

Teacher Autonomy in Chinese Public Kindergartens Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract: To address practical industry problems including the lack of teachers' independent class management rights, insufficient internal work motivation and weakened professional sense of gain under the centralized administrative management model of public kindergartens in China, this paper adopts the framework of three core psychological needs proposed by Self-Determination Theory. It analyzes the dual educational and managerial values of preschool teachers' independent management rights in public kindergartens, and sorts out practical dilemmas triggered by campus centralized control, quantitative assessment and hierarchical communication barriers, such as restricted authority, low self-efficacy and weak organizational belonging. The research shows that appropriately delegating micro preschool education and care decision-making power, cultivating teachers' management capabilities through tiered empowerment, and building a flat communication mechanism can satisfy teachers' basic psychological needs, activate the endogenous motivation for preschool education and care work. This research can provide theoretical references and practical ideas for public kindergartens to optimize campus governance structures, improve teachers' power and responsibility systems, and advance refined governance of preschool education.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory; Public Kindergartens; Teachers' Independent Management Rights.

1. Introduction

As the core carrier of the public service system for preschool education, public kindergartens implement a standardized administrative control system for public institutions, and have long formed a top-down hierarchical management model. Most frontline decision-making power over class preschool education and care management is concentrated in campus management and administrative functional departments, resulting in vague boundaries of powers and responsibilities for frontline preschool teachers and excessive dilution of their independent management authority. Teachers' independent management right is a fundamental core right for teachers to carry out class-based preschool education and care, children's behavioral management, and home-kindergarten collaborative work[1]. Self-Determination Theory focuses on three essential psychological prerequisites for the formation of individuals' endogenous motivation, which fits the developmental law of professional motivation among preschool educators. Analyzing the dilemmas of management rights of teachers in public kindergartens from the perspective of this theory breaks away from the traditional research perspective of administrative systems. It explores underlying obstacles to the implementation of management rights from the dimension of teachers' psychological motivation, and constructs targeted optimization paths compatible with the institutional framework of public kindergartens. This bears important practical value for stabilizing preschool teacher teams, improving grassroots preschool education quality, and perfecting the modern campus governance system.

2. Overview of Self-Determination Theory

2.1. Concept Definition Self-Determination

Theory is a humanistic motivational psychology theory put forward by Deci and Ryan. Distinct from behavioral incentive

theories driven by external rewards and punishments, this theory centers on humans' innate psychological growth endowments, and defines individual behavioral motivation as originating from three fundamental intrinsic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Among them, the need for autonomy refers to individuals' desire to control their own behavioral decisions and work procedures, and their aversion to passive and coercive external control. The need for competence denotes individuals' perceived efficacy derived from skill recognition, task accomplishment and environmental adaptation in professional practice[2].

The need for relatedness means individuals' access to emotional acceptance and interpersonal support from peers and management within organizational settings. When applied to the context of public kindergartens, this theory is not a universal incentive framework but a micro motivation analysis tool tailored to grassroots preschool education posts. Specifically, it refers to the inherent behavioral logic under which teachers in public kindergartens take the initiative to exercise authority over class preschool education and care and internal affairs management based on the three core psychological needs within the campus administrative governance system. It provides a core academic basis for this research to define the motivational boundary of teachers' independent management rights.

2.2. Theoretical Logic Self-Determination

Theory follows a closed-loop operating logic of "external environmental stimuli — satisfaction of basic psychological needs—generation of intrinsic motivation — output of professional behaviors", which progressively explains the internal correlation between organizational environments and teachers' managerial behaviors. The core logic of this theory emphasizes that individuals' intrinsic motivation is not inherently stable, but regulated by institutional systems, hierarchical management modes and interpersonal interaction environments. The three core psychological needs support one another and cannot be separated; a single need cannot

independently stimulate sustained endogenous professional motivation.

Projected onto the bureaucratic management system of public kindergartens, its theoretical logic manifests as follows: the campus administrative control model acts as an external environmental variable that directly affects the degree to which teachers' three psychological needs are met. Excessively centralized administration suppresses teachers' demand for autonomous decision-making, weakens their perceived job competence, and severs their sense of organizational belonging within the campus. In contrast, campus governance models featuring appropriate authorization, flat governance and tiered empowerment can sequentially satisfy the three underlying psychological needs, prompting teachers to shift from passively complying with administrative arrangements to voluntarily exercising independent class management authority, thereby forming long-term and stable grassroots management performance behaviors.

