



Constructing Teachers' Professional Identity in Early Childhood Education: An Exploratory Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: June 29, 2026 Revised: July 13, 2026 Accepted: July 29, 2026 Available Online: August 10, 2026 Keywords: <i>Professional identity, early childhood education, teacher roles, collaboration, mentorship, institutional culture, qualitative research</i> Corresponding author: Sahar Iftikhar Siddiqi Email: saharsiddiqi@hotmail.com	This study aims to explore how teachers working in early childhood education (ECE) construct their professional identity, the challenges they face in the process and the factors that influence them in Karachi, Pakistan. Teachers' professional identity, or image a teachers have of themselves, plays an integral role in their decision to remain in the profession. Although ECE teachers are professionals, they are still often viewed as caregivers or babysitters. By using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a lens, the professional identity is built through social interactions, experiences, self-reflections. Through semi structured interviews altogether 5 teachers who are teaching 3-5 years of children were interviewed. The data analysis was thematic. The findings show that it is an ongoing process. It is also suggested that many ECE teachers found a gap between how they see themselves as professionals and how society sees them as a caregiver. Some also see their job as a passion to guide and support young children's learning journey. While some want to bring a change not just in a class room but beyond that. Overall, the identity of ECE teachers evolves because of both positive and negative impacts on society. This study recommends forming reflective practice communities which also helps teachers build their strength by peer collaborations, interaction, self-reflection and working environment. Its contribution lies in highlighting the gap between how ECE teachers perceive their professional identity and what is actually practiced in early childhood education settings.

Introduction

Professional identity goes beyond employment status or formal qualifications. It also involves the meaning that employers give to their roles, how they mean to do their work, the kind of responsibility they bear, expectations they are supposed to meet and the day-to-day realities of meeting complicated demands. The role of a teacher is never predetermined. It is developed as time goes by and this is influenced by training, experiences, policies, leadership structures, curriculum expectations, school culture, and interactions with children, families and colleagues (Beijaard et al., 2021). Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been gaining increased recognition as an essential part of learning all over the world. This stage helps children's emotional, social and early cognitive development. Despite the need to focus on early childhood education, there is still a struggle for the teachers to define and negotiate their role as a professional ECE teacher because of the blurred boundaries between care and education. It is

common practice among the early childhood professionals to practice caregiving and teaching. However, (Akaba et al., 2022) highlights that senior teachers, administrators, and policymakers show biases towards primary and secondary education, supporting the assumption that early years educators function primarily as caregivers rather than as teachers. This hierarchical perception is manifested in everyday school interactions and professional recognition. As a result, ECE teachers may find it difficult to establish themselves as professionals contributing to early literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and socio-emotional development.

The current issue is to convince the society that early childhood education is a professional field that needs to be acknowledged in the areas of developmental psychology, curriculum planning, assessment, classroom management and responsive teaching strategies. Even with the growing acceptance of early childhood education as a specialized field, ECE teachers in Pakistan, still hold a low professional status and receive little recognition. Most of the current studies on teacher professional identity are conducted in the West or with pre-service teachers and thus there is a lack of research to comprehend how in-service ECE teachers negotiate and construct their own professional identity in local cultural and institutional contexts. (Akaba et al., 2022; Chao, 2024)

Most of the research focused on the teacher's professional identity in the western countries like the United States Akaba et al. (2022). In Pakistan recent research has developed more interest in regard to early childhood education, particularly in relation to classroom engagement, teacher motivation or teaching special subjects in early childhood classrooms (Rafiq et al., 2023). An example of such studies includes the attitude and behavior of early childhood educators in the classroom (Wasi and Kang, 2024), and the experience of other educators when teaching specific subjects such as mathematics in early childhood classrooms (Qayyum et al., 2024). Other researchers have examined issues connected to teacher motivation, professional development, and problems that early childhood educators are forced to address in Pakistan (Rafiq et al., 2023).

