Article

Unlocking Emotional Aspects of Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Identity through Photovoice

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Abstract: The previous literature has strongly emphasized the professional aspects of teacher identity in terms of knowledge and pedagogical matters. However, teachers' emotions have also been academically discussed in recent decades. The voices of kindergarten teachers are critical for reflecting on professional identities within the community of kindergarten teachers. Regrettably, in Hong Kong, kindergarten teachers have become an oppressed professional community due to the marketization of kindergartens in this neoliberal city. Therefore, this arts-based participatory study aimed to investigate teachers' identities by discovering kindergarten teachers' emotional characteristics in Hong Kong. Teachers' voice has been collected through photo narratives. Twelve in-service kindergarten teachers participated in this study; all of them worked in local kindergartens in Hong Kong. The teachers were invited individually to take a photo of an object in their daily lives and share their own stories. Altogether 1080 min of interview data were recorded. Through a series of oral narratives by members of this marginalized professional community, this study unlocked the emotions and voices of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. Through a photovoice approach, the findings revealed how the teachers' personal aspects were a neglected but important part of their teacher identity.

Keywords: professional identity; photovoice; early childhood education

1. Introduction

In the world of neoliberalism, we are forced to face never-ending competitions [1]. We repeatedly make choices and calculations for personal advantage. Everyone is spurred to strive for excellence in productivity and efficiency. Both losers and winners live with "a necessary and unavoidable evil"—the inequality and insecurity generated by neoliberalism [2]. As Hong Kong is a capitalist metropolis that embraces the devils of neoliberalism, local kindergarten teachers are neglected by the professional community, while their professional identities are solely defined in terms of social status, salary, and qualifications. Teachers' work is emotionally engaging and personally demanding; yet under the impact of neoliberalism, the caring nature of the teaching profession is frequently ignored when it comes to educational policy and teacher standards, particularly in Asian contexts [3–5]. As a result, there is now an ironic gap between what the public expects from "a caring and loving teacher" and what the public demands in terms of successful student outcomes.

This gap is especially pronounced in the field of early childhood education (ECE), as kindergarten teachers are often more valued for being caring and loving [6]. As a result, kindergarten teachers are more likely to experience emotional burnout and issues with their identity formation [6]. In addition, the global pandemic has certainly placed teachers on the frontline of constant educational changes. Previous empirical studies, e.g., [7,8] have addressed how teachers may experience "inefficacious vulnerability" [8] when confronted with educational change, which can result in concerns about teachers' job commitment and resilience. Thus, this arts-based participatory study aimed to investigate kindergarten teachers' identities in Hong Kong to unlock the emotional aspects and collect the voices of

kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. This study helped kindergarten teachers regain their subjectivities and express their voices through a photovoice approach. This alternative approach opened up a space for teachers to liberate themselves through dialogue while increasing public awareness of teachers' voices and emotions.

2. Teachers' Professional Identity and Emotions

At the end of the last century, teacher professional identity (TPI) emerged as a separate field of study [9]. The term TPI has rapidly entered many scholarly discussions, as it sits at the core of the teaching profession and is connected to a number of other factors relating to professional effectiveness, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and motivation [10]. Regardless of variations in how scholars have defined TPI, three common features have been found in the key literature, e.g., [4,11]. First is the shifting and multiple nature of TPI. This notion of the plurality of identities not only echoes the work of symbolic interactionists who believe that individuals hold different identities according to the objects they interact with, but it also reflects recent sociological perspectives in which identity is multiple and coexisting [12] and shifting and fragmented [13]. Second, TPI is formed and mediated by complex contexts and conditions and influenced by a variety of internal and external factors. Although there is no formula for how these factors contribute to identity formation, identity formation can be understood as complex acts of negotiation [13]. Third, TPI involves teachers' subjective intentions—in other words, teacher agency [4,11,13]. Summing up the above-mentioned characteristics, in the TPI formation process, teachers identify themselves not only via their personal and social histories and current positions but also by their beliefs and values about the type of teacher they wish to be in their constantly changing political, social, institutional, and personal situations [14]. As a result, agency can be found through teachers' narratives of their career paths and used for the maintenance or further shaping of these identities and the tensions among them [13,15].

Teaching is an emotional endeavor, e.g., [5,16,17]. Research has shown that, like TPI, teacher emotion may also be evoked by various factors, including teachers' professional goals, the school climate, educational policies, students, and sociocultural factors [4,5,18,19]. The relationship between teacher emotions and professional identities is not unidirectional; instead, it goes both ways [20], as when emotion alters a teacher's identity in relation to the profession, it may simultaneously be altered by aspects of the profession. For example, as Burke and Stets [21] pointed out, positive emotions can motivate social actors to continue acting in a particular circumstance because positive emotions serve as symbols showing that what they are doing is beneficial to identity verification; conversely, negative feelings can alert social actors that their identities have been falsified, in which case they must either change their identities in that situation or alter their behaviors to re-verify their identities.

In fact, it is inevitable that teachers experience success and failure in their professional development. Understanding the coping mechanisms for how teachers respond to challenges seems to be crucial for understanding teacher emotions. Prior studies have addressed the relationship between teacher emotion and self-motivation, defined as people's ability to motivate themselves to perform difficult and challenging tasks [18]. According to studies, teachers who exhibit high levels of self-motivation are more likely to be able to regulate their emotions positively and combat feelings of drowsiness [22]. As a result, teachers may foster confidence for facing challenges in the future [22]. Moreover, teacher emotions involve dynamic interactions between personal, professional, and social environments [5].

