

Career Plateauing among Chinese Kindergarten Teachers

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Abstract: *Teacher career plateaus hinder the high-quality development of teaching staff. Based on a nationwide questionnaire survey on Chinese kindergarten teachers' career plateaus, this study developed a kindergarten teacher career plateauing structural model. The research findings indicate that overall career plateauing among Chinese kindergarten teachers is at a moderate level. The kindergarten teacher career plateauing model is best represented by the second-order single-factor/first-order three-factor structure, which consists of three dimensions: professional development, hierarchical, and emotional plateauing. Among these dimensions, emotional plateauing is most intensively perceived by teachers. Telltale signs of kindergarten teacher career plateauing range from stagnation of professional progress to losses of senses of meaning in work, constrained promotion of professional titles, slim chances of promotion to higher positions, fading positive emotional engagement, and increased negative workplace emotions. Implications of the study for building a professionalized preschool teaching force include emphases on teachers' long-range career planning and their agency in career advancement. Special attention should be paid to their emotional needs.*

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Raising the Question

THIS STUDY is an examination of career plateaus among Chinese kindergarten teachers. Career plateauing in preschool teachers refers to the phenomenon that at a certain point in their career, the kindergarten teacher stops progressing in terms of promotion and mobility, knowledge and skill acquisition, and opportunities for new responsibilities, ending up with behavioral and/or psychological stagnation or even regression. Career plateauing has the potential to instigate a wide variety of negative outcomes, including low career satisfaction (Nicholson, 1993), high job strain (McCleese et al., 2007), losses of enthusiasm (Peterson, 1993), negative attitudes (West et al., 1990), absence of professional aspirations (Locke et al., 1998), permanent career stagnation (Lemire et al., 1999), increased turnover intention (Heilmann et al., 2008), and more. Research on the characteristics and causes of kindergarten teachers' career plateauing is of vital significance for understanding the challenges in their professional development and identifying appropriate coping strategies for sustaining career development in them.

Career plateau research was initiated in the mid- and late-20th centuries. Ference et al. (1977) advanced a definition of career plateau from a management perspective, which was widely accepted (Harvey & Schultz, 1987) and later further expanded (Choy & Savery, 1998). The definition of career plateau in management has been drawn upon in studies of teacher career plateauing. Newman et al. (1980) and Krupp (1987) both paid attention to this phenomenon but did not provide sufficiently in-depth insights. Chinese researchers Kou and Zhang (2008) and Zhang (2017) studied the issue of career plateauing among Chinese teachers. Chen and Lian (2011), Li (2012), and Hu (2013) conducted more specific investigations of teacher career plateauing at differential education levels.

In existing research, there were two approaches to measuring career plateauing: objective and subjective. Chao (1990) found that a perceptually based measure of career plateaus was more appropriate than the objective measure based on job tenure and had greater explanatory power for outcomes. The measurement results in the literature included both single-dimension and multiple-dimension career plateauing models. Tremblay & Roger (1993) posited the single-dimension model from the perspective of promotions. The two-dimension model included individual plateauing (a lack of upward mobility ability and opportunities due to personal factors) and organizational plateauing (an inability to provide developmental needs and opportunities on the part of the organization) (Warren et al., 1977). The three-dimension model comprised structural plateauing (organizational structure-induced constraints on employee development), job content plateauing (little likelihood of the individual acquiring new knowledge and skills from

work or a lack of challenge in the job per se), and individual plateauing (a lack of enthusiasm for the job or developmental directions) (Bardwick, 1986). The four-dimension model incorporated structural, job content, personal choice, and job skill plateauing (Veiga, 1981). Foreign academics have contributed to the literature on career plateau theories, which is the focus of the majority of Chinese studies in this area (Xie & Long, 2005).

The bulk of career plateau research has concentrated in the field of management. Teacher career plateau research has expanded to the primary and secondary levels. However, there are only a small number of studies on pre-primary teacher career plateauing, which are mainly theoretical analyses with a lack of empirical research, let alone studies with appropriate research instruments. The present study is an endeavor to create a kindergarten teacher career plateauing scale that conforms to psychological assessment criteria and suits current Chinese social and cultural contexts. It is meant to be a useful tool for analyzing the status quo and main components of pre-school teacher career plateauing and exploring the causes of challenges in the professional development of this group.

Research Methodology

Research Participants

Participants in the Development of the Questionnaire: At the stage of establishing items, convenience sampling was adopted to include in the interview three principals and 24 teachers from different kindergartens who had graduated from the School of Preschool Education of N University, and 150 open-ended questionnaires were distributed via them. Three principals, 24 senior kindergarten teachers, and 70 preschool education majors at Y University conducted a thorough examination for the semantic analysis of the questionnaire items. To evaluate the unidimensionality, appropriateness of expression, and pertinence of the items, one professor, one associate professor, three doctors with questionnaire development experience, and one psychology researcher were involved in the expert evaluation.

Participants in the Questionnaire Survey: In the trial survey, convenience sampling and cluster sampling were employed to distribute questionnaires to 350 teachers from 10 kindergartens in northern, central, and southern Jiangsu Province. After excluding invalid questionnaires (with no answers, identical answers, omissions, or redundant answers), 312 valid questionnaires were gathered, with a validity rate of 89%. In the formal survey, stratified random sampling was adopted, with a sample frame based on the division of eight major regions and 43 areas in the “Report on the Characteristics of Regional

Socioeconomic Development in Mainland China” by the Development Strategy and Regional Economy Research Department of the State Council’s Center for Developmental Research. A total of 1,500 questionnaires were distributed, and 1,163 valid ones were finally collected, with a 77% validity rate.

