

Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities in Cultivating Vocational Competence among Preschool Education Students in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges: A Comparative Study of Policy Texts and Industry Needs

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examined the challenges and opportunities in cultivating vocational competence among preschool education students in higher vocational colleges in Jiangxi Province, China. It sought to explore student perceptions, identify barriers and supports in their training, and compare these perspectives with industry needs and policy directions.

Methods: A qualitative, interview-based exploratory design was employed. Data were collected through 15 semi-structured interviews with 10 preschool education students and 5 industry stakeholders, including principals and experienced teachers. Purposive sampling ensured diversity in student backgrounds and industry perspectives. Data were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and comparisons across groups. **Findings:** Students perceived vocational competence as a combination of knowledge, teaching skills, and personal attributes such as patience and empathy. Challenges included limited hands-on practice, outdated curricula, and insufficient internship opportunities. However, policies supporting preschool education, strong job demand, and mentorship provided important opportunities. Comparisons with industry needs revealed alignment on the importance of soft skills but highlighted gaps in graduates' readiness for immediate classroom responsibilities.

Originality/Implications: By integrating student and industry perspectives, this study provides nuanced insights into the mismatch between policy ambitions and practical training outcomes. It underscores the need for stronger alignment between vocational colleges, policymakers, and employers in preparing a high-quality preschool teaching workforce.

Keywords: Preschool Education, Vocational Competence, Higher Vocational Colleges, Policy and Industry Alignment, Jiangxi Province

Introduction

China has over the last few years put more emphasis than ever on enhancing the vocational education system to address the social and economic development needs of the country. One of the main areas of interest is preschool education because the number of persons who need qualified teachers has been on the rise due to demographic changes and change of policies to encourage early childhood learning and rising levels of awareness among the population about the importance of early learning(Z. Li & Rao, 2023). The largest institutions that produce the greatest number of preschool teachers are higher vocational colleges which are required in building the professional and practical skills that would see them succeed in this profession(Wan, 2023). It is not only that the development of vocational competence among students of preschool education helps them to be more employable, but it is also important to their adapting to different needs of children, parents and preschools that are not only diverse but also dynamic(Wu et al., 2024a). Vocational competence, in this respect, not only encompasses the theoretical knowledge of child development and pedagogy, but also covers instruction skills, classroom management, communication, creativity and incorporation of the latest educational practices and tools(Müller, 2024). These competencies are essential in enhancing these capabilities towards matching vocational training to the requirements of the preschool sector and provide high-quality early childhood education throughout China(Chen et al., 2023).

Although there is an increasing national focus on early childhood education and a renewed focus on reforms in vocational education, there is still a gap between the policy intents and the reality of preschool teacher training in higher vocational colleges(Jing, 2025). The policy documents emphasize the need to combine industry and education, revised curriculum, and disseminate competence-based teaching and evaluation practices(Yang et al., 2024). The institutional level implementation however fails. Most of the programs are too theoretical with little practical training and relevant interactions with preschool institutions(Meng, 2023). Students have been found to complain of having fewer exposure to practical experience, most teaching resources are outdated and they are not exposed to new teaching methods(Liang & Feng, 2023). Meanwhile, the employers in the preschool sector are worried that the graduates are not adequately equipped to face the harsh realities of the classroom, especially in matters related to the child-centered approach to pedagogy, communication with parents, and adaptive problem-solving(Huang (黄瑾) & Xiong (熊灿灿), 2025). This gap poses doubts on the effectiveness of the existing training models and its capacity to respond to the increasing demands of the sector on quality preschool teachers.

The difficulties are more pronounced in provinces like Jiangxi where higher vocational colleges are mandated to deliver a workforce capable of supporting the growing demand of preschool teachers both in an urban and rural environment(Zheng, 2024). Although the national policies focus on vocational competence development and the integration between industry and education, local institutions are frequently characterized by the lack of resources, disproportionate teaching personnel quality, and the lack of cooperation with industry partners(Zhou et al., 2024). These contextual and structural problems further widen the disjuncture between policy vision and industry demand to create a mismatch between the employability of graduates and quality of early childhood education provision. Thus, it is urgent to examine the issues that students experience in terms of developing vocational

competence but also the possibilities and mechanisms that can positively influence the correspondence of policy objectives with the industry requirements.