Yin's [23] research on kindergarten teachers' emotional labor in Hong Kong revealed three unique features of teachers' emotions in ECE. First, socioemotional development is critical for early childhood learners, which means that teachers' expressions of emotions are part of the teaching content [6]. Second, compared with school-aged children, early childhood learners attach stronger emotional relevance to their teachers, which contributes to the intensive interactions between teachers and children. The ethic of care has certainly intensified kindergarten teachers' emotional labor. Third, kindergarten teachers frequently suffer disadvantages related to lower income and lower social status compared to school

teachers [24]. Because of these unfavorable working conditions, ECE teachers are frequently subjected to increased stress and instability. Apart from the above features, some recent research has also pointed out that Chinese kindergarten teachers may undertake a higher emotional workload due to certain sociocultural factors, such as close interpersonal relationships with others (e.g., parents and colleagues), the examination-oriented nature of education, and higher pressure regarding children's safety [25,26]. In addition, Zhang et al.'s research on ECE teachers' emotional rules highlighted that a smiling service rule is embedded in Chinese kindergarten teachers' emotion management [6].

In short, teacher emotion and teacher identity are interrelated concepts formed under the interactions between teachers' personal aspects of identification and the sociological factors that they encounter [5]. In an ever-changing world, contextualizing teacher identity and emotion is critical for giving adequate support to teachers. Considering the particular working environment and professional rules of kindergarten teachers and the surprisingly small amount of research discussing kindergarten teachers' emotions and identity, there is a strong need for studies focusing on teachers in this field.

3. The Narratives of Hong Kong Kindergarten Teachers

People are living in a world with ways of thought and discussion that are composed of various discourses or stories. Narratives enable us to make meaning and interpret the world through discourses and stories [1]. There is an innate drive in human beings to make meaning of their existence through stories [27]. Stories as realities are dominant discourses that emphasize thinking, talking, and behaving in a particular way. In early childhood education, dominant discourses [28] provide the narratives of early childhood education that form the reality of young children. The experience of top-down changes has been described as revolutionary in school and as evolutionary in early childhood institutions [29] as there are differences in the historical trajectories of these two settings. Education (including how the institutions are managed and governed, how teachers, students, and parents see themselves and are seen, and how they are related to one another) has been adversely reshaped by these top-down changes, which embody the economic imperatives of calculation, choice, and competition [29].

Early childhood education in Hong Kong is a marketized system under keen competition. The highest quality and efficiency are guaranteed by kindergartens at the lowest price, which enables parents in Hong Kong to select the best possible kindergarten according to their preferences and budget [1]. Meanwhile, unrealistic admission requirements and examination-driven curricula in Hong Kong secondary schools [30] have led to top-down pressures on primary schools and kindergartens. Parents in Hong Kong highly value their children's academic achievements while devaluing the power of play in kindergartens [31]. Parental expectations create tensions among kindergarten teachers regarding school management and curriculum development decisions. Kindergarten teachers thus face tremendous pressure from parents who undermine the true meaning of childhood through means such as intensive parenting [32], interest classes [33], and private tutoring [34]. The accelerating marketization of kindergartens forces teachers to focus on the interests of parents, and they have to concentrate on the demand for economic efficiency to avoid being closed down [35]. For example, because of the Kindergarten Education Scheme [36], parents have the choice to pay for the kindergarten where they wish their children to study, and kindergartens secure the headcounts of their teachers according to their enrollments. However, this is not the case in the primary and secondary education sectors, where the government directly subsidizes primary and secondary school teachers' salaries.

Scholars have pointed out that advocating professionalism in the early years of education has become an essential policy in many European countries [37]. In Hong Kong, the kindergarten sector's professionalism issues are still under debate. There are 13,486 kindergarten teachers in the field, and the turnover rate was around 13% in the year 2021–2022 [36], which means that there are around 1800 leaving the field every year. Apparently, the career prospects for kindergarten teachers were not attractive or promising enough for those teach-

ers who have left the field. The public connects the professionalism of a field to its salary package and benchmarking mechanisms. Previous literature has stated that the higher the educational qualifications of teachers, the higher the quality of education delivered in the classroom [38]. It is sad to say that in Hong Kong today, no more than half of kindergarten teachers hold a bachelor's degree. As a result of the steady rise in professional requirements, many in-service kindergarten teachers are simultaneously studying for certificates, diplomas, or degrees on a part-time basis [39]. However, such support cannot fully change the mentality and ideology of early childhood education. Many kindergarten teachers and most of the public still hold the impression that kindergarten teachers are not professional at all.

4. The Resistance Movement: The Photovoice Approach

When no alternative is allowed to the imposition and dictatorship of dominant discourses, the only conceivable reality is formed by them [40]. However, it is hard for a discourse to be so dominating that it entirely silences other stories [1]. According to Foucault, "where there is power, there is resistance" [41]. Ball elaborated on how "resistance is manifold and operates at a multiplicity of points in different forms, in many small acts and passing moments" [42]. Movement, experimentation, and new thinking build up a world filled with diverse possibilities that are reflected by alternative narratives [1]. If we decide to listen, it is not a challenging task to hear the voices of the resistance movement and the corresponding alternative narratives [1]. As stated by Dahlberg and Moss, the Reggio Emilia approach was the first to come up with a pedagogy of listening [1]. Listening is regarded as a concept that is multi-faceted and complex. The dynamic relationship involved in listening is interpretive and dialogic [43]. In this study, the photovoice approach was adopted as an alternative way to listen to teachers' voices and resist the tensions caused by dominant neoliberal discourses.

Conventionally, text has been the major mode of presentation in research studies. Nonetheless, visual research methods have also been emphasized, as the textual mode may not be able to represent all sources of data. Kress explained the differences between visual and textual modes in data collection. Visual images represent the data collected in a spatially organized manner, whereas text data are temporally organized [44]. Textual representations are limited because they express the logic of a temporal sequence. Unlike drawings, neither writing nor speech can represent the relationships among visual elements in terms of a spatial depiction [45]. Due to the logic of temporal sequence, text should primarily be presented in a linear manner. By contrast, images allow for a more holistic representation of information, concepts, and emotions in a non-linear form [46,47]. Furthermore, language-based methods are more time-pressured than visual methods because researchers often ask for the spontaneous or instinctual reactions of their participants [48]. By contrast, visual methods give participants more time to express their reflective responses and inner voices. In particular, visual research methods are helpful for participants who are young or disadvantaged. Although textual expression can also achieve the creation of complex emotions, perceptions, and metaphors, this requires a level of cognitive, linguistic, and emotional maturity that young children do not have [47]. Indeed, visual research methods can uncover subconscious or unrealized feelings and perspectives more effectively than traditional written or oral research strategies [49].

