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A Study of the Present Situation of Occupational Well-Being among Kindergarten Teachers

—Based on OECD "Teachers' Well-Being: Data Collection and Analysis Framework"

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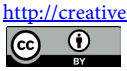

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Abstract

Drawing from the OECD's "Teachers' Well-being: Data Collection and Analysis Framework", this study investigates the current state of occupational well-being among 394 kindergarten teachers in Suzhou. It reveals that the overall level of occupational well-being among kindergarten teachers is at the middle level, with the highest social well-being and the lowest physical and mental well-being; There are significant differences in the occupational well-being of kindergarten teachers in terms of teaching experience and professional titles. Kindergarten teachers with more than 16 years of teaching experience have the highest occupational well-being, while kindergarten teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience have significantly lower occupational well-being than other teachers; Senior kindergarten teachers have the highest sense of occupational well-being, while kindergarten teachers with second level titles have significantly lower levels of occupational well-being compared to other teachers. Based on research data, in order to enhance the occupational well-being of kindergarten teachers, this study suggests paying attention to the physical and mental well-being, and strengthening the health support system; inspiring a sense of well-being throughout the entire career process and optimizing the career development strategies for kindergarten teachers; creating a good professional environment for kindergarten teachers to reduce their workload and enhance their abilities.

Keywords

Kindergarten Teachers, Occupational Well-Being

1. Introduction

In recent years, paying attention to and promoting the acquisition of teachers' occupational well-being is a key issue of the Chinese government's teacher education policy, and it is also an ardent demand for the development of teachers' groups. As an important part of China' s basic education teacher system, kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being directly affects the stability of kindergarten teachers and the quality of early childhood education. However, the professional environment of high job requirements and low job support makes many kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being face severe challenges. Some researchers have investigated kindergarten teachers in underdeveloped areas of Guangdong (Cao & Yang, 2014) and Anyang in Henan (Hu, 2016), and found that teachers' occupational well-being is not high or at a general level. Therefore, the occupational well-being of kindergarten teachers needs urgent attention.

At present, the evaluation of kindergarten teachers' professional well-being in China's domestic research often focuses on a certain level of well-being, such as subjective well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being, and fails to integrate different levels of well-being. However, the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) "Teacher's Well-being: A Framework for Data Collection and Analysis" (2020) is more comprehensive. It includes four levels of cognitive well-being, subjective well-being, physical and mental well-being and social well-being, reflecting the complete appearance of teachers' professional well-being (OECD, 2020). It realizes the unity of physical and psychological, personal and social aspects of teachers' occupational well-being. Therefore, this study uses the "framework" as a research tool to investigate the current situation of kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being in Suzhou City, China, so as to understand the whole picture of kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being and put forward reasonable suggestions for improving their occupational well-being.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Object

Table 1. The basic situation of the subjects.

Item	Category	Number of people	Percentage
Gender	Male	61	15.48%
	Female	333	84.52%
Teaching experience	Below 5 years	281	71.32%
	6 - 10 years	62	15.74%
	11 - 15 years	15	3.80%
	Over 16 years	36	9.14%
Educational level	Associate degree or below	87	22.08%
	Bachelor's degree or above	307	77.92%

Continued

Professional titles	Not yet ranked	197	50.00%
	Kindergarten Level 2	152	38.58%
	Kindergarten Level 1	43	10.92%
	Senior	2	0.5%

*Note: Participants' professional titles were categorized as: "Not yet ranked" (the entry-level status for new teachers), "Kindergarten Level 2", "Kindergarten Level 1", and "Senior" (the highest rank, denoting expert status). This title system is a government-standardized framework that signifies a teacher's career progression and is a central component of their professional identity in China.

In this study, kindergarten teachers of different regions and different levels in Suzhou were selected as the research objects to investigate the current situation of their occupational well-being. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed in this study, and 394 valid questionnaires were recovered, with a recovery rate of 98.5%. The composition of the subjects is as shown in Table 1. In the composition of the subjects, the gender is mainly female, the proportion of bachelor degree or above is more than 70%, and the kindergarten title is mainly temporarily ungraded, which is consistent with the research of Hong Xiumin and other scholars, which more truly reflects the composition of kindergarten teachers (Hong & Zhang, 2019).

2.2. Analysis Method and Tools

Based on the OECD Framework, and incorporating the professional characteristics of kindergarten teachers, Chinese cultural features, and the current state of early childhood education, this study developed the "Suzhou Kindergarten Teacher Occupational Well-Being Questionnaire". The questionnaire comprises four subscales and 66 items.

