

Article

Emotional Labor and Professional Identity in Chinese Early Childhood Teachers: The Gendered Moderation Models

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Abstract: The sustainable development of early childhood institutions in aging China calls for the sustainable development of early childhood teachers, which should attend to the balanced development between male and female teachers. Yet this issue has not been adequately investigated in the literature. To fill this research gap, this study explored the gender differences in Chinese early childhood (EC) teachers' professional identity (PI) and emotional labor strategies. Altogether, 250 teachers (146 female and 104 male, $M_{age} = 30.28$ years, $SD = 7.81$) from Southern China were sampled and surveyed. First, the independent samples t-tests revealed significant gender differences in teachers' PI, deep acting, and surface acting. Second, the structural equation modelling results demonstrated that PI fully mediated the relationship between teacher educational attainment, years of teaching experience, and natural and deep acting. Third, multigroup analysis confirmed different mediation paths for female and male teachers. These findings suggest that male and female early childhood teachers differed in their sense of PI and use of emotional labor strategies. Therefore, future policy-making efforts should design and implement teacher professional development (PD) programs and teacher support mechanisms catering to male EC teachers' needs, characteristics, and difficulties in the Chinese EC workforce.

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Keywords: early childhood teacher; professional identity; emotional labor

1. Introduction

Educational researchers have scrutinized teacher emotions (TE) as an essential element of teaching for the past three decades [1]. Guided by the cognitive behavior theory and social identity theory, TE are critical to teaching because teachers need to deal with their own and many others' emotional demands daily [2]; the way they manage these intricate matters links closely to the fulfillment of their teaching and caring duties [3,4]. Rising with the growing interest in teacher emotions is the theorization and research on teachers' emotional labor (EL). Existing studies have extensively explored the dimensionality of EL [5–7], its association with teachers' emotional intelligence [8,9], psychological and job-related wellbeing [10–13], and teachers' classroom teaching practice or student outcomes [14,15]. However, few studies have empirically examined the relationship between teachers' EL and their PI, especially those working in the sector of early childhood education and care (ECEC), to support the theory. This field requires teachers to be extra mindful in managing their own and young children's emotional states. In addition, although the ECEC workforce is characterized by a persistently female-dominated profession [16], there is a dearth of evidence on whether gender plays a part in affecting the association between EL and PI. No studies, so far, have examined the gender differences in Chinese EC teachers' PI and EL strategies. To fill the research gaps, this study adopted Grandey's [17] integrative model of EL and social identity theory to investigate if gender

functions as a moderator in the association between EL and PI. The findings of this study will provide empirical evidence about the EL strategies and PI profile of a group of teachers who are underpaid and facing a daunting workload [18] yet still under-represented in the current literature [19]. Also, the special focus on gender will yield valuable findings for policymakers to reflect on and improve the gender equality policies to give rise to a more professional and sustainable ECEC workforce.

2. Literature Review

2.1. EL in Teachers and Teaching

According to Hochschild [20], EL refers to ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (p. 7). Although this concept was initially used to describe the work mainly conducted by employees in the service sector (e.g., shop clerks, flight attendants, waiters, or waitresses), it has gained abundant attention from researchers studying other occupation groups that entail a higher level of professionalism [7,9]. For example, lawyers, nurses, and teachers. Teaching has been perceived as an emotional practice in the literature because it fulfills Hochschild’s [20] three work criteria that entail EL [21]. First, it requires face-to-face contact between teachers and others around them, including students, colleagues, leaders, and parents, to name a few [22]. Second, it requires teachers to produce emotional states (e.g., joy, fear, anxiety, etc.) in their students and other people. Third, there is a degree of external control over teachers’ EL, which usually comes from cultural norms or professional rules [23]. In the education arena, EL is viewed as teachers’ effort ‘to inhibit, generate, and manage their feeling and expression of emotions according to the normative beliefs and expectations held about the teaching profession’ [24] (p. 56).