Despite extensive reforms in vocational education, there remains a critical gap in understanding how policy frameworks and institutional practices interact to shape the vocational competence of preschool education students within China's evolving social landscape. This issue resonates with broader international debates in social science regarding education–employment alignment, skills formation under globalization, and the social value of early childhood education as human capital investment (Qingmin, 2025a). Therefore, the research problem of this study extends beyond the local context of Jiangxi Province—it engages with global discussions on how technical and vocational education systems can effectively balance policy ambitions with real-world workforce needs. Addressing this issue is crucial not only for China's preschool education reform but also for understanding the social dynamics of teacher professionalism and employability in comparative education.

This research is aimed at investigating the issues and prospects of developing vocational competence among the students of preschool education in higher vocational colleges in Jiangxi Province. Through analyzing the views of students and the anticipations of industry stakeholders and the trends outlined by policy documents, the research is aimed at determining the gaps, synergies, and viable courses of action to enhance the preparation of preschool teachers in the changing vocational education sector in China. The given research questions of the present study are:

- What is the perception of the preschool education students regarding the formation of their professional competence?
- What are some obstacles to them developing these competencies?
- What do they see as the chances and support systems to enhance vocational competence?
- What are their views in comparison with the industry expectations and the policy directions?

The research has been important because it offers understanding on the intricate interaction between the educational policy, institutional practice and the expectations of the industry in training preschool teachers. It emphasizes the local facts and contextual issues which constitute the development of the vocational competence, and provides a policy refinement implication and institutional reform by targeting on Jiangxi Province. It is assumed that the results will guide higher vocational colleges, policymakers, and preschool institutions to identify the particular needs and opportunities to develop students to be better prepared to meet industry standards. Finally, the research has the overall purpose of enhancing the quality of early childhood education in China by making sure that future preschool educators are empowered with the competencies that would make them succeed in their practice.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Theories of vocational competence development focus on knowledge, skills, and attitudes as being integrated to be able to perform well in the workplace. The concept of vocational competence was described by Bunk as the capacity to carry out intricate tasks in professional

situation autonomously, creatively and responsibility, a concept which has driven a large percentage of the discourse on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)(Bunk, 1999). This has subsequently been expounded upon by later researchers who note that competence does not consist in the isolated control of discrete skills but an ability to apply these skills in a flexible way to different situations(Hager, 2017). Vocational competence in preschool education is an appreciation of child development, curriculum planning, classroom management and efficient interaction between self and children and parents(Sun, 2023). It also requires soft skills such as empathy, creativity and patience that are important in early childhood education. One more addition to the competence frameworks is the theory of reflective practice(Visser, 2010), which suggests that the ability of teachers to analyze the actions carried out critically would help in enhancing the professional experience and flexibility development. Consequently, the process of competence in preschool education must not only accommodate technical skills, but also reflective and interpersonal skills to impart the students the realities of the professional practice.

The other useful projection that can be utilized in the development of vocational competence is the human capital theory. According to(Becker et al., 1964), education and training increases the productivity of a person, and provides economic and social long-term advantages. When applied to the vocational education, the theory focuses on the significance of imparting the preschool teachers with skills that will be of importance to the society as their services will directly influence child development, and, therefore, the development of human capital. To add on this is the practice-based learning models, like the experiential learning theory(Kolb, 2007), which points to the cyclical nature of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation, and the situated learning theory(Lave & Wenger, 1991), which argues that learning is optimally accomplished through engagement in real-life social and professional settings. According to these models, vocational competence is best developed in practice-rich settings (e.g., internships, practicum placements, and enterprise-based classrooms). In the case of preschool education students, authentic teaching experiences are guaranteed to facilitate the translation of learning to practice, and close the gap between institute training and workplace preparedness.