Visual research methods are not limited to drawing but also extend to photography. The photovoice concept was initially developed by Wang and Burris to enable Chinese village women to photograph their everyday health and work realities [50]. Photovoice has since become a participatory action research strategy that offers a unique space whereby people can identify, represent, and enhance their communities through a specific photographic technique. Wang explained three main goals of photovoice: (1) recording and reflecting on a community's strengths and concerns; (2) promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through discussions of a community's photographs; and (3) reaching policymakers [51]. Photovoice is a process whereby people

with limited power due to poverty, language barriers, race, class, ethnicity, gender, culture, or other circumstances use photo images to capture aspects of their environments and experiences and share them with others [52]. Wang defined five key principles of photovoice: (1) photo images can teach the public; (2) visuals can influence policy; (3) community members participate in creating and defining the images; (4) the public serves as an audience in the process; and (5) photovoice emphasizes individual and community actions [51].

Wass et al. used photovoice as a visual data collection method to explore students' conceptions of good teaching and effective learning at the university [53]. They also investigated the applications of the photovoice approach, finding that most students expressed appreciation for the approach, while some found it restrictive and challenging in some respects. Wan et al. studied preservice teachers in Hong Kong by using the photovoice data collection approach [54]. They showed that in preservice teacher preparation programs that have inadequate support for developing teachers as reflective practitioners, photovoice forms a channel for prospective teachers to reflect on their beliefs and orientations toward education by expressing their concerns. Their study demonstrated that photovoice can be a powerful tool in teacher development by using multimodal elements to genuinely engage prospective teachers in reflective dialogues.

5. Method

Arts-based research has been an accepted method in educational settings since its introduction by Elliot Eisner in the early 1990s [55]. Arts-based research, especially participatory projects, encourages the use of innovative and artistically inspired methods to generate various kinds of visual data for analysis and reporting [51]. It focuses more on unraveling complexities, stimulating discussions, and confronting uncertainties [55]. On the other hand, a participatory action research (PAR) approach typically centers the wisdom and experience of educators and learners [56], positioning them as architects rather than objects of research [57]. Meanwhile, PAR is more than a research method when researchers committed to justice "must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" [58]. Therefore, PAR was adopted to accommodate its unconventional research interests through an arts-based approach (i.e., photovoice). To unlock emotional aspects of kindergarten teachers' professional identity through photovoice, the following research questions have been addressed:

1. What were the emotional aspects of kindergarten teachers' identities?
2. How did the kindergarten teachers interpret their identities through their photo narratives?

Twelve in-service kindergarten teachers participated in this study (Table 1). The sample was gathered based on a purposive sampling strategy [59]. The researcher knew these participants for more than six years in the field of early childhood education. The researcher invited them to participate in this study and none of them refused to participate. All of the participants were alumni from different cohorts of the same teacher education program and worked in local kindergartens in Hong Kong. This sampling strategy was used so that the participants could share their thoughts and feelings in trusting and comfortable circumstances. The teachers were invited individually to take a photo of an object in their daily lives and share their own stories. Ethical considerations were discussed around the use of photography for research purposes, such as the need to seek consent if the participants wanted to take photographs of people whose faces could be recognized [60]. The invitation to participate in this study emphasized that the researchers were interested in the participants' ideas, not their photographic skills. Due to the pandemic, two online Zoom sharing sessions were conducted, each with six participants. Altogether, 1080 min of interview data were recorded. To establish the trustworthiness of this study [61], its credibility was observed in the following ways [62]: (1) the researchers chose participatory action research as a research method for this qualitative study; (2) the participants are the researcher's colleagues in the field and they knew each other for more than six years;

(3) the researcher interviewed all participants by herself with established rapport in the dialogues, and to help ensure that the qualitative data collected was an honest reflection; and (4) as a kindergarten teacher herself, the researcher came from a background similar to that of the participants, which gave her credibility. The credibility of the researcher is crucial in qualitative studies since the researcher is the major instrument of data collection and analysis [63]. Based on the steps of conducting action research [64], the author of this study also provided a research diary for this project in the Appendix A.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education Level	Years of Teaching	Context/Role
A	Male	32	Bachelor	12	Principal of a kindergarten
B	Female	26	High Diploma	6	Class teacher of a kindergarten
C	Female	30	High Diploma	8	Class teacher of a kindergarten
D	Female	24	Bachelor	2	Teacher of a special education center
E	Male	26	Bachelor	4	Class teacher of a kindergarten
F	Female	39	Master	18	Principal of a kindergarten
G	Female	27	Bachelor	5	Class teacher of a kindergarten
H	Female	32	Master	10	Deputy principal of a kindergarten
I	Female	34	Bachelor	9	Class teacher of a kindergarten
J	Female	42	Bachelor	21	Deputy principal of a kindergarten
K	Female	51	High Diploma	27	Deputy principal of a kindergarten
L	Female	33	Bachelor	9	Class teacher of a kindergarten