Research Instruments

The Initial Development of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire items were derived from interviews and the open-ended questionnaire survey. Keywords were extracted from the survey results, semantic units were identified, and categories were established through level-by-level coding. Based on the foregoing processes and the literature analysis, a three-dimension structural construct was created, with each dimension being specifically defined. Subsequently, a semantic analysis questionnaire, an item evaluation form, and an expert evaluation questionnaire were developed, and relevant specialists were engaged to assess the appropriateness and pertinence of the items included. With their professional comments and other established scales taken into consideration, an initial questionnaire consisting of 59 items across three dimensions was developed. Due to career plateauing being a discrete variable, an interval scale and the Likert 5-point rating method (from 1 denoting “absolutely disagree” to 5 denoting “completely agree”) were used. The questionnaire subjectively measures career plateauing through a self-report format, including a title, questionnaire description, answer instructions, questionnaire items, and a conclusion.

The Questionnaire Optimization

Data from the trial survey was utilized in the item analysis to finalize the question items. The critical ratio was used to detect the Sig value, and the item with the smallest t-value was deleted. The item-total correlation was calculated to delete items that reached the level of statistical significance. The reliability of the item was tested, and items with a corrected item-total correlation lower than 0.4 were removed. The commonality and factor loading of items were tested to delete those with factor loadings less than 0.45. Finally, 27 items that met the criteria were retained and included in the questionnaire.

Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha was 0.922 (above 0.800) for the questionnaire and 0.902, 0.791, and 0.791 (all above 0.50) for the three dimensions

Table 1. Cronbach's Coefficients of Alpha of the Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing Questionnaire.

Names	# of Items	Cronbach's Coefficients of Alpha
Overall Career Plateauing	20	0.922
Emotional Plateauing	10	0.902
Professional Development Plateauing	5	0.791
Hierarchical Plateauing	5	0.791

Table 2. Matrix of Inter-Dimension Correlations and Dimension-Total Correlations.

	Dimension One Emotional Plateauing	Dimension Two Professional Development Plateauing	Dimension Three Hierarchical Plateauing	Overall Career Plateauing
Dimension One	/	0.614**	0.640**	0.925***
Dimension Two	0.614**	/	0.554***	0.805***
Dimension Three	0.640**	0.554***	/	0.825***
Overall Career Plateauing	0.925***	0.805***	0.825***	/

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

of the questionnaire, respectively, indicating high consistency among the items and good reliability of the questionnaire itself and its three dimensions (Table 1).

Validity Analysis

- (I) Content Validity: This study conducted logical analysis and judgment on the validity of the questionnaire using a two-way specification table. It created questionnaire items based on the literature review, interviews, the open-ended questionnaire, and existing scales. The evaluation and post-trial survey revision of the questionnaire effectively guaranteed its content validity.
- (II) Expert Validity: In the processes of semantic analysis, item evaluation, and expert evaluation, valuable comments were generated for the modification of question items in terms of unidimensionality, clarity of expression, pertinence, relevance, and appropriateness, resulting in a questionnaire with a considerable degree of expert validity.
- (III) Construct validity. The coefficients of correlation between dimensions range from 0.55 to 0.65, and there are relatively high dimension-total

correlations, indicating that the questionnaire has desirable construct validity (**Table 2**).

Research Procedures and Data Processing

First, a questionnaire survey was carried out, and quantitative data were gathered from respondents' self-reports. Personnel who executed the trial and the formal surveys received unified training to ensure the effectiveness of their results. The reliability analysis, validity analysis, and exploratory factor analysis were administered to half of the data collected using the software SPSS 17.0, and the other half went through confirmatory factor analysis under AMOSS 5.0. A model of kindergarten teacher plateauing was constructed and validated.

Furthermore, the phenomenological method was adopted to gather qualitative data through interviews, which were based on relevant ethics and principles of voluntariness, convenience, and confidentiality. The survey participants were fully aware of the purpose, content, and methods of the study before signing the statement of informed consent. Interview questions were well prepared, and interviewers were trained to obtain phenomenological interview techniques in advance. The interviews were face-to-face, in-depth conversations that were recorded. Interviewers were required to pay attention to the gestures and facial expressions of the interviewees. After the interview, audio tapes were repeatedly played, written records were examined, and meaningful statements were preliminarily grouped. Essential and individually definable elements were extracted, and duplicate ones were deleted or merged. Themes were generalized from key elements through the methods of excerption, elaboration, and summary (Van Manen, 1997). Individual statements were presented in the interviewees' own words and interpreted with phenomenological analysis devices.

Results of Statistical Analyses

Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing Model

Goodness-of-Fit Test

The KMO test of data from the questionnaire survey of kindergarten teacher career plateauing resulted in a value of 0.945, and the Bartlett sphericity test showed a Sig value of 0.000 (**Table 3**), indicating the existence of common

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett Sphericity Tests Results of the Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing Questionnaire.

KMO Measure		0.945
Bartlett sphericity test	Approx. Chi-Square	7737.015
	Degree of Freedom(df)	351
	Sig Value	0.000

Table 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing Questionnaire.

