

The Situation and Countermeasures of Preschool Teachers' Professional Autonomy

—Taking S City of Jiangsu Province as an Example

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Abstract

Professional autonomy is teachers' basic rights, and is the key of preschool teachers' professional development. In this study, a questionnaire survey was conducted on the situation of professional autonomy of 564 preschool teachers in S City, Jiangsu Province. The results show the ideal and actual conditions of democratic management autonomy were both assigned the lowest scores, and the gap between the two was the largest. Moreover, there are differences between individual teachers and preschools in professional autonomy. Aiming at the results, it is suggested that the state should establish a sound legal system to protect teachers' professional autonomy. Strengthen the professional training of teachers to improve the awareness and ability of professional autonomy. Improve the preschool management system to effectively implement teachers' professional autonomy.

Keywords

Preschool, Professional Autonomy

1. Introduction

As professionals, preschool teachers should have professional autonomy. They should be able to make judgments and decisions freely in their professional fields, according to their professional knowledge, on the basis of following social norms, educational laws and the characteristics and levels of children's physical and mental development. They should choose educational behaviors without external interference and assume responsibility for such behaviors (Shan & Yuan, 2015) (Schwimmer & Maxwell, 2017). This right mainly includes the right to education and teaching, the right to manage and evaluate children, the right to democratic management, and the right to professional growth. Studies have shown that pro-

professional autonomy is the key content of teachers' professional development, an important indicator to measure the level of teachers' professional development, and also the core driving force to promote teachers' professional development (Jiao, 2012; Luo, 2020; Shen, 2011). Only by fully enjoying professional autonomy can teachers improve the autonomy, enthusiasm and creativity of education and teaching, and improve job satisfaction and professional well-being. This study will investigate and analyze the ideal expectation and actual enjoyment of preschool teachers' professional autonomy, and try to put forward countermeasures and suggestions to improve preschool teachers' professional autonomy.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Object

This study utilized a stratified cluster random sampling method. All 14 kindergartens in S city, stratified by type (Public/Private) and level (Demonstration/Non-Demonstration), were selected as clusters. All in-service teachers from these kindergartens were then invited to participate. From 600 distributed questionnaires, 564 valid responses were collected, constituting the study sample (Table 1).

Table 1. The basic situation of the subjects.

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	5	0.9%	Professional Title	Senior Primary Level	67	11.9%
	Female	559	99.1%		Level 1 Primary	151	26.8%
Position	Assistant Teacher	306	54.2%		Level 2 Primary	106	18.8%
	Lead Teacher	186	33.0%		Level 3 Primary	6	1.1%
	Grade Leader	72	12.8%		No Title	234	41.5%
First Degree	Postgraduate	4	0.7%	Highest Degree	Postgraduate	11	2.0%
	Bachelor's	136	24.1%		Bachelor's	385	68.3%
	Associate's (Diploma)	310	55.0%		Associate's (Diploma)	162	28.7%
	Secondary Tech & Below	114	21.2%		Secondary Tech & Below	6	1.1%
Age	Under 30 years	331	58.7%	Teaching Years	0 - 1 year	78	13.8%
	31 - 40 years	164	29.1%		2 - 5 years	174	30.9%
	41 - 50 years	63	11.2%		6 - 10 years	127	22.5%
	Over 51 years	6	1.1%		11 - 15years	57	10.1%
Level	Demonstration Kindergarten	400	70.9%		Over 16 years	128	2.7%
	Non-Demonstration Kindergarten	164	29.1%	Age Group Taught	Toddler Class (Nursery)	18	3.2%
Kindergartens Type	Public	399	70.7%		Small Class (K1/K2)	180	31.9%
	Private	165	29.3%		Middle Class (K2/K3)	180	31.9%
Location	Prefecture-level City	507	89.9%		Large Class (K3/Preschool)	184	32.6%
	Town/Township	57	10.1%		Mixed-age Class	2	0.4%

2.2. Analysis Methods

This study mainly adopts the questionnaire survey method. On the basis of referring to the existing research, a questionnaire on the status quo of kindergarten teachers' professional autonomy was compiled. The questionnaire consists of three parts: one is the basic information, including teachers' age, gender, teaching age, professional title, position, education and the area, nature and level of the teaching park; the second is the status quo of professional autonomy, including the ideal and actual situation of education and teaching rights, management and evaluation of children's rights, democratic management rights, and professional growth rights. The questionnaire uses Likert's five-point scale to score statistics on the ideal and actual status of preschool teachers' professional autonomy in four aspects.

