psychological safeguard against the intrinsic stresses associated with their professional responsibilities.

This segment requires particular emphasis, as the apprehensions expressed were not uniform across all interviewees. The interviewed educators were categorized into two distinct employment types: those formally integrated into the educational system and those engaged in standard labour contracts. It is widely acknowledged that the former category benefits from enhanced job security, superior social protections, and more favourable salary and benefit standards compared to their counterparts. Nevertheless, this discussion predominantly centres on teachers with standard labour contracts, who demonstrated pronounced anxiety in their interview responses.

During the conducted interviews, a minority of eight teachers were found to be formally integrated into the educational system, in contrast to the majority of twelve who were employed under standard labour contracts. Within this group of non-systemic educators, nine, possessing less than a decade of teaching experience, reported significant anxiety. Their apprehension was primarily rooted in uncertainties regarding their long-term career trajectories, with a pronounced concern over the prospects of re-entering the job market in the event of potential downsizing (see discussion). As a preschool teacher with 6-year teaching experience in this area, Xiaomi expressed his opinion as a teacher outside the educational system that, "To be honest, I'm still very worried about the future. Kindergartens have been reducing classes recently, and the peak of China's two-child policy has passed, so the number of students will continue to decrease. For us teachers who are not part of the system, the future is really uncertain and confusing. This confusion, if it lasts long enough, can turn into anxiety, you know? For those of us who have been in this profession for so long, if we really become unemployed, choosing this industry again would be even more difficult. After all, there isn't such a high demand for teachers in society, and at our age, we no longer have a competitive edge in the labour market."

Intriguingly, beyond concerns about potential unemployment and the subsequent challenges in re-employment, three veteran educators with two decades of teaching experience, who continue to serve on the front lines, articulated an additional dimension in their interviews concerning career advancement: a certain lack of transparency in the promotion process. However, this topic, related to organizational hierarchies and selection mechanisms, lies beyond the purview of the current research, and will not be elaborated upon in this paper. Nonetheless, these respondents highlighted a significant issue during their discussions, noting that "kindergartens are already quite saturated with teachers, and the

managerial positions are also mostly filled, making promotions even more challenging.”

Consequently, this analysis leads to the following summation: In the realm of preschool educational settings, there are two main concerns regarding career insecurity. First, with fewer preschool-aged children, teachers who are not formally part of the education system face increased risks of unemployment and significant challenges of reemployment. Second, the near-capacity status of teaching positions in kindergartens, paralleled by a similar scenario in managerial roles, markedly diminishes the opportunities for individual career progression within this sector. This saturation in both instructional and administrative capacities presents a significant barrier to professional advancement for educators.

Classroom assessment-induced work pressure was identified as a source of anxiety by two-thirds of the interviewees (13). The analysis revealed that the classroom assessment criteria in their respective schools encompassed five key dimensions: teaching proficiency, curriculum design, classroom interaction, classroom management, and professional competencies. Notably, these assessment outcomes are integrated into the overall performance evaluation, directly influencing the teachers' benefits and salary. As explicated by the respondents, for instance, Tiantian noted, “Linking performance to salary inevitably heightens anxiety among teachers, as everyone aims to avoid salary deductions. However, a prolonged state of concern and heightened tension can lead to fatigue and significant emotional fluctuations.” Similarly, Teacher Xiaohua remarked, “The multifaceted nature of classroom assessments can, to a certain extent, limit our teaching effectiveness. For various class types, like academic subjects and crafts, distinct classroom designs and teaching approaches are inherently required. But with the awareness of standardized assessment criteria, our teaching, aimed at meeting these benchmarks, feels restricted and more focused on fulfilling set standards rather than catering to the dynamic, real-time needs of the classroom. Standards are static, yet the needs of each class are fluid and evolving. This feeling of constraint also contributes to my mental and emotional exhaustion.”