In her conceptualization of EL, Hochschild [20] identified two major EL strategies: surface acting (SA) and deep acting (DA). Specifically, SA refers to displaying emotions that are not a true reflection of one’s genuinely felt emotions. Thus, SA usually involves some degree of ‘faking’, such as teachers may hide their negative emotions during teaching by pretending to be positive. In contrast, DA relates to one’s effort to alter their emotions and feelings by employing cognitive techniques such as self-persuasion and distraction as per the emotional rule of the profession [7,25]. In addition, Diefendorff et al. [6] suggested the third EL strategy, namely, the expression of naturally felt emotions or genuine expression. This strategy refers to one’s expression of the emotions they actually experienced [14]. These EL strategies reflect Grandey’s [17] argument that individuals’ ability to regulate their own emotions underlies all conceptualizations of EL. Based on this notion, Grandey [17] suggested the integrative framework of EL, which consists of four parts: (1) the situational cues that elicit an individual’s EL, such as interactional expectations and emotional events; (2) the individual’s emotional regulation processes, manifested through the EL strategies aforementioned; (3) the personal (i.e., education, emotional intelligence) and organizational factors (i.e., support from company or co-workers) that shape one’s emotion regulation; and (4) the long-term consequences of EL, covering both the individual and organizational wellbeing. This seminal framework provides a comprehensive description of the mechanisms that underpin the relationship between EL and its antecedents and consequences [19].

2.2. Teacher PI and Its Relationship with EL

PI refers to an individual’s recognition and sense of devotion to a certain profession [26]. Despite a lack of agreement on the definition of teacher PI (or teacher identity), it has received much research attention over the past two decades. This is partly because teacher identity stands ‘at the core of the teaching profession’ [27] (p. 15) and functions as a framework to organize and enrich their professional lives [28]. In this study, teacher PI is defined as how they understand their role as teachers and how they present the teacher image to others [15]. Prior research has shown that teacher PI is not a fixed personal

character; rather, it develops throughout each teacher's entire career course, with a wide range of internal and external factors contributing to this dynamic and complex process [28,29]. Despite the increasing volume of research on Chinese teachers' PI, most prior studies focused on those working with children in higher grade levels [30,31] or pre-service ECEC teachers [32,33], leaving the in-service ECEC teachers an under-researched group.

Social identity theory denotes that the identity of oneself and the community is formed by self-conception, social background, and contextual factors [34]. Consequently, teachers would take certain actions, such as resignation or seeking internal recognition. In the growing literature tapping into the role of teachers' emotional experiences in relation to their PI formation [35–37], there is a dearth of empirical studies exploring the relationship between teachers' EL and their PI. Schutz and Lee [38] suggested the potential impact of teachers' experienced emotional episodes and the associated EL on their identity formation. However, this statement has not been verified by empirical evidence. Recently, Kocabaş-Gedik and Ortaçtepe Hart [39] studied two novice language teachers' working experience and found that three factors (i.e., educational background, competence in a local language, supportive discourse in a workplace) contributed to not only teachers' different EL strategies, but also enabled their successful emotional navigation practice, which in turn, facilitated the construction of their PI as language teachers. O'Connor's [40] case study illustrated how teachers perceived and undertook EL to fulfill their teaching professional demands. Meanwhile, one teacher viewed herself as a 'performer' since teaching entailed a great deal of 'acting', and another teacher felt that the caring attitude she displayed towards the students was no mere performance. Brown et al.'s [41] quantitative research revealed that all the participating K–12 teachers engaged in EL. Teachers' knowledge of the school's emotional rules correlated with their heightened level of deep and surface acting, and their teaching experience was significantly correlated with their deep acting. The findings of these studies underlined the relevance of teachers' EL in forming their PI; however, the relationship between these two constructs has largely been explored qualitatively [36,39,40]. Therefore, the present study aimed to address this matter by employing a quantitative survey research design. Also, given the importance of the gender factor as described in the next section, we explored the role played by gender in this relationship.

2.3. Gender Difference in EL and PI in Teachers

Gender has been examined as one of the most important individual factors in teacher EL studies [42]. This is partly because the teaching profession, particularly the education and care of preschool-aged children, has long been female-dominated work due to the stereotypical belief that females are more suitable for this profession's nurturing and caring nature. Gender difference has also been widely detected in individuals working in other professions regarding their emotional experience and management [43,44]. Although there is a sizeable body of studies examining the gender factor in teachers' EL, the findings of these studies have been mixed. For example, a number of studies found that male teachers tend to use more surface acting than female teachers [8,45,46]. However, Akin et al.'s [47] study revealed an opposite pattern in which female primary teachers prefer using both surface and deep acting more often than male teachers. Also, Akin et al. [47] found no gender difference in the genuine emotions scores. However, different from the above studies, Meier et al.'s [42] research drew the conclusion that gender is not an influential variable in teachers' EL. So far, there is still limited evidence on what role gender plays in the ECEC teachers' EL. This matter needs to be empirically examined if we are to gain a better understanding of female and male ECEC teachers' emotional practice at work. However, most studies examining the gender difference in teachers' EL had an unbalanced gender distribution of the sample [8,9]. This study addresses this limitation by sampling an approximately equal number of female and male ECEC teachers.