2.3. Data Processing and Analysis

Using SPSS22.0 data statistical software to process and analyze the results of the questionnaire survey, it mainly includes three aspects: first, descriptive statistical analysis of the basic situation of the research sample, the average and standard deviation of the four dimensions of teachers' professional autonomy and the overall professional autonomy; the second is to analyze whether there is a difference between the ideal and actual situation of the four dimensions of professional autonomy and the overall professional autonomy through the independent sample T test; the third is to conduct a one-way analysis of variance test on the individual differences of teachers' professional autonomy and the differences between kindergartens.

3. Research Results and Analysis

3.1. The Overall Status of Preschool Teachers' Professional Autonomy

3.1.1. The Ideal Situation of Preschool Teachers' Professional Autonomy Is Higher Than the Actual Situation, and There Is a Significant Positive Correlation between the Two

The results of the survey show that preschool teachers' scores on the ideal and actual professional autonomy of the four dimensions are higher than 3 points, which is above the middle level. Among them, the gap between the ideal and reality of democratic management is the largest (**Figure 1**).

In terms of correlation, there is a significant positive correlation between the expectation of preschool teachers' professional autonomy and the actual situation of professional autonomy, which indicates that the higher the expectation of autonomy, the more rights they actually have (see **Table 2**). This conclusion is consistent with the existing research. If the current situation of teachers' professional autonomy can be improved, it will promote the improvement of the ideal situation of teachers' professional autonomy, so as to further promote the improvement of the current situation of teachers' professional autonomy, and finally form a virtuous circle. On the contrary, if teachers' expectations of professional autonomy are

difficult to achieve, teachers will gradually give up their professional autonomy in practice, and show no concern for their reasonable rights, resulting in the ideal and actual situation of professional autonomy falling into a vicious circle of getting worse. Therefore, improving the expectations of preschool teachers for professional autonomy can improve the current situation of teachers' professional autonomy to a certain extent.

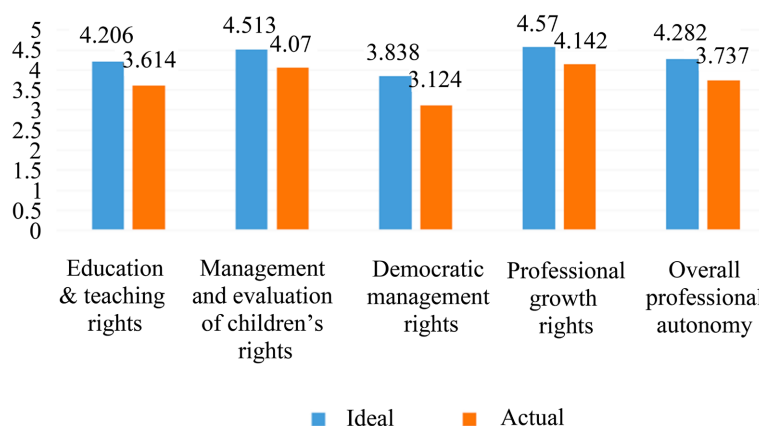


Figure 1. Comparison between ideal and reality of kindergarten teachers' professional autonomy.

Table 2. A comparative analysis of the ideal and actual situation of preschool teachers' professional autonomy.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Correlation coefficient	T-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	0.356***	17.524***	0.000
Management and evaluation of children's rights	0.525***	16.844***	0.000
Democratic management rights	0.363***	14.927***	0.000
Professional growth rights	0.5206***	16.099***	0.000
Overall professional autonomy	0.415***	20.069***	0.000

*Note: *** $P < 0.001$.