Policy Context in China

The national policy frameworks in China have focused more on competence-oriented training and integration of industry and education especially in the area of preschool teachers preparation(Wyse et al., 2025). Reforms based on the emphasis on professional competence, employability, and lifelong learning are founded in the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)(Rahmaningtyas et al., 2023). More recently the significance of matching the needs of the industry to the vocational education was reaffirmed in the Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2022) which stressed the importance of training so-called dual-qualified teachers who could unite academic knowledge and practical experience(Tang & Lan, 2025a). Also, in 2019, the so-called Double High Plan was undertaken, which is aimed at the construction of high-level vocational colleges and programs, and preschool education is often considered a priority area because of the fast spread of early childhood education services(J. Zhang, 2025a). These policies emphasize the necessity of new curricula, new teaching materials, and new competency-based tests that are in line with the requirements of the preschool industry. Meanwhile, they

urge schools to find consistent collaborations with employers to support practice-based learning and make sure that the graduates will be ready to work(Li et al., 2023).

On the provincial level, Jiangxi has been keeping up with the national directions by making vocational education the center of its human resource development agenda. Jiangxi Provincial Education Department has introduced specific programs to increase preschool teachers training programs, formulate localized curriculum, and enhance teacher quality through training and development(Yu et al., 2023). It has also focused on reinforcing the relationship between vocational colleges and local preschool institutions in order to develop internship programs and joint training(L. Li & Han, 2022). Nevertheless, there are still problems with the establishment of these policies throughout the province. Inequality of resources available to urban and rural colleges, lack of dual-qualified teachers, and insufficient funding of practice-driven reforms are barriers to development(Zeng et al., 2023). Practically, the vocational colleges in Jiangxi continue to deem mostly to the old and traditional teaching methods whereby the impact of imparting the skills of real life to the students is limited(Dan & Isab, 2024). Such a discrepancy between policy aspirations and institutional reality makes Jiangxi a valuable study in the research of the effectiveness of the vocational education reforms in training preschool teachers.

Industry Needs

The employers in the preschool industry emphasize that vocational competence is a multi-dimensional construct and that encapsulates the professional knowledge besides personal attributes(Tang & Lan, 2025b). Besides good background in theories of child development and child pedagogical strategies, preschools should also receive graduates who are supposed to be good classroom managers, able to facilitate safe and interest learning activities, and able to develop developmentally suitable learning tasks(Rao et al., 2023). Additionally, the issue of teachers being well-versed with the employment of digital tools in their practice is raised more and more often by the industry stakeholders as technological innovation is changing the manner in which early childhood education is provided(Lindeman et al., 2021). Employers also focus on such interpersonal and emotional skills as patience, resilience and the ability to communicate with children, parents and colleagues(Grant & Kinman, 2014). These soft skills have been regarded as akin in importance to technical expertise in the measurement of the effectiveness of a teacher in a preschool set up(Bautista et al., 2023). The increasing need to be holistic and child centered pedagogies implies that employers require vocational college graduates to be innovative, flexible and able to meet the needs of children and families that are diverse(Hong et al., 2023).

Although these expectations exist, another common problem among employers is that graduates of tertiary vocation colleges fail to translate theory to practice(Abidin et al., 2017). Although students might excel in tests and show good understanding of pedagogy, their minimal exposure to real classroom setting presents them with inadequate knowledge level on the complexity of teaching preschool(Ye et al., 2024). According to employers, novice teachers are often seen to lack confidence in dealing with large groups of children, have difficulties in solving problems in dynamic situations, and lack the skills of collaborative work with parents or the ability to incorporate new methods of teaching(Bubnys, 2020). This competency gap indicates the lack of full incorporation of practice based learning in the vocational programs, as well as lack of collaboration between colleges and

preschools(Wahyuni et al., 2020). According to industry stakeholders, a better solution to this gap is more immersion based internship programs, co-developed curricula, and continuous professional mentorship so that graduates could be prepared to meet the demands of the sector on the ground.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the high volume of research in the area of vocational education reform in China, limited literature has conducted systematic research to identify the alignment of policy goals with industry demands in the preschool industry(Liu & Paramalingam, 2025). A large part of the existing literature concentrates on national-level changes, including the Vocational Education Law or the Double High Plan(Z. Zhang & Yang, 2025), without looking at the local interpretation and application or how the national policy fits employer needs. Similarly, when industry-based research is presented, there is a tendency to point at a lack of satisfaction with graduate preparedness but seldom put these data into perspective in the larger policy picture(McAlpine et al., 2020). This comparison deficiency obscures the extent to which the policies of vocational education can respond to the needs of industry or whether competence gaps emanate as a result of failures in policy design, implementation or institutional practice(Maharani et al., 2024). It is hard to realize the policy-practice dilemma underpinning the long-standing imbalance between the training in vocational colleges and the needs of the preschool sector without such comparative perspectives(Wu et al., 2024b).