Although these studies provide valuable information about the ECE practices and the issues of the Pakistani context, they are mostly concerned with the instructional strategies, attitudes, or external influences on the teaching. So, we don't have much Findings about how full time, practicing early childhood teachers in Pakistan construct their Professional identity. We especially don't know how the culture of a Pakistani school, teamwork and mentorship affect these teachers who see themselves as professionals. School culture plays a major role in shaping how ECE teachers see themselves. This study aims to fill these gaps. It also explores how an ECE teacher builds their professional identity and negotiates their roles who are currently working in early childhood education (ECE) in Karachi Pakistan. The findings will also provide useful insights to help support teachers and improve educational policies in Pakistan. This study addresses an important gap in the literature by focusing on the professional identity of full-time early childhood education teachers in Pakistan, a context that remains underrepresented in teacher identity research. Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, the study explores how teachers' practices, cultural influences, collaboration, mentorship, and institutional culture contribute to the construction and negotiation of professional identity (Edwards, 2012; University of Arkansas Pressbooks, 2024). By examining teachers' experiences within their school and sociocultural contexts, the study provides insights into the complex and evolving nature of professional identity among ECE teachers (Tran & Nguyen, 2015). The findings may contribute to greater recognition of early childhood educators and inform professional development initiatives, mentorship practices, school policies, and institutional support aimed at strengthening teachers' professional identity and improving the quality of early childhood education.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

RO1: Explore the teaching practices and cultural influences that shape teachers' professional identity in early childhood education settings.

RO2: Examine how collaboration, mentorship, and institutional culture contribute to the development of teachers' professional identity.

RO3: Identify the challenges and issues early childhood education teachers experience while negotiating their professional roles and identities.

Research Questions

RQ1: What teaching practices and cultural factors influence teachers' professional identity in early childhood education settings?

RQ2: How do collaboration, mentorship, and institutional culture support or shape the development of teachers' professional identity?

RQ3: What challenges and issues do early childhood education teachers experience while negotiating their professional identity?

Theoretical Framework

The sociocultural theory by Vygotsky guided this study as it highlights that professional identity is constructed through social interactions and by using cultural tools. Vygotsky states that learning and identity development emerge in a social environment in which individuals internalize knowledge, behaviors, and norms through interactions with more experienced members of the community. The major constructs of the Vygotskian theory in this research are:

Social Interaction: Through interaction, mentoring and collaboration with peers, knowledge and professional practices are developed. These interactions form the sense of professional identity in ECE teachers because they negotiate their roles and receive recognition (Teachers Institute, 2023).

Cultural Mediation: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, (2024) emphasize that language, planning routine, instructional materials and institutional practices are the tools through which the professional identity of teachers are constructed. For example, being part of a mentorship program or joining teachers to plan activities.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): When teachers are encouraged by other teachers or administrators who are more experienced in their work, it helps them to develop new skills and become more confident (Zaretsky, 2024).

Community and Context: In ECE, societal perceptions of teachers as caregivers, school hierarchies, and cultural norms influence how teachers perceive themselves professionally.

The paper uses Vygotsky sociocultural perspective as an explanation of the connection between daily interactions, mentorship, collaborative practice and school culture with the changing professional identity of ECE teachers in Karachi. The framework enables the conceptualization of teacher identity as a negotiable process that is dynamic and influenced by social, cultural and institutional forces. Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework of the study, illustrating the relationship between Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, ECE teachers' professional identity, the research objectives, and the qualitative research approach.

Theoretical Framework of ECE Teachers' Professional Identity Based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