3.1.2. The Ideal and Actual Conditions of Democratic Management Autonomy Have the Lowest Scores, and the Gap between the Two Is also the Largest

Preschool teachers have higher scores on the four dimensions of ideal professional autonomy, but the democratic management right has the lowest score (3.838), indicating that teachers have a weak understanding of democratic management rights and awareness of rights protection. In addition, the standard deviation of teachers' ideal democratic management power is also the largest (0.963), indicating that there are two different attitudes of teachers in participating in democratic management. Some are accustomed to obeying the administration and are not concerned about their democratic participation rights. The other part is particularly eager to participate in management. Teachers' democratic management right is the most unrealized in practice, with the lowest score (3.124), and the standard

deviation of democratic management right is the largest (1.047), indicating that there are great differences in the actual situation of different teachers' democratic management right. Teachers have the lowest expectations for democratic management, and in practice have little democratic management. The reasons are primarily related to kindergarten management systems. Currently, most kindergartens in China operate under a principal accountability system, where the kindergarten principal serves as the highest-level administrator and holds ultimate administrative authority. These powers include decision-making, personnel appointments, financial management, and reward and punishment mechanisms. Most decisions in kindergartens are made by the principal, while teachers are primarily responsible for implementation. Additionally, most early childhood teachers have a relatively weak awareness of their right to participate in democratic management. Many believe that only individuals who have reached certain positions or possess specific seniority should participate in kindergarten management and decision-making. They perceive that ordinary teachers need only focus on fulfilling their designated educational and instructional duties, considering it neither necessary nor feasible to engage in the democratic management of the kindergarten.

3.2. The Individual Differences of Teachers with Professional Autonomy

3.2.1. The Differences between the Ideal and Actual Professional Autonomy of Teachers in Different Positions Are Extremely Significant, and the Higher the Position, the Higher the Score

Among the subjects, assistant teachers accounted for 54.2%, lead teachers for 33.0%, and grade leaders for 12.8%. Grade leaders rated the highest levels of both ideal and actual professional autonomy across all four dimensions and overall (Ideal Overall Professional Autonomy: 4.49, Actual Overall Professional Autonomy: 4.01), followed by lead teachers (Ideal Overall Professional Autonomy: 4.33, Actual Overall Professional Autonomy: 3.71), with assistant teachers reporting the lowest levels (Ideal Overall Professional Autonomy: 4.21, Actual Overall Professional Autonomy: 3.67). The reason is that grade group leaders are middle-level cadres in kindergartens. Compared with ordinary teachers, they have more opportunities to participate in management and professional development, and their professional autonomy can be paid more attention to. The overall professional autonomy and the autonomy of the four dimensions of the ideal ($F = 9.299$, $P < 0.001$) and actual ($F = 13.008$, $P < 0.001$) of teachers in different positions are extremely significant (see **Table 3**). The ideal and actual overall professional autonomy of the grade group leader is the highest (the ideal overall professional autonomy is 4.49, the actual overall professional autonomy is 4.01), the main class teacher is the second (the ideal overall professional autonomy is 4.33, the actual overall professional autonomy is 3.71), and the assigned class teacher is the lowest (the ideal overall professional autonomy is 4.21, the actual overall professional autonomy is 3.67).

Table 3. Analysis of the differences of teachers' professional autonomy in different positions.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference Analysis of Ideal Situation		Difference Analysis of Actual Situation	
	F-value	Significance	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	6.873**	0.001	6.018**	0.003
Management and evaluation of children's rights	6.709**	0.001	9.653**	0.000
Democratic management rights	4.979**	0.007	13.209**	0.000
Professional growth rights	7.061**	0.001	7.629**	0.001
Overall professional autonomy	9.299**	0.000	13.008**	0.000

*Note: ** $P < 0.01$.

3.2.2. Teachers with Different Professional Titles Have Significant Differences in the Ideal Democratic Management Rights and the Actual Professional Growth Rights

The results of data analysis showed that teachers with different professional titles had significant differences in the ideal democratic management rights ($F = 4.751$, $P < 0.001$) and the actual professional growth rights ($F = 3.044$, $P < 0.001$) (See **Table 4**). Teachers with professional titles have higher scores on ideal democratic management than teachers without professional titles (3.65). Among them, teachers with senior professional titles in primary schools have the highest scores (4.14). Because most of the teachers with senior titles in primary schools are managers of kindergartens, they have greater expectations for democratic management. In terms of the actual professional growth rights, the scores of teachers in the third grade of primary school (4.06) and the second grade of primary school (3.92) are higher, because most of the teachers with these titles are new teachers with less working years, and kindergartens will give them more entry training opportunities.