In addition to the regular curriculum evaluations conducted within the school, educators must also face the evaluations conducted by the Education Bureau. These evaluations conducted by the Education Bureau are crucial to the overall rating of the school, and the evaluations are extensive and require teachers to provide a lot of written materials. This has led to schools attaching great importance to these evaluations. As the main participants in the evaluations, teachers are under considerable psychological pressure. This stress stems not only from the augmented workload associated with preparing assessment materials but also from the physical and mental challenges inherent in the process. Additionally, routine responsibilities such as teaching and

childcare are expected to meet elevated standards to assure successful assessment outcomes. Seventeen interviewees reported that during these periods, teachers must undertake greater physical labour and engage in more emotional labour than usual, including maintaining constant smiles and enthusiasm. Confronted with such demands, teachers frequently experience feelings of discouragement. For instance, Teacher Jili expressed, “What I fear most is the assessment by the education bureau. Everyone in the kindergarten, from the leadership to the regular staff, is very tense. It's common to work overtime until 10 pm. Working overtime isn't really the issue; it's the stress of facing the assessment, as it's of great importance. Everyone feels a heavy responsibility and doesn't want to bring any negative impact to the school. Every action in the school could be assessed, and it feels like being under surveillance, which is very uncomfortable. This kind of emotion can't be released during work, and we still have to keep smiling, which is really painful and makes us feel emotionally drained.”

In summary, classroom assessments at different levels invariably exert stress on educators. The standards of these assessments not only confine the scope of teachers' teaching activities, leading to adverse emotional impacts, but assessments at higher levels also inflict significant physical and psychological strain on teachers.

2.4.5. Member Checking

To ensure the accuracy of the research results and that they accurately reflected the participants' experiences, we conducted member checking to triangulate the findings. The four themes identified from the thematic analysis were sent to the participants for verification to confirm that the results accurately represented their real experiences. Participants were asked to provide feedback on whether the themes accurately reflected their experiences, if any aspects were misinterpreted or overlooked, and if they had any additional comments. The feedback received was systematically analysed and incorporated into the final analysis, ensuring that the findings were both accurate and comprehensive.

3. Discussion

The widely recognized challenges and stressors of teaching, especially in preschool settings, have been confirmed by numerous studies and acknowledged by educators [13]. Research shows that during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese primary and secondary school teachers experienced significant psychological distress, particularly with symptoms of anxiety, sleep disturbances, and physical complaints [4]. Previous research has consistently pinpointed factors that adversely affect the psychological well-being of preschool teachers. Many of these stressors are job-related, including teaching efficacy and the work environment. As to career

insecurity, specifically in China, educators outside the educational system reported severe concern and insecurity about their future professional development. The ongoing diminution in the population of preschool-age children in China has precipitated a decrease in kindergarten enrolment, compelling a downsizing of classes in both public and private sectors of early childhood education [14]. This development has heightened concerns over employment stability among teachers bound by conventional contractual arrangements [15]. A decline in student count may result in reduced income for these educational establishments, potentially leading to a rationalized reduction in staff [16]. Additionally, the protracted downturn in China's employment landscape following the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the predicaments confronting educators outside the formal educational system [17]. The impact of the pandemic on China's financial markets has been particularly pronounced and enduring, with individual investors demonstrating heightened sensitivity to the crisis [18]. These factors collectively contribute to the intensified challenges educators face in the post-pandemic context.

In this study, most stressors teachers perceived are related to increased workload, classroom evaluation and career insecurity. To be more precisely, it is the prolonged encroachment of work on personal life that predominantly elicits substantial negative psychological responses in kindergarten teachers. This is further compounded by the considerable psychological stress and emotional labour stemming from classroom evaluations, particularly those conducted by higher authorities, coupled with a profound sense of professional insecurity.

Research has shown that school-based mental health interventions are promising for promoting mental health among teachers [19]. As the primary setting for teachers' professional activities, the implementation of interventions at the school level is imperative for the amelioration of teachers' mental health. By integrating core theories of developmental psychology and drawing upon the gathered data, this study delineates feasible strategies from both institutional (school-level) and personal dimensions to facilitate the enhancement of mental health among kindergarten teachers. As deduced from the data analysis, it is evident that preschool educators predominantly experience significant stress from four distinct perspectives: (1) work-life balance, (2) teaching efficacy, (3) career insecurity, (4) restrictions arising from classroom evaluation.

3.1. Work-life Balance

In relation to the equilibrium between work and life, the data analysis suggests that this issue can be dissected from two dimensions: firstly, the overwhelming workload as universally reported by the respondents inevitably results in the encroachment of professional responsibilities on personal life; secondly, there is a requisite enhancement of

time management competencies among teachers to facilitate a more effective balance between their professional and personal spheres. "Role Theory" posits that fulfilling multiple roles can lead to stress, while increased workload for teachers comes from expanded roles [20]. Hence, in a school context, the most immediate solution would be to diminish the scope of teachers' roles as a means to lessen the burden on teachers. Besides, given the fixed nature of their work responsibilities, it becomes imperative to assist educators in developing time management skills such as offering workshops on effective time management to reduce stress.