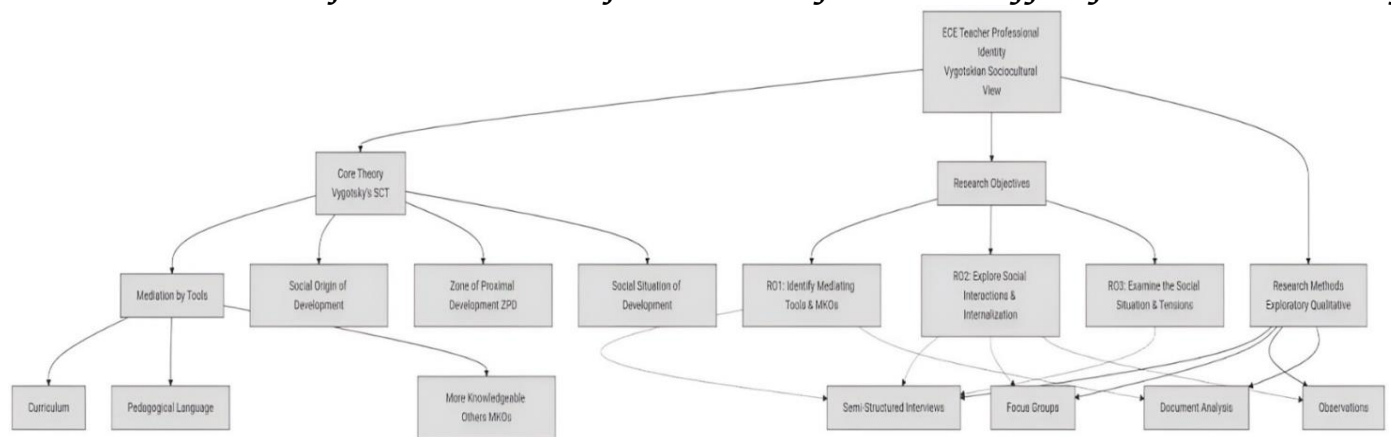


Figure 1: Note. The framework illustrates the application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to the construction of ECE teachers' professional identity, linking the core theoretical concepts, research objectives, and qualitative research methods.

Literature Review

Professional identity is the way that the teachers consider themselves as professionals, their beliefs, values, roles, responsibility and the sense that they have attached to their work. There is consensus among the scholars that identity is not given but it is constantly defined by experiences, interactions and the environment. In early childhood education, professional identity depends on how teachers see themselves and perceive their roles in their job. The ECE teachers are crucial for young children for their early development, usually they seem as a caregiver rather than educators. To improve the teacher development and the overall quality of ECE, it is really important for the teachers to understand how they can construct and negotiate their professional identity.

Looking at the existing research, we can find that Teachers' identity has been shaped by various aspects such as, Beijaard et al.(2021) assert that teachers construct their identity in their practice, their experiences and the expectations of institutions

and society. This process is more complicated in early childhood environments as teachers merge care giving, emotional labour and teaching. The presence of these several roles can make or break their professionalism based on their value. It has been continuously shown that teacher professional identity is a key to teacher confidence, decision-making skills, job satisfaction, and long-term commitment to the profession. Teachers are more likely to exhibit better instructional practice and develop better relationships with learners when they clearly know their roles and feel acknowledged. On the other hand, teachers feel undervalued if they don't recognize as professional and it results in low morale of the teacher. Research has also revealed that early childhood education in institutes is perceived as having a low level, basic, and care giving, thus undermining the teachers. According to Maclean and Pereira (2022), this is also the case in ECE: the teachers feel the need to combat the stereotype of being babysitters, and only when the leaders recognize the pedagogical competencies of teachers, they have the confidence.

Ozdemir (2024) found that teachers formed their identity by reflecting on their past experiences, their current work with students and future goals. By Narrating their own stories, it helps them to understand who they are as a teacher. Chao (2024) believes that when teachers are involved in active learning and engage students enthusiastically in the learning it boosts their confidence in their teaching skills. This confidence also makes them understand their professional identity. Akaba et al. (2022) shows that because of government policies or school's demands teachers need to adjust their roles to meet expectations. Bipath (2024) discovered that a good mentor is really necessary to support teachers to help them understand what they have to do and what is expected from them. Beka and Gjelaj (2025) identified that how self-image and how they perceive themselves and professional development plays a key role in teachers' professional identity. Daily routines, planning, classroom setup, and interactions with children also shape professional identity. When teachers develop learning experiences, control behaviour, and employ developmentally appropriate practices, they develop confidence. Such day-to-day activities enable teachers to think of themselves as professionals and not caretakers, particularly when their planning and decision-making process is respected by others or by the administration. Emotional experiences are also significant. According to Hong, Greene, and Lowery (2020), the emotional effort involved in teaching young children comforting, regulating behaviour, or managing stress directly impacts how teachers define themselves. When their emotional labour is ignored, teachers feel undervalued. Strong collaboration strengthens identity. Teachers who receive support from colleagues, senior teachers, or leadership feel more capable and confident. Those teachers that get the feedback of their colleagues, senior teachers or even the leadership are more competent, and confident. Hahl and Lofstrom (2021) demonstrate that mentorship assists the teacher in recognizing his or her strengths, self-reflecting, and asserting his or her professional identity. In ECE, as teachers usually work on the lowest levels of the school hierarchy, mentorship might make them feel noticed and valued. With feedback, common planning, and advice of peers, teachers can make sense of their roles and form a more understandable professional voice. Identity is created through reflection as daily practices, which include planning, observation of children, routine management, and communication with parents. Educators who observe the improvement of children feel more competent. The highly dependent individuals on the instructions given by administrators may not have so much professional freedom. The literature has highlighted that teacher identity is not a one-off structure, it is an ongoing dynamic process that is influenced by Personal beliefs, School culture, Interpersonal relationships and management, Training and qualifications, Societal expectations.