Table 4. Analysis of the differences in professional autonomy of teachers with different professional titles.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference Analysis of Ideal Situation		Difference Analysis of Actual Situation	
	F-value	Significance	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	2.208	0.067	0.828	0.507
Management and evaluation of children's rights	0.718	0.580	0.889	0.470
Democratic management rights	4.751**	0.001	1.410	0.229
Professional growth rights	2.057	0.085	3.044*	0.017
Overall professional autonomy	1.750	0.138	1.377	0.240

*Note: ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

3.2.3. Teachers with Different Educational Backgrounds Showed Statistically Significant Differences in Their Perceptions of Ideal Democratic Management Rights

Teachers with a postgraduate degree rated the ideal democratic management

rights the highest (3.95), followed by those with a secondary technical school education or below (3.92). Teachers with a bachelor's degree rated it relatively lower (3.83), while those with an associate's degree gave the lowest ratings (3.56).

Furthermore, teachers with a postgraduate degree gave the highest ratings across all dimensions of ideal professional autonomy. However, their ratings for actual professional autonomy were notably low. This indicates that teachers with postgraduate qualifications have high expectations for professional autonomy and strongly desire to possess more autonomy, but their actual experience of it is quite limited. The reason may be that postgraduate-trained teachers are more eager to utilize their professional expertise and seek greater development opportunities within the kindergarten. When these expectations are not met in reality, it results in a low perception of their actual professional autonomy (**Table 5**).

Table 5. Analysis of the differences in the ideal situation of teachers' professional autonomy with different educational backgrounds.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference analysis of ideal condition	
	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	2.398	0.067
Management and evaluation of children's rights	0.857	0.463
Democratic management rights	5.727**	0.001
Professional growth rights	1.893	0.130
Overall professional autonomy	2.165	0.091

*Note: ** $P < 0.01$.

3.2.4. Teachers of Different Ages Have Significant Differences in the Ideal Democratic Management Right

Teachers aged 41 - 50 have the highest score on democratic management (4.02), and those over 51 have the lowest score (3.58). Because teachers aged 41 - 50 are mostly backbone teachers or managers of kindergartens, they have high expectations for democratic management rights. There were significant differences in the ideal democratic management right among teachers of different ages ($F = 3.717$, $P < 0.05$) (See **Table 6**).

Table 6. Analysis of the differences in the ideal situation of teachers' professional autonomy at different ages.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference analysis of ideal situation	
	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	2.106	0.098
Management and evaluation of children's rights	0.886	0.448
Democratic management rights	3.717*	0.011
Professional growth rights	0.721	0.540
Overall professional autonomy	1.716	0.163

*Note: $P < 0.05$.

3.2.5. Teachers of Different Teaching Ages Have Differences in Ideal Education and Teaching Rights, Democratic Management Rights, Professional Growth Rights and Overall Professional Autonomy

In terms of the rights to ideal education and teaching, teachers with 6 - 10 years of teaching experience have the highest score, hoping to have more autonomy in education and teaching (4.30), while teachers with 0 - 1 years of teaching experience have the lowest score (4.08). Their own education and teaching ability and experience are insufficient, and they lack the awareness of education and teaching autonomy. Teachers of different teaching ages have differences in ideal education and teaching rights ($F = 2.453$, $P < 0.05$), democratic management rights ($F = 4.401$, $P < 0.01$), professional growth rights ($F = 2.808$, $P < 0.05$) and overall professional autonomy ($F = 2.821$, $P < 0.05$) (See **Table 7**).