Recent empirical studies have increasingly highlighted the tension between vocational policy intentions and institutional realities. For instance, Fu (2025) demonstrated that the implementation of competence-based teaching in Chinese colleges often fails to translate into practical skill acquisition(Fu, 2025). Similarly, Zhang (2025) analyzed early childhood education policy reforms and found persistent regional disparities in vocational program outcomes(Zhang, 2025b). Internationally, Qing min (2025) emphasized that effective competence-based learning requires continuous collaboration between training institutions and industry partners—a principle often under-realized in China's preschool education sector(Qingmin, 2025b). This study builds upon these findings by integrating perspectives from students, employers, and policy texts, thereby providing a *comparative and multi-stakeholder understanding* of how vocational competence can be cultivated under current reform conditions.

The other gap in the literature that has not been adequately exploited is the contribution of the student in assessing the effectiveness of vocational competence development. Despite the overwhelmingly quantitative nature of scientific literature on vocational education based on statistical analysis, there are few qualitative studies to capture the experiences of students in terms of curricula, internships and experiences in preschool institutions(Sofyan et al., 2024). This omission is particularly significant, with those student voices potentially offering additional information on the minor aspects of the constraints students face, such as outdated teaching methods, poorly selected practicum placements, or insufficient mentoring, or the resources that students find the most beneficial in developing competence(Sofyan et al., 2024). Qualitative data collected among the students in such areas as Jiangxi where resource endowments and local distinctions affect the implementation of national policies play critical role in the way reforms are being played out in real life. By sealing these gaps with a mixture of policy, industry, and student perspectives, we will be not only making our

contribution to a deeper academic discourse, but will also have in place some actionable evidence to reform the vocational preparation of a preschool teacher in China.

Methodology

Research Design

The study design was qualitative and descriptive in nature in which it aimed to provide detailed insight into the problem of challenge and opportunities in forming vocational competency among the preschool education students in the Chinese higher vocational colleges. The qualitative method was considered because the investigation was to comprehend the lived experiences, perceptions, and understandings of the students, rather than measure the variables. The semi-structured interviews were adopted since these facilitated dwellings on their own experiences and allowed the researcher to ask further explanations and clarification, thus ensuring the acquisition of rich and nuanced information. The inclusion of the two students and industry stakeholders facilitated the process of triangulation, hence the ability to have a more detailed understanding of the perception of vocational competence, development and evaluation in different perspectives.

Participants

The primary research subjects in this study were preschool education students in high vocational colleges in Jiangxi Province since they were the direct target of the policies and practices of competence cultivation. The industry stakeholders including preschool principals and veteran preschool teachers were also involved to provide additional views and corroborate the results. These stakeholders gave an insight into competencies demanded within professional practice and placed the perception of the students within the framework of what is expected within the industry. This two-layer construct of participant set up was needed to ensure that policy receivers (students) and industry researchers (employers) were factored in the analysis.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants since they could provide a wide and pertinent information. The student participants wanted diversity in terms of year of study (first to final year), socio-economic background, internship experience and career aspirations. This distinction helped the research to generalize a collection of inferences in the perception and growth of vocational ability in the diverse levels of training. Principals and teachers may be selected among preschools where vocational students were a regular internship, to the industry stakeholders, so that they could have firsthand experience in establishing student competency. The sample size was selected by the principle of data saturation, which meant that the interviews would continue until no further themes would be discovered.

Data Collection

In this study, semi structured interviews were used to gather data aimed at capturing the views of students in preschool education and the industry stakeholders. A total of 15 interviews were carried out, including 10 participants of the student body enrolled in higher vocational colleges in the Jiangxi Province and 5 industrial stakeholders, including preschool principals and experienced teachers (Table 1). This balance provided the representation of the voices of both the trainees and practitioners whereby a comparative position on the perspective on vocational competence development would be observed.