Subscale 1: Cognitive Well-Being Scale. Cognition refers to the behaviors and processes through which people acquire and understand knowledge, involving mental processes such as attention, concept acquisition, and problem-solving. Teachers' cognitive well-being denotes the range of skills and abilities required for them to work effectively. This subscale uses focused work and self-efficacy as secondary indicators and consists of 14 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Among these, items related to focused work are reverse-scored. A higher score on this subscale indicates a higher level of cognitive well-being among kindergarten teachers. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this subscale was 0.901, indicating high reliability.

Subscale 2: Subjective Well-Being Scale. Subjective well-being is an individual's psychological state regarding their life. This subscale uses job satisfaction, life satisfaction, emotional state, and sense of purpose in work as secondary indicators and consists of 22 items. Specifically, Item 25 ("Overall, how satisfied are you with your job?") and Item 26 ("Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?") are rated

on an 11-point scale (0 - 10), where higher scores indicate greater satisfaction. The remaining items employ a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Certain items within the job satisfaction dimension (e.g., "I regret deciding to become a teacher") and the sense of purpose in work dimension (e.g., "I sometimes feel my work is useless") are reverse-scored. A higher score on this subscale indicates a higher level of subjective well-being among kindergarten teachers. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this subscale was 0.934, indicating high reliability.

Subscale 3: Physical and Mental Well-Being Scale. A healthy body is very important for people. The physical and mental well-being Scale directly assesses the frequency of physical and mental discomfort symptoms (e.g., "headaches," "back pain") to understand kindergarten teachers' physical and mental well-being. It consists of 10 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Almost daily). All items in this subscale are reverse-scored. A higher score indicates a higher level of health well-being among teachers. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this subscale was 0.811, indicating acceptable reliability.

Subscale 4: Social Well-Being Scale. Social well-being refers to the quality and depth of a teacher's social interactions with other relevant individuals. Teaching work requires collaboration with others, and the frequency and quality of these communications and collaborations impact teachers' well-being. Therefore, this subscale focuses on the "relationships" that closely influence teachers' occupational well-being, evaluating it from four aspects: relationship with colleagues, relationship with the kindergarten principal, teacher-child relationships, and trust in the school atmosphere. It consists of 20 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Item 48 ("I feel left out at school") and Item 50 ("I feel awkward and out of place at school") are reverse-scored. A higher score on this subscale indicates a higher level of social well-being among kindergarten teachers. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficient for this subscale was 0.937, indicating high reliability.

Consequently, the overall Cronbach's α coefficient for the Kindergarten Teacher Occupational Well-Being Questionnaire was 0.958, demonstrating high reliability. For the collected questionnaires, this study mainly uses SPSS 26.0 software for data processing and analysis.

3. Research Results and Analysis

3.1. The Overall Situation of Kindergarten Teachers' Occupational Well-Being

The mean overall score for occupational well-being was 3.16 on a 5-point scale. Considering the scale's anchors (from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Always"), the theoretical midpoint is 3.0. Thus, a score of 3.16 falls within the moderate range but leans slightly toward the positive end, indicating a generally moderate level of well-being among the sampled teachers. Among them, kindergarten teachers scored the highest in social well-being (M = 3.637, SD = 0.505), followed by cognitive well-being (M = 3.428, SD = 0.525) and subjective well-being (M =

3.095, SD = 0.599). The score of physical and mental well-being was the lowest (M = 2.043, SD = 0.714), which was lower than the median value of 3, indicating that the overall physical and mental well-being of kindergarten teachers in Suzhou was at the lower middle level.

3.2. The Specific Situation of Kindergarten Teachers' Occupational Well-Being

As presented in Table 2, there were significant effects of teaching experience ($F = 7.38$, $p < .001$) and professional title ($F = 4.82$, $p < .01$) on kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being.

Table 2. Analysis of differences in kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being.