Table 7. Analysis of the differences in the ideal situation of teachers' professional autonomy of different teaching ages.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference analysis of ideal situation	
	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	2.453*	0.045
Management and evaluation of children's rights	1.830	0.121
Democratic management rights	4.401**	0.002
Professional growth rights	2.808*	0.025
Overall professional autonomy	2.821*	0.025

*Note: ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

3.3. Differences in Professional Autonomy among Kindergartens

3.3.1. There Are Extremely Significant Differences in the Ideal Democratic Management Rights and Professional Growth Rights of Teachers of Different Levels and Types of Kindergartens, and There Are also Differences in the Actual Democratic Management Rights

Teachers from Demonstration Kindergartens (3.96) and public kindergartens (3.97) rated both the ideal and actual democratic management rights higher than their counterparts from Non-demonstration Kindergartens (3.53) and private kindergartens (3.53). This indicates that, compared to teachers in non-demonstration and private kindergartens, those in demonstration and public kindergartens have higher expectations for democratic management rights and perceive these rights to be better realized in practice. Regarding ideal professional growth rights, however, teachers from Non-demonstration Kindergartens (4.69) and private kindergartens (4.70) gave higher ratings than those from Demonstration Kindergartens (4.52) and public kindergartens (4.51). The reason is that non-demonstration and private kindergartens generally receive less policy support from the education authorities, and their teachers have far fewer opportunities for professional development. Consequently, these teachers have a stronger desire for more professional growth rights (**Table 8**, **Table 9**).

Table 8. Analysis of the differences in the ideal situation of teachers' professional autonomy at different levels of kindergartens.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference analysis of ideal situation		Difference analysis of actual situation	
	F-value	Significance	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	1.113	0.292	0.390	0.533
Management and evaluation of children's rights	0.154	0.695	0.436	0.509
Democratic management rights	24.146**	0.000	5.149*	0.024
Professional growth rights	11.991**	0.001	0.200	0.655
Overall professional autonomy	2.893	0.090	0.656	0.418

*Note: ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

Table 9. Analysis of differences in the ideal state of professional autonomy by kindergarten type.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference analysis of ideal situation		Difference analysis of actual situation	
	F-value	Significance	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	1.070	0.301	0.356	0.551
Management and evaluation of children's rights	0.099	0.753	0.616	0.433
Democratic management rights	24.906***	0.000	5.739*	0.017
Professional growth rights	12.472***	0.000	0.314	0.576
Overall professional autonomy	2.852	0.092	0.622	0.431

*Note: *** $P < 0.001$, * $P < 0.05$.

3.3.2. There Are Significant Differences in the Actual Education and Teaching Rights, Democratic Management Rights and Overall Professional Autonomy of Teachers in Different Kindergarten Locations

Teachers in township kindergartens reported higher scores for actual education-teaching rights (3.87), democratic management rights (3.48), and overall professional autonomy (3.96) compared to their counterparts in prefecture-level city kindergartens (3.58, 3.08, and 3.71, respectively). This indicates that these aspects of professional autonomy are more readily realized for teachers working in township kindergartens (Table 10).

Table 10. An analysis of the differences in the ideal situation of teachers' professional autonomy in different kindergarten locations.

Professional Autonomy Dimension	Difference Analysis of Actual Situation	
	F-value	Significance
Education & teaching rights	4.649*	0.010
Management and evaluation of children's rights	1.202	0.301
Democratic management rights	4.464*	0.012
Professional growth rights	2.165	0.116
Overall professional autonomy	4.751**	0.009

*Note: ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$.

4. Discussion and Suggestions

4.1. Establishing and Improving the Legal System to Legally Protect Teachers' Professional Autonomy

The relevant legal systems established by the state serve as a crucial guarantee and political foundation for enabling early childhood teachers to enjoy and realize their professional autonomy. These laws provide a legal basis for teachers to exercise their professional autonomy and allow them to protect their legitimate rights and interests according to the law when such autonomy is infringed upon. Currently, Chinese legislation contains some stipulations regarding teachers' professional autonomy. For instance, the Teachers Law of the People's Republic of China, enacted in 1993, grants teachers the rights to conduct education and teaching, engage in scientific research, guide and evaluate students, receive remuneration, participate in democratic management, and pursue further training. Researchers note that, apart from the right to remuneration, the other five rights are directly related to teachers' professional autonomy (Wu, 2002). On November 8, 2024, the 12th Session of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress passed the Law of the People's Republic of China on Preschool Education, which will take effect on June 1, 2025. Article 40, Chapter 5, explicitly states: "Kindergarten teachers shall enjoy the rights prescribed by law and fulfill the obligations prescribed by law." Furthermore, Article 42 clarifies: "Kindergartens shall support teachers in participating in continuing education and professional training to enhance their professional competence and teaching abilities."