3.2. Teaching Efficacy

As to the improvement of teaching efficacy, deliberations may be structured around the subsequent three dimensions: Erikson's "Stages of Psychosocial Development", Vygotsky's "Sociocultural Theory" and Bandura's "Social Learning Theory". Bandura's Social Learning Theory elucidates the process through which individuals acquire knowledge and skills by observing and interacting with others, a process termed as observational learning or modelling [21]. According to Bandura, learning can transpire in the absence of direct experience or reinforcement, solely through the observation of others' behaviours and the consequent outcomes of those behaviours. The theory delineates four core elements: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, which are imperative for efficacious observational learning. This theory highlights the central role of social interaction in the educational process. Through communication and interaction with others, individuals can learn new behaviour patterns and knowledge information, and can also receive feedback and support from others. This feedback and support are essential to promoting individual learning and behaviour improvement, helping them to better understand and master new knowledge, while also improving their ability to solve problems and adapt to the environment. Social interaction provides individuals with a rich learning environment, enabling them to continuously learn and grow in practice [21]. The application of Social Learning Theory suggests that people learn from observing and interacting with others. Hence, schools should provide teachers to share experiences in teaching and coping strategies for hardships. In alignment with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, the proposition to establish a platform where educators can exchange experiences and coping strategies is substantiated. Such a platform facilitates observational learning among preschool teachers, which allows them to learn from their peers' experiences, strategies, and outcomes in managing classroom challenges [22].

Based on Sociocultural Theory, regular training sessions focused on teaching methods or children behaviour can equip teachers with the skills they need to

manage classroom challenges effectively. Furthermore, it is recommended that educational institutions initiate mentorship programs. These programs can pair novice teachers with seasoned mentors, offering both emotional and professional guidance. The essence of teaching revolves around relationships, considering that teachers consistently interact with students, their families, and fellow educators [23]. Teaching-related support has a direct impact on job demands and is more closely linked to feelings of exhaustion, whereas non-work-related support has stronger ties to depersonalization and personal achievement [24]. Professional figures such as peers, senior educators, mentors, principals, and psychologists offer internal support.

Nevertheless, some teachers during the interview did not endorse this strategy, or rather, they believed that the currently implemented strategy should include more specific improvements. For instance, Teacher Xiaohua claimed, "Experienced teachers should not be too old, because those who are too old or even nearing retirement are not suitable as mentors. They have low work enthusiasm, and their experience is mostly outdated and inapplicable in current teaching practices, often rendering it ineffective."

In an educational setting, classrooms can be high-stress environments [25], wherein teachers' ability to effectively regulate their emotions can substantially influence their teaching efficacy and the overall classroom atmosphere. Drawing from Gross's Process Model of Emotion Regulation, it is plausible to posit that training programs aimed at equipping teachers with emotion regulation techniques could be of significant benefit. Such training programs could provide teachers with practical skills and strategies aligned with the principles elucidated in Gross's model, enabling them to manage their emotional responses adeptly amidst the challenges and stressors inherent in classroom settings [26].

3.3. Career Insecurity

The issue of job insecurity among kindergarten educators in China partly stems from the prevailing socio-economic context. This context is characterized by a declining population of preschool-aged children and an oversupply of kindergarten teachers. Such circumstances invariably lead to an array of adverse emotional responses, ranging from heightened anxiety and stress to potential depressive states among these educators. While a comprehensive solution to this dilemma requires a multi-faceted approach, including the implementation of stable and reassuring policies for kindergarten teachers, this discussion focuses on examining psychological interventions aimed at reducing occupational anxiety. In this realm, leadership is paramount in alleviating the professional stress experienced by kindergarten teachers. In this case, effective leadership can counteract such pressures by providing teachers with acknowledgment,

motivation, and, where appropriate, rewards and those can be conceptualized as addressing multiple strata of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, first proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, is a psychological theory that suggests human needs are arranged in a five-level hierarchy, where the fulfilment of lower-level needs is prerequisite to the pursuit of higher-level needs [27]. The levels are physiological needs, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization, which is the pinnacle of the hierarchy where individuals strive to realize their full potential [27]. Maslow acknowledged that the hierarchy is not rigid but flexible, influenced by external circumstances and individual differences, with human behaviour being multi-motivated and capable of pursuing multiple needs simultaneously.