The process of teachers reconstructing identities repeats as they pass through new experiences and surmount challenges and consider new ways of practice. When teachers are given ownership of their teaching judgments, are recognized and do reflective learning, the professional identity is enhanced. The cultural norms determine the way the society perceives early childhood teachers and the way teachers perceive themselves. The ECE profession is often viewed as a job of female workers in most countries, and thus, the raising of young children is as natural as women work. This feminized framing reduces the perceived level of skill needed in the early years teaching. Researchers observe that femininity and care and emotional labour are usually underestimated and this results in an identity crisis in teachers who desire their knowledge in pedagogy to be considered.

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how early childhood education (ECE) teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities and the challenges they experience in this process (Tracy, 2020). A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their professional roles (Adeniran & Tayo-Ladega, 2024). This approach also allowed professional identity to be examined as a dynamic process shaped by teachers' daily practices, interactions, expectations, and institutional culture.

The study was conducted in a private school in Karachi, Pakistan, where ECE operates as an established department. The ECE teachers worked with children aged 3–5 years and followed regular classroom routines involving circle time, learning activities, and caregiving responsibilities. The school included early-years, primary, and secondary teachers, providing a relevant institutional context for examining differences in professional recognition and teachers' perceptions of their professional roles.

Participants and Sampling

The participants comprised five ECE teachers currently teaching children aged 3–5 years in the selected private school. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide detailed and experience-based insights into professional identity in early childhood education. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative research when participants are selected on the basis of their knowledge and experience relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). To be eligible for participation, teachers were required to have at least two years of teaching experience and a diploma in ECE.

Data Collection

Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30–35 minutes and was conducted within the school environment to ensure participants' comfort and privacy. Participants were recruited through in-person communication based on their experience in early childhood education, and participation was voluntary.

The interviews were conducted in Urdu and English, allowing participants to express their experiences in the language in which they felt most comfortable. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. The semi-structured format provided sufficient flexibility for participants to describe their experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to ensure that the key areas relevant to professional identity were consistently addressed across interviews.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with familiarization, during which the researcher repeatedly listened to the audio recordings and read the interview transcripts to develop an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Manual coding was then conducted by identifying and labeling meaningful sentences, phrases, and recurring ideas related to professional identity.

The initial codes reflected issues such as limited recognition of ECE teachers, perceptions of teachers as caregivers, reliance on senior teachers, parental misunderstanding of teachers' roles, and the perceived simplicity of teaching young children. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader patterns and potential themes. The emerging themes included professional identity developed through everyday practice, limited recognition and cultural perceptions of ECE, teamwork as a source of confidence, negotiation of the caregiver label, and professional challenges and emotional labour.

The themes were reviewed against the interview transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences. They were then refined, clearly defined, and named. Finally, the findings were organized around the identified themes and supported with direct participant quotations. The coding and theme-development process was also reviewed by a peer to enhance consistency and reduce potential researcher bias.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. Credibility was strengthened through repeated engagement with the interview recordings and transcripts and careful examination of the data throughout the analytical process. Dependability was supported through repeated transcript reading and peer review of the coding and theme-development process. Confirmability was enhanced by maintaining a transparent process of coding and theme development and by using direct participant quotations to support the interpretations. Transferability was facilitated by providing a detailed description of the study context and participants, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar ECE settings.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of personally identifiable information. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. Throughout the research process, participants were treated respectfully, and the interviews were conducted in a non-judgmental manner.