Items	Components		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
a21 No active responses to superiors' initiatives	0.745		
a14 Having different working attitudes from superiors	0.738		
a16 No concern with job outcomes	0.701		
a17 Losses of enthusiasm for the job, which is taken as routinized labor	0.677		
a15 Perception of heavy job pressures	0.645		
a13 Feeling no positive reactions from the leadership to my complaints	0.645		
a12 Deliberately distancing myself from the leadership	0.623		
a18 A low sense of achievement from the current job	0.610		
a9 My dedication to the job being undervalued	0.594		
a23 Feeling underpaid	0.559		
a27 No aspirations for further professional development		0.759	
a24 No intention of participating in selection and contests		0.755	
a6 Feeling overburdened with miscellaneous duties		0.687	
a20 No deliberate reflection on career planning		0.595	
a22 No intention of engaging in educational research		0.521	
a2 No intention of outperforming colleagues			0.717
a1 Low desire of pursuing leadership positions			0.708
a5 A lack of motivation for higher professional titles			0.679
a3 Perceiving overwhelming uncertainties in the process of promotion			0.664
a4 Few opportunities for promotions			0.510

Table 5. Goodness-of-Fit Index Test Results.

Model	NFI Delta1	RFI rho1	IFI Delta2	TLI rho2	CFI	RMS EA	LO 90	HI 90	PCL OSE	PRA TIO	PN FI	PC FI
Default model	0.879	0.863	0.908	0.895	0.908	0.069	0.064	0.075	0.000	0.879	0.773	0.798
Saturated model	1.000	/	1.000	/	1.000	/	/	/	/	0.000	0.000	0.000
Independence model	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.214	0.209	0.219	0.000	1.000	0.000	0.000

Table 6. Comparison of Goodness-of-Fit Indexes in Various Structural Models of Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing.

Models	x2	x2/df	RMR	RMSE	CFI	NFI	GFI	AGFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	PNFI	PGFI	PCFI
Measures		1-3	<0.05	<0.10	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.50	>0.50	>0.50
M1	1282.425	7.544	0.397	0.106	0.781	0.756	0.824	0.783	0.727	0.781	0.755	0.677	0.667	0.698
M2	997.238	5.866	0.101	0.091	0.837	0.810	0.822	0.781	0.788	0.837	0.818	0.725	0.666	0.749
M3	633.784	3.795	0.081	0.069	0.908	0.879	0.897	0.871	0.863	0.908	0.895	0.773	0.714	0.798
M4	560.744	3.419	0.072	0.064	0.922	0.893	0.908	0.882	0.876	0.922	0.909	0.771	0.709	0.796
M5	524.650	3.279	0.078	0.063	0.928	0.900	0.914	0.887	0.882	0.928	0.915	0.758	0.697	0.782
M6	633.784	3.795	0.081	0.069	0.908	0.879	0.897	0.871	0.863	0.908	0.895	0.773	0.714	0.798

factors among the correlation matrices. This demonstrated that the scale in question met the requirements of exploratory factor analysis.

Factor Extraction

Principal component analysis (PCA) was applied to extract common factors and reach the unrotated factor loading matrix. After that, the rotated factor loading matrix was obtained through varimax rotation. Multiple experiments were conducted based on the screening principles until a clear framework of dimensions emerged.

A three-dimension construct was established after the removal of items with a less-than-0.45 factor loading, items that appeared concurrently in two dimensions, and factors with only two items (**Table 4**). The factor loading of each of the 20 items was above 0.5, and there was no cross-factor relationship between these items.

Naming of Factors

The extracted factors were named and described according to the rules of factor naming. Factor 1 included 10 items and was named “emotional plateauing” to characterize the situation in which the emotional engagement of the kindergarten teacher in the current job shows no signs of increase or decrease after reaching a certain level. Factor 2 covered five items and was named “professional development plateauing” to describe the situation where the professional development of the kindergarten teacher halts for the time being after they have accumulated certain scales of expertise and skills, or their current job no longer provides challenges or developmental opportunities. Factor 3 included five items and was named “hierarchical plateauing” to characterize the state in which the professional title and position of the kindergarten teacher exhibit no signs of change after reaching certain levels as a consequence of the restriction of organizational structure.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Structural Model of Career Plateauing among Kindergarten Teachers

Confirmatory factor analysis was administered to the data from the remaining 581 questionnaires with the software Amos 21.0 to test the appropriateness and applicability of the model. **Table 5** shows that the key goodness-of-fit indexes meet the statistical requirements, indicating that the model is consistent with the theoretical construct and that the questionnaire displays a significant level of construct validity.

Testing and Adjusting the Structural Model of Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing

To test the goodness of fit of the model in question, competing models were created for comparison and further analysis. After consulting the literature, the items in the present questionnaire were arbitrarily categorized into different factors to establish five competing models for the comparison of goodness of fit: Model 1 (M1), a null model (**Figure 1**); Model 2 (M2), a first-order single-factor model (**Figure 2**); Model 4 (M4), a first-order four-factor model (**Figure 4**); Model 5 (M5), a first-order five-factor model (**Figure 5**); Model 6 (M6), a second-order single-factor/first-order three-factor model (**Figure 6**). Model 3 (M3), a first-order three-factor model (**Figure 3**), was the model under testing.

Table 6 shows the goodness-of-fit indexes of all models. The χ^2 , χ^2/df , RMR, CFI, NFI, GFI, AGFI, RFI, IFI, and TLI values of M2 exceed prescribed measures, indicating poor goodness of fit of the single-factor model. Therefore, a one-dimensional structure is unsuitable for the model in question. The goodness-of-fit indexes of M3, M4, and M5 are by far more

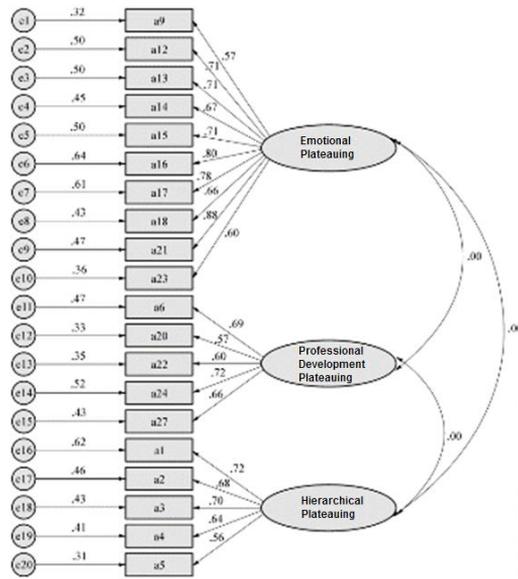


Figure 1. M1: A Null Model.