Table 1

Profile of Respondents

Code	Participant Type	Gender	Year of Study / Role
S1	Student	Female	Year 1
S2	Student	Female	Year 1
S3	Student	Male	Year 2
S4	Student	Female	Year 2
S5	Student	Female	Year 2
S6	Student	Male	Year 3
S7	Student	Female	Year 3
S8	Student	Female	Year 3
S9	Student	Female	Year 3
S10	Student	Female	Year 3
I1	Industry Stakeholder (Principal)	Female	10+ years' experience
I2	Industry Stakeholder (Teacher)	Female	8 years' experience
I3	Industry Stakeholder (Teacher)	Male	12 years' experience
I4	Industry Stakeholder (Principal)	Female	15 years' experience
I5	Industry Stakeholder (Teacher)	Female	7 years' experience

The interviews were facilitated by open-ended protocol which not only enabled the participants to think about their experiences and opinions, but also provided the researcher with the flexibility to dig deeper when new information arose. In the case of students, the questions were focused on their perception of vocational competence, difficulties in attaining practical and professional skills, and the opportunities or support systems available to the students in the course of the training. To the industry stakeholders, the questions investigated their expectations of new graduates, the most suitable skills in professional practice of preschool, and their judgment on whether vocational colleges trained students towards employment (Table 2).

Table 2

Interview Guidelines

Section / Theme	Sample Questions for Students	Sample Questions for Industry Stakeholders
Perceptions of Vocational Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you understand the term "vocational competence" in preschool education? - What qualities or skills do you think are most important for a competent preschool teacher? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In your opinion, what competencies are essential for preschool teachers? - How do you assess competence when hiring new graduates?
Training Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How has your college training prepared you for preschool teaching? - Can you describe specific courses or experiences that you found useful? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think about the current training provided in higher vocational colleges? - Do you feel graduates are adequately prepared for the job?
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What challenges have you faced in developing your teaching skills? - What barriers limit your readiness for practice? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From your experience, what weaknesses do new graduates typically have? - What areas of improvement do you see in their training?

Opportunities and Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What support systems (e.g., mentorship, internships) have helped you develop your competence? - Do you feel there are opportunities to practice and improve? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What kinds of training or support would help bridge the gap between college preparation and preschool practice? - How can preschools contribute to competence development?
Future Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do you envision your future role as a preschool teacher? - What additional skills do you think you need to develop before graduation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are your expectations of future preschool teachers given current industry needs and policies? - How do you see the role of vocational colleges evolving?

Interviews were held in person at the institutions and workplaces of the participants or through the video conferencing sites based on the accessibility and the choice of the participants. The sessions were about 45 to 60 minutes long and were in conversational format to facilitate a free environment to share. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed word-to-word with the consent of the participants to guarantee the accuracy. Both the student and stakeholder viewpoint and the semi-structured format presented qualitative rich data that led to the thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data and this involved the systematic coding and categorization of the interview transcripts to determine patterns and themes. The first coding was concerned with participation description of development, challenges, and opportunities of skills. These codes were further classified into wider groups including skill gaps, support systems, institutional practices and improvement opportunities. It also compared the views of the students and the stakeholders in the industry so that the study is able to identify areas where there are similarities and dissimilarities between policy objectives, training of the institutions, and workplace demands. The management and the organization of qualitative data was facilitated with the help of NVivo software (Table 3).

Table 3

Themes and Sub-Themes from Data Analysis

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Perceptions of Vocational Competence	Knowledge and skills Personal qualities
Challenges Encountered	Limited practical opportunities Outdated curriculum and resources Internship barriers
Opportunities and Supports	Favorable policy and job demand Mentorship and guidance
Comparisons with Industry Needs	Alignment on soft skills and attributes Gap in readiness for immediate practice

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted within the required ethical principles of the educational research. All the participants were informed through informed consent; they were made aware of the study purpose and their right to get out of the process at any point. Transcripts

of interviews were anonymized and identifying information were eliminated in the results to maintain confidentiality. The involvement was voluntary and there was no form of incentive that could compel any form of participation. The use of the procedures in the research was reviewed and accepted under the institutional ethics committee before the actual data collection could start.

Findings

Perceptions of Vocational Competence

The students in the study tended to view vocational competence more than acquiring theoretical knowledge, rather, they saw a need to have a balanced mix of subject knowledge, teaching skills, and personal attributes. Most participants explained that they had shown true competence when they were able to translate their classroom acquired learning to practical action in actual preschool settings. This is because one student added that it is not just about knowing child psychology in books but what you can do really when children cry, fight or refuse to play. This implied to them that competence had to do with handling everyday life challenges, and unpredictability, with confidence and sensitivity. The same was echoed by a second respondent who stated that you could have memorized definitions and theories but once in front of twenty children, that was all you needed to know but how to use it. These thoughts are based on the premise that students conceptualized competence as being practical and rooted in lived experiences in the classroom and not in abstract knowledge.

Other than knowledge and practice, personal characteristics were never overlooked by students as being an indivisible segment of vocational competence. Tolerance, compassion, innovation and a genuine love of children were considered to be as important as professional competence. According to one of the participants, it was as follows, that preschool teachers have to love children first. You do not need to be competent in the training unless you are patient and sensitive. This opinion demonstrates the fact that the notion of competence was never conceived by students as technical, but rather as whole development of professional identity, moral principles, and character. Additionally, other participants also emphasized that they needed to be flexible and communicate to succeed in the modern preschools, especially communication with parents. One student mentioned that sometimes parents are even more difficult to handle than the children. When you are not familiar with the methods of communicating, it is stressful. These may be seen as an insight that students conceptualized vocational competence as a multipolar construct that went beyond teaching methods to incorporate interpersonal effectiveness and professional ethics.

Challenges Encountered

Although the students were conscious of the aspects of vocational competence, they were able to identify several factors that inhibited their growth. The biggest obstacle was that there were no proper practical training opportunities on their programs. Most of them complained that internships in most cases were of a short duration and were designed in a manner that did not give them the opportunity to be active participants. One of the students observed, that during the internship we were simply observing the teachers, and not actually teaching ourselves. So I do not feel that I am prepared to work full-time. This feeling of the unpreparedness was reflected in some others who characterised their internship experience as symbolic and not transformative. The excessive focus on observation as opposed to direct practice did not allow students to practice teaching methods, classroom management, and

gain confidence as professionals. Consequently, although they were aware of what competence entailed, many of them believed that the system had not given them enough opportunities to develop it to its full potential.

The other notable obstacle was the old fashioned and theoretical curriculum. Higher criticism was often cited by students, asserting that most of their classes lacked relevance to modern realities of preschool education, including the use of digital technologies and modern methods and practices of pedagogy. One of the respondents said that we are still reading through textbooks that are not pertinent to what is really going on in the current day preschools. The principals would want us to be informed of the digital tools, which is not what we get in the classroom. This classroom-industry mismatch in the learning process resulted in disappointments by the students who felt unprepared to cope with the expectations of the new preschools. Other respondents also mentioned structural barriers such as inaccessibility to well-equipped practice rooms, instructional equipment, and work overloads with emphasis on academic rather than skill development work. All this underscored systematic inadequacies between training space and professional realities and put students in a condition of disjuncture between promise and policy reality.

Opportunities and Supports

Along with the struggles, the students also reported great opportunities and support systems that made them develop. Most people put the national and provincial push towards the more children in preschool education as a push factor, as it indicated high skill demands on the teacher side. This kind of policy climate brought hope to the students as far as employability in future was concerned. In the remarks of one of the students he stated that the government still maintains that there are shortages of preschool teachers hence I am hopeful that I might have a job opportunity after graduation. To students it was a feeling of orientation and assurance that their occupation of choice was underpinned by national priorities. The broadening workforce was therefore viewed as a safety net, as a pilot to take competence seriously. Also, those policy orientations that aimed at quality improvement, as seen by some of the participants as an assurance that vocational education would continue to evolve, and consequently training experiences of the participants would be improved in the nearest future.

On top of policies, the students noted that peer support and mentorship were crucial in the further development of competence in them. Others of the participants recalled specific mentors- college professors or internship supervisors- who had advised them that allowed them to perceive the connection between theory and practice. One of the students mentioned that his mentor teacher taught him how to get a group of children to calm down in a few minutes, which he could never figure out how to do in a book. This was an experience that gave me confidence. This mentoring experience helped the students acquire the tacit knowledge that had not been encoded in the textbooks, therefore, equipping them with a preparedness in their professional life. Similarly, peer learning played a role in this as well and during group work or practice students would often share experiences and teaching methods with each other. Combined with formal guidance of mentors, these informal support systems were openings that partially relieved some of the structural challenges that they faced.