Findings

This investigation was done to learn how teachers working in the early childhood context perceive and develop their professional identity in the environment when they can be seen mostly as caregivers but not educators. The analysis of the data from semi-structured interview from five ECE teachers using thematic analysis produced five major themes:

Theme 1: Everyday Practice in the Classroom Enhance a Concept of Professional Responsibility

The participants explained how their daily routines and teaching practices help them see themselves as professional. They emphasized on being organized and well prepared as it gives them confidence and strength to see them as a professional.

One participant shared:

"She arrives at school early so that she organizes activities and develops tasks for students. These habitual things enable her to feel organized, confident, and professional."

Another participant added that:

If you plan everything beforehand then the day will go with ease

"When I am all ready, I am confident and happy... I like to be organized."

This indicates that routine and preparation play a significant role in the process of teachers identity development.

Theme 2: The Cultural perceptions and school hierarchy affect the valuation of ECE teachers

The interviewees added that teaching during early years is not valued by people. Teachers reported that many people in their close circle and school think that it is easy or not real teaching to teach small children.

One teacher stated:

"The people believe that the early year's teachers only teach ABC... they do not know how much effort and patience it needs."

Another participant also compares ECE teacher's role with teachers in higher grades:

"People believe that only teachers who teach O-level are professional teachers."

This is an indication of a cultural ideology that early childhood teachers are perceived to have a small role, which influences the perception of teachers.

Theme 3: Colleague Collaboration and Support: Confidence Building.

Teamwork was found to be a powerful source of support. The participants also often use the assistance of senior and more experienced teachers. They rely on other faculty members to provide ideas, feedback, and strategies, particularly with problem children.

One teacher explained:

"I cannot work out everything myself. I need help from my seniors."

Another teacher shared how collaboration helped her improve child's writing

"An experienced senior teacher guided me and now that little kid writes correctly".

Participants also noted the feedback from colleagues also helped them boost their sense of professional identity.

This indicates that the collaboration supports professional growth and is also effective in enhancing the identity as a teacher.

Theme 4: On-going Negotiation of Identity between a Teacher and a Caregiver.

A significant portion of their experience is working to negotiate the fact that teachers in early years are not only caregivers. They always have to defend their duties to people in order to be acknowledged.

One participant shared:

"It happens that when I explain to people what I do, some will start laughing and ask what I even do?"

Participants also explained that they often need to defend their role as a teacher. Some of them seem frustrated about people who only see them as caregivers.

Another teacher stated:

"We must make them realize... we are teachers... not babysitters."

This constant pressure to justify and assign them a place depicts the effect of the identity by the perceptions of others.

Theme 5: Challenges and Emotional Labour in Professional Identity

The participants pointed out several challenges they experience as early years teachers, including managing the needs of children who are unable to verbalize their feelings, dealing with emotional or crying behaviours, working with children with special needs, managing school and parental expectations, and experiencing low social recognition.

One teacher explained:

"It is hard; little children are unable to describe their emotions."

Emotional labour was also a significant aspect of the participants' experiences, as they have to deal with various behaviours on a daily basis. Nevertheless, they continue to strive for recognition and believe that their role is significant and valuable.

Summary of Findings

The results reveal that teachers working in early childhood education form their professional identity through their everyday teaching preparation and routines, the perceptions of others regarding their work, colleague collaboration and feedback, their efforts to distinguish between the roles of a teacher and a caregiver, and the personal and practical challenges associated with ECE practice. These themes emphasize the influence of teachers' inner beliefs, external expectations, school culture, and ongoing negotiation on the development of professional identity in early childhood education settings.

Discussion

The paper has examined the ways in which early childhood teachers in Karachi identify and negotiate their profession in an environment in which the role is often viewed as an act of care giving rather than teaching. Although past international research has discussed the ECE professional identity, the current results provide context-relevant information by clarifying the identity construction process in a socio-cultural context characterized by low professional awareness, high ranks of school structure, and low level of awareness among people on the nature of early childhood pedagogy. The participant explained that in her experience when the classroom is ready, she feels confident and considers herself as a competent teacher. This is in line with Beijgaard et al. (2021), who postulates that the identity of a teacher is formed through recurrent professional practices that create confidence and self-belief.