Gender also plays an important role in affecting the development of ECEC teachers' PI. This is especially true for a heavily gender-skewed occupation within and beyond the Chinese context. Doğan and Erdiller Yatmaz [28] compared Turkish female and male ECEC teachers' perceptions of PI. They found that female teachers viewed teaching in the early childhood sector as more valuable and attractive than male teachers. Low salaries, struggles in gaining social recognition, and standing up to sociocultural biases are among the numerous difficulties that make ECEC less attractive and valuable work to male teachers. However, there is a scarcity in the current literature concerning the gender issue in Chinese ECEC teachers' PI. Given the similar working environment and the public perception of ECEC as a 'feminized' profession, male teachers in the Chinese ECEC workforce could face the same sort of obstacles that undermine their PI. Xu and Xu's [48] recent investigation found that Chinese female ECEC teachers in a south-western city scored higher on average than male teachers in their recognition as kindergarten teachers, albeit such difference was not statistically significant.

2.4. The Context of This Study

ECEC service consists of two levels in China, with nurseries and kindergartens providing childcare and education services for children aged 0–3 and 3–6. In 2010, the central government launched a new wave of national campaigns to tackle the '3A' problems (accessibility, accountability, affordability) that had plagued the ECEC sector for decades, causing parents' widespread dissatisfaction with the country's ECEC provision [49,50]. Since then, raising the overall and domain-specific quality of ECEC has become of paramount importance for kindergartens, families, local governments, and the nation. Despite the '3A' problems having been partially resolved after more than 10 years of continuous efforts made by governments at various levels, the quality of ECEC remains the core concern for all stakeholders. This is notably reflected in the 2018 State Council document—Several Opinions of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening Reform and Regulating Development of Preschool Education [51]. In this document, the state authority stated that by 2035, a more accessible, universal, affordable, and high-quality ECEC system should be established across the country. The fulfillment of this long-term target has recently become even more relevant and crucial, as China officially announced its 3rd child policy in 2021 to address the rapidly aging population problem. Among the proposed measures to further improve the quality and ensure the sustainable development of the ECEC field, the building and maintaining of a professional, competent, and committed ECEC workforce becomes a matter of utmost priority.

Despite the enormous efforts that the Chinese government has made to develop the ECEC sector, the existing evidence shows that, as in other countries, Chinese kindergarten teachers' average salary remains significantly lower than their counterparts working in primary and secondary schools [52]. Also, high parental expectations, insufficient professional development, heavy workload, pressures from the kindergarten leadership as well as the local educational authority, among other factors, contribute to teachers' high level of job stress and emotional exhaustion, which, in turn, lead to their burnout and high turnover rate [19,53]. In addition, given the conspicuous gender unbalance of the ECEC workforce, it is likely that teachers of the opposite gender could experience obstacles of various magnitude and nature in their daily educational practices and, over time, develop different perceptions of their PI. Furthermore, female teachers are generally assumed to be better at coping with other people and attribute more importance to friendly and harmonious social relationships than male teachers [17]. Therefore, they may use different EL strategies from male teachers. However, no prior study has empirically examined the relationship between teachers' EL and PI in a Chinese context, with the gender factor being considered. Therefore, this study is dedicated to filling this research gap to provide both theoretical and empirical evidence on this issue. The following research questions guided the current study:

1. Are there gender differences in teachers' PI and EL strategies?
2. What is the relationship between teacher demographic statistics, PI, and EL strategies?
3. Does gender moderate the association between teachers' PI and EL strategies?

Drawing on the literature review and research questions, we proposed the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *There are significant gender differences in teachers' PI and EL strategies.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Teachers' PI predicts EL strategies.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Gender moderates the association between teachers' PI and EL strategies.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

The participants were sampled in two ways: (1) Female teachers were recruited through stratified random sampling. Thirteen preschools from a coastal city in southern China were selected, and teachers from these preschools were invited to participate in the study. A total of 154 teachers were invited, and 146 teachers agreed to participate, all of which were female teachers. (2) Male teachers were sampled by employing the snowballing technique. This is primarily due to the scarcity of male teachers working in Chinese ECEC settings. We asked the male teachers to share the link to the survey with other male teachers they personally know or forward the link to online chat groups that include male ECE teachers. Eventually, 111 male participants agreed to fill out the questionnaire. However, five of them were excluded due to the non-teaching positions (such as an electrician) they held; another two were also excluded due to their highly similar responses to the questionnaire items. The final sample included 104 male ECEC teachers. Given the sampling method, the sample was adequately representative of the teaching population in China.