2.3. Guiding Value Introducing Self-Determination

Theory into research on teachers' independent management rights in public kindergartens delivers dual guiding value in theoretical adaptation and practical implementation. Theoretically, this theory remedies the shortcoming of existing research on preschool education administrative management, which overemphasizes top-level institutional design while neglecting teachers' micro psychological motivation. It explains the root causes of deviations in the implementation of teachers' management rights in public kindergartens from a psychological perspective, and builds an interdisciplinary analytical framework linking campus organizational governance and teachers' professional behaviors.

Practically, this theory can specifically resolve realistic pain points within the public kindergarten system including administrative centralization, rigid assessment and hierarchical estrangement, and provide evaluation criteria for clarifying the boundary between campus administrative authority and teachers' class management authority. It can directly guide kindergartens to design authorization systems, burden-reduction plans and communication mechanisms based on teachers' psychological needs, breaking free from the rigid management mindset of traditional administrative control. Meanwhile, it addresses frontline practical issues such as teachers' reluctance to exercise delegated authority, lack of willingness to perform managerial duties and weak initiative in management within public kindergartens, and provides a standardized theoretical guiding framework for this research to optimize the implementation paths of teachers' independent management rights.

3. Significance of Endowing Teachers with Independent Management Rights in Public Kindergartens in China

3.1. Satisfying Frontline Teachers' Autonomy Needs in Daily Preschool Education and Care

Preschool education and care work in public kindergartens is characterized by fragmented scenarios, strong individual

differences among children and frequent unexpected incidents. Granting frontline teachers independent class management authority within the scope of compliance precisely matches the core individual psychological need for autonomy proposed by Self-Determination Theory. Standardized management systems in public kindergartens often solidify daily activity schedules, teaching courseware and regional activity paradigms, ignoring heterogeneity among classes in terms of children's age characteristics, behavioral habits and developmental levels. When equipped with independent management authority to fine-tune preschool education and care work, implement activity plans and formulate class routines based on the real-time developmental status of children in their respective classes, teachers can dynamically adjust preschool education and care implementation strategies, breaking free from one-size-fits-all procedural work instructions issued by administrative departments.

This power-and-responsibility-matched management model transforms teachers from implementers passively executing administrative tasks into primary decision-makers for class preschool education and care work. It eliminates psychological resistance brought by coercive external control, satisfies their underlying psychological demands for behavioral and decision-making autonomy in professional scenarios, boosts teachers' subjective initiative in daily preschool education and care work from a motivational perspective, and resolves the pain points of homogenization and formalization of preschool education and care under standardized institutional frameworks[3]. In addition, independent management authority covers trivial daily work such as scheduling outdoor class activities and refining children's dining and napping routines, enabling teachers to flexibly handle minor unexpected preschool education and care incidents based on on-site learning conditions. It further weakens the constraints of administrative ledgers on on-site preschool education and care, refocuses work priorities on early childhood education itself, and continuously consolidates teachers' psychological sense of professional autonomy.

3.2. Enhancing Teachers' Perceived Competence in Practical Class Management

From the dimension of competence needs in Self-Determination Theory, rationally implementing teachers' independent class management rights serves as a core external condition for cultivating preschool teachers' perceived professional competence and strengthening their managerial self-efficacy. For a long time, class management work in public kindergartens has been defined as an auxiliary administrative duty. Teachers are only responsible for implementing management detailed rules issued by the management, without independent authority to resolve conflicts among children, arrange class environments or coordinate home-kindergarten disputes. As a result, teachers cannot verify their practical management capabilities and struggle to form positive evaluations of their professional abilities.