In the context of preschool teachers' mental health, applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is essential to ensure their well-being. Maslow's theory states that meeting basic physiological needs, such as getting adequate rest and nutrition, is fundamental to achieving overall well-being. The theory further emphasizes that only after these basic needs are met can individuals pursue higher-level needs, such as safety, belonging, respect, and self-actualization. Therefore, ensuring that kindergarten teachers' basic physiological needs are met is a key step in promoting their mental health and well-being [27]. Furthermore, this theory highlights the importance of safety needs, which include not only material safety, such as protection from physical harm, but also emotional safety and avoidance of abuse, which are key elements in maintaining personal mental health [28]. This is especially critical for kindergarten teachers, as their ability to pursue higher-order needs, such as professional growth and self-actualization, is premised on the satisfaction of their basic physiological and safety needs. Only when these basic needs are properly addressed can teachers more effectively commit to personal and professional development [27]. The applicability of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory to mental health and well-being is widely recognized, as confirmed by applied research in a variety of fields, including education and psychology. For example, a study of early childhood educators noted that when setting expectations for these professionals, it is critical to meet their physiological and safety needs first, according to Maslow's theory. This highlights the importance of prioritizing teachers' basic needs within the field of education for their mental health and overall well-being [29]. In addition, the impact of emotional labour on mental health in the work environment of kindergarten teachers is consistent with the principles of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, highlighting the central position of emotional health in the hierarchy of needs. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of ensuring emotional health as a basic need before pursuing higher levels of personal development [30]. Finally, the need for self-actualization is about

maximizing individual’s potential, and this need varies from person to person. For preschool teachers, self-actualization may be manifested as adopting innovative teaching strategies, achieving professional success, or making significant contributions to the field of early childhood education. An environment that encourages innovative thinking and respects each teacher’s unique teaching style is essential to promoting teachers’ self-actualization.

At the level of esteem needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, recognition and rewards for teachers satisfy their inherent pursuit of self-esteem, achievement and praise, which helps to improve their self-esteem and professional status. This recognition not only enhances teachers' sense of self-worth, but also improves their

recognition and status among peers, students and the entire educational community. Furthermore, at the Self-Actualization level, rewards and recognition serve as catalysts for teachers to reach their full potential. Figure 5 demonstrates Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

In educational institutions, particularly preschool settings, where a structured system of recognition and rewards is implemented, the comprehensive needs of educators are significantly fulfilled. This fulfilment occurs particularly when teachers receive explicit acknowledgment and rewards for their professional contributions. Such an environment substantially mitigates the anxiety and stress associated with vocational uncertainty, leading to an enhanced sense of job security among educators.