Thus, a total sample of 250 teachers were included in this study (146 female and 104 male, see Table 1), with a mean age of 30.28 years ($SD = 7.81$; $M_{female} = 31.17$, $SD_{female} = 8.79$; $M_{male} = 29.03$; $SD_{male} = 6.01$), mean teaching experiences of 6.54 years ($SD = 5.26$; $M_{female} = 6.76$, $SD_{female} = 5.21$; $M_{male} = 6.28$; $SD_{male} = 5.35$), as well as diverse educational attainment and positions in the preschool (see Table 1). There were significant differences identified between female and male teachers, with male teachers being younger, having higher educational attainment, but less likely to have ECE-related degrees, and more likely to hold administrative positions. Teachers' years of teaching experience did not show any gender-related difference.

Table 1. Demographic descriptive of participants (female = 146, male = 104).

	Female <i>n</i> (%)	Male <i>n</i> (%)
Age		
≤25 years old	51 (34.9%)	39 (37.5%)
26–30 years old	33 (22.6%)	29 (27.9%)
31–35 years old	20 (13.7%)	20 (19.2%)
36–40 years old	14 (9.6%)	9 (8.7%)
> 40 years old	28 (19.2%)	7 (6.7%)
ECE Degree		
Yes	117 (80.1%)	69 (66.3%)
No	29 (19.9%)	35 (33.7%)
Teacher Education		

Junior middle school	9 (6.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Senior middle school	17 (11.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Associate	53 (36.3%)	18 (17.3%)
Bachelor	66 (45.2%)	83 (79.8%)
Master and above	1 (0.7%)	3 (2.9%)
Years of teaching experience		
<1 year	5 (3.4%)	5 (4.8%)
1–5 years	67 (45.9%)	52 (50.0%)
6–10 years	49 (33.6%)	28 (26.9%)
11–15 years	14 (9.6%)	12 (11.5%)
16–20 years	9 (6.2%)	5 (4.8%)
>20 years	2 (1.4%)	2 (1.9%)
Position		
Administrative	0 (0.0%)	23 (22.1%)
PE teacher	0 (0.0%)	41 (39.4%)
Class teacher	103 (70.5%)	40 (38.5%)
Care teacher	43 (29.5%)	0 (0.0%)

3.2. Measurement

3.2.1. Teacher PI

Teachers' PI was measured using the *Role Values* subscale of the *Chinese Teachers' Professional Identity Scale* (TPIS) [54]. This subscale contains 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) that describe the extent to which teachers felt about the teaching profession at their work (e.g., "A career in teaching can fulfill my life's values"). A higher overall score denotes a higher level of teacher PI. The Cronbach alpha for the teachers' PI was 0.902.

3.2.2. Teacher EL

Teachers' surface acting, deep acting, and natural acting of EL strategies were measured by the *Teacher Emotional Labor Strategy Scale* (TELSS) [6]. Its Chinese version has been validated by Yin [7] and used in the current study. Teachers were instructed to rate the extent to which they employed different EL strategies in their interactions with children, such as surface acting (six items; e.g., "I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display for my job."), deep acting (four items; e.g., "I make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display towards students and their parents"), and expression of naturally felt emotions (three items; e.g., "The emotions I show students or their parents come naturally"). A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used. The Cronbach's α coefficients for the current study reached an acceptable level ($\alpha_{\text{surface}} = 0.77$, $\alpha_{\text{deep}} = 0.64$, and $\alpha_{\text{natural}} = 0.74$).

3.2.3. Teachers' Demographic Variables

Teachers' demographic variables such as their age, educational level, attainment of ECE-related degrees, years of teaching experience, and their positions in the preschool (administrative, PE teacher, class teacher, or care teacher) were collected using the survey questionnaire.

3.3. Procedure

First, ethical approval was obtained from the first author's University Human Research Ethics Committee. Then, thirteen preschools were recruited through stratified random sampling. The preschool principals were contacted and given a detailed explanation of the research purpose. After gaining their approval, the teachers were invited to participate, and with their informed consent, a link to an online questionnaire platform

(“Wenjuanxing” or Questionnaire Star) [55] was sent to them. Teachers were instructed to follow the steps to complete the survey questionnaire. All participants were not exposed to any harm or unpleasant situation. They were all granted full freedom to choose to participate willingly in or withdraw from the study at any time point without any negative consequences whatsoever. This is in line with the best practice proposed by Petousi and Sifaki [55]. Data drawn from all the participants were saved, transcribed, and cleaned before using them for data analyses.