However, the law still lacks explicit clarification regarding the specific professional autonomy rights enjoyed by teachers, resulting in poor operability during practical implementation. Therefore, the state should further establish and improve the relevant legal framework. First, specific provisions concerning the professional autonomy of early childhood teachers must be formulated, clearly defining its scope and elaborating on its various aspects. This provides a reference for both teachers seeking to uphold their professional autonomy and administrators granting such autonomy. Second, efforts to publicize these relevant laws should be intensified to enhance understanding of professional autonomy as defined by the law among early childhood teachers and management departments, ensuring they know and abide by the law. Finally, safeguard mechanisms and remediation pathways for teachers' professional autonomy should be established. This enables teachers to restore and seek redress for infringed rights based on legal provisions when their professional autonomy is violated (Jiao & Yao, 2012).

4.2. Enhancing Teacher Professional Training to Improve Awareness and Capacity for Professional Autonomy

Existing research on factors influencing teachers' professional autonomy has found that teachers' own awareness and capacity regarding professional autonomy are significant internal factors affecting it (Jiao, 2012; Jiao & Yao, 2012). Only when teachers possess awareness of professional autonomy will they actively strive

for and safeguard it, and only with certain professional capacities can they exercise their professional autonomy reasonably and effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance teachers' awareness and capacity for professional autonomy through specialized training.

First, regarding the target participants for training, comprehensiveness should be emphasized. Whether they are kindergarten principals or ordinary teachers, master teachers or novice teachers, teachers from public or private kindergartens, or those with postgraduate degrees or associate degrees, all should have the opportunity to participate in training. This is because all these teachers are entitled to professional autonomy and should enhance their awareness and capacity through training. However, targeted training appropriate to the developmental level and characteristics of different participant groups' awareness and capacity for professional autonomy should be arranged. This approach ensures practical and effective improvement in the professional autonomy awareness and capacity of different teachers.

Second, concerning training content, topics such as modern theories of human rights, domestic and international laws and regulations on teachers' rights, and case studies of early childhood teachers' professional autonomy can be selected. This aims to guide teachers in establishing an awareness of professional autonomy, clarifying what professional autonomy they possess, and understanding how to correctly exercise and safeguard it. Content related to instructional leadership, self-reflection and evaluation skills, and classroom management abilities can also be included to help teachers develop the capacity to exercise their professional autonomy reasonably and effectively.

Third, in terms of training methods, a combination of various approaches should be utilized. In addition to traditional formats like academic conferences and expert lectures, methods such as case analysis, group discussions, individual exchanges, task-driven learning, and distance learning should be incorporated. By employing diverse and varied training formats, the initiative and enthusiasm of early childhood teachers to participate in training can be stimulated, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the training.

4.3. Improving Kindergarten Management Systems to Effectively Implement Teachers' Professional Autonomy

The professional autonomy of early childhood teachers is exercised within the framework of kindergarten management systems, which define the limits within which this autonomy can be practiced. China's "Kindergarten Work Regulations" stipulate that kindergartens implement a principal accountability system and regularly convene kindergarten affairs committee meetings to review significant issues concerning the kindergarten's operations. The regulations also require the establishment of a staff assembly or staff congress system to strengthen democratic management and supervision according to the law.

However, the findings of this study reveal that among the four dimensions of early childhood teachers' professional autonomy, the scores for democratic man-

agement autonomy were the lowest for both the ideal and actual states, and the gap between ideal and actual was also the largest. This indicates that teachers have low expectations regarding democratic management rights and, simultaneously, find it very difficult to enjoy these rights in their actual work.

Therefore, kindergarten principals should enhance the level of democratic management within their institutions by appropriately granting teachers certain democratic management rights. This involves enabling teachers to genuinely participate in kindergarten management, such as in curriculum review, personnel hiring, and institutional reforms. This approach not only helps increase teachers' sense of responsibility and mission in their work but also improves the scientific rigor of management decision-making in the kindergarten.