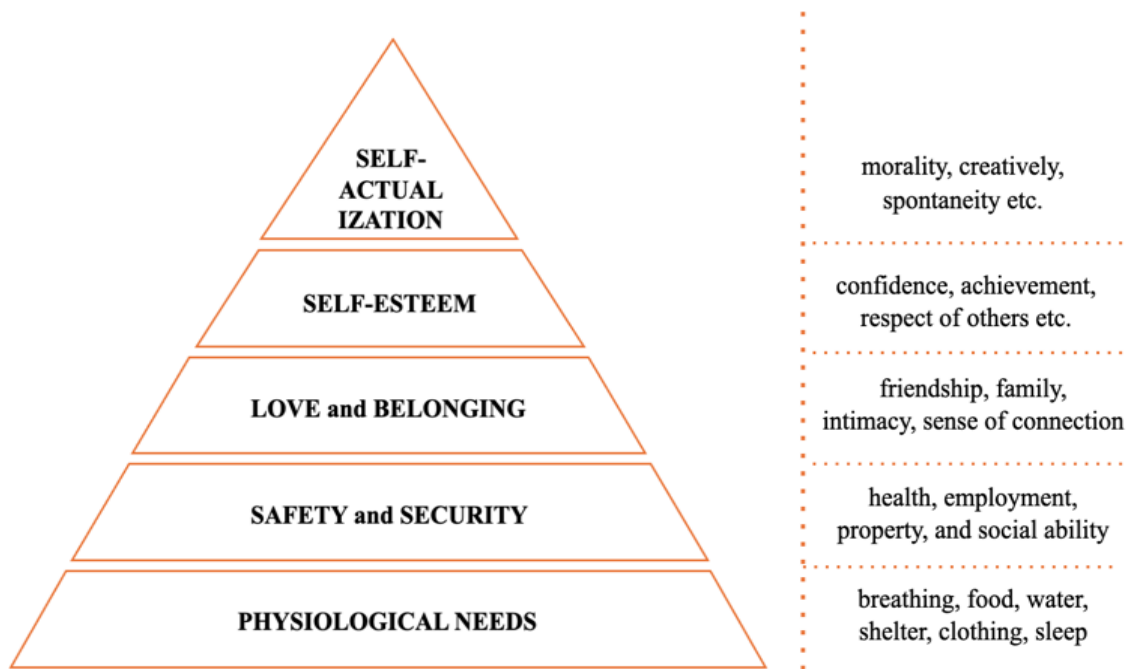


Figure 5. Evaluation Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

3.4. Restrictions Arising from Classroom Evaluation

As to the restrictions arising from classroom evaluation conducted at different hierarchical levels, particularly those initiated by senior educational departments, not only augment the workload of educational professionals but also frequently engender a sense of constraint among teachers within the classroom environment. In the pursuit of meeting educational inspection standards, educators may experience a reduction in teaching freedom. Self-determination theory (SDT), proposed by Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci in the 1970s, provides an approach that argues that individual performance and well-being can be enhanced by satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This theory provides a theoretical basis for improving educators' teaching experience and promoting their motivation [31]. SDT theory emphasizes that satisfying basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness is essential in order to enhance an individual's intrinsic motivation and overall well-being. The theory suggests that when these needs are met, individuals are more likely to experience positive emotions and greater life satisfaction [31]. This theory has significant benefits for educational professionals who experience significant job stress. Research by Collie and colleagues [32] found that when teachers' basic psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, were met, their mental health improved, and their physical symptoms related to stress were reduced. This suggests that meeting these basic psychological needs is critical to maintaining teachers' motivation and well-being in demanding educational environments [32]. Autonomy represents the fundamental need to be the master of one's own life, encompassing the desire for choice and personal affirmation of one's actions. Individuals aspire to experience a sense of "ownership" and intentionality in their work, striving not to feel estranged or overwhelmed but to appreciate the value of their work quality. When supervisors and job structures facilitate a sense of significance and relevance in daily tasks, they effectively nurture this need for autonomy, enhancing the individual's perception of their work as meaningful and significant [33].

At an institutional level, considerations might be taken as: foster autonomy, provide flexible assessment criteria and adopt autonomy-supportive leadership. To be more specific, empowering teachers by involving them in the creation and refinement of classroom assessment standards can make the standards feel less imposed and more self-endorsed, increasing the teachers' sense of autonomy. Also, advocate for assessment criteria that are

flexible and take into account the individuality of each classroom and teaching style, rather than rigid standards that do not account for diversity in teaching methods and student learning styles. Lastly, school leaders are encouraged to adopt an autonomy-supportive approach, where they guide teachers with a focus on the rationale behind assessment standards, offer choices, and encourage teacher initiative. Beyond the aforementioned autonomy-enhancing stratagems, additional recommendations may be posited from the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) vantage point, such as the acknowledgment of distinct pedagogical styles or the promotion of interpersonal relatedness. These facets, nevertheless, have been previously deliberated in the context of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Sociocultural Theory. Thus, the current discourse is purposefully narrowed to scrutinize potential interventions aimed at bolstering teacher autonomy.

Building upon the four themes mentioned above and drawing from pertinent psychological theories, a comprehensive discourse has been conducted on measures aimed at bolstering the psychological health of kindergarten teachers at the institutional level. Consequently, it is meritorious to also consider and evaluate individual-level coping strategies. In the conducted interviews, the majority of participants shared a common perspective, indicating that they predominantly manage adverse emotional states independently. For instance, teacher Hehua stated, "Often, I opt to take a walk to clear my mind and console myself. Occasionally, I also vent to my friends, which makes me feel psychologically better." From an individual standpoint, in light of James Gross's model of emotion regulation and the principles of resilience theory, various strategies can be implemented to foster the psychological health of educators: (1) Techniques for Managing Stress: Instructing teachers in practices like mindfulness, meditation, or yoga can aid in controlling stress levels and sustaining emotional equilibrium. (2) Training in Resilience: Offering programs that provide teachers with the abilities to recover from difficulties and adapt to changes or adverse situations. (3) Emphasizing Self-Care: Encouraging activities that support overall health, including consistent exercise, nutritious eating habits, and sufficient sleep.