3.4. Data Analysis Plan

First, correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship among teacher demographic variables, PI, and the three EL strategies. A paired *t*-test was used to examine the difference between male and female teachers regarding the study variables using SPSS 26. Next, the measurement models for teachers’ professional identity and emotional labor were explored via the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Mplus 8.0 was applied to perform this analysis. The initial model fit indices were not satisfactory: χ^2/df (416.36/146) = 2.857, RMSEA = 0.086, CFI = 0.838, TLI = 0.810, and SRMR = 0.088. A review of modification indices suggested that two items were highly correlated, and two had low factor loadings (<0.04). Thus, they were removed from the model. The revised model yielded good model fit: χ^2/df (179.55/84) = 2.138, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.928, TLI = 0.910, and SRMR = 0.055.

Second, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to explore the relationship between teachers’ PI and EL, controlling for their educational attainment and years of teaching experience. Given the cross-sectional design of the study, we also examined another model with a reverse relationship to further test our hypothesis [56]. Based on the results, a bootstrap mediation analysis was conducted further to explore the mediating role of teacher PI.

Third, we examined whether the relationship between PI and EL varied between male and female teachers. Measurement invariant was examined, and configural invariant was confirmed [57]. Multigroup analysis with gender as a grouping variable was used to explore the significant model in the previous SEM analysis [58].

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Analysis, and Gender Differences

The means and standard deviations for teacher PI and the three EL strategies are presented in Table 2, along with the associations among teacher demographic statistics, PI, and EL strategies. The correlational analyses showed that teachers’ educational attainment was negatively correlated with their perception of PI. However, teachers’ years of teaching experience were positively correlated with their perception of PI. In other words, the longer they teach, the higher the level of their PI tends to be. Also, teachers’ PI was positively correlated with their natural and deep acting but not with surface acting. In terms of the relationship among the three EL strategies, the analyses showed that teachers’ deep acting was positively correlated with their natural acting and surface acting.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of the study variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Year ¹	1				
2. Identity	0.22 ***	1			
3. Natural	0.09	0.50 ***	1		
4. Deep	0.07	0.33 ***	0.41 ***	1	
5. Surface	0.07	0.11	0.09	0.53 ***	1
<i>M</i>	6.56	4.24	4.34	4.10	3.46
<i>SD</i>	5.27	0.71	0.59	0.59	0.79

Note: *** $p < 0.001$. ¹ Years of teaching experience.

A series of independent samples *t*-tests were also conducted to examine the potential gender differences in demographic variables and the study variables (see Table 3). Descriptive analysis of the variables (education, year of teaching experience, professional identity, natural, deep, and surface acting) within each group showed that the skewness and kurtosis of these variables were mostly less than 1.96, except for female teachers' years of teaching experience (kurtosis = 4.24) and natural acting (kurtosis = 2.44). Therefore, years of teaching experience and natural acting were excluded from the *t*-test. Results showed significant differences between male and female teachers regarding their educational attainment, PI, deep acting, and surface acting. This finding supports H1 that there are significant gender differences in teachers' PI and EL strategies.

Table 3. Gender differences in the study variables.

Variables	Male (M ± SD)	Female (M ± SD)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Education	3.86 (0.43)	3.23 (0.89)	7.41	221	0.00	0.95
Year	6.28 (5.35)	6.76 (5.21)	−0.71	218	0.48	−0.09
Identity	3.99 (0.84)	4.43 (0.54)	−4.7	162	0.00	−0.64
Natural	4.24 (0.62)	4.37 (0.57)	−1.66	212	0.10	−0.21
Deep	4.21 (0.53)	4.02 (0.62)	2.32	239	0.01	0.33
Surface	3.69 (0.75)	3.30 (0.78)	3.97	226	0.00	0.51

4.2. The Relationship between PI and EL

We performed SEM analysis to explore the relationship between teachers' PI and EL. Teachers' educational attainment and years of teaching experience were entered into the model. The fit of the overall model appeared excellent: χ^2/df (231.25/106) = 2.182, RMSEA = 0.069, CFI = 0.915, TLI = 0.891, and SRMR = 0.056. Results showed that teacher PI predicted natural acting ($\beta = 0.616$, $p < 0.001$) and deep acting ($\beta = 0.476$, $p < 0.001$), but did not predict surface acting ($\beta = 0.002$, $p > 0.05$); although, teachers' educational attainment and years of teaching experience did not predict any of the teachers' EL strategies ($ps > 0.05$), but they did predict teachers' PI ($\beta = -0.208$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.255$, $p < 0.001$). Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, we explored a reversed model in which teachers' EL strategies were examined as potential predictors of teachers' PI. However, the resultant model fit indices were unsatisfactory (χ^2/df (313.59/109) = 2.877, RMSEA = 0.087, CFI = 0.861, TLI = 0.827, and SRMR = 0.100). This finding supports our proposed model and H2 that teachers' PI predicts EL strategies (see Figure 1).