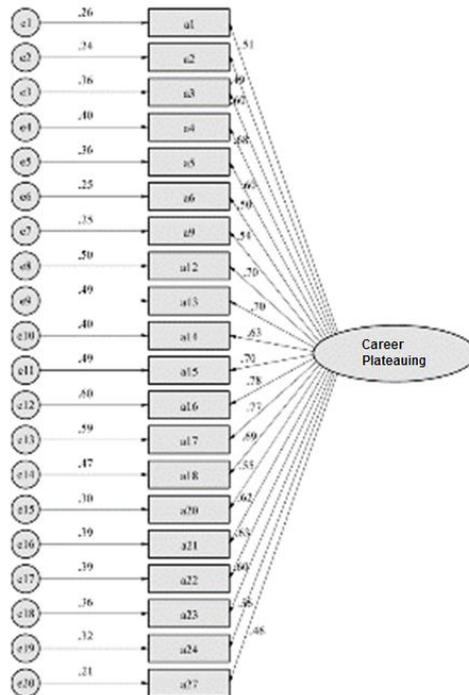


Figure 2. M2: A First-Order Single-Factor Model.

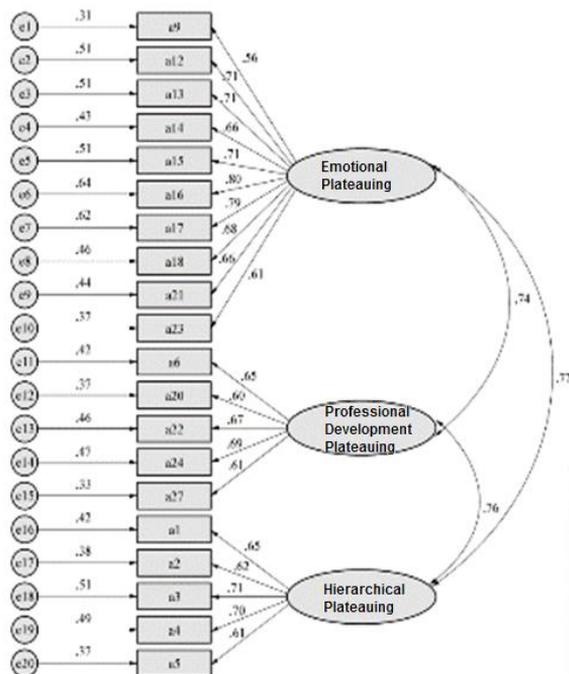


Figure 3. M3: A First-Order Three-Factor Model.

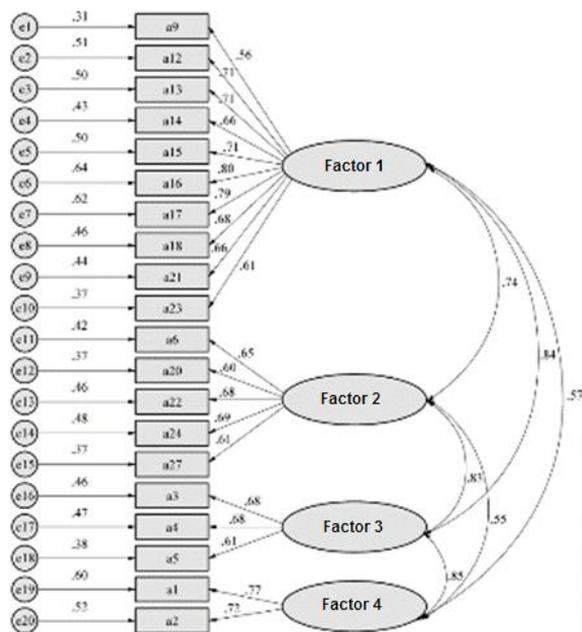


Figure 4. M4: A First-Order Four-Factor Model.

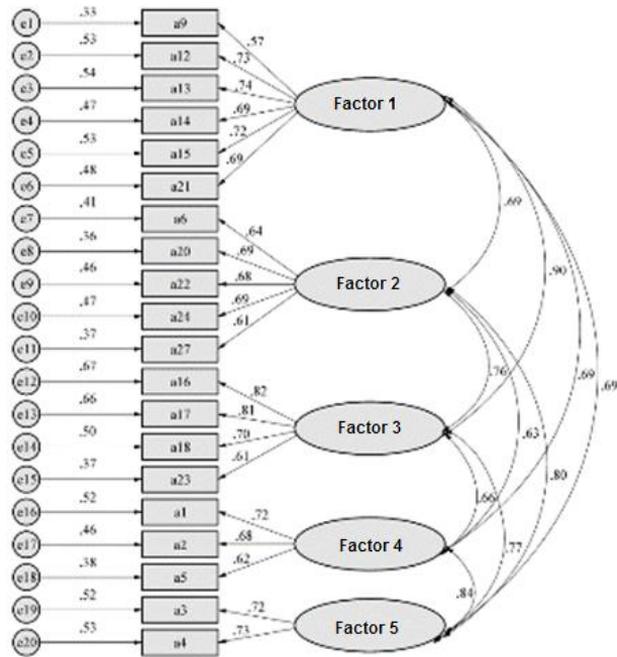


Figure 5. M5: A First-Order Five-Factor Model.