To start with, one of the authors, who was previously a kindergarten teacher, shared with the teachers one of the photographs that she had taken as well as her thoughts on that photograph. Then, we used the critical incident technique [65] to ask the participants to recall a personal incident that stood out in their minds for any reason. Open-ended questions were asked to facilitate their reflections on the histories of their own professional development [66]. The participants completed the photography exercise over two weeks and then shared their photographs with the group members at the second session. They explained why they took each photograph and the ideas they wanted to convey [50]. Following a usual practice of photovoice methodology, each photograph was shown on a large screen connected to a laptop, which allowed the group to see the images and facilitated further dialogue among the group members [67]. The discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. The photographic and audio data were then analyzed inductively, considering relevant literature and our research aims [68]. Two researchers were separately involved in the data analysis to offset researcher subjectivity. One researcher, who was also the interviewer, first analyzed the transcripts to identify each of them relating to the affective aspects of the teachers. The other researcher then checked the categorizations independently before conducting discussions with the first researcher. In the discussions, the two researchers considered the discrepancies in their analyses and agreed on a final version of categorizations concerning the teachers' emotions shown in the data collected. All video data were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in the data [68], so it was helpful for discovering different aspects of teachers' emotions. The authors categorized the photographs as metaphorical if they were used to convey an idea that was not directly evident in the photograph [69]. For instance, the participants used images to represent a good model of a kindergarten teacher instead of describing an actual teacher. When coding for emotion, the authors were guided by the participants' verbal descriptions of how they felt ("frustrated", "motivated", etc.).

6. Findings

This section focuses on the qualitative findings from the kindergarten teachers who shared their photos and object narratives. Their sharing unlocked the personal aspects of the teachers' professional identity, which went far beyond the professional aspects of their identity. Based on the analysis of the interview data, three main themes were examined in this study: (1) role modeling, (2) critical reflection, and (3) personal recognition.

6.1. Theme One: Role Modeling

Recognizing, recalling, and analyzing positive emotions are key components of the self-awareness of teachers [70]. In this study, some of the teacher participants held positive teacher identities due to the good models they had encountered in their personal lives. In the stories they shared, the professional qualifications of these role models were not mentioned. Instead, personalities and attitudes mattered in terms of how they thought of their role models: for example, the strength and persistence of a grandmother, the tenderness of a teacher's voice or smell, and the caring personality of a teacher.

6.1.1. A Jade Ring (Teacher A; Male; Aged 32)

Teacher A presented a photo of a jade ring (Figure 1), which represented his bonding with his grandmother during his childhood. His grandmother was born in 1928. When she was very young, she was deceived into smuggling opium by an unscrupulous businessman. Only when she grew up did she finally realize that she had been deceived. Therefore, she taught Teacher A not to lie and that she hated deceivers. For Teacher A, his bonding with his grandmother provided him with positive emotions: he felt proud of being a kindergarten teacher, as he believed his grandmother would feel a similar way.

Figure 1. A jade ring.

"During World War II, grandma brought her mum to Hong Kong and married my grandpa. She later gave birth to three children: my uncle, my dad, and my auntie. Back then, grandpa was always out to work as a coolie, and grandma had to stay at home to take care of her children. Since grandpa had an unstable income, grandma sold her snacks from day to night to support the family. In 1989, Grandma was 61 years old, and I was born. I lived with grandma for my entire early years. My grandma was very benevolent, and she loved children a lot. Her love and attitude toward children are what I learned from her. She was always very helpful to others. Whether she was in prosperity or adversity,

she would never forget her original intent. My decision to work in the early childhood education field was, in fact, greatly influenced by my grandma."

6.1.2. Meringue Cookies (Teacher B; Female; Aged 26)

Teacher B introduced a photo of a snack that was very common in local kindergartens in Hong Kong (Figure 2). Teacher B mentioned her class teacher during her childhood by introducing a meringue cookie. Although the professional qualifications of her role model were not mentioned, positive attitudes mattered in terms of how she thought of her role model. Teacher B felt warm thanks to her teacher, who cared about her very much even though it was only snack time.

Figure 2. Meringue cookies.

"I was quite picky. I always thought the white meringue cookie was yummier because it had vanilla flavor and looked prettier. I wouldn't even look at other meringue cookies except the white ones. When I had meringue cookies as a snack, the teachers would not distribute them to students based on their color; the teachers just randomly gave us them. Usually, I would first calm down when I received my meringue cookies, and then I would finish the white ones. I would just stare at the rest of the meringue cookies and wait for the teachers' help. But when I saw everyone else had finished, I would resort to crying. Usually, at this moment, a teacher, of whom I have a strong impression, would appear. I can remember her name, Miss Mok, after 30 years. Her look, her voice, and her details still vividly appear in my mind. She would sit with me while I finished the snack. She did not make me surrender; instead, she would use some strategies to allow me to finish it. In fact, sometimes, she would even encourage me positively by giving me white meringue cookies or small treats after I finished eating all of my snack. If my memory serves me right, I was never blamed because of not finishing the meringue cookies, and there were no hard feelings about it."

6.1.3. A Bottle of Fragrance (Teacher C; Female; Aged 30)

Teacher C shared a change in her emotions during her early career. At first, she had felt very frustrated, as she had a false impression or expectation of the field of early childhood education due to a happy childhood memory of a class teacher's sweet and refreshing

fragrance (Figure 3). Then, she worked in the field for a few years and started to realize the meaning of this professional career for herself. The good smell of her class teacher gave her a happy memory and a positive attitude, encouraging her to be a persistent person.

Figure 3. A bottle of fragrance.

"My kindergarten class teacher was always fragrant. She was a caring and gentle woman. I thought all kindergarten teachers were just like that, so I put early childhood education as my first priority. After working for a few years, I found that the reality was not that ideal. I do not have a good smell every day; instead, I have the smell of sweat. The sweat smell may be emitted by the stress of catching up on the schedule. This is the part that makes me frustrated and is not what I expected. I thought teachers could play happily with all the children and that they would really like the children. But now I realize there is no time for us to take care of and understand each of the children. Now that I have worked in this field for a few years, I think the only part that matches my expectation is the smile. I love children, and that is why I teach them. Also, the children in the pre-nursery class and the K1 class start from zero. I feel a sense of accomplishment when they learn something out of nothing. I feel happy when they like me. So my smile is genuine; there is no contradiction to the reality at all. This occupation is challenging. If I continue to work as a kindergarten teacher, I hope I can spread positivity to children, just like my kindergarten teacher who made me idolize her."