Although this study discussed several potential interventions to improve early childhood teachers' mental health, detailed strategies for implementing these interventions in real-world settings are essential to ensure their effectiveness and applicability. Figure 6 clearly demonstrates the steps for practical implementation.

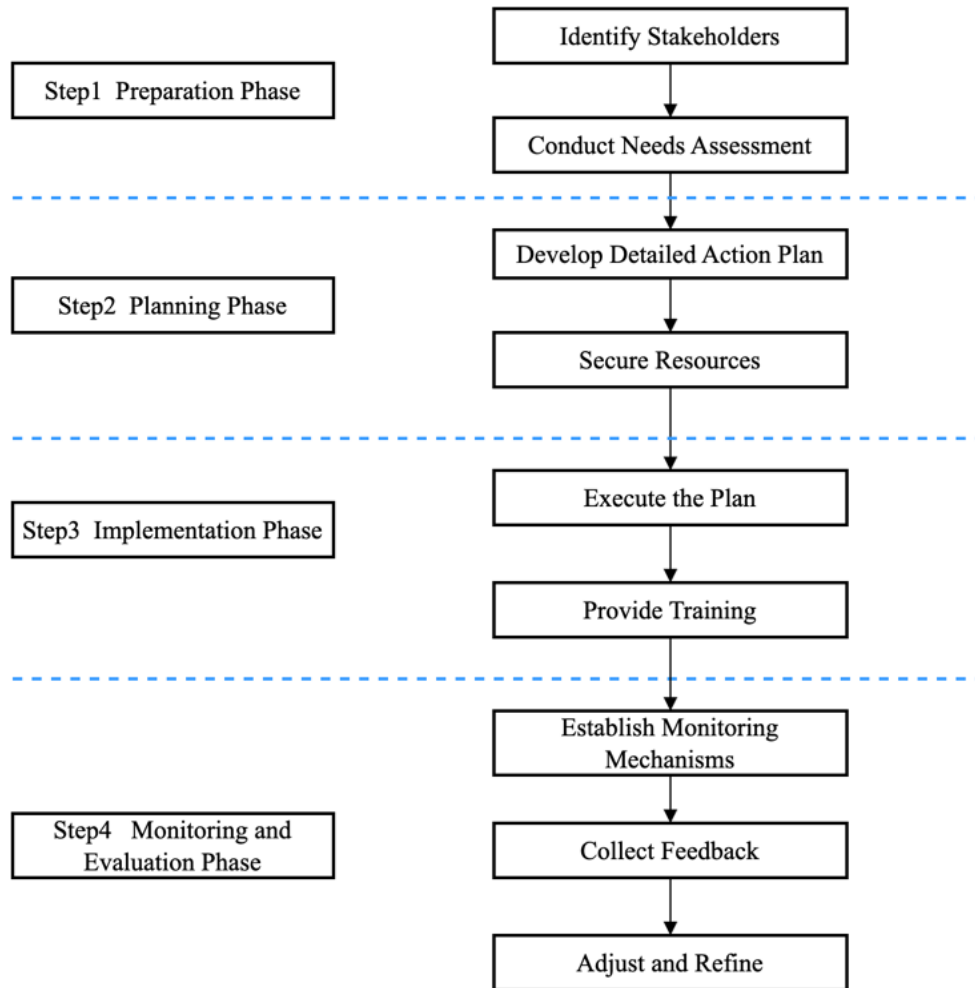


Figure 6. Steps for Practical Implementation

4. Limitations and Suggestions

It is worth pointing out that there are some limitations which cannot be neglected in this study. First, there are some deficiencies in the sample used in this study. Despite efforts to filter out ineligible participants during the recruitment and screening phases, the final sample consisted solely of female participants, with no male participants recruited. This resulted in an inability to control for gender differences. However, it should be noted that within the preschool education system in China, the majority of teachers are female. Moreover, the sample was concentrated in Jiangsu Province (though it included participants from different cities within Jiangsu), possibly limiting the generalizability of the findings due to the influence of regional cultural similarities. Secondly, this study aims to provide comprehensive and general suggestions for enhancing the psychological well-being of preschool teachers from the perspective of developmental psychology. These suggestions are based on data analysis and widely accepted psychological theories. It is recommended that further empirical studies be conducted in various educational settings to test the viability of these conclusions. Moreover, future studies should expand

beyond current regions to investigate effective strategies for enhancing the psychological health of preschool educators across diverse areas and cultures.

It is of significant importance to note that the sample in this study predominantly resorted to introspective methods when encountering stress, such as self-regulation and self-nurturing, with minimal inclination towards seeking external assistance (from institutions like schools or unions). This trend may stem from specific cultural norms, which lead the interviewed educators to prioritize their professional responsibilities and use a strong sense of professional responsibility as a guiding principle for their actions. At the same time, a parallel study conducted by Jeon et al. [5] in another cultural context explored the determinants of mental health among kindergarten teachers and found no phenomena that echoed these themes or norms. This difference suggests that the stressors and mental health promotion strategies of preschool teachers in different cultural contexts are unique. Therefore, it highlights the importance of adopting a cross-cultural approach in future research, which will help increase the diversity and depth of academic research in this field.

For the suggestions made through classic

developmental psychology for school leaders, policy makers and preschool teachers, it is necessary to point out that these suggestions are possible solutions to improve preschool teachers' mental wellness in a theoretical perspective. Hence, further research is recommended to shed a light on the design, implementation and evolution of practical intervention

5. Conclusions

In this study, four main factors that negatively affect mental wellbeing status of preschool teachers in Nanjing have been identified empirically: work-life balance, teaching efficacy, career insecurity and restrictions arising from classroom evaluation. It can be concluded that preschool teachers in Nanjing are undergoing severe stressors varying from personal level, institutional level to social level. At personal level, preschool teachers normally perceive stress due to professional teaching skills lockage, which hinders their efficacy to carry out teaching practice. Unlike previous research in this area which only posed stressors at personal level, this paper investigated more. In terms of institutional level, frequent teaching or class evolution with fixed criteria can worsen preschool teachers' mental wellness as it makes educators work under great pressure of inspection. Furthermore, over emotional labour, anxiety of performance-based salary impact and restriction of teaching style make the situation worse. At social level, work-life balance has been discussed sufficiently in this line of research, while career insecurity especially of preschool teachers in China remains to be discussed in a broad and deep sense.

Considering the four issues explored, certain suggestions for improving preschool teachers' mental well-being could be made based on classic developmental psychology theories. To help preschool teachers better balance their work and life, schools and intuitions should reassess teachers' workload and arrange work in a flexible manner. In terms of teaching efficacy, it is advised to formulate and establish communities where teachers can share teaching skills, stress coping strategies. Also, continuous teaching training should be implemented to provide a platform for collaborative learning. Theatrically, schools and institutions can not only improve teachers' psychological well-being, but also enhance their professional efficacy and engagement by taking these approaches. As to career insecurity, as this aspect arouse mostly from a broad social level, hence, policy reform within additional settings (school level to nation level) should be taken into consideration seriously. According to organizational psychology which advocates for the development of a transparent and fair policy framework, detailed and appropriate policies aiming at ensuring preschool teachers' job stability and professional development should be well developed and enforced. In addition, the current study pays special attention to

restrictions from classroom assessment, and it is believed assessment criteria should be designed more flexibly, taking account of various aspects. For example, different teaching styles should be allowed, and teaching performance might be assessed accordingly. That is, assessment practice should reflect more precise and comprehensive assessments regarding different situations in the process of teaching practice. Despite suggestions given to policy makers, teachers themselves should make efforts to cope with stress. For example, according to positive psychology and stress management, techniques such as mindfulness and self-care should be emphasised. Such strategies are vital and effective for teachers' mental well-being in coping with stress and depression.

To conclude, this study not only identifies the main challenges faced by early childhood educators in terms of mental health, but also discusses a strategic framework to address these challenges. It provides significant insights for leaders, policymakers, and practitioners in educational settings to cultivate a resilient, supportive, and facilitating environment that supports the development of an educational ecosystem. Through these efforts, prioritizing educators' mental health at preschool level can enhance the overall quality and sustainability of early childhood education and foster a better future in child growth.

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