Comparisons with Industry Needs

Looking at the opinions of the students and the industry stakeholders, several aspects of convergence and divergence appeared. They both agreed that vocational competence in preschool education was not confined to technical teaching skills but to personal character qualities such as empathy, patience and communication. It is important to add that in addition to qualified teachers, there is a need to have teachers who can reach children and parents one of the preschool principals stressed. Soft skills are important as opposed to the teaching skills. This fitted into the preoccupation of the students with emotional attributes and interpersonal capabilities as the foundation of competence by far. Equally, employers affirmed that knowledge of child development theories and limited pedagogical facts were relevant entry points to new graduates, and the knowledge base students were working to develop in their programs was confirmed.

But most notable variance was on the level of preparedness which employers required. Stakeholders in the industry often complained that new graduates, even though they knew what competence demanded, did not have the capability to operate in a classroom or meet the demands of a preschool classroom independently. One of the teachers who have experienced it relayed that the new graduates are knowledgeable in theories but once they encounter 30 children in a classroom they are flustered. Months we will have to restudy them. This criticism depicted the failure to overcome the disconnect between the things colleges emphasized and those that preschools required. The employers required new teachers to be job-ready on the first day, to have experience in classroom management, and students often admitted that they had very little time to develop this competency during their training. This lack of connection between policy ideals and education practices and industry anticipations tell us that there is an urgent necessity of having closer working of the vocational college and preschools in the sense that there will be a similarity in making the future founders of the preschool teachers.

Discussion

The findings of the present study report that the enrolled students within the preschool education of the vocational colleges of Jiangxi Province, formulated the concept of vocational competence as a blend of professional knowledge, teaching practice, and personal qualities. This holistic understanding can be compared with the existing body of knowledge about vocational education that pays attention to both the technical and affective components of professional training (Teacher et al., n.d.). The fact that the importance of instructional methods as important are accompanied by patience, empathy, and responsibility is an indication of a highly developed perception of the needs of preschool teaching, which falls under the practice-based learning paradigms which highlight the need to relate knowledge, skills and dispositions in the development of vocational competencies.

Despite this knowledge, learners still reported persistent troubles in mastering these competencies particularly due to unavailability of practical training opportunities, and outdated curriculum. Their story is reflected in the literature on the gap between formal training in vocations and readiness in the workplace, more generally due to their frustrations with internships that offered them more observation than practice (Owuondo, 2023). The use of old teaching resources added to these problems, as the students were not adequately prepared to use new resources and methods, which are becoming popular in the preschool

settings. This lack of connection indicates structural inadequacies in the advanced vocational training that restrains the ability of the students to transfer into professional life with ease.

In the meantime, the study also showed supportive structures and opportunities that encouraged and assisted students in building their competences. The implementation of policies on both national and provincial levels meant to provide preschool education with a boost contributed to the establishment of a sense of security in students in regards to their future employment opportunities (Barentien et al., 2020). It was also the realization of the high demand of qualified teachers that made students invest in their education despite the challenges. Moreover, mentorship became one of the most important support tools and provided students with significant experience and certainty that were not possible in coursework. These findings contribute to the importance of learning environments that are based on experience and the role of interpersonal support in facilitating competence.

Comparing the results with the opinions of the industry stakeholders, it was discovered the differences and similarities were present. There was agreement among students and employers on the importance of professional skills and personal qualities especially, communication, patience and empathy (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Nevertheless, employers paid more attention to the immediate practice readiness that was a competency that they felt graduates lacked. This difference speaks volumes of the weakness of the present training models that appear to impart theory to the students and do not have the capacity to train them in how to handle full classrooms independently (Shea, 2020). The nature of this gap, which persists, is not only a result of curricular constraint, but also of structural privilege between vocational colleges and the realities of preschool working places.

