

# “I’m the mother of all children”: Exploring caring in Chinese early childhood teachers’ professional identity

Qun Ma

Supervised by Dr. Maria Cooper, Prof. Helen Hedges and Assoc. Prof. Fiona Ell

## Introduction

Exploring caring as part of Chinese early childhood teachers’ professional identity belongs to my doctoral project about Early childhood teachers’ professional identity in China. Professional identity in my studies refers to what distinguish teachers from others such as parents and paediatricians. My research aims to unpack teachers’ professional identity in the context of China. This piece of work about caring is underscored here because caring has long been undervalued and even silenced in empowering teachers’ professional identity in educational research (Bradbury, 2012; Rogers et al., 2020).

## Literature Review

The address of “mothers” is female-oriented and thus mothering and its extension, caring, is often labelled as feminine. However, according to Montessori and Noddings, caring should be gender-neutral and apply to creatures not exclusive to humans (Aslanian, 2015; Noddings, 2003)

Caring is essential to early childhood teachers’ professional identity and can be found in the existing literature that conceptualise caring as ethics of care (e.g., Noddings, 2003) and professional love (e.g., Page, 2018) in the Western context.

However, caring in Chinese context has less been addressed in terms of early childhood teachers’ professional identity and how context influence caring as part of teachers’ professional identity is the focus of this poster.

## Research Question

How might a Chinese context influence caring as part of early childhood teachers’ professional identity?

## Methods

Semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese kindergarten teachers from three different settings in China.

“Mothers” as the epitome of caring in early childhood teachers’ professional identity can be explained by China’s collective environment, family-like ties, and socialist morality.

## Findings

All except one of teachers conceived “mothers” as an appropriate word to describe part of their professional identity because “妈妈这个词还是非常光辉、非常伟大的 The word mother is very glorious, very great” (Bishe, K2).

In terms of caring children like a mother, all teachers reported that they treated children with care and love within a large group to encourage children's adaptation to kindergarten, become independent, and get along with their peers.

## Discussion

“Mothers” in the Chinese teacher-student relationship reflects a parent-like role that is group-oriented, ethical, with professional purposes (Hu et al., 2021). This role is rooted in the Chinese collective environment, family-like tie, and socialist morality.(Ji & Cui, 2021; Peng et al., 2022; Zuo, 2013).

## Implication

Caring has the potential to empower early childhood teachers’ professional identity in different cultural contexts and future research can compare different contexts to further the understanding caring in teachers’ professional identity and conceptualise a new notion of caring that can unfold teachers’ professional identity.

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qma689@acuklanduni.ac.nz