When kindergartens delegate micro class management authority, teachers independently complete practical work including class order control, allocation of preschool education and care resources, and personalized intervention in children's behaviors, and can intuitively perceive positive

preschool education outcomes brought by their own managerial actions. Meanwhile, work outcomes under independent management scenarios generate clear capability feedback, helping teachers accumulate specialized experience in preschool class management, and gradually build professional confidence spanning basic preschool education and comprehensive class management. This mitigates self-denial of abilities arising from teachers' instrumental performance of duties under the public institutional system, and systematically elevates their perceived job competence and recognition of professional value. Kindergartens can also carry out personalized capability assessments based on teachers' independent management performance, and targetedly remedy teachers' weaknesses in home-kindergarten communication and emergency incident control. Cumulative independent management practice enables teachers to form exclusive personal class management styles and consolidate solid professional competence confidence.

3.3. Strengthening Emotional Attachment and Connection Between Colleagues and Administrative

Hierarchies within Kindergartens Self-Determination Theory clarifies that the need for relatedness constitutes the emotional foundation sustaining stable work motivation among organizational staff. Standardized implementation of teachers' independent management rights can reconstruct hierarchical interpersonal relationships in public kindergartens and reinforce emotional attachment bonds between frontline teachers and the campus collective, parallel teaching teams and co-teachers. The traditional centralized management model of public kindergartens severs two-way communication between grassroots teachers and administrative management. Lacking the right to participate in managerial decision-making, frontline teachers merely serve as grassroots performers within the institutional system and struggle to develop a sense of ownership of the kindergarten.

After being granted reasonable independent management authority, teachers need to collaborate with co-teachers and childcare workers to conduct class management work. Meanwhile, as principal stakeholders, they participate in grassroots campus governance forums and preschool education seminars, breaking down interpersonal barriers created by administrative hierarchies. In work scenarios featuring collaborative management and equal deliberation, teachers gain respect, emotional support and work recognition from peers and campus administrators, gradually establishing a sense of organizational identity with the kindergarten[4]. This reduces the marginalized feeling of grassroots staff within public institution systems and builds a stable and positive internal social support network. Collaborative class preschool education and care work narrows the distance between preschool education and care teams, minimizing conflicts arising from duty evasion. Equal deliberation mechanisms also bridge gaps between superiors and subordinates, allowing frontline teachers to deeply integrate into the campus preschool education team and forge long-term stable professional emotional bonds.

4. Existing Problems with Teachers' Independent Management Rights in Public Kindergartens

4.1. Campus Unified Control Restricts Teachers' Authority to Fine-Tune Class Preschool Education and Care

Affiliated to public institutions under the education system, public kindergartens in China adopt a standardized and homogenized all-campus comprehensive management mechanism. Excessively centralized administrative decision-making power drastically curtails frontline teachers' authority to fine-tune class preschool education and care work, directly contradicting the underlying logic of satisfying the need for autonomy proposed by Self-Determination Theory. Most public kindergartens formulate rigid campus-wide systems covering daily life schedules, thematic teaching plans, regional activity material allocation and outdoor game procedures, and implement ledger-based supervision over the entire preschool education and care process.

Fearing that teachers' autonomous decision-making may trigger preschool education risks or violate preschool assessment standards, management strictly restricts teachers' on-site adjustment authority over teaching content, class routines and activity rhythms. Some kindergartens even unify class environmental creation styles and interactive dialogue scripts with children, fully standardizing teachers' preschool education and care behaviors. Under such a model, teachers can only mechanically implement superior administrative instructions, without authority to optimize preschool education and care plans according to the developmental status of children in their own classes. All decision-making power over class management is transferred to administrative management, leaving teachers in a state of passive duty performance for a long time. Their psychological need for autonomy cannot be fulfilled, inducing work inertia and formalized duty performance in preschool education and care.

4.2. Administrative Assessment Control Undermines Teachers' Managerial Self-Efficacy

Currently, public kindergartens implement a dual quantitative administrative assessment system jointly administered by education competent authorities and internal campus management. Rigid and homogenized assessment indicators severely weaken teachers' self-efficacy in class management work and hinder the proper satisfaction of the need for competence. The assessment system of public kindergartens prioritizes the completeness of ledgers, procedural compliance and campus evaluation results, while ignoring process-based outcomes and personalized work achievements of teachers' class management.

The one-size-fits-all assessment criteria fail to differentiate class learning conditions, teachers' teaching seniority and management styles, taking the completion of campus administrative indicators as the core basis for evaluating teachers' managerial work. Teachers' personalized class management and flexible scheduling of preschool education and care are easily judged as substandard performance for failing to meet assessment criteria. Constrained by high-pressure external assessments, teachers prioritize catering to administrative assessment indicators and abandon efficient yet non-standard independent management practices. Their

own managerial decision-making outcomes cannot receive official positive evaluations. Long-term negative feedback leads teachers to doubt their own management capabilities, continuously reduces their perceived job competence, weakens professional self-efficacy, and eliminates their intrinsic motivation to voluntarily carry out independent class management.

4.3. Communication Barriers Between Superiors and Subordinates Reduce Teachers' Initiative to Develop Organizational Relatedness

The traditional pyramid-style hierarchical administrative structure of public kindergartens creates one-way communication barriers separating frontline teachers, grade-level leaders and campus management, blocking internal organizational emotional interaction and drastically lowering frontline teachers' initiative to build organizational belonging, which violates the logic of fostering the need for relatedness outlined in Self-Determination Theory. Existing campus communication mechanisms mainly rely on top-down administrative notices and task assignments, lacking upward feedback channels for frontline teachers to voice demands over management rights. Realistic dilemmas encountered by teachers in the implementation of independent management, including power-and-responsibility disputes, ambiguous authority boundaries and practical work hardships, cannot be effectively transmitted to campus decision-making levels.

Management prioritizes administrative control while neglecting frontline teachers' emotional demands and rights protection needs. Parallel teaching teams also lack regular communication channels to exchange management experience. Identity barriers stemming from administrative hierarchies prevent grassroots teachers from participating equally in campus governance deliberations. Unaddressed work demands over time breed a sense of organizational alienation. Teachers' willingness to voluntarily integrate into the campus collective and collaboratively conduct internal campus governance continues to decline, making it difficult to establish stable emotional belonging to the organization and further weakening the endogenous motivation to exercise independent management rights.

5. Optimization Paths to Improve Teachers' Independent Management Rights in Public Kindergartens

5.1. Delegating Independent Decision-Making Power Over Micro Class Preschool Education and Care Affairs

Targeting the core goal of satisfying teachers' need for autonomy based on Self-Determination Theory, public kindergartens must clarify the power-and-responsibility boundary between administrative management authority and teachers' class management authority, delegate independent decision-making power over micro class preschool education and care affairs by classification and tier, and construct a grassroots authorization system with clear powers and responsibilities. Campus management retains core administrative authority covering campus-wide macro safety management, student enrollment management, internal financial control and teacher ethics risk control.

Meanwhile, full decision-making power over micro affairs

including fine-tuning daily class activity rhythms, creating regional activity content, formulating personalized routines for children in respective classes and drafting home-kindergarten communication plans shall be delegated to lead and co-teachers. A negative list authorization mechanism shall be established to define the red line scope of teachers' independent management, excluding prohibited matters involving safety risks and policy compliance; teachers may independently decide and implement all items within the list. One-size-fits-all campus-wide control over preschool education and care procedures shall be weakened, and a filing system rather than an approval system for class preschool education and care plans shall be adopted to reduce excessive administrative intervention in on-site frontline preschool education and care.

Compliance authorization at the institutional level fulfills teachers' professional behavioral autonomy demands via external environments, fundamentally activating their endogenous work motivation to independently conduct class management. Kindergartens shall sort out implementation ledgers of authorization lists on a monthly basis, assigning preschool education directors to track the implementation of teachers' autonomous decisions without interfering with detailed execution, only controlling bottom-line outcomes. A lead-teacher responsibility system shall be implemented, clarifying lead teachers as primary decision-makers for class environmental layout, after-school extended activity arrangements and educational reward and punishment methods for children[5]. Full independent application channels shall be opened for distinctive class development, allowing teachers to customize characteristic preschool education and care models matching their own professional strengths.

Meanwhile, a fault tolerance and exemption mechanism shall be established to exempt teachers from accountability for non-principled and safety-risk-free work mistakes arising from independent management within the list scope, eliminating teachers' fear of exercising delegated authority or accepting authorization. Approval procedures for teaching aid procurement and small-sum class activity fund usage shall be moderately relaxed; frontline teachers may independently select and file regular small-sum supplies for direct use to further implement micro-level independent management authority.

5.2. Implementing Tiered Burden Reduction and Building Channels for Teachers' Management

Capability Improvement Centered on the goal of cultivating teachers' sense of competence as outlined in Self-Determination Theory, public kindergartens shall implement tiered burden reduction of administrative affairs and build ladder-like specialized training channels for teachers' class management capabilities to remedy grassroots teachers' managerial capability deficiencies. First, campus management shall strip frontline teachers of non-teaching administrative ledgers, repetitive report forms and inspection auxiliary work, transferring administrative affairs to logistics and administrative posts to free up teachers' time and energy for class management. Second, a tiered empowerment training system shall be constructed targeting newly recruited teachers, young backbone teachers and senior head teachers.

Pre-job training covering basic class management procedures shall be delivered to new teachers, while advanced

management capability training on public opinion emergencies and home-kindergarten conflicts shall be provided for backbone teachers. A process-oriented and diversified evaluation system for teachers' management work shall be established, abandoning single quantitative assessment standards and incorporating class management effectiveness, incremental developmental progress of children and home-kindergarten satisfaction into evaluation dimensions. Positive public feedback shall be provided for teachers' achievements in independent management, and role models of in-class management shall be set up to help teachers at all tiers continuously gain a sense of capability accomplishment, comprehensively elevating their perceived job competence and supporting efficient implementation of independent management rights.

A refined burden-reduction list shall be formulated, designating the final week of each month as a period free of administrative report forms, banning ad-hoc assignments such as photo check-ins and document sorting unrelated to core work[6]. A targeted empowerment master-apprentice pairing program shall be implemented, with senior head teachers providing one-on-one guidance for new teachers to practically implement independent class management. In-campus micro-lectures shall be launched, focusing on short practical drills for high-frequency operational scenarios including resolving conflicts among children, class attendance management and handling parental complaints.

Special management training posts shall be added to arrange rotational secondment of young teachers to participate in grade-level preschool education coordination work. Special bonus indicators for independent management shall be added to assessment standards; teachers who boldly exercise management authority and form high-quality class management models shall receive priority bonus points in professional title evaluation and in-campus merit assessments. Regular management review workshops shall be held to targetedly remedy capability deficiencies emerging during teachers' duty performance, steadily strengthening their confidence in fulfilling job responsibilities.

5.3. Constructing a Flat Benign Internal Communication and Interaction Mechanism within Kindergartens

To satisfy preschool teachers' psychological need for organizational relatedness and break communication barriers of traditional hierarchical structures, kindergartens shall restructure a flat internal campus governance communication mechanism and open two-way communication channels between superiors and subordinates as well as parallel teaching teams. Redundant middle administrative posts shall be streamlined to simplify existing administrative hierarchies, establishing a direct two-way communication channel between campus management and frontline class teachers. Regular forums for collecting teachers' demands over management rights and online opinion feedback channels shall be set up specifically to gather difficulties, demands and institutional optimization proposals emerging during the implementation of teachers' independent management authority, forming a closed-loop process covering demand collection, research and judgment, rectification and feedback.

A sharing platform for management experience among parallel class teachers shall be built to promote seminar discussions on independent management cases and cross-class observation exchanges among teaching teams. Frontline

teachers shall be incorporated into the preschool education governance deliberation group of the kindergarten, endowing them with voting rights to offer suggestions on revising internal campus management systems, acknowledging the principal status of grassroots teachers at the organizational level[7]. Equal and efficient two-way interaction eliminates interpersonal estrangement brought by administrative hierarchies, strengthens teachers' sense of ownership of the kindergarten and their emotional belonging to the organization, and consolidates the emotional environmental foundation for teachers to voluntarily exercise independent management rights.

Regular peer mutual-aid groups shall be built based on grade levels, holding weekly cross-class consultations on management issues to exchange practical experience of independent management. A full-staff hearing must be convened prior to the implementation of major revised preschool education and care management systems, with voting by frontline teachers as a prerequisite for rollout. Campus management shall sink to frontline classes for follow-up research, spending at least half a day per week stationed in classes to understand daily management hardships of teachers. Regular in-campus team-building activities shall be held to weaken superior-subordinate identity barriers, narrow the distance between management and frontline teachers, enhance teachers' overall sense of organizational belