Article

Impact of Professional Competency on Occupational Identity of Preschool Education Publicly Funded Teacher Trainees: The Moderating Role of Support from Significant Others

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of professional competencies (moral, knowledge, and skill) on the occupational identity of government-supported preschool teacher trainees and examines the moderating role of support from significant others, including family, peers, and mentors. A quantitative research methodology was employed, involving a cross-sectional survey of 193 publicly funded teacher trainees. Validated scales were used to measure professional competencies, occupational identity, and perceived support. The results revealed a strong positive correlation between professional competencies and occupational identity ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$), supporting the hypothesis that higher competency levels enhance trainees' professional identity. Furthermore, support from significant others moderated this relationship, with a higher level of support amplifying the positive association ($\beta = 1.412$, $p < 0.01$). These findings highlight the interconnected nature of professional competencies and social support in shaping occupational identity. Based on these results, it is recommended that teacher training programs integrate targeted competency-building strategies alongside structured support systems to enhance professional identity formation. These initiatives are critical for fostering sustainable professional development and improving the quality and stability of preschool education.

Keywords: publicly funded teacher trainees; professional competency; occupational identity; significant support from others

1. Introduction

Preschool education is a foundational component of the education system, significantly shaping early childhood development and setting the stage for lifelong learning [1]. Research consistently highlights the long-term impact of quality early education on cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes, and preschool education has gained increasing attention from educators, policymakers, and parents alike [2]. However, despite its acknowledged importance, this sector faces pressing challenges, including a shortage of qualified teachers and a lack of sufficient professional competency among existing educators. These challenges threaten the sustainability and effectiveness of preschool education, as a well-prepared and competent teaching workforce is essential for high-quality early childhood education [3].

In response to this need, publicly funded teacher trainees—prospective preschool educators supported by government funding—are positioned as pivotal figures in advancing early childhood education. These trainees are educated and trained with a specific

focus on becoming skilled, knowledgeable, and ethical educators who are committed to the teaching profession. Their professional competence, encompassing moral, knowledge, and skill dimensions, directly influences not only their career satisfaction and commitment but also the quality and stability of preschool education as a whole [4,5]. Thus, cultivating a highly competent teaching workforce has become a central objective in China's educational agenda, with particular emphasis on preschool education. Strengthening teacher competencies is a cornerstone for establishing a high-quality education system and enhancing the national educational landscape. Developing a strong occupational identity among publicly funded teacher trainees is crucial for universities to fulfill their training objectives and to foster a sense of purpose, commitment, and resilience in future educators [6]. Enhancing the professional competencies of these trainees not only reinforces their occupational identity but also creates a sustainable foundation for advancing the quality and effectiveness of preschool education.

1.1. Teacher Occupational Identity and Its Importance in Early Childhood Education

Teacher occupational identity is a multi-dimensional construct that extends from the broader concept of occupational cognition in the educational field. It encompasses a teacher's core understanding and assessment of their profession, shaped through active engagement in work, study, and lived experiences [7]. This identity transcends mere professional commitment; it reflects a deeper acceptance of and passion for the educational profession, a recognition of its values and societal significance, and an adherence to professional standards that are integrated into daily teaching practices. Furthermore, teacher occupational identity is not static; it continuously evolves through self-construction, reflection, and adaptation, processes that are essential for personal growth and professional development [8]. This evolving identity drives not only individual growth but also the enhancement of educational practices, thereby contributing to the quality of early childhood education.

In preschool education, a strong occupational identity is particularly critical due to the unique demands of working with young children. Preschool teachers must balance cognitive and social development needs, manage classroom dynamics, and foster safe and inclusive learning environments. Such responsibilities require an educator who is not only skilled and knowledgeable but also dedicated, compassionate, and committed to ethical principles [9]. Teacher trainees' occupational identity plays a substantial role in shaping their approach to these responsibilities and their persistence in the profession. For teacher trainees, developing a robust occupational identity that aligns with the values and demands of preschool education is essential for long-term success and resilience in their careers.

1.2. Role of Social Support in Developing Occupational Identity

In addition to the direct influence of professional competency, existing research underscores the critical role of support from significant others, including family members, peers, mentors, and institutional leaders, in shaping teacher trainees' occupational identity [10,11]. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proposed a teacher well-being framework in 2020, which integrates four interrelated dimensions: personal state, recognition of professional roles, the school environment, and broader societal perceptions. Among these, support from significant others is recognized as a pivotal social structure influencing occupational identity, psychosocial competence, and socio-emotional development. Numerous studies across various age groups have highlighted the significant effects of social and relational support on psychological well-being and academic performance [12]. For instance, students benefit significantly from stronger social connections

with teachers and peers, as these relationships provide enhanced social support during periods of stress, indirectly contributing to their success [13,14]. For teacher trainees, such support provides the emotional reinforcement, practical guidance, and a sense of belonging that are crucial for cultivating a resilient occupational identity. Social support is widely acknowledged as a protective factor that not only enhances psychological well-being but also strengthens teachers' occupational identity and professional competency. Empirical evidence demonstrates that social support mitigates the stress associated with teaching, enabling teachers to navigate challenges more effectively and maintain their professional commitment [15]. This is particularly salient in early childhood education, where teachers may encounter high emotional demands and complex classroom dynamics, rendering the presence of support from significant others indispensable.

Support from significant others not only strengthens teacher trainees' occupational identity directly but also moderates the relationship between their professional competency and occupational identity. This type of support can positively influence trainees' perceptions of their professional roles and reduce the adverse effects of external stressors. For instance, research shows that teacher trainees who receive substantial support from mentors, family, and peers are more likely to embrace their occupational identity, leading to increased career satisfaction and a sense of belonging [16]. Conversely, an absence of support and understanding from significant others may foster feelings of career rejection, diminishing trainees' professional achievement, self-confidence, and long-term commitment to teaching. Thus, support from significant others serves as a form of social reinforcement that not only strengthens occupational identity but also fosters resilience and adaptability within teacher trainees.

1.3. Challenges in Building Occupational Identity for Teacher Trainees

The development of an occupational identity in teacher trainees is shaped by a combination of individual, institutional, and social factors. As the primary environment for teacher training, universities significantly influence students' occupational identity through their talent development models, curriculum design, internship opportunities, and standards for teacher ethics. Research shows that outdated training models in higher education institutions can hinder the development of teacher trainees' occupational identity by failing to keep pace with the evolving core values and expectations of the teaching profession. For instance, Qi et al. argued that many teacher education programs still follow traditional frameworks that inadequately prepare trainees for the modern educational landscape [17]. Furthermore, Wang et al. highlighted the influence of social factors, noting that educational internships, curriculum structure, and instructional reforms play crucial roles in fostering students' occupational identity by exposing them to practical experiences and reinforcing theoretical knowledge [18]. Additionally, Hu et al. identified a gender-related disparity in occupational identity, where the imbalance between theoretical knowledge and practical skill training hinders the development of a robust occupational identity [19]. Zhang et al. also found a strong positive correlation between support from teachers and students' occupational identity, demonstrating the impact of social reinforcement from significant others [20].

Professional competency is a critical enabler of occupational identity, empowering teachers to fulfill their responsibilities effectively and meaningfully, thereby enhancing their occupational identity [21]. Against the backdrop of building a robust educational system, cultivating high levels of professional competency among teacher trainees is essential. Comprehending the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity, as well as the moderating influence of support from significant others, is increasingly

relevant in developing teacher education programs that meet the demands of the evolving educational field.

1.4. Study Aims and Hypotheses

Despite the extensive body of research on teacher professional competencies and occupational identity, limited attention has been given to publicly funded preschool teacher trainees, who represent a critical yet underexplored population in early childhood education. Existing studies predominantly focus on general teacher education or secondary schooling, leaving a gap in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by government-supported trainees in preschool education. Additionally, while social support has been widely recognized as an influential factor in teacher development, its moderating role in the relationship between professional competencies and occupational identity remains underexplored, particularly in the context of early childhood education.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the impact of professional competencies, including moral, knowledge, and skill, on the occupational identity of publicly funded preschool teacher trainees. It further examines the moderating role of support from significant others, such as family, peers, and mentors, in strengthening this relationship. By situating the research within the framework of publicly funded teacher training programs, this study contributes novel insights into how competency development and social reinforcement shape occupational identity and foster sustainable professional development in early childhood education.

1.4.1. Professional Competency and Teacher Trainees' Occupational Identity

Professional competency is instrumental in shaping teacher trainees' occupational identity. Huang's research demonstrated a significant positive correlation between professional competency training and occupational identity, showing that high-quality competency training enhances teacher trainees' self-understanding and reflection on their profession, thus strengthening their commitment [22]. This study builds on these findings by examining how the three dimensions of professional competency, including moral, knowledge, and skill, interact to shape the occupational identity of preschool teacher trainees. Based on this relationship, Hypothesis H1 is proposed:

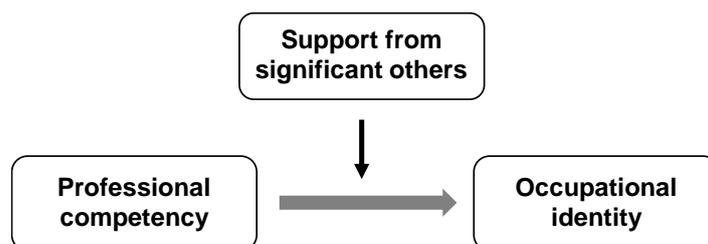**H1.** *Professional competency has a positive impact on teacher trainees' occupational identity.*

1.4.2. Moderating Role of Support from Significant Others

Support from significant others, such as family, mentors, and peers, is widely recognized as a critical factor in teacher development. It not only strengthens teacher trainees' occupational identity directly but also moderates the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity by enhancing trainees' perceptions of their professional roles and buffering against external stressors. Prior research shows that teacher trainees who receive substantial support from significant others are more likely to embrace their occupational identity, leading to increased career satisfaction and a sense of belonging [23,24]. By focusing on the interaction between social support and professional competency, this study explores how support networks amplify the positive effects of competencies on occupational identity. Accordingly, Hypothesis H2 is proposed:

H2. *Support from significant others moderates the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity.*

In summary, this study aims to develop a theoretical model (Figure 1) to illustrate the impact of professional competency on the occupational identity of teacher trainees, with

support from significant others as a moderating factor. By addressing gaps in prior research, this study contributes to the field of teacher education by offering a nuanced understanding of how moral, knowledge, and skill competencies interact to shape occupational identity. Additionally, the focus on the moderating role of support from significant others introduces a novel perspective, highlighting the importance of social support networks in professional identity formation. The findings are expected to inform teacher training programs by providing actionable insights into curriculum design and support systems, ultimately fostering resilient, ethically grounded educators. This work aligns with broader educational goals to enhance the quality and sustainability of preschool education, addressing pressing challenges in teacher competency and retention.

Figure 1. Research model.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study involves 193 publicly funded preschool education teacher trainees at Q University, a comprehensive institution located in Shandong Province. This research investigates the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity while also exploring the moderating role of support from significant others. These trainees participate in a government-funded teacher training program, motivated by several factors, including tuition and accommodation waivers, living subsidies, the resolution of employment challenges, the realization of personal educational aspirations, the promotion of educational equity, and prospects for career development and advancement. The participants exhibit broad representativeness across various dimensions, including geographical distribution, academic levels, internship experiences, their status as beneficiaries of the policy, and their potential future influence within the field of education.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Professional Competency

Professional competency was assessed through a rigorously designed 15-item questionnaire that targets three essential dimensions: moral, knowledge, and skill competencies. Each dimension comprised 5 items based on their relevance to preschool teacher training. Moral competency included items such as commitment to children, professionalism, integrity, and a sense of responsibility and mission, reflecting the ethical and moral standards expected of educators. Knowledge competency evaluated habits of studying educational theories and subject-specific knowledge essential for effective teaching and curriculum development. Skill competency focused on practical aspects such as communication skills, teaching abilities, and self-development awareness crucial for classroom management and student engagement. Sample items include statements such as "I am aware of the employment prospects in my field", with responses rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with Cronbach's α coefficients for the dimensions ranging from 0.79 to 0.88, indicating substantial internal consistency.

2.2.2. Occupational Identity

The Occupational Identity questionnaire comprehensively assessed three core dimensions relevant to the participants' professional development. The emotional identity dimension (10 items [24]) measured participants' emotional attachment to their profession, their sense of belonging, and relational ties with students and staff. The value identity dimension (7 items [25]) evaluated the degree to which participants aligned with the values inherent to the teaching profession, reflecting their internalization of professional principles. The volitional identity dimension (9 items) focused on participants' commitment, passion, resilience, self-discipline, and aspirations in the field of education. Each dimension was rated on a scale from 1 (indicating the highest level of occupational identity) to 3 (representing a critically low level of occupational identity). The reliability of these measures was confirmed, with Cronbach's α coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 0.89, demonstrating strong internal consistency and supporting the robustness of the questionnaire.

2.2.3. Support from Significant Others

Support from significant others was quantified using a 5-item questionnaire [23] that probed the extent of emotional, instructional, and logistical support provided by family, peers, mentors, and institutional leaders. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (not supportive) to 5 (very supportive), demonstrating good reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.83. This scale helped to evaluate the impact of social support systems on the trainees' professional growth and identity consolidation.

2.3. Data Analysis

SPSS (26.0), Graphpad Prism (9.5.1), and Origin (2023b) were used for data analysis and plotting. Harman's single factor test was employed to examine the common method bias for data validity. The descriptive data are presented using the mean and standard deviation. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the correlation between each variable. Finally, simple and multiple linear regression analyses were performed to investigate the direct effect of social support on the occupational identity of the third-year students majoring in the preschool nursery teacher program of secondary vocational schools in Shanghai, as well as the mediating roles of psychological adjustment and school belonging.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Distribution of Survey Respondents

A survey assessing occupational identity and professional competency among preschool education teacher trainees at Q University yielded 193 valid responses. As illustrated in Figure 2, respondents were distributed across five graduation cohorts, with the largest representation from the Class of 2022 (24.35%), followed by the Class of 2020 (23.32%), Class of 2018 (21.76%), Class of 2021 (17.10%), and the smallest from the Class of 2019 (13.47%). This distribution ensures a balanced sample across different academic levels, enabling a thorough analysis of professional competency and occupational identity development at various stages of their training. Regarding gender, the sample was predominantly female (87.05%), with males comprising 12.95% of respondents, a gender distribution consistent with broader demographic patterns in early childhood education, where women are predominantly represented.
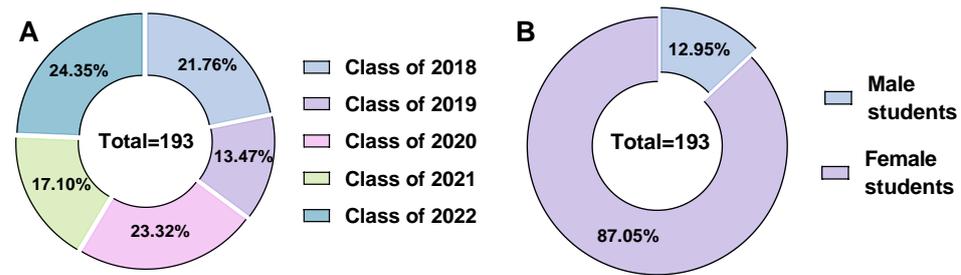
Figure 2. Class (**A**) and gender (**B**) distribution of survey participants (*n* = 193).

3.2. Common Method Bias

All measures in this study relied on self-reported scales completed by students, which could introduce common method bias. To assess this potential bias, Harman's single-factor test [26] was conducted, revealing 8 common factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1. The first factor accounted for 37.53% of the variance, which is below the critical threshold of 40%. These results indicate that common method bias is not a significant concern in the data used for this study.

3.3. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Professional Competency
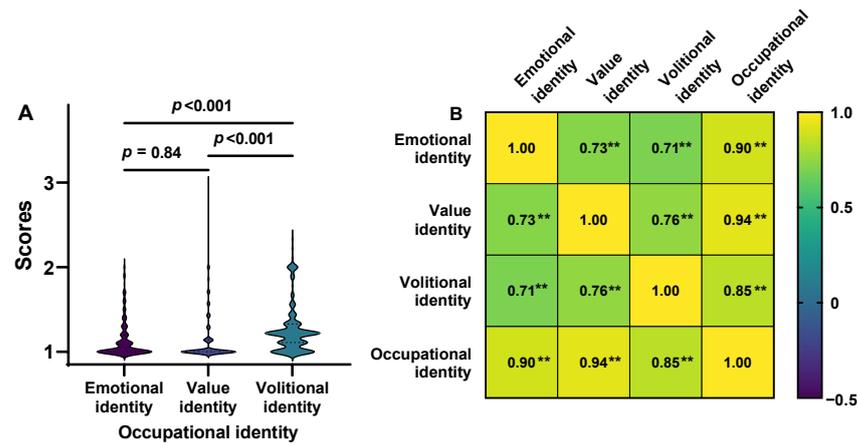
Figure 3 provides the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for various dimensions of professional competency, including moral, knowledge, skill, and overall professional competency, among publicly funded preschool education teacher trainees (*n* = 193). In Figure 3A, violin plots illustrate the score distributions across these competencies, revealing comparable median values and interquartile ranges across moral, knowledge, and skill dimensions. The absence of significant differences in these competencies (*p* = 0.66, 0.97, 0.50) suggested a balanced development across these areas among the trainees. Figure 3B displays the correlation matrix, highlighting statistically significant, strong positive correlations among all competency dimensions (*p* < 0.01). Notably, the correlations between overall professional competency and the individual competencies (moral, knowledge, and skill) were particularly robust, with coefficients ranging from 0.91 to 0.93. These high correlations imply that competencies are interdependent, with strengths in one domain likely enhancing others. For instance, as teacher trainees improve in knowledge competency, overall professional competency may also be reinforced, potentially through the integration of moral and skill competencies. This interconnectedness underscores the holistic nature of occupational identity formation in preschool education. The particularly strong correlation between professional and moral competencies (*r* = 0.91, *p* < 0.01) suggests that ethical and moral foundations are integral to these students' occupational identity. Similarly, the significant correlations (*p* < 0.01) with knowledge and skill competencies (*r* = 0.93 and *r* = 0.92, respectively) highlight the importance of both theoretical understanding and practical application in shaping a comprehensive occupational identity. Beyond the relationship with overall professional competency, positive correlations are also observed among the individual competencies. Specifically, moral competency is significantly correlated with knowledge (*r* = 0.76, *p* < 0.01) and skill competency (*r* = 0.71, *p* < 0.01), indicating that higher moral competency is associated with greater knowledge and skill levels. Likewise, knowledge competency shows a strong positive correlation with skill competency (*r* = 0.81, *p* < 0.01), suggesting that students with broader knowledge tend to possess more advanced practical skills.
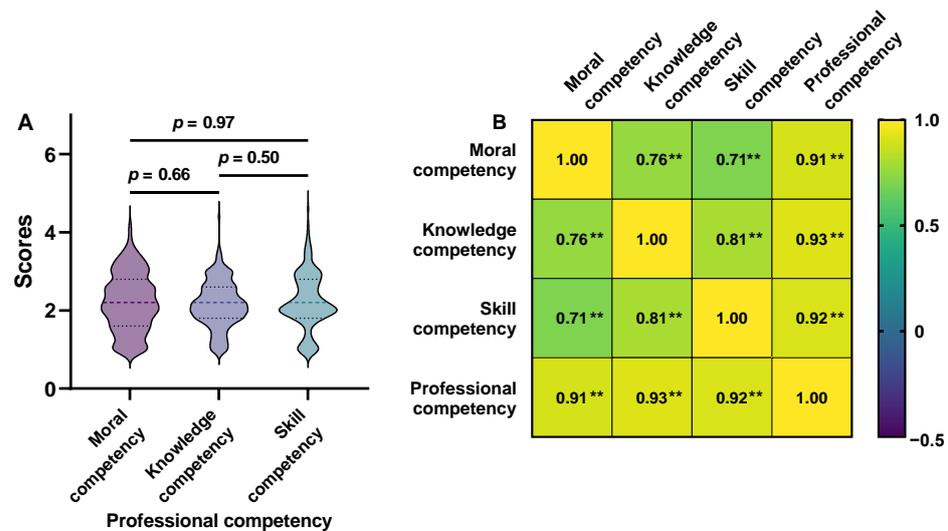
Figure 3. Descriptive statistics (**A**) and correlation matrix (**B**) of professional competency (*n* = 193). Note: ** indicates that a correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

*3.4. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Occupational Identity*

Figure 4 presents the descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix for the dimensions of occupational identity, including emotional, value, and volitional, among publicly funded preschool education teacher trainees (*n* = 193). In Figure 4A, violin plots show the score distributions for each component, revealing significant differences between volitional identity and both emotional identity (*p* < 0.001) and value identity (*p* < 0.001), while no significant difference is observed between emotional and value identity (*p* = 0.84). This suggests that trainees demonstrate a stronger volitional identity, indicating a heightened willingness and personal drive toward their professional commitment, in comparison to their emotional and value identities. Figure 4B, the correlation matrix, indicates statistically significant positive correlations among all identity dimensions at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). Occupational identity shows a particularly strong correlation with value identity (*r* = 0.94), followed by emotional identity (*r* = 0.90) and volitional identity (*r* = 0.85). These results suggest that occupational identity in these students is closely tied to their sense of value and emotional attachment to the field, with the strong association between occupational and value identity highlighting the role of aligning personal values with professional aspirations in fostering a robust occupational identity. Further correlations among the individual identity dimensions reinforce these findings. The correlation between emotional and volitional identities (*r* = 0.71) implies that students who feel emotionally connected to their profession are also more likely to exhibit sustained motivation and commitment. The moderately strong correlation between emotional and value identity (*r* = 0.73) suggests that those with a high emotional investment in their profession are inclined to align personal values with their professional role. Additionally, the correlation between volitional and value identities (*r* = 0.76) indicates that students with a strong personal drive and willingness to engage in the profession are likely to hold values that reinforce this commitment.

Figure 4. Descriptive statistics (**A**) and correlation matrix (**B**) of occupational competency (*n* = 193). Note: ** indicates that a correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

3.5. Correlation Analysis Among Professional Competency, Occupational Identity, and Support from Significant Others

Figure 5 examines the relationships among professional competency, occupational identity, and perceived support from significant others. In Figure 5A, a scatter plot illustrates a positive association between professional competency and occupational identity, with color gradations indicating varying levels of support from significant others. An upward trend in the plot suggests that greater professional competency is linked to a stronger occupational identity, especially with higher levels of support from significant others. Figure 5B, which displays the correlation matrix, confirms the significant positive correlations among all three variables. Professional competency is significantly correlated with occupational identity (*r* = 0.61, *p* < 0.01) and support from significant others (*r* = 0.50, *p* < 0.01), indicating that higher competency levels are associated with stronger occupational identity and increased support. Additionally, a robust correlation between occupational identity and support from significant others (*r* = 0.90, *p* < 0.01) indicates that students with greater perceived support tend to report stronger occupational identity. These findings highlight the moderating role of support from significant others, which appears to strengthen the positive link between professional competency and occupational identity. This suggests that support networks are likely instrumental in reinforcing students' occupational identity, potentially enhancing their commitment and motivation in their educational and career development.
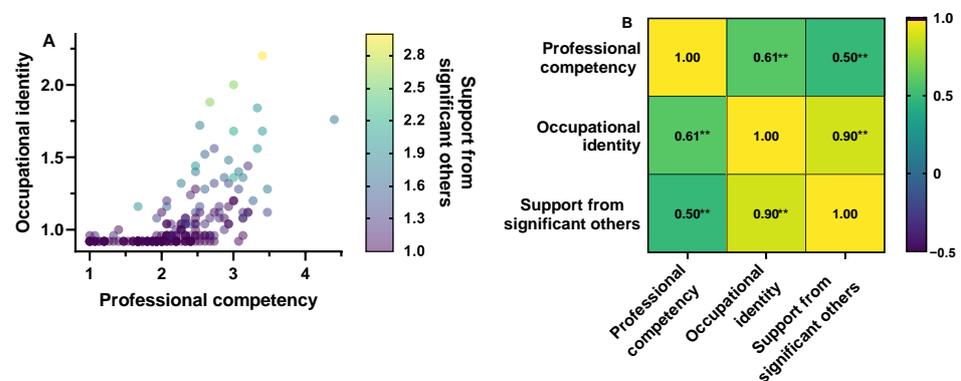
Figure 5. Relationship between professional competency and occupational identity, with scatter points color-coded to represent levels of support from significant others (**A**). Correlation matrix among professional competency, occupational identity, and support from significant others (**B**). Note: ** indicates significance at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

3.6. Moderating Effect Analysis of Support from Significant Others

Figure 6 illustrates the moderating influence of support from significant others on the link between professional competency and occupational identity. In Figure 6A, a simple linear regression analysis between support from significant others and professional competency reveals a positive association, with a slope of $\beta_1 = 0.269$ ($p < 0.01$) and an R^2 of 0.251. This indicates a moderate relationship between support from significant others and professional competency. Figure 6B shows a stronger association between support from significant others and occupational identity, with a slope of $\beta_2 = 1.351$ ($p < 0.01$) and a notably higher R^2 of 0.802, suggesting that support from significant others more substantially impacts occupational identity than it does professional competency. In Figure 6C, a multiple regression analysis considers both professional competency and occupational identity as predictors of support from significant others, yielding slopes of $\beta_3 = -0.234$ ($p < 0.01$) for professional competency and $\beta_4 = 1.412$ ($p < 0.01$) for occupational identity, with an overall R^2 of 0.805. The comparison between $\beta_2 = 1.351$ and $\beta_1 = 0.269$ underscores that support from significant others has a more pronounced effect on occupational identity than on professional competency. Furthermore, the comparison of $\beta_4 = 1.412$ with $\beta_2 = 1.351$ highlights a significant moderating effect of support from significant others on the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity; specifically, the inclusion of professional competency as a factor further strengthens the association between occupational identity and support. These findings suggest that although professional competency contributes to the level of support received from significant others, occupational identity has a stronger influence, underscoring the role of significant others' support in fostering a more robust occupational identity among teacher trainees.
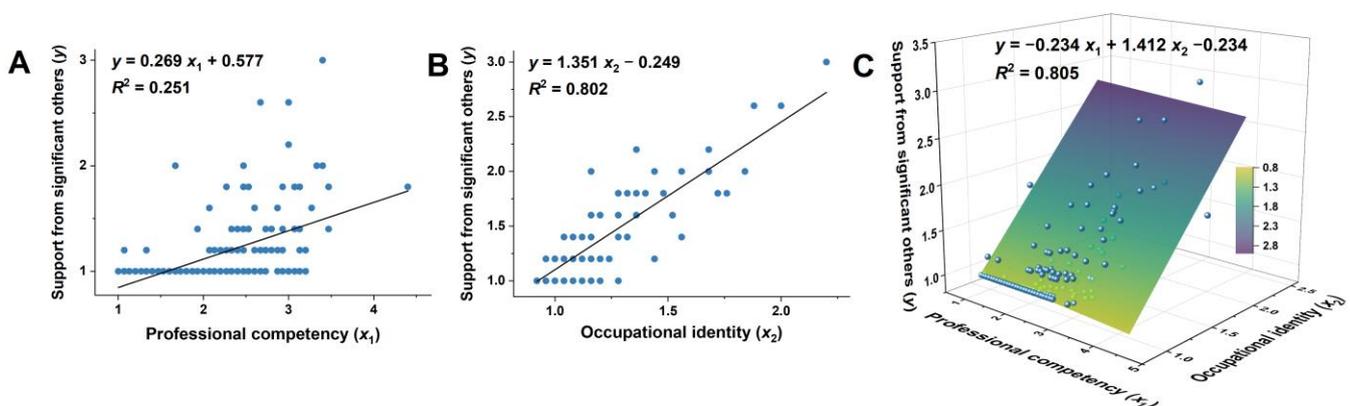

Figure 6. Simple linear regression analyses on the relationship of significant others' support to professional competence (**A**) and to occupational identity (**B**). Multiple regression analysis of the combined effect of professional competence and occupational identity on support from significant others (**C**).

3.7. Model of the Relationship Between Professional Competencies, Occupational Identity, and Support from Significant Others

Finally, Figure 7 presents a structural model summarizing the interrelationships among moral, knowledge, and skill competencies as contributors to professional competency and the influence of these competencies on occupational identity, moderated by support from significant others. The model reveals strong positive correlations among the three competency dimensions ($r = 0.71$ between moral and skill competency, $r = 0.76$ between moral and knowledge competency, and $r = 0.81$ between knowledge and skill competency), indicating a close interconnection among these aspects of professional competency. Together, these competencies significantly contribute to overall professional competency, which is strongly correlated with occupational identity ($r = 0.61$). These findings lend substantial

support to Hypothesis H1, affirming that professional competency training has a positive impact on the occupational identity of teacher trainees. This underscores the importance of targeted competency development in fostering a robust occupational identity among future educators.
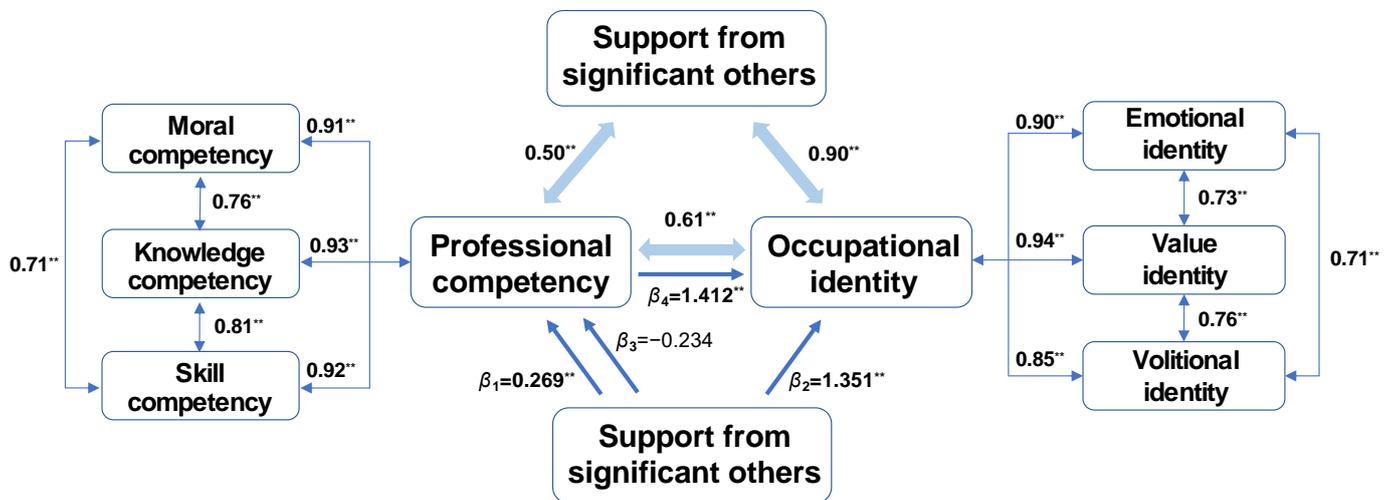
Figure 7. Structural model depicting the relationships between professional competencies, occupational identity, and the moderating effect of support from significant others among preschool education publicly funded teacher education students. Connections between subcomponents of professional competency (moral, knowledge, and skill competency) and occupational identity (emotional, value, and volitional identity) with their correlation coefficients are also depicted. Path coefficients (β) indicate the strength of associations between variables. Note: ** indicates significance at the 0.01 level.