Variable	Category	Cognitive Well-Being	Subjective Well-Being	Physical and Mental Well-Being	Social Well-Being	Occupational Well-Being
Teaching experience	<5 years (A)	3.37 ± 0.51	3.01 ± 0.57	2.02 ± 0.72	3.58 ± 0.50	3.10 ± 0.45
	6 - 10 years (B)	3.53 ± 0.56	3.17 ± 0.57	2.03 ± 0.66	3.73 ± 0.46	3.23 ± 0.43
	11 - 15 years (C)	3.45 ± 0.56	3.13 ± 0.65	2.05 ± 0.74	3.69 ± 0.55	3.19 ± 0.47
	> 16 years (D)	3.68 ± 0.46	3.59 ± 0.61	2.23 ± 0.72	3.86 ± 0.52	3.46 ± 0.48
	F	4.88**	10.92**	0.86	4.23**	7.38***
	LSD Post-hoc	B, D > A	D > A, B, C		B, D > A	D > A, B
Professional titles	Not yet ranked (A)	3.38 ± 0.50	3.09 ± 0.58	2.11 ± 0.72	3.63 ± 0.54	3.16 ± 0.47
	Kindergarten Level 2 (B)	3.42 ± 0.55	3.00 ± 0.60	1.93 ± 0.68	3.59 ± 0.46	3.09 ± 0.45
	Kindergarten Level1 (C)	3.65 ± 0.50	3.39 ± 0.58	2.11 ± 0.75	3.81 ± 0.45	3.36 ± 0.43
	Senior (D)	3.93 ± 0.20	3.98 ± 0.35	2.65 ± 0.64	3.95 ± 0.14	3.72 ± 0.22
	F	3.82**	6.32***	2.34	2.49	4.83**
	LSD Post-hoc	C > A, B	C, D > A, B			C > A, B

*Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

3.2.1. Differences in Occupational Well-Being by Teaching Experience

Regarding teaching experience, teachers with over 16 years of experience reported the highest level of occupational well-being, while those with fewer than 5 years of experience reported the lowest. Post-hoc tests further revealed (see Table 2) that the occupational well-being of teachers with over 16 years of experience was significantly higher than that of teachers with fewer than 5 years and those with 6 - 10 years of experience.

Across the various dimensions of kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being, the following patterns were observed:

- In terms of cognitive well-being, teachers with over 16 years of experience scored the highest, followed by those with 6 - 10 years of experience; teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience scored the lowest.
- Regarding subjective well-being, teachers with over 16 years of experience reported the highest levels, followed by those with 6 - 10 years of experience;

again, teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience reported the lowest levels.

- For physical and mental well-being, teachers with over 16 years of experience reported the highest scores, while those with fewer than 5 years reported the lowest. A general trend indicated that physical and mental well-being scores increased with longer teaching experience.
- In social well-being, consistent with the overall findings, teachers with over 16 years of experience scored the highest, followed by those with 6 - 10 years of experience, while teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience scored the lowest.

Therefore, kindergarten teachers with over 16 years of teaching experience demonstrated higher levels of well-being both in terms of their overall occupational well-being and across all its individual dimensions.

3.2.2. Differences in Occupational Well-Being by Professional Title

In terms of professional title, as shown in Table 2, kindergarten teachers with a senior title reported the highest level of occupational well-being, while those with a Level 2 title reported the lowest. Post-hoc multiple comparisons further indicated that the occupational well-being of teachers with a Level 1 title was significantly higher than that of both unranked teachers and those with a Level 2 title.

Across the dimensions of occupational well-being, the following patterns were observed:

- In cognitive well-being, teachers with a senior title scored the highest, followed by those with a Level 1 title, while unranked teachers scored the lowest.
- For subjective well-being, senior-ranked teachers reported the highest levels, followed by Level 1 teachers; those with a Level 2 title reported the lowest.
- In physical and mental well-being, senior title teachers scored the highest, followed by Level 1 and unranked teachers. Level 2 teachers scored significantly lower than those in all other title categories.
- Regarding social well-being, senior title teachers again scored the highest, followed by Level 1 teachers, with Level 2 teachers scoring the lowest.

In summary, teachers with a senior professional title demonstrated higher levels of well-being both in overall occupational well-being and across each individual dimension.

4. Discussion

4.1. Overall Occupational Well-Being of Kindergarten Teachers Is at a Medium Level

There are some differences in the relevant research conclusions on the overall level of occupational well-being of kindergarten teachers in China. Some studies have found that kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being is relatively high (Wu, 2020; Wang, 2013) while others indicate that it is not (Cao & Yang, 2014). As academic research on teachers' occupational well-being continues to deepen, its

focus has become increasingly comprehensive and specific. Consequently, this study adopted an integrated approach, investigating kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being across four dimensions: cognitive, subjective, physical and mental, and social well-being. The results indicate that the overall occupational well-being of kindergarten teachers is at a medium level, which is consistent with the findings of researchers like Hu Yanhong and Li Dan (Hu, 2016; Li, 2021). Among the dimensions, physical and mental well-being was the lowest, falling at the lower end of the moderate range; followed by subjective well-being, which was at a moderate level; and social well-being was the highest, approaching the upper end of the moderate range. This further suggests that while the overall occupational well-being of kindergarten teachers is moderate, fluctuations across the different dimensions reflect underlying concerns in their professional lives. First, there is the concern of overextension. The increasing physical and mental pressure kindergarten teachers endure in educational practice poses a significant challenge to their health well-being. Second, there is the concern of burnout. Reduced job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and sense of purpose at work negatively impact their subjective well-being.