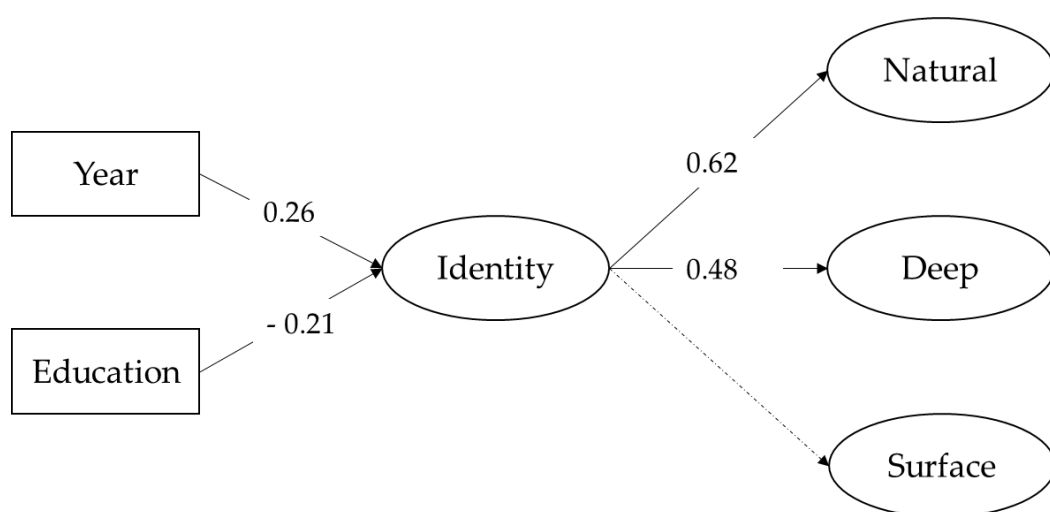


Figure 1. SEM result of teacher demographic variables, PI, and EL strategies.

Given the above SEM results, we further examined whether teacher PI mediated the relationship between teachers' educational attainment, years of teaching experience, and EL strategies. The fitness of the mediation model appeared to be excellent: χ^2/df (117.419/57) = 2.174, RMSEA = 0.065, CFI = 0.945, TLI = 0.925, and SRMR = 0.042. This result demonstrates the full mediation effect of teacher PI (see Table 4).

Table 4. Mediation analysis for the paths from teacher demographic variables to EL strategies.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Education → Natural acting	0.029	[-0.084, 0.142]
Education → Deep acting	0.087	[-0.046, 0.219]
Year → Natural acting	-0.042	[-0.174, 0.090]
Year → Deep acting	-0.058	[-0.198, 0.082]
Education → PI → Natural acting	-0.127	[-0.207, -0.047]
Education → PI → Deep acting	-0.098	[-0.163, -0.032]
Year → PI → Natural acting	0.157	[0.072, 0.243]
Year → PI → Deep acting	0.121	[0.051, 0.191]

Note. Bold indicates significant results.

4.3. Moderating Role of Gender

Gender differences in the associations among teacher demographic variables, PI, and EL strategies were tested. First, the PI, natural acting, and deep acting measurement model was examined (χ^2/df (84.029/41) = 2.049, RMSEA = 0.065, CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.937, and SRMR = 0.040). Next, the measurement invariance for the scales was confirmed with configural invariance achieved (χ^2/df (128.353/82) = 1.565, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.938, and SRMR = 0.049). Then, multigroup analyses were conducted to examine the moderating role of gender in the association among teacher demographic variables, PI, natural acting, and deep acting. Each of the fully constrained model paths was constrained to be equal across male and female teachers, and the models were then compared with the fully unconstrained model. A Satorra-Bentler chi-squared test indicated significant differences between the two comparing models. The analysis showed significant differences when the path from the year of teaching experience to deep acting and PI was constrained to be equal, indicating significant gender differences in these two paths ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.62$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p = 0.010$; $\Delta\chi^2 = 5.20$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p = 0.023$). This finding supports H3 that gender moderates the association between teachers' PI and EL strategies. When looking back at the baseline model, different path coefficients can be observed (see Figure 2).