6.1.4. Bean (Teacher D; Female; Aged 24)

During the interview, Teacher D introduced Bean, a toy from her childhood (Figure 4). This was a gift from her kindergarten teacher when she reached certain goals in her classroom learning. Teacher D felt moved by her class teacher and regarded this as lifelong encouragement. This experience of Teacher D encouraged her to keep the same practice with the children in her kindergarten classroom.

Figure 4. Bean.

"Bean accompanied me for years. I held it when I slept and when I bathed. Most importantly, it carried the encouragement the teacher gave me. I brought it wherever I went. I did not play with Bean when I grew up. But it is still very precious to me. I chose this stuffed toy because I think encouraging children is very important. You may think a small gift or toy does not mean much. But, in fact, it can represent a lot of things and be a lifelong encouragement. I give stuffed animals to children and play with them now because it feels good, and stuffed animals can mean a lot to children."

6.1.5. A Graduation Photo (Teacher E; Male; Aged 26)

Teacher E studied in a traditional boys' secondary school in Hong Kong (Figure 5). He acquired a stereotypical identity regarding early childhood teachers from hearing stories that were shared by parents, teachers, and alumni about how people usually preferred to work in IT or finance or become lawyers, doctors, or architects. Therefore, Teacher E felt very anxious and lost regarding his future study and career development. Teacher E felt thankful to his class teacher who did not force him to follow the path of others but encouraged him to chase his own dream job.

Figure 5. A graduation photo.

"My DSE result was not satisfactory. So I applied to overseas universities to study early childhood education. At last, an overseas university accepted my application to study engineering, and a local university accepted my application to study early childhood education. I struggled in choosing what was best for me, asking questions such as should I study abroad and should I study a more common subject. So, I sought advice from my class teacher. He did not give me a concrete answer at first, but he asked me to think about which career path would bring me a sense of achievement and joy after studying at university. At last, my class teacher's words made me determined to be a kindergarten teacher. I am glad that I made this wise decision, as I very much enjoy my work and the time I spend with my students, witnessing their growth. Until now, I am still very thankful to my class teacher for giving me this wise advice."

6.2. Theme Two: Critical Reflection

Negative experiences are inevitable in the formation of a teacher's identity [71,72]. For student teachers, negative emotions, especially disappointment, were found to be mostly related to their supervising teachers and university lecturers, often connected with failed expectations of finding role models in them [70]. For the in-service teachers in this article, sources of disappointment included the rigidness of the teaching environment, the underdevelopment of the field, and mechanisms that could create dilemmas for their own teacher identities, beliefs, and professional and career expectations.

6.2.1. A Kindergarten Report (Teacher F; Female; Aged 39)

Teacher F showed her kindergarten report card to the group during the interview (Figure 6). She shared how she spent her childhood in a very academic-driven and demanding kindergarten in Hong Kong. She felt very stressed at that time because she had to spell vocabulary to pass some tests when she was only 5 years old. This unpleasant experience made her strive to be a kindergarten teacher.

Figure 6. A kindergarten report.

"Children from these schools would learn a lot of vocabulary, but they were exhausted. It makes me reflect on myself. I like getting high grades and have an A-grade complex. I see many As in my report card, but there are some Bs in it as well. So what is the difference between B+ and A-? Why is my "public morality" score lower than my "diligence"? There

is no proof. Working in the kindergarten education field at university, it strikes me how it took us years to make changes. We still cannot change the ways and attitudes through which we see and measure a child."

6.2.2. Washable Marker Pens (Teacher G; Female; Aged 27)

Teacher G showed a photo of washable marker pens to the group during the interview (Figure 7). She mentioned that everyone treated them as non-washable marker pens and misunderstood their function without any exploration. After deep thought, Teacher G said that she realized that conservative thoughts and teaching methods remained in the entire industry. She felt disappointed and depressed, as it was different from what she had learned at school, where teachers respected children's creativity and designed various activities for them.

Figure 7. Washable marker pens.

"My colleague adopted the traditional approach of using hand sanitizer to wipe the transparent film. She found that the stain could not be easily wiped off. She felt frustrated and asked me to wipe it off. Since the marker was washable, I put the film under running water, and it was clear right away. I feel so surprised that no one knows that the stains can be easily washed by water, even though these marker pens are not new to the school. Everyone ignores the function of these pens. Similar situations happen around the school and even the entire field when people keep conventional ideas and methods in the schools. It is totally different from what I have learned at school—to be open and liberal to children, colleagues, and the learning environment."

6.2.3. Hand Sanitizer (Teacher H; Female; Aged 32)

Teacher H showed a photo of hand sanitizer to the group during the interview (Figure 8). In Teacher H's classroom, there was a child who had autism and ADHD and always sought the teacher's attention. She felt confused and uncertain about the current implementation of inclusive education in her workplace as the teacher–children ratio was insufficient to respond to all the children in the classroom.

Figure 8. Hand sanitizer.

"That child has other behavioral problems, like pushing others, screaming, running around, and spitting all around. He once left a stain on the table and was asked to wipe it with this hand sanitizer. After that, he always intentionally makes the table dirty, like spitting on it and wiping it with hand sanitizer again. Also, he always asks for hand sanitizer to sterilize his hands for no reason. One time, this situation got very serious. The teacher was supervising other children and neglected the child with special needs. The child spat on the table and kept pressing the hand sanitizer crazily, getting a massive amount of it all over the table and the floor. More than half of it was used. The hand sanitizer is supposed to be consumed by everyone. Yet, whenever the child's behavioral problems appear, he gets all the attention from the teacher. This represents that every student should be treated equally and not labeled based on their needs and abilities. In reality, those children with special needs at this age cannot receive any psychological or medical support from society but can only rely on the teacher's assistance. Within a limited 3-h session per day, most of the time is already spent calming down those children with special needs. We cannot be fair to all. Does equal education still exist? This is really thought provoking."