4.2. Significant Differences in Occupational Well-Being by Teaching Experience and Professional Title

It is widely acknowledged that kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being is influenced by individual factors, particularly demographic variables. This study found significant differences in kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being based on teaching experience and professional title.

Regarding teaching experience, teachers with over 16 years of experience demonstrated significantly higher levels of overall occupational well-being and well-being across all dimensions compared to teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience. This significant difference aligns with the findings of researchers such as Cao Kai (Cao & Yang, 2014) and Dan Fei (Dan & Liu, 2019). This is likely related to increasing experience and growing proficiency in handling professional matters associated with longer teaching careers. In contrast, teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience, being in the early exploratory stage of their careers, have less experience in managing various kindergarten tasks, including unexpected events. Consequently, their cognitive, subjective, physical and mental, and social well-being are lower than those of their more experienced counterparts.

Regarding professional title, teachers with a senior title reported significantly higher overall occupational well-being than those with a Level 2 title. This finding is, to some extent, corroborated by related research from Li Dan (Li, 2021). With the exception of cognitive well-being, teachers with a Level 2 title scored the lowest on subjective, physical and mental, and social well-being. This can be partly attributed to factors associated with the professional development trajectory and motivation implied by the title, as well as salary and benefit expectations linked to it. Critically, this mid-career "Level 2" stage presents unique challenges that dis-

tinguish it from the not yet ranked phase. While not yet ranked teachers are often in a protected learning and support phase, focused on skill acquisition and survival, Level 2 teachers have surpassed these fundamentals only to encounter a 'career plateau.' The path to the next promotion (Level 1) appears distant, and the structured mentorship they once received often diminishes, just as their personal responsibilities (e.g., family obligations) tend to increase. After the initial passion for the profession cools, Level 2 teachers face issues such as the psychological gap between being a "role model" and an "ordinary person", alongside work-family conflicts, which affect their occupational well-being. In contrast, teachers with higher professional titles typically have longer tenures. Through their extensive experience, they have developed adaptable work skills and professional competencies, possess a clearer career development path, and exhibit greater initiative in their professional lives. Furthermore, these teachers are often key or backbone staff in their kindergartens and have a stronger professional identity, all of which positively influence their occupational well-being.

5. Suggestions

5.1. Paying Attention to the Physical and Mental Well-Being of Kindergarten Teachers and Strengthening the Health Support System

Physical and mental well-being is one of the most crucial aspects of kindergarten teachers' overall well-being, directly impacting the attainment of other well-being dimensions. When teachers frequently experience headaches, back pain, insomnia, and endure the dual pressures of physical strain and work demands, it is imperative to address their physical and mental well-being from their perspective and strengthen a comprehensive health support system.

First, kindergarten teachers should consciously monitor their physical and mental states and cultivate healthy lifestyle habits. This includes balancing work and rest to ensure adequate breaks during high-intensity daily work, allowing the body to recover promptly. They should also focus on physical care; for instance, as teachers frequently lift children and move nap-time beds, placing significant strain on their lower backs, they can learn relevant healthcare knowledge, adjust their movement mechanics to avoid back strain, thereby achieving internal reinforcement of their health well-being.

Second, kindergarten administrators and educational authorities should collaboratively build a comprehensive teacher health support system. Key measures include: 1) Implementing the relevant provisions of the Teachers Law, ensuring teachers undergo at least one medical check-up annually, and establishing exclusive health records for teachers to provide targeted support based on longitudinal tracking; 2) Establishing or optimizing staff lounges to provide dedicated spaces for teachers to rest and relax, where they can listen to music, read, or exercise, creating autonomous personal spaces within the kindergarten; 3) Organizing activities such as inviting doctors and experts to the kindergarten for specialized lectures and consultations, or collaborating with community hospitals to set up

health columns and screenings, helping teachers identify and address health risks proactively.

Additionally, introducing courses on positive psychology and stress management can help teachers develop self-regulation and stress reduction techniques.