Support from significant others is strongly associated with occupational identity ($r = 0.90$) and moderately associated with professional competency ($r = 0.50$), indicating that higher perceived social support aligns with a stronger sense of occupational identity. The path coefficients in the model further clarify these relationships: with $\beta_1 = 0.269$ from support to professional competency, $\beta_2 = 1.351$ from support to occupational identity, and $\beta_4 = 1.412$, the latter exceeding β_2, highlighting the moderating role of support from significant others. Collectively, these findings lend strong support to Hypothesis H2, demonstrating that support from significant others moderates the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity. This reinforces the essential role of social support in amplifying the positive impact of professional competency on occupational identity development among teacher education students.

4. Discussion

This study examined the impact of professional competency on occupational identity among publicly funded preschool teacher trainees, with a focus on the moderating role of support from significant others. The results revealed strong positive relationships between the professional competency dimensions, including moral, knowledge, and skill, and occupational identity, emphasizing the holistic, interdependent nature of these competencies. Support from significant others emerged as a critical moderating factor, enhancing the impact of professional competency on occupational identity and contributing to sustainable professional development in early childhood education.

4.1. The Relationship Between Professional Competency and Occupational Identity

The positive association between professional competency and occupational identity among preschool teacher trainees highlights the essential role of comprehensive competen-

cies in building a strong occupational identity. Each competency, such as moral, knowledge, and skill, collectively fosters a profound professional self-concept, supporting previous findings that emphasize these elements as foundational to identity formation [27]. This study reaffirms that occupational identity extends beyond mere skills and knowledge acquisition; it involves the integration of these competencies with ethical practices, forming a comprehensive, resilient professional persona.

These findings build upon prior research, such as Qi et al.'s analysis of outdated training models hindering identity development [17], by emphasizing the dynamic interplay among competencies as a remedy to such barriers. Specifically, moral competencies, comprising ethical standards and values, are foundational, shaping professional decision-making and everyday interactions with students, colleagues, and families [28,29]. This ethical framework aligns with sustainable educational practices by promoting integrity, compassion, and responsibility [30–32]. Teachers with strong moral competencies are more likely to address educational challenges with solutions that are both effective and socially responsible, thereby enhancing their overall professional competency and commitment to sustainable educational practices [33].

A study on EFL students in higher vocational colleges highlights the importance of motivation and cognitive ability in fostering deep learning, emphasizing the interplay between contextual factors and personal competencies within hybrid learning environments [34]. This aligns with our findings, which show that moral, knowledge, and skill competencies collectively contribute to a robust occupational identity, where motivation and adaptability play pivotal roles in professional growth.

Follow-up tracking research involving in-depth interviews with the government-funded teacher trainees who participated in the survey revealed a significant trend: those who demonstrated stronger professional competencies in their respective fields often exhibited higher levels of occupational identity, greater enthusiasm and loyalty toward the teaching profession, and a more positive mindset. Conversely, students with relatively weaker professional competencies generally reported lower levels of occupational identity, reflecting insufficient job satisfaction and engagement.

Knowledge competencies encompass a deep understanding of educational theories and developmental psychology, essential for effective teaching in early childhood education. Skill competencies, in turn, reflect the ability to translate this knowledge into practical, interactive classroom strategies [35,36]. The strong correlation between knowledge and skill competencies underscores the significance of integrating theoretical and practical training, as noted by Wang et al.'s findings on the importance of curriculum structure and internships in fostering professional development [18]. These competencies are particularly relevant in preschool education, where teachers must adapt to meet the diverse developmental needs of young children [37]. By addressing these needs effectively, educators contribute to sustainable teaching practices that have lasting positive impacts on children's learning outcomes and emotional well-being.

Moreover, this study highlights that the interaction between knowledge and moral competencies enhances ethical decision-making, supporting a holistic approach to teaching. Educators who successfully integrate moral and knowledge competencies report higher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, which are critical for building sustainable occupational identity [38]. These results reinforce Zhang et al.'s observations on the importance of teacher support systems in developing professional values and self-concept [20]. The connection between professional competencies and career adaptability, as noted in a study on perceived organizational support and career exploration [39], provides further evidence for the role of such competencies in shaping not only occupational identity but also long-term career development. Thus, teacher training programs for publicly funded preschool

educators should prioritize balanced curricula that nurture these competencies, not only to cultivate occupational identity but also to promote sustainable practices in education.

4.2. The Moderating Role of Support from Significant Others

Findings from this study emphasize the critical role of support from significant others, such as family, peers, mentors, and colleagues, in moderating the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity for preschool teacher trainees. This support not only amplifies the direct impact of professional competencies on occupational identity but also acts as a buffer against the unique challenges of early childhood education [40,41]. Support from significant others provides emotional reinforcement, practical guidance, and a sense of belonging, all of which are indispensable for developing a sustainable and resilient occupational identity [42,43]. Previous research has demonstrated that social support is closely linked to professional growth by enhancing self-efficacy and professional commitment. This study builds on such findings by illustrating how these mechanisms are particularly relevant for teacher trainees in early childhood education, where high emotional demands and classroom challenges necessitate robust support systems [44–46].