Furthermore, to prevent situations where principals act autocratically and teachers' democratic management rights are undermined, education authorities should supervise the democratic management practices of principals, ensuring the effective implementation of teachers' professional autonomy. It is important to note that the professional autonomy exercised by teachers is not without boundaries; it should be exercised within reasonable and legal limits.

4.4. Considering Urban-Rural Differences and Implement Tailored Empowerment Strategies for Teachers' Professional Autonomy

This study found that teachers in township kindergartens reported higher levels of actual professional autonomy across several dimensions compared to their urban counterparts. This counterintuitive finding suggests that enhancing teachers' professional autonomy does not require a single, universal approach. Instead, it is crucial to fully consider the urban-rural regional context of kindergartens and implement differentiated empowerment strategies.

First, for urban kindergartens, the focus of management reform should be on "streamlining" and "empowerment." Urban kindergartens are often subject to stringent administrative oversight and standardized curricula, while also facing high parental expectations and intervention, which collectively constrain teachers' autonomous decision-making space. Therefore, education administrative departments and kindergarten management should strive to simplify management processes, reduce unnecessary administrative interference and paperwork, and grant teachers greater flexibility in curriculum design and teaching methods. Simultaneously, initiatives like parent schools and home-kindergarten communication meetings should be used to guide parents in building trust in professional education, thereby creating a more relaxed environment where teachers feel empowered and capable of exercising their professional autonomy.

Second, for township kindergartens, the policy focus should be on "preserving advantages" and "addressing shortcomings." The relatively flexible management environment and higher degree of community trust in township settings form a fertile ground for teachers' professional autonomy, and this should be preserved. However, it is also necessary to address the potential limitations township teachers

may face in terms of professional development resources and opportunities. Therefore, policies should tilt resources towards these areas. Through targeted training, urban-rural pairing programs, and master teachers visiting township schools, the professional capacity of township teachers should be continuously enhanced. This ensures that the autonomy they are granted is built upon a solid foundation of professional competence, thereby transforming the advantage in autonomy into higher-quality educational practices.

In conclusion, recognizing the existence of urban-rural differences is only the first step; the key lies in translating this recognition into precise policies and practices. We recommend that when formulating and implementing policies related to teacher professional development, a “one-size-fits-all” approach should be avoided. Instead, regions and individual kindergartens should be encouraged and supported to explore and construct the most suitable pathways for realizing teachers’ professional autonomy, based on their unique administrative, cultural, and community contexts.

5. Conclusion

Professional autonomy is a fundamental right granted to teachers by law and is crucial for the professional development of early childhood educators. This study reveals that the perceived ideal state of professional autonomy among early childhood teachers scores higher than the actual situation, with a significantly positive correlation between the two. The scores for both the ideal and actual states of democratic management autonomy are the lowest among all dimensions, with the largest gap between expectation and reality. Furthermore, professional autonomy varies significantly based on individual teacher characteristics and kindergarten attributes.

Based on the findings of this study, future research should delve deeper into the following aspects: Firstly, research methods should be expanded by introducing qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews, case tracking, and participatory observation. This would provide a more vivid and profound understanding of the specific contexts, decision-making processes, and underlying motivations behind teachers’ exercise or relinquishment of professional autonomy in their daily work, thereby enriching the explanatory power of the research. Secondly, research content should be deepened. Future studies could focus more specifically on the characteristics of professional autonomy among groups such as “teachers with postgraduate degrees” and “teachers in township kindergartens,” and uncover the underlying reasons behind these characteristics.

It should be noted that this study has certain limitations. On the one hand, the research data primarily relied on teachers’ self-reports, which may be subject to social desirability bias. On the other hand, the sample was concentrated in a single city, and the generalizability of the findings needs to be further verified across broader geographical regions. These limitations also provide directions for improvement and further exploration in future research.

Subject Project

Jiangsu Higher Education Teaching Reform Research Project “Research on the Curriculum Integration System for the Infant and Child Care Services and Management Major in Higher Vocational Colleges under the ‘1 + X’ Certificate System” (No:2025JGYB669) & “Qinglan Program” of Jiangsu Universities.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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