6.3. Theme Three: Personal Recognition

A large part of our thinking is carried out using metaphors [73]. In this study, some teacher participants used objects as metaphors to reflect how personal encouragement had affected their beliefs about teaching and the teacher's role. They illustrated both their professional identities and their personal beliefs through object narratives. As one teacher looked back at the time when she was a student teacher, an apron reminded her of being persistent. A small notebook motivated one teacher to integrate creativity into early childhood teaching. A banknote with a picture of Maria Montessori gave one teacher a compliment regarding her competency. A gift of a plant helped a teacher recognize the way in which he nurtured his students.

6.3.1. An Apron (Teacher I; Female; Aged 34)

Teacher I showed the group a photo of an apron during the interview (Figure 9). Teacher I explained that it was an apron representing her teacher education program. Her teacher education institution provided an apron for every student teacher for their practicum training in kindergartens. She received the apron in her first year of studying early childhood education. At that time, she felt excited and treasured the apron very much. The apron was an important object for her, reminding her of her original intent as a kindergarten teacher.

Figure 9. An apron.

"It accompanied me for four years. After I finished my study, I kept it safe in my cupboard until I had a setback at work last year. When I got home, I sorted out my thoughts by tidying up. I found this apron when I was tidying up. When I looked at it, my heart was heavy, as I thought of the times I studied at school and my great passion and expectations when I first encountered education. The child-oriented education idea is washed away by the passing of time. I think my original intent was gradually eroded by reality. Also, as a teacher, I bear a lot of stress, including bodily, mental, and relationship stress. I am pressured by many things. When I looked at the apron, I reminded myself not to forget my original intent and to hold fast to my position and be a role model for my students. I think even though there are many papers and tight schedules to follow, the tough days will pass. So when I looked at it, I was immediately filled with confidence. We must not forget our original intent, and we must always remember the reason we chose to be a teacher. We shall treasure these memories and use them to wake us up when we feel frustrated again."

6.3.2. A Small Notebook (Teacher J; Female; Aged 42)

Teacher J shared how she met her first mentor in her career in early childhood education (Figure 10). Her supervisor inspired and greatly influenced her career development. After her graduation from university, Teacher J transferred her profession from an artist to a kindergarten teacher. Her supervisor, the first mentor in her life, gave her a small notebook as a gift. This notebook told her the importance of creativity in early childhood education. She felt touched by encountering such a significant person in her life.
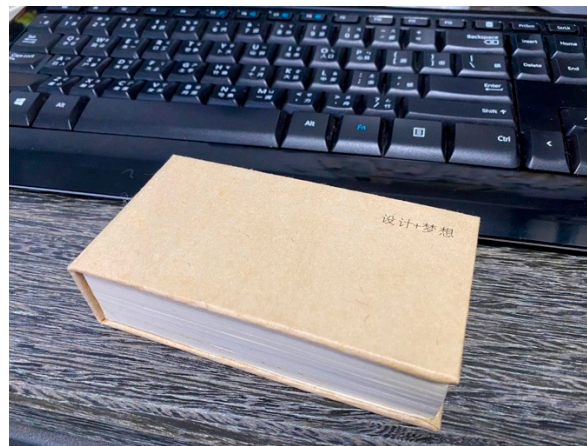
Figure 10. A small notebook.

"This boss was very important to me because I had no clue what early childhood education was like. She was the most open-minded boss I have ever met in this industry. She gave me this notebook as a souvenir after one of her travels. We were in separate offices, so she sent an internal mail to me, saying that I was a creative person and hoping that I could put all my daily creative ideas into the curriculum. She allowed me to have my own views and grow. I am very thankful for her. But sadly, she passed away after the first 4 years of my work. It was a devastating blow to me. Yet, this made me determined to stay in this field. It may sound silly to stay for a person, but her thoughts really touched me. Also, she emphasized creativity. I have thought of many ways to combine arts and creativity into the curriculum. I think she is the teacher who enlightened me."

6.3.3. A Banknote of Maria Montessori (Teacher K; Female; Aged 51)

Teacher K shared how she met her most important supervisor in her career life. She introduced a photo of a banknote of Maria Montessori during the interview (Figure 11). Maria Montessori is one of the key philosophers and educators in early childhood education. This banknote was a gift from her supervisor during an appraisal meeting with Teacher K. Her supervisor recognized her work and contribution to the organization. This recognition meant a lot to Teacher K, who said that it had motivated her to serve the organization for more than 30 years.

Figure 11. A banknote of Maria Montessori.

"This banknote with the picture of Maria Montessori is a souvenir given to me by my former boss, who passed away during her travels in Europe. I am an ordinary teacher among a huge teaching team, but the fact that she remembered me and left the banknote for me is heartwarming. During the appraisal, she told her colleagues in a meeting that I am like a diamond in the sand. Her encouragement reinforced me in changing to a growth mindset. I will not be scared of failure but be willing to try and believe in my ability to improve. I believe I am at a growth-mindset stage. I hope every teacher can appreciate their students, build up their confidence, and explore their interests and strengths."

6.3.4. A Gift of a Plant (Teacher L; Female; Aged 33)

Teacher L introduced a photo of a plant to the group during the interview (Figure 12). She shared how one of her career goals was to help children to grow and develop their strengths. Teacher L said that she was extremely grateful at the time when she received this gift from a parent of a child in her class. She explained that it was crucial for a kindergarten teacher to be recognized by parents. She also gained some insights from growing the seed that was the gift from the mother. The plant reminded her of how a successful teacher should be.

Figure 12. A gift of a plant.

"The mother thought the seed was a suitable gift for me and wanted to thank me by giving it to me. I am glad and delighted, as this represents gaining the parent's recognition. I was thankful for the gift, and I brought it back home and planted it. In the beginning, the size of the seed was just like a pea. I started to study the methods for planting it, whether I should use water, put the seed in soil, or cover it with small rocks. I observed it every day. At first, it did not germinate, and I thought my methods were not working at all. So I used other ways, like preventing it from directly facing the sunlight and moving it to different positions. Eventually, many branches appeared, and I have even had to use a vine as a support for the plant since the branches are too long. The result is more than I expected, as I did not imagine it would grow this tall. This is similar to how we teach

students. If appropriate resources and teaching methods are applied to every student, like providing a suitable amount of sunlight and soil for the plant, students can grow sturdily in a suitable environment."

To embrace the teachers' voices in this participatory research, with the participants' consent, a form of installation art was exhibited in a local institution in Hong Kong in August 2020 during the pandemic, deploying an authentic kindergarten classroom setting. In addition to the displayed objects, there were photographs relating to the teachers' voices and drawings relating to the children's voices. QR codes were printed on the captions, allowing visitors to browse the web-based material. Such exchanges of meanings and dialogue in the exhibition may open the visitors to participate in the dialogical encounters. Visitors from the public were invited to visit the exhibition space and join group dialogues advocating respect for teachers' voices and perspectives as constructed values to the activities and routines in everyday life (Figure 13).
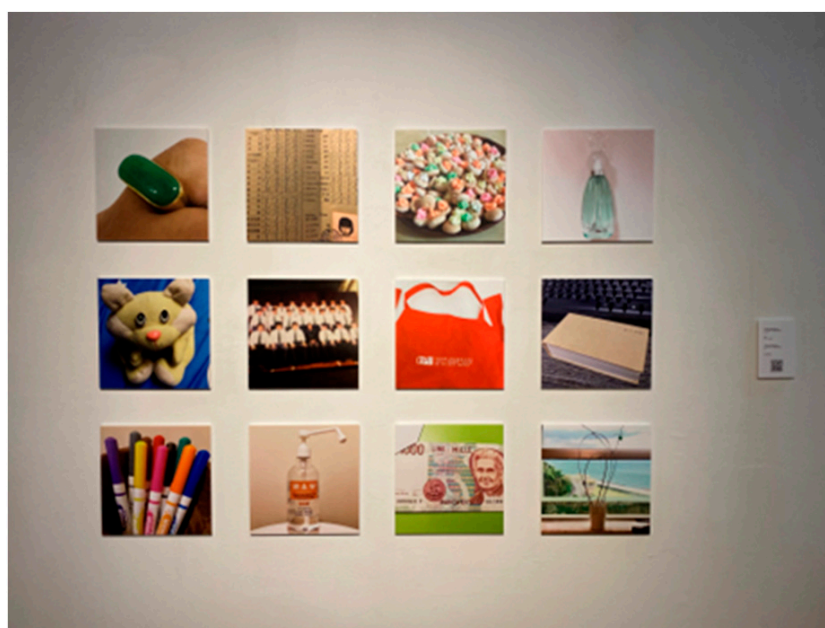

Figure 13. A public exhibition at a local institution in Hong Kong.

7. Discussion

7.1. Emotions in a Teacher's Identity

The previous literature has discussed teacher identity with regard to its professional aspects [70]. Given that neoliberal culture emphasizes effort, diligence, emotional control, and academic achievement [74], the kindergarten education sector in a neoliberal city may lay more emphasis on the importance of knowledge accumulation [75] and professional expertise [76]. Teacher identity has been shown to be based on the internalization of teachers' role expectations and reasoning through the actual experiences of teaching in professional settings [77]. In this study, the teachers shared their positive and negative feelings through the photovoice approach. They shared emotional words such as "grateful," "helpless," and "frustrated" in their narratives. Their stories were mostly personal and unique to their own lives.

Scholars found that teachers tended to think more about *who they are* than *what they know* when they engaged in telling narratives of themselves [78]. The notion of the self can be revealed through, for example, personal or life stories [79,80]. One of the teacher participants in this study shared his grandmother's biography to show how her positive characteristics affected the way in which he acted as an educator. Indeed, previous studies [72,81–83] have suggested that becoming a teacher is an emotional experience that generates not only positive but also negative emotions. Both positive and negative emo-

tions can reinforce or shape teachers' identities to some extent [84]. These are all critical affective elements that should not be overlooked when aiming to understand the development of professional identity. Policymakers should be aware of teachers' emotions and their relationship to kindergarten teacher professionalism. If we consider teacher emotion as a means of getting feedback and acknowledgment, caring is a crucial component for improving the education management system. Furthermore, peer mentorship is an approach that is potentially useful in learning and meeting teachers' needs. The professional community should be encouraged to connect with one another as this is the final and most effective step.

7.2. Voices in a Professional Community

Neoliberalism focuses on standardization and accountability and often relies on top-down regulations and compliance monitoring [85]. There is a tension between teachers' professional identity and the standardization required by neoliberalism [86]. Under the pressure of marketization, kindergarten teachers must follow school and societal regulations. Teachers' subordinate positions may limit their ability to exert control over the teaching labor process. Teachers' opinions are hence more likely to be disregarded [5]. Kindergarten teachers are often dehumanized when they are oppressed and silenced by the neoliberal mechanisms of early childhood education [58]. Everyone has an obligation to engage in actively resisting neoliberal tensions. Tesar suggested that disturbing the existing power structure may be a key element of resistance, which involves creating new ideas, developing new perspectives, and being critical of thinking and acting [87]. The pedagogy of listening serves as an alternative narrative in early childhood education, and listening to teachers' voices can become a collective experimental practice [5]. The kindergarten teachers served in local communities in Hong Kong and were developing their profession in the same context. However, they had specific roles, different genders, and different family backgrounds, which revealed the diverse nature of this profession. The teachers' voices were relational and echoed with one another to create a narration of a community [4]. Different stories carrying heterogeneous elements from the community can create a clash that provides new perceptions of these narrations for the teachers involved and even for the public [84]. Through teachers' participation, reflections, and actions, PAR empowers the oppressed participants in this study to express their voices and involve the public to listen to their perspectives. In the future, teachers and researchers should apply PAR to reflect on different issues in early childhood education. Last, policymakers should involve frontline practitioners' voices in resisting top-down policy development.

8. Conclusions

In this study, the emotional aspects of the teachers' identities and voices were meaningfully unfolded through the teachers' photo narratives. Albeit in an exploratory manner, this study investigated the collective voice of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. In addressing the research questions, three types of interpretations of kindergarten teachers' identities were found: (1) role modeling, (2) critical reflection, and (3) personal recognition. These themes revealed the dominant patterns of the kindergarten teachers' identity formation against their neoliberal working context while demonstrating the efforts that they put into regulating their emotions. Although this study is rooted in multiple interview and photo data sources, it has certain limitations. First, PAR is a method of empowering participants to own the research study. Thus, providing participants with more opportunities to engage in the events (e.g., exhibitions) would improve the research and arouse public awareness of listening to teachers' voices. Second, as PAR focuses on participants' reflections, individual interviews and personal diaries would be better to capture participants' in-depth thoughts about the research. Nevertheless, by using the photovoice approach, we were able to challenge the dictatorship of *no alternative* and the discourses regarding the importance of high qualifications and high salaries for the professional identities of kindergarten teachers.

Finally, this study demonstrated the importance of resisting neoliberalism to improve early childhood education.

9. Declaration

This study's data may not be accessed for ethical reasons (in order to protect the identity of the participants). This research was carried out in full compliance with ethical guidelines and received approval from the appropriate institutional ethics committee. Ethical consent forms were signed by each participant. There are no potential conflicts of interest in the work reported here.

Appendix A. The Researcher's Diary (May 2020)

This project focused on kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong as a community. The personal reason why I created this project is that I was a kindergarten teacher before this, and I established a community of friendships in which we can share our thoughts together. The second reason is that kindergarten education is marginalized in the education system regarding professional recognition, financial support, and resource allocation. If we look at the kindergarten education trajectory, however, this field has significantly improved throughout the last few decades. In reviewing our current practice, extant literature frequently discusses the professional aspects of a teacher's identity, such as subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and teacher qualifications. However, we seldom consider the personal aspects of how a teacher develops his or her professional identity as a kindergarten teacher. Teachers' emotion is definitely an aspect that I want to improve and this was the reason for me to conduct a participatory action research. Empowering teachers' voices may be a way forward for enhancing the professional identities of teachers in early childhood education.

A group of kindergarten teachers participated in this project in February 2020. All of them serve local kindergartens in Hong Kong. I, who used to be a kindergarten teacher, shared one of my photographs and my thoughts on that photograph with these teachers. The teachers were then invited to photograph an object in their daily lives and share their own stories. The teachers' oral narratives and photos were collected from March to mid-April. A web-based artwork entitled "A Teacher's Biography" was finished by late April. This website displays the objects and stories of this community group by rearranging the usual timeline, which runs from the early to mature stages of a kindergarten teacher's professional development.

They were thus invited to create a temporal experience. They were asked to tell us their stories related to an object which was found in their everyday life. This project collected narrations from a professional community and allowed the participants to share teacher voices about their professional identities. This project created a sense of community in which kindergarten teachers are collectively shaped by their common feelings in a specific cutting out of space and time that binds similar thoughts, intellects, practices, and representations. The group of kindergarten teachers serves in local Hong Kong communities

and develops their professions in the same context (sharing the same ideologies and mechanisms). However, they have specific roles, different genders, and family backgrounds, which may provide a diverse spectrum of this profession.

Unlike conventional studies, I discovered little about the teachers' professional (technical) aspects. Instead, through their oral narratives, I discovered quite a lot about their memories, emotions, and relationships, such as the strength and persistence of a grandmother, the tenderness of the voice and smell of teachers, and their caring personalities. The teachers also shared negative feelings, such as disappointment in the rigidity of the teaching environment and their underdeveloped field, which may create dilemmas in their teacher identities. An apron reminded a teacher of being persistent as she recalled the time she was a student teacher. A small notebook motivated another teacher to integrate creativity into her early childhood teaching. A banknote of Maria Montessori complimented another's competency. A plant gift recognized yet another teacher's means of nurturing his students.

I realized that the webpage created may not be powerful enough for raising the public's awareness about respecting and listening to teachers' voices. Therefore, the materials will be rearranged and exhibited in an art gallery in a local institution in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, I wish to seek consent from the participants and engage them in the execution.

In this project, I went through a cycle of engaging the community's participation. As an artist, I first invited a target group from the community based on societal needs. Then, I provided some principles (but not rules) for the teachers to share their object narratives in a bottom-up manner. I further looked into their voices and tried to interpret the meanings of their stories from the nature and theories of the community. I found that they have different stories along the same path as kindergarten teachers. Therefore, I structured the materials collected meaningfully as a curator.

I also reflected on my beliefs and intentions in this project and its outcomes through my artist's agency. There should be continuous participation for social engagement. This webpage is shared with the larger community of kindergarten teachers. They were invited to send their photos (objects) and stories to continue the narration. When the webpage approaches a larger group of people, it creates an encounter experience, a socially engaged opportunity for the public through visual immediacy. I hope these object narratives serve as a "clash" for everyone in or even outside the community to provoke critical views on the issues in the field of early childhood education.

The website has been launched to the public and I strongly encourage the participants to share this work with their relatives and peers in the field. Hopefully, we will gain some feedback and open discussions with different groups of audiences and readers. These experiences will be very important to the plan of the upcoming exhibition.

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