Overall, this study has revealed that students are aware of what vocational competence entails and are motivated by the fact that supportive policies and mentorship are provided, but until the systemic barriers of training are removed, students are still crippled as far as occupational readiness is concerned. The difference between the student experience and the employer requirement is a medium demonstration of the fact that there is an underlying issue of significant concern in vocational education, the balance between the policy ambitions, the institutional potential, and the industry facts. All that will be required is to close this divide by ensuring that training institutions are more closely oriented to professional environments in such a way that competence development in the students is both theoretically informed and practically relevant.

Implications of the Study

Among the main implications of the results of this study, the following may be given to the stakeholders in the sphere of preschool education, the policymakers, higher vocational institutions, and industry in the area. To begin with, it is evident that the policy objectives and the actual preparedness of the students are evidently dissimilar, which could be the sign that the national and provincial policies should be closer to the facts of vocational training. It means to policymakers, not only the rise in the number of preschool teachers education, but also the fact that the standards of the curriculum are aimed at applied practice, the integration of modern methods of teaching, and the additional collaboration with preschools. In the instance of higher colleges of vocation, the paper indicates that there is a need to revamp training programs so as to introduce a longer internship program, a practice based

course program as well as mentorship system which would enable the students learn the technical as well as the soft skills before they can take up the job market. At the industry level, a greater role should be played by the preschools and employers in partnership with colleges to co-design training opportunities which may reflect better the real-world demands, so that the graduates may be better placed to be deployed in direct professional tasks. Lastly, the attitudes of students support the idea that vocational education should be made student-focused in a more thorough way, i.e., they should be heard in making changes, their interest in gaining practical preparedness should be taken into account, and their ways of becoming competent should be better defined. Taken together, these implications lead to the need to have a more integrated ecosystem where policy, education and industry collaborate to develop the high-quality workforce of preschool teachers that national development goals see as the final product.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Although this research provides useful details about the challenges and opportunities to develop vocational competence in the students of preschool education in Jiangxi Province, it has its limitations. The rich and in-depth perspectives offered by the qualitative design, which is based on 15 interviews, had a limitation to the breadth and generalizability of the findings to all higher vocational colleges in China. There is also the limitation of examining only one province, thus missing the regional differences in policy implementation, institutional resources and demands in industries, and this could impact the transferability of the findings elsewhere. Also, because interviews were based on self-reported experience and perceptions of participants, answers can have been due to social desirability or selective recall. These limitations can be resolved in future studies by extending the sample to several provinces, diversifying and increasing the size of the samples of students, and integrating qualitative and quantitative designs to permit broader generalization of results. The longitudinal studies would also be useful in following the development of vocational competence over time and the impact of changes in policies on students in practice. Moreover, it might be questioned that the perspectives of parents and community stakeholders, whose expectations and experiences also create the professional roles of preschool teachers, can be explored in more depth in future work.

Conclusion

This paper has identified the challenges and opportunities in nurturing vocational competence between preschool education students in the higher vocational colleges in Jiangxi Province, based on the views of students, as well as industry stakeholders. The results showed that students considered vocational competence as an integrated set of knowledge, skills, and personal qualities, but they could not develop it due to the lack of practice, obsolete education, and inadequate preparation to practice independently. Meanwhile, favorable policies, mentorship and high demand of preschool teachers provided significant opportunities that encouraged and helped students develop their professional life. The comparison of the industry expectations showed partial congruency in appreciating the value of soft skills and professional qualities but also showed that there are notable gaps in the preparation to be hired on the spot. These observations highlight the ongoing conflict between the policy hopes, institutional training power and the actual preschool requirements. Finally, the research leads to the understanding of the perception, development and challenge of vocational competence in relation to Chinese higher vocational

education and projecting the necessity of more positive partnership between the policymakers, institutions and industry in order to provide the high-quality preschool teaching workforce..

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Author Contributions Statement

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
Huang Jiadi	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Ahmad Nabil Bin Md. Nasir	✓	✓		✓					✓	✓				

C: Conceptualization **M:** Methodology **So:** Software **Va:** Validation **Fo:** Formal analysis

I: Investigation **R:** Resources **D:** Data Curation **O:** Writing – Original Draft

E: Writing – Review & Editing **Vi:** Visualization **Su:** Supervision

P: Project administration **Fu:** Funding acquisition

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. Authors state no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, **Huang Jiadi**, upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants and institutional ethical requirements.

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