Emotional labour also contributes to identity as demonstrated in the experiences of the participant. When it comes to young children, the work of the teacher becomes complicated because it is necessary to control their emotions, comfort them in case of crying, and address their personal needs. According to Hong et al. (2020), emotional demands also form the core of early childhood practice and define the way teachers perceive their functions. In cases where emotional labour is not appreciated, teachers feel inferior, which was evident in the interview.

The Social Negotiation of Identity: A Vygotskian Approach

The other significant theme is the social and cultural perception of early childhood teachers. The results are very in line with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky which considers an identity as socially constructed through interaction, language, and cultural instruments. Networking and support became beneficial forces. The participant stated that she mostly involves the senior teachers whenever planning or targeting the learning needs of the children. This is in line with the observation of Hahl and Lofstrom (2021) that mentorship enhances professional identity through provision of guidance, feedback, and reassurance. Collaboration with colleagues also enabled the teacher to resolve the classroom issues and gave her confidence. Meanwhile, the participant pointed out that recognition in the teachers in higher grades is minimal. The feedback provided by primary teachers assisted her in developing although she had the urge to explain what she did all the time to be viewed as a professional teacher. This is an indication of the struggles that Maclean and Pereira (2022) note that early childhood teachers usually encounter in regard to identity tension since they have to defend their professionalism to the rest of the society.

In general, the discussion demonstrates that the identity of early childhood teachers is defined by their day-to-day classroom activities, caring and emotional duties, the social position of ECE in school, teamwork and coaching, and the necessity to bargain for recognition. These results demonstrate that professional identity in ECE is not something we are born with; rather, it is constantly negotiated and depends upon individual efforts as well as the school context.

Contribution to Existing Literature

This research builds upon the existing literature about teacher identity in early childhood by providing an insight into an environment (a Global South) where cultural perceptions and institutional hierarchies have a strong impact on the development

of a professional self-concept. Contrasting a lot of international literature which implies the rising professional awareness of ECE, the given study demonstrates the fact that there is still a struggle to prove oneself as a professional despite the high degree of commitment and competence. It shows that professional identity is not strictly defined by training or policy but rather by negotiation on a daily basis within a certain socio-cultural context.

Limitations

This research is limited in a number of ways. To start with, the sample size of five teachers is too small, as the results may not be generalized to the whole population. Second, the data were only gathered in one educational setting that may not be representative of a wide range of the schooling experiences in various schools or regions. Third, there can be subjectivity and social desirability bias due to the use of self-reported data used in the interview. Lastly, the time factor did not make it possible to continue the interaction or classroom observations. To overcome these limitations, future studies might involve more sites, larger sample sizes, and observation to extend the knowledge on the topic of professional identity formation in early childhood education.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the ways in which early childhood educators formulate their professional identity within their school context. Based on the interviews, it was found that identity is developed through concrete classroom practices, emotional labour, working relationships, and cultural understandings of early childhood teaching.

The experiences of the participants also reveal that although ECE teachers demonstrate good planning, teaching, and professionalism, they continue to experience stereotyping that describes them as nurturers rather than educators. At the same time, supportive colleagues, senior teachers, and positive feedback contribute to building their confidence and professionalism. These results are consistent with other current studies that have suggested the importance of positive school cultures, effective mentoring, and acknowledgement of the specialized knowledge that ECE teachers possess.

The paper concludes that the professional identity of early childhood teachers is developed as a result of constant negotiation. Therefore, schools should recognize the complexity of the work performed by ECE teachers and acknowledge their professional role in early childhood education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the professional identity of ECE teachers:

Institutional Recognition: Schools should officially recognize the expertise of ECE teachers, and their contributions should be valued as much as those of teachers working at higher grade levels.

Parental Awareness: Parental programs and workshops should help parents appreciate the complexity of early childhood teaching and the role it plays in children's long-term learning.

Mentorship Programs: Formal mentorship and collaborative planning should be provided to support professional development and build teachers' confidence.

Professional Development: Teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities that help them cope with challenges in the classroom, address the needs of diverse learners, and promote their professional identity.

Role Communication: Teachers should be supported in communicating their roles and accomplishments, which may help change perceptions of them as caregivers and strengthen their recognition as professional teachers.

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