5.2. Stimulating Well-Being across the Entire Career Trajectory and Optimizing Career Development Strategies for Kindergarten Teachers

Given the significant differences in occupational well-being related to teaching experience and professional title, it is necessary to address the developmental needs of teachers at different career stages, optimize career development strategies, and stimulate well-being throughout the entire professional journey.

Kindergarten teachers at different experience levels and professional titles face distinct professional experiences and living conditions. Kindergartens should, based on teachers' professional development levels (e.g., novice, proficient, and expert teachers), understand their professional challenges, provide appropriate job demands and reasonable work resources, and offer dynamic, continuous follow-up support. For novice teachers, who are often in the "survival concern stage" (Ling, Wang, Zhang, & Li, 2016) and experience multiple pressures from work, interpersonal relationships, and daily life, kindergartens should provide systematic pre-service training and on-the-job professional development opportunities. Utilizing mentorship programs like "experienced teachers guiding novices" or "teacher-apprentice pairing" can help them rapidly accumulate professional experience. Simultaneously, showing care for novice teachers in their daily lives, making them feel loved and respected, can enhance their occupational well-being.

For proficient teachers, who, compared to novices, have relatively established work and interpersonal patterns and begin facing the choice between "lying flat" and "involution," kindergartens should focus more on enhancing teachers' "inner drive." Combining internal and external motivators, such as focusing on the external driver of professional title promotion, involves establishing transparent and fair promotion mechanisms to enhance professional trust. Concurrently, organizing activities like master teacher workshops, growth story sharing, experience exchanges, and peer modeling can help teachers perceive their own growth and success, improve their professional competence, and gain lasting endogenous satisfaction.

For expert teachers, who excel in professional ability, social status, and salary compared to novice and proficient teachers and report the highest occupational well-being, it is recommended to provide more opportunities for academic exchange and presentation to maintain their teaching vitality.

5.3. Fostering a Positive Professional Environment for Kindergarten Teachers, "Reducing Burdens" and "Enhancing Capacities"

The OECD points out that numerous school-level factors affect teachers' occupa-

tional well-being and emphasizes the impact of "job demands" and "job resources". Kindergartens should clearly define "job demands" to "reduce burdens" and provide "job resources" to "enhance capacities," thereby creating a positive professional environment.

Certain job demands are inherent in any social profession. However, these demands must operate within the boundaries of rationality and legitimacy. Kindergartens should alleviate teachers' workload to mitigate negative factors affecting their occupational well-being. This primarily involves avoiding, minimizing, or refraining from "requests in the name of work," "job requirements unrelated to teaching duties," and "excessive work demands," which can marginalize their core educational responsibilities and diminish their professional confidence and teaching efficacy. Therefore, kindergartens need to foster a humane work environment and propose reasonable job demands to reduce the external burdens on teachers' professional development.

Enhancing professional competence is the perpetual driving force for improving kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being (Li & Gai, 2022). Consequently, efforts to boost occupational well-being should focus on elevating teachers' professional competence as a key strategy, providing resources for their professional development to achieve "capacity enhancement". Kindergartens should strategically plan the development of the teaching team, expanding teachers' professional horizons through diverse and rich training, workshops, and expert lectures, thereby cultivating their professional interests. By guiding research initiatives and facilitating collaborations with enterprises and institutions, we can deepen teachers' practical experience and refine their professional understanding. This, in turn, creates a supportive ecosystem for professional growth where teachers can identify their passions, receive specialized support, and tangibly feel their skills developing—all of which reinforce their professional identity and boost their sense of well-being.

6. Conclusion

Teacher well-being is a crucial guarantee for children's well-being. Therefore, it is essential to comprehensively enhance kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being across dimensions such as cognitive, subjective, health, and social well-being.

A limitation in the analysis by professional title is the exceptionally small sample size (n = 2.0.5%) of the "Senior" teacher group. Although statistical tests indicated significant differences, the results for this specific subgroup are not robust and should be interpreted with extreme caution. The generalizability of the high well-being scores observed in this group is limited, and this issue is flagged as a constraint on the validity of the findings related to the highest professional title. Future research should further expand and deepen the scope of investigation. On one hand, sample sizes should be enlarged. As this study was limited to Suzhou, its findings have certain limitations. Subsequent research should broaden the range of participants to understand the current state of occupational well-being

among kindergarten teachers in different regions. On the other hand, horizontal research should be extended. While this study primarily investigated the status quo of kindergarten teachers' occupational well-being, further research is needed to explore the influence of various factors on it, and to analyze the direct effects, mediating effects, and other relationships of these different factors.

Subject Project

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Conflicts of Interest

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

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