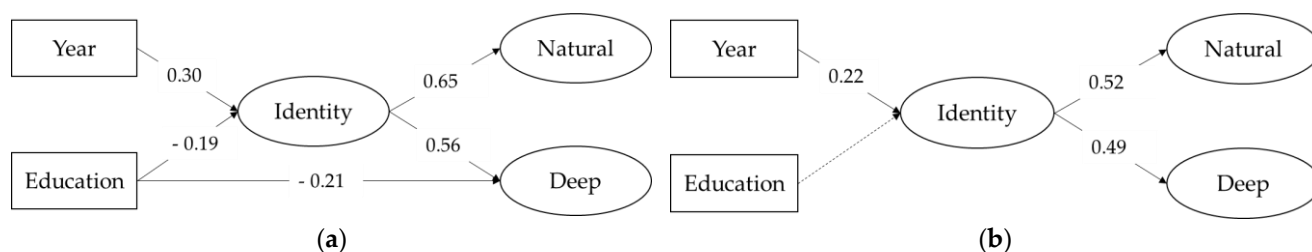


Figure 2. Moderating role of gender in the associations among teacher demographic variables, PI, and EL strategies: (a) SEM results for male teachers; (b) SEM results for female teachers.

5. Discussion

Based on a quantitative research design, this study revealed gender differences among a group of Mainland Chinese ECEC teachers concerning their PI and EL strategies, supporting the findings of previous studies [28,48]. Also, the present study showed that teachers' PI fully mediated the relationship between teachers' educational attainment,

years of teaching experience, and their EL strategies. Furthermore, multiple group analyses demonstrated different paths for male and female teachers regarding the association between their demographic factors, PI, and EL strategies. This section discusses these findings and the implications for educational practices and policymaking in the Chinese ECEC context.

5.1. Gender Differences in EL and PI

Although teacher emotion has received increasing research attention in the past decade, the current literature has not yet concluded the gender difference in teachers' EL strategies [8,45–47]. This study reveals that male Chinese ECEC teachers used more surface acting and deep acting than their female counterparts. This finding differed from that of Akin et al.'s [47] study, which reported an opposite pattern (i.e., female teachers preferred using both surface and deep acting more often than male teachers). Such contradictory findings might be attributed to the different target participants involved in these studies. Akin et al.'s [47] research focused on teachers working in primary schools, where the gender imbalance of the teacher cohort is less pronounced. The current study involved teachers from early childhood education and care settings, where female teachers markedly outnumber male teachers. Thus, male teachers working in such conditions might feel under extra pressure to not only manage the wide array of emotional events in their daily interaction with preschool-aged children [59] but also deal with such difficulties as low salaries, low social status, and all other sorts of stereotypical opinions about them as ECEC teachers. These unfavorable conditions could potentially lead to their frequent exercise of surface acting and deep acting, which, according to some researchers [60,61], are stressful and resource-depleting. On the other hand, natural acting is generally considered an adaptive way to regulate one's emotions. Our finding that male and female ECEC teachers did not differ significantly in their practice of natural acting reflects that they did not differ in the effort to express feelings they actually experienced in a genuine way.

Previous research has established that gender is important in shaping teachers' PI. The current study found that female ECEC teachers' perception of PI was significantly higher than male teachers, indicating female teachers' higher level of self-recognition as ECEC professionals. Such finding corroborates Doğan and Erdiller Yatmaz's [28] research with a group of Turkish ECEC teachers. It also goes hand in hand with public perception of ECEC as a 'feminized' profession, which may negatively affect male teachers' perception of their occupation and how they relate themselves to this line of the profession [48]. According to Kristeva's philosophical conception of identity as being constantly constructed [62], the PI of ECEC teachers is formed, influenced, and (re)shaped by their individual context, social status, and early childhood practice environment in different countries [59]. Consequently, Chinese male ECEC teachers' lower PI than female ECEC teachers was due to the gendered constructions of early childhood teaching and their low social status in China.

5.2. PI as Mediator between Teacher Demographics Variables and EL

Grandey's integrative model illustrates the complex mechanism underneath the relationship between EL and its antecedents and consequences [23]. However, most prior studies primarily focused on examining the consequences of teachers' EL, such as burnout and job satisfaction [63], leaving the antecedents of teachers' EL less explored. The findings of this study add to our understanding of the complicated relationship between teachers' EL and the relevant constructs. We found that teachers' PI mediated the relationship between teachers' educational attainment, years of teaching experiences, and their EL strategies. This finding shed new light on how a host of personal factors may influence teachers' emotional regulation practice. Also, the reverse SEM demonstrated that teachers' PI predicted their employment of the EL strategies. In addition, it is interesting to note that although teachers' educational attainment and years of teaching experiences did not predict their emotional regulation strategies, this link was fully mediated

by teachers' PI. Thus, teachers' EL may stem from both 'professionalism' and the gendered identity constructions of the profession [64], which lead to a positive effect of teachers' years of teaching experience and a negative effect of educational attainment on PI and EL strategy.

5.3. Gender Moderates the Relationship between PI and EL

To investigate whether gender moderates the relationship between PI and EL, we performed a series of multigroup analyses. In line with the existing literature, gender invariance was achieved to measure EL strategies [58], indicating no significant individual differences. However, the path from PI to EL suggested that male and female teachers felt differently in the early years teaching profession. For a start, male teachers' years of teaching experience are positively and directly related to their PI and positively and indirectly related to their natural and deep acting. This indicates that male teachers' PI grew with their teaching experience. They gradually understood that early years education is an occupation with strong professionalism that requires not only a set of specialized knowledge and skills but also professional management and display of teachers' own emotions and their sincere love for children [59]. This understanding leads to male teachers' use of deep acting, a strategy adopted with goodwill, and natural acting, which always seems adaptive [60,61]. However, male teachers' educational attainment was negatively and directly related to their PI and negatively and indirectly related to their natural and deep acting. This might be explained by the low social status of early-year teaching and the gendered profession identity that weigh on male teachers with higher educational attainment [59,65]. Education is also negatively and directly related to male teachers' use of deep acting, further revealing the problem that the higher educational attainment of male teachers, the less willingness they show to practice deep acting, despite the emotional demand of the job.

On the other hand, female teachers showed some different features from male teachers. Female teachers' years of teaching experience are positively and directly related to their PI and positively and indirectly related to their natural and deep acting, similar to that of male teachers. Despite existing evidence indicating that females are thought to be more emotionally expressive and tend to use maladaptive ways to regulate their emotions [17,66], the current study found no difference between male and female teachers when years of teaching experience are considered. However, female teachers' educational attainment showed no relationship to their PI or EL. This might also be explained by the gendered identity construction that females are more suitable for the nurturing and caring nature of this profession [44,64]. Future studies should include more relevant variables, such as teachers' wellbeing, to further understand the gender differences in the early years teaching profession.

6. Conclusions

This study set out to understand the gender differences in Chinese early childhood teachers' PI and EL strategies. The main findings of this research extended the existing literature on gender differences in the early years teaching profession. The paired sample t-test revealed that male and female teachers differed significantly in their PI, deep acting, and surface acting. The male teachers' tendency to practice surface and deep acting implies the potential extra pressure they face in their daily educational practice. The bootstrap mediation analysis indicated that teachers' PI fully mediated the relationship between teachers' educational attainment, years of teaching experiences, and the EL strategies they adopted. This finding accentuates the significant role of teacher identity in affecting how ECEC teachers of different professional development stage manage the emotional aspects of their educational practices. Moreover, the multigroup analysis revealed that the paths from teacher demographic variables to their EL via PI were significantly different between female and male teachers.

Second, the findings of this study have some policy and practice implications. Male and female teachers play important roles in young children's holistic development, despite the long-standing perception that the early-year teaching profession is suitable for females. Currently, the social status of early-year teachers is relatively low in the Chinese context, driven primarily by the lack of policy support and the public's misunderstandings about the nature of the profession. This research indicated that more targeted and domain-specific educational policy and sustainable financial support for the ECEC sector are urgently needed to further raise ECEC teachers' social status and income level. In particular, more social resources should be mobilized to highlight the social value of this profession and cultivate an ECEC workforce whose emotional states are always monitored, supported, and positively nurtured. Furthermore, despite the study focused on teachers from China, it implies for policymakers in the ECEC field around the globe that more attention should be paid to male ECEC teachers. In designing and implementing teacher professional development (PD) programs and teacher support mechanisms, the needs, characteristics, and difficulties of male ECEC teachers cannot be overlooked if their full potential and commitment to this profession are to be achieved. In such a way, a more sustainable early childhood education workforce can be built, laying a solid foundation based on which the overall quality of the nation's ECEC service can be lifted in the long run.

Finally, the findings of this study indicated directions for future investigations in the research community. First, the integrative model suggests that the relationship between teachers' EL, emotional intelligence, psychological capital, and individual and organizational wellbeing should be extensively explored to further understand the gender differences in early-year teaching. Second, in-depth interviews with both male and female teachers can lead to deep insight into their teaching experience; such understanding can serve as the basis for developing gender-targeted professional development opportunities responsive to their practical needs. Finally, since this study sampled only some kindergarten teachers in Shenzhen, southern China, the sampling approach and sample size have limited the generalization of the findings. Cross-regional/national/cultural studies will be valuable in the future since PI and EL are influenced by a wide range of contextual events, personal educational and working experiences, as well as other social, cultural, economic, and individual factors.

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