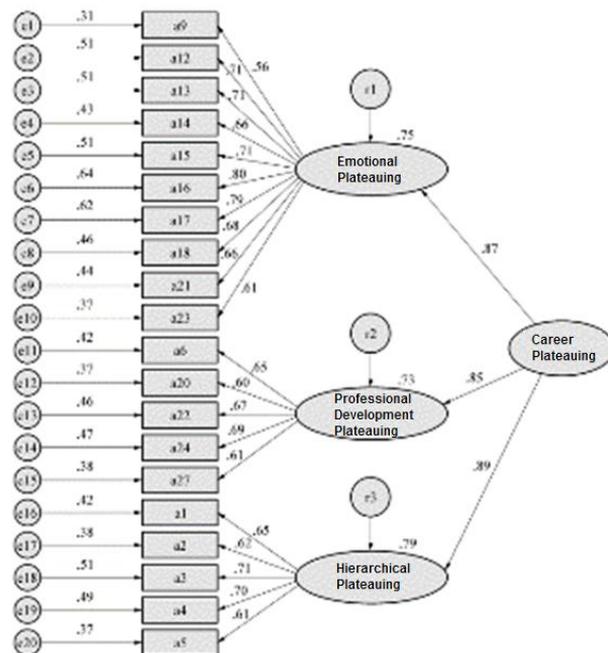


Figure 6. M6: A Second-Order Single-Factor/First-Order Three-Factor Model.

suitable than those of M1 and M2, showing the superiority of a multiple-dimension structural model. However, M4 and M5 both have dimensions with only two items after the process of clustering, so M4 and M5 were excluded. The goodness-of-fit indexes of M3 and M6 are identical. Nevertheless, the correlation coefficients between the three factors in M3 are above 0.74, indicating that these first-order factors are all influenced by a latent higher-order feature and that there is a higher-order structure that can explain the constructs of first-order factors. The factor loadings of the three first-order factors in M6 are 0.87, 0.85, and 0.89, all greater than 0.71, and their reliability index values are 0.75, 0.73, and 0.79, indicating the good quality of the model. In addition, the second-order structure's GFI and TLI values approximate 0.90, meeting the criteria of marginal interpolation. Therefore, M6 is superior to M3. As a result, the second-order single-factor/first-order three-factor structure (**Figure 6**) was selected as the structure for the kindergarten teacher career plateauing model.

Hence, based on the initial model of kindergarten teacher career plateauing, a final structural model with 20 items in three dimensions (**Figure 6**) was established after exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and the comparison of competing models being conducted.

Results of Interviews

Experience of the Professional Development Plateau

Stagnation of Professional Progress

A Quotation from an Individual Statement: *I am presently experiencing a career plateau, feeling stuck between aspiration and reality and with a deep sense of emptiness. You aspire for education, but you are unsure of how to achieve them, or you know the right approach but find it difficult to apply in real-life situations. I accept those scientific notions of preschool education, but somehow, I have no chance to implement them or apply my professional expertise. For instance, at a demonstration class, an instructor may show us how to behave professionally when a child is looking for his personal stuff under the bed after the afternoon nap. In the actual classroom setting, however, a child's failure to get dressed up in time after the nap may result in missing snack time or causing a delay in the work of logistics staff. In this case, I have to stop them searching, even though I am fully aware that, professionally, I should be more patient with them. You do not know who you should turn to for issues like this; even those grade leaders or educational research team leaders cannot help too much. Also, the majority of training programs are based on the needs of performance evaluation, not on teachers'*

authentic needs for professional development. Research projects are often carried out in a superficial fashion, with few of them reaching meaningful outcomes. How can a serious project only last one or two years? Older teachers may have the chance to engage in longer-range research, whereas young teachers have no choice but to get involved in projects that come one after another. This is not favorable for their professional advancement.

Content Analysis: This interviewee is a teacher at a public kindergarten with over ten years of tenure. She stands out among the few teachers of her age in kindergarten who have been awarded senior professional titles, showcasing her dedication as a teacher. She has her own career ideals and aspirations and has been a front-line teacher for years. With her unique insights into early childhood education, she can look at events at the workplace from multiple perspectives. In her opinion, kindergarten events related to teacher professional development, such as in-service training, research projects, and regular teacher education activities, are typically treated as matters of form with a lack of effective implementation. Teachers cannot really benefit from them in terms of career progression. As for herself, she has gained a superior professional standing among her peers, and the current job is no longer challenging for her. However, poorly implemented research projects, which were intended to drive teacher professional development, have proven to be unhelpful for her career progress. She has been deeply perplexed by this issue, feeling that the workplace limitations have constrained her professional development and placed her on a career plateau.

Losses of Senses of Meaning in Work

A Quotation from an Individual Statement: *Being perfunctory is my current work attitude. I should do better at work and more for the children, but somehow, I cannot. Currently, multiple government departments are involved in the management of kindergartens. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I have been assigned miscellaneous duties that make me feel overburdened but have no sense of meaning. I used to pay visits to my colleagues' classrooms and learn from what I thought were good practices. However, my colleagues were not happy about it. As a grade leader, I should collect lesson planning sheets from teachers in my grade. Once, we were assigned a lesson preparation task for a "theme-specific class-based activity." Teachers in other grades decided to submit one collective plan for each grade. However, I believed that since it was a "class-based activity," the content of lesson preparation should be tailored to each class. Therefore, I required teachers in my grade to submit an independent sheet for each class. As a result, teachers both in my grade and other grades opposed my proposal, claiming that I took the task in an unnecessarily serious way and would increase their workloads. I had to give up on my decision. Since then*

on, I no longer took my responsibility as the grade leader as seriously as before. I now just concentrate on finishing off my teaching duties and do not care much about other matters.