The moderating effect of support from significant others operates through multiple mechanisms. Emotional support from family, mentors, and peers equips teacher trainees with resilience, enabling them to manage the emotional and physical demands of teaching while maintaining sustained professional commitment [47,48]. Constructive feedback from mentors and colleagues promotes reflection and the refinement of teaching methods, directly strengthening occupational identity and aligning with sustainable professional practices that emphasize continual learning and adaptability.

Supportive relationships also foster occupational identity through social learning. Interactions with experienced educators provide teacher trainees with models of professional behavior and ethical practices [49,50]. Mentors act as role models, guiding trainees in integrating competencies into their professional identity. Research on career exploration among university students highlights how perceived organizational support fosters adaptability and career-related behaviors, further emphasizing the critical role of support systems in professional development [39]. This is particularly relevant in early childhood education, where robust support networks help trainees navigate the complexities of their profession.

Additionally, these relationships expand trainees' professional networks, granting access to resources, professional development opportunities, and communities of practice. Participation in such networks fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces occupational identity, aligning with the principles of sustainable professional development. The study on EFL students in vocational settings further illustrates how well-structured support systems can optimize learning outcomes by bridging contextual and individual factors [34]. These findings suggest that publicly funded teacher training programs should integrate support-building strategies to enhance occupational identity and promote sustainable educational outcomes.

In preschool education, where teachers often face complex challenges such as managing diverse classroom dynamics and supporting young children's developmental needs, support from significant others is essential in building confidence and competence. Follow-up tracking research reveals that support from significant others (e.g., mentors, colleagues, and family) plays a critical role in teachers' actual work environments, influencing not only their professional adaptation and growth but also their job satisfaction, motivation, and long-term retention intentions. These findings suggest that publicly funded teacher training programs should integrate support-building strategies to enhance occupational identity and promote sustainable educational outcomes. By nurturing supportive networks, teacher education programs can create environments that foster strong professional identi-

ties among future educators, emphasizing resilience, adaptability, and ethical commitment in education [51,52].

A comparison of the present findings with existing research reveals consistent evidence supporting the positive influence of professional competency on teacher trainees' occupational identity [53]. However, unlike previous studies, this research expands the discourse by examining the moderating role of support from significant others. Although the sample size in this study is relatively small, the results demonstrate that support from significant others significantly moderates the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity. This aligns with suggestive findings in earlier studies but provides more robust evidence for this interaction [54]. Future research could explore the intricate relationships among professional competency, support from significant others, and occupational identity across diverse cultural contexts and educational stages. Such investigations could deepen the understanding and provide a broader applicability of these findings.

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of support from significant others in shaping the relationship between professional competency and occupational identity among publicly funded preschool teacher trainees. Teacher education programs that prioritize the development of moral, knowledge, and skill competencies, alongside structured strategies to foster supportive relationships, are well-positioned to enhance occupational identity. These findings contribute to the field by providing practical insights into how integrated support systems can promote sustainable professional practices and prepare educators to navigate the complexities of modern educational environments while contributing positively to early childhood development.

5. Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

This study underscores the essential role of professional competency in establishing a strong occupational identity among publicly funded preschool teacher trainees. Support from significant others, such as family, peers, mentors, and colleagues, also emerged as a critical moderating factor, enhancing the impact of professional competency on occupational identity. The observed interdependence among moral, knowledge, and skill competencies suggests that a holistic approach to competency development is vital in fostering a resilient occupational identity. These findings carry important implications for teacher education programs, particularly in the development of curricula that integrate both competency-building and support-oriented components. Such a design would align with sustainability principles, promoting adaptability, ethical engagement, and long-term commitment within educational careers.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations that may impact the generalizability of the findings. The sample was drawn from a single institution; although the sample size was sufficient, broader studies encompassing various institutions or regions would yield more comprehensive results. Additionally, this study relied on self-reported data, which could introduce biases associated with social desirability or inaccurate self-assessment. Future research could incorporate longitudinal designs and observational methods to capture the progression of professional competency and occupational identity over time.

The findings highlight the importance of fostering a balanced development of moral, knowledge, and skill competencies among publicly funded preschool teacher trainees. Teacher education programs should prioritize curricula that integrate real-world scenarios and ethical dilemmas, encouraging moral reasoning alongside the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Structured support systems should also be established to promote mentorship and peer collaboration, cultivating a community-centered approach

to professional development. By providing professional development opportunities such as expert lectures, research projects, and career advancement programs, alongside support measures including positive family–school relationships, enhanced colleague collaboration, psychological counseling, and family engagement, teacher training programs can effectively strengthen teachers' occupational identity. These initiatives help trainees enhance their professional competencies, recognize the value of their work, and foster a stronger sense of belonging and accomplishment in their profession. The publicly funded teacher training policy represents a significant effort toward promoting educational equity and sustainable development. The occupational identity of these trainees is pivotal to the successful realization of national objectives for teacher education. Higher education institutions can enhance this identity by scientifically planning curricula, prioritizing the development of professional competencies, and emphasizing the importance of support from significant others. These strategies align with sustainable educational practices, equipping future educators with the resilience and adaptability required for sustainable career growth.

In conclusion, the insights gained from this study on the interaction between professional competency and support systems establish a foundation for educational interventions aimed at fostering strong, ethically anchored, and sustainable professional identities in preschool education. By addressing both the competencies and support mechanisms that shape occupational identity, teacher education programs can more effectively prepare future educators to navigate the complexities of contemporary educational environments and make meaningful contributions to the field of early childhood education.

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