Content Analysis: This is a senior, responsible teacher from a kindergarten affiliated with the education bureau of X City, an economically prosperous city in southern Jiangsu Province. As an early childhood education experimental base, the kindergarten has undertaken a big variety of trial projects in early childhood care and education, teacher training, and curriculum reform and has received numerous visitors. Teachers here juggle a multitude of tasks. The requirements of leaders, parents of students, and the community are changeable and often contradictory with each other, which leaves teachers with no idea about the right way to follow them. Increased duties, temporarily added tasks, and constantly changing instructions from the leadership contribute to elevating tension and anxiety in teachers and distracting their attention from professional development. Making perfunctory efforts for all workloads is their coping response. She sees this work climate as the source of the career plateau she is experiencing. In the meantime, in the context of perfunctory “group attitudes,” her seriousness can make her colleagues’ carelessness more pronounced, resulting in her alienation from the collective. Under the influence of group behaviors, she has become less devoted to her job. In addition, there are no close connections between teachers from different classes. Collective activities for kindergarten teachers are mainly in the form of contests and selections. The lack of a cooperative atmosphere at the workplace is also unfavorable for their professional development.

Experience of Hierarchical Plateauing

Constrained Promotion of Professional Titles

A Quotation from an Individual Statement: *Among more than 50 teachers in this kindergarten, only 10% of them are working for a higher professional title; the majority of them intend to stay at the current levels of career plateaus. There are a very limited number of senior professional titles available to ordinary kindergarten teachers. Teachers with an education background like mine usually get a second-rank professional title after one year of service and a first-rank professional title after fulfilling the evaluation process. The senior professional title is the ceiling for most of them; only a few teachers and leaders strive for higher ranks. I don’t consider taking part in demonstration classes, publishing papers, or engaging in research projects anymore. At present, the demonstration class is typically a product of collective effort, and usually, the teacher with outstanding “star quality” is chosen to*

do the representation in order to make it impressive. It is not easy to get a paper published. The standards for papers are extremely high when you apply for a professional title above the senior rank. In the research project, it is assumed that the principal is the primary contributor, while the other participants are considered to play minor roles despite doing most of the work. I am currently holding the first-rank professional title, and I don't think it matters much to move ahead in professional title rating. It is too much trouble. Anyway, a professional title rating makes a difference in your pension after retirement, but with a minimal impact on your in-service compensation.

Content Analysis: The perception of this interviewee and her career trajectory are quite common among Chinese kindergarten teachers. The current criteria for kindergarten professional title rating are discouraging teachers from making further advancements after reaching a certain professional rank, and they are not sufficiently motivated to reach higher professional titles.

Slim Chances of Promotion to Higher Positions

A Quotation from an Individual Statement: I first encountered career plateaus 10 years ago. As a young teacher, I was selected as the grade leader. However, those teachers older than me were not happy about my promotion; you could feel jealousy and unfriendliness around you. At times, when selecting "excellent class teachers" and "excellent classes," I could not avoid offending some of my subordinates. If A was selected, B would be upset and spread humor about me. I could not do much except for transferring the instructions of my superiors to teachers in my grade. As a result, I chose to resign from the position of grade leader. Moreover, there was no higher position I could pursue after becoming a grade leader. Promoting a grade leader to deputy principal is challenging due to the high level of competence and experience required for all candidates. In many cases, the deputy principals of a public kindergarten are designated by the educational authorities. I often contemplate my future and question whether I will remain in my current position for the duration of my career.

Content Analysis: This interviewee is a male kindergarten teacher. In a female-dominated kindergarten setting, a male teacher appears somewhat like an intruder and has difficulty adapting to the communication styles of his female colleagues. Traditionally, men tend to be more ambitious than women in terms of career advancement. The flattening organizational structure of kindergartens provides slim opportunities for male preschool teachers to realize their career aspirations, therefore eliciting stronger senses of disappointment and helplessness in them. The interviewee has been in a state of career plateauing for a long time and has shifted his focus to part-time jobs. Shortly after the interview, he reportedly changed his profession.

Experience of Emotional Plateauing

Fading Positive Emotional Engagement

A Quotation from an Individual Statement: *To be a kindergarten teacher has been an aspiration of mine since I was young. I love children very much and love the profession of preschool education. I shared common notions of education with my co-workers from the previous class, and working there was very enjoyable. But in the current class, it's different. There is a divide in educational ideas between other teachers and me. Different educational ideas result in distinct educational attitudes, right? For example, should children be allowed to play with plastic building blocks during the last afternoon session before leaving kindergarten? Yes, since the game of building blocks is beneficial for them. In my view, children should be allowed time for spontaneous and low-control games. Nevertheless, my colleagues did not think it was a good idea because it would prolong students' stays at kindergarten. In the end, they agreed to my proposal on the condition that children must put away the toys before the parents come to fetch them. To complicate the issue, the childcare teacher raised the point that children must dismantle their "work" before leaving; otherwise, she would have to do it herself. As a result, the children had limited time for free play! I find my behaviors incompatible with the workplace environment and feel frustrated. In the past, I would leave aside the work that did not require immediate handling and do it at home so that I could spend more time with my students in the classroom. But now, whenever I can, I would rather keep myself away from them and occupy myself with other duties, for fear that I will get used to what is happening before my eyes, which is not the right interaction between preschool educators and young children.*

Content Analysis: This interviewee has a master's degree in preschool education, having developed a profound understanding of her profession and a substantial repertoire of early childhood education after seven years of undergraduate study and post-graduate program. As a novice teacher, she worked smoothly with those senior teachers whose educational ideas and methods were similar to hers. However, she cannot get along well with co-workers in the current new class; there is a huge gap in notions of preschool education between them. She is experiencing an unprecedented sense of distress, as she feels unrecognized, unaccepted, and isolated in the new environment. As a result, she faces a severe psychological crisis, doubting her self-worth and the significance of her career pursuit, which substantially compromises her emotional engagement in the present job.

Increased Negative Workplace Emotions

A Quotation from an Individual Statement: *People may say that children are a vulnerable group. So are teachers, indeed. For a while, I got so upset about workplace misunderstandings that I often complained tearfully to the principal. For example, once, a girl wet her pants after leaving kindergarten. It did not happen in the classroom, according to our final check. Anyway, her grandma filed a complaint against us, and our superiors criticized us. A child in my class told their parents at home that Z Teacher had stabbed him with a needle in the class, and they believed it and reported it to the principal, claiming that a three-year-old child would not lie. It happened that Z was off work that day, which could be testified by another teacher and me. If Z had been on duty that day, she would have been in trouble. In another case, a parent rang me up at night and asked me to go to her home immediately because her son said he was scratched by another child in kindergarten during the day. At that time, my child and I were running a fever, so my husband told me not to go out, but I decided to pay her a visit and check out. I also bought some fruits as gifts for the boy and managed to find his home, supported by my husband. Actually, there were no signs of scratches on the child's body, but his mother still threw tantrums, scolding me for not having watched her son closely. It was past ten o'clock when I got home. I was so upset that night that I considered ending my career as a kindergarten teacher. If I had one more insensible parent like her, I would choose to quit. Those years were a hurdle for me. To be honest, if there had been a better job available at that time, I would have left this position. I am an ordinary mortal, not a noble-minded person.*

Content Analysis: This teacher works at a private kindergarten and claims that she is going through a career plateau. She feels she is not being recognized and respected by the parents of her students. Amid ongoing conflicts with parents and surges in workloads, kindergarten teachers' grievances are accumulating. Kindergarten leaders and the public tend to think that kindergarten teachers should be patient with and tolerant of these illegitimate encounters and that dealing with home-kindergarten conflicts is among their job responsibilities. Little attention has been paid to the detrimental impacts of negative workplace emotions on preschool teachers' career development and the necessity of providing them with relevant psychological counseling. As a result, their emotional input in the job diminishes, which may even lead to the intention of leaving the job. The interviewee in the discussion spotted the shortcomings of teaching kindergarten when she compared it with other professions. However, there is no institutional mechanism in place to correct these shortcomings or organizational support and guidance available to her, resulting in her continuously accumulating negative emotional experiences at work.

Discussions and Analysis

The Structure of Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing

Research findings show that the structure of kindergarten teacher career plateauing is of multiple dimensions, comprising the first-order factor “career plateauing” and the second-order factors “emotional plateauing,” “professional development plateauing,” and “hierarchical plateauing.” There are commonalities and discrepancies in the results between this study and existing research. Since it was advanced by Bardwick, the construct of a three-dimensional career plateauing structure has been widely accepted, subsequently verified, and applied in many studies (Allen et al., 1998; Allen et al., 1999). The present study is a validation of this structure based on Chinese evidence. “Professional development plateauing” is basically identical with the job content plateauing in the literature, which refers to the stagnation of professional development of expertise, skills, and other aspects in the subjects (research participants). Professional development is one of the most important factors in the growth of kindergarten teachers. “Hierarchical plateauing” is also known as structural plateauing in the literature. Hierarchical development is a basic component of the initial definition of career plateauing as well as an essential consideration in career planning. “Emotional plateauing” describes the stagnation of the emotional input of the subject in the current job. To put forward this concept is to stress the importance of emotional development and its influencing factors for a career as a kindergarten teacher.

The commonalities in research results between the present study and the existing ones indicate the generality and stability of the structure of career plateauing in various professions. “Emotional plateauing,” which distinguishes this study from existing research, highlights the peculiarity of kindergarten teacher career plateauing and issues with emotional concern for kindergarten teachers.

The Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing Scale

The structural model of kindergarten teacher career plateauing was established on the basis of a literature review, interviews, expert evaluation, reliability and validity tests, and other processes. It meets the criteria of psychological testing and can be used as an assessment tool to evaluate the kindergarten teacher’s level of career plateauing. The self-developed “kindergarten teacher career plateauing questionnaire” can be utilized to gather statistical and demographic data for further dimension-specific research of kindergarten teacher career plateaus and to provide evidence for solving issues with career advancement in kindergarten teachers.

The Status Quo of Kindergarten Teacher Career Plateauing in China

The present study finds that the overall career plateauing of Chinese kindergarten teachers is at a moderate level, with nearly half of the teachers polled suffering from it. This indicates that kindergarten teacher career plateauing is relatively widespread under the current social and cultural backdrop and that factors related to teacher career plateaus are pervasive in our society.

Among the three dimensions, emotional plateauing is the most intensively perceived by Chinese kindergarten teachers as well as the most easily neglected issue. A considerable number of interviewees in this study complained that current preschool teacher education and training focused only on teachers' professional knowledge and behaviors, disregarding their emotional competence; that kindergarten management seldom praises or encourages teachers but instead frequently reprimands them even for minor problems; and that attention has been concentrated on high-performing teachers whereas those low-performing ones received no help. With heavy workloads and stressful pressures, kindergarten teachers need emotional support from relevant parties.

It is important to examine the plateauing professional development of kindergarten teachers within the context of the current initiative to professionalize preschool teaching staff. Despite the Teachers Law's provision that teachers are professionals specializing in educational and instructional responsibilities, the significance of preschool teachers' professionalism is less noticeable as the outcomes of early childhood education cannot be measured quantitatively in the short term, and as a result, the professional identity of the kindergarten teacher is not widely recognized by the public. Although the "Professional Standards of Kindergarten Teachers (Trial)" provide a framework of reference and direction for the professional development of this group, there are no concrete, operational stipulations in this government paper. How to promote the professional development of preschool teachers is an issue that deserves all stakeholders' attention.

Hierarchical plateauing is the earliest identified dimension in career plateau research. Nevertheless, it is a relatively less prominent issue among Chinese kindergarten teachers because the majority of this group is females, who have more conservative expectations of positional advancements due to their traditional family-centered roles. It also reflects the relatively flat organizational structure of preschool institutions. The organizational structure of a kindergarten is basically composed of three levels: ordinary teachers, middle-level management, and principals (including deputy principals). The principals are usually appointed by the local education authorities rather than being promoted to the top-level position from within the kindergarten. The

number of middle-level positions is limited, and promotion to this level largely depends on seniority. Therefore, promotion opportunities are scarce for ordinary teachers, and consequently, they have low expectations and little concern for positional changes. Regarding professional titles, far fewer kindergarten teachers can acquire them than their primary and secondary counterparts. The primary reason for this is the limited number of professional titles, particularly senior-rank titles, available for preschool staff. Moreover, the criterion of scientific research in professional title rating is also challenging for ordinary kindergarten teachers. Additionally, applying for professional titles is not encouraged in private kindergartens, and some of them are not even entitled to participate in professional title ratings. In sum, the majority of kindergarten teachers choose not to consider further hierarchical progress after reaching a certain professional level. This research result demonstrates the flattening organizational structure of kindergartens and the restricted paths of professional title elevation for preschool teachers.

Educational Implications

Strengthening Kindergarten Teachers' Career Planning

Teaching kindergarten is a specialized profession, requiring scientific, ongoing planning. It is important for preschool teachers to augment their career planning awareness and abilities. Career planning is the process of determining the action direction, timing, and plan for achieving career goals based on the individual planner's personal conditions and environmental factors. The notion of career planning originated from the early 20th century's career guiding movement in the United States, under the influence of theories of career development, whole-life development, and lifelong development. Kindergarten teachers should attach greater importance to career planning, recognize the significance of proactive planning in professional development, cultivate career planning and management habits, formulate development plans with clear goals and processes, and implement them through persevering efforts and effective measures. A well-crafted career plan significantly contributes to promoting the career progress of the preschool teacher, adjusting them to the development needs of kindergartens, and assisting them in overcoming career plateaus.

Encouraging Preschool Teachers' Use of Initiative in Professional Development

A plateaued teacher is a passive executor of assignments without initiative. Constrained by environmental factors, a plateaued kindergarten teacher can

only bury themselves in day-to-day chores, lose a sense of direction, and be unable to enjoy the charm and value of their profession. According to Schiller (1984), when a human is permanently bound to a separate fragment of a system, they gradually turn themselves into a fragment. What fills their ears is the monotonous noise of the machine wheels they are driving. In such a situation, they cannot develop a harmonious existence. Hence, it is important for kindergarten teachers to actively explore the meaning of their careers. They should keep themselves informed of the current dynamics of early childhood education development and increase their agency in shaping career trajectories. Self-construction is a precondition of free development. Through using their initiative and exercising autonomy, preschool teachers can extricate themselves from career plateaus and head for a broader career prospect.

Kindergarten Teachers' Career Development Is a Long-Term Course

The survey results of the study show that career plateauing experiences are common among preschool teachers, and their career plateaus are related to a wide variety of factors. Therefore, a reasonable understanding of career progression and realistic goal setting are crucial to kindergarten teachers' career planning. According to Bollnow (1999), it is impossible for an individual to develop with high momentum continuously and permanently. They often encounter burnout due to personal dispositions and burdens, falling into an undesirable state of degeneration. Teacher development is a long-term endeavor. Preschool teachers' lifelong learning is a practice aligned with the prevailing notion of lifelong education for all. The objective of lifelong education is to increase the individual's capacities to learn, which include the habit of persistent learning, self-renewal ability, and the capability to cope with ever-emerging challenges. Kindergarten teachers should prepare for a long course of active learning, continuously improving their understanding of the preschool profession, delving into its value, and, in the meantime, enjoying successes in their careers to circumvent career plateaus and achieve long-term development.

Conclusion

A substantial portion of kindergarten teachers can successfully transition from being novices to mature teachers but may encounter barriers to further career progress. Career plateauing among preschool teachers has become a grave issue involving a wide range of influencing factors, challenging the sustainability of their professional development. As a result of increased

public investment in early childhood education and expanded preschool teacher education, the shortage of kindergarten teacher supply has been significantly mitigated. Preschool teacher development will become the focus of attention in the ensuing period. Researchers can further explore the factors impacting the professional and cultural environment of kindergarten teachers or conduct finer-grained studies based on the present one to look into specific career plateauing issues faced by Chinese preschool teachers in different regions and at varied developmental levels and ascertain the support and assistance they need. In addition, due to the integration of care and education in early childhood education, career plateauing issues among kindergarten caregivers and health care providers also deserve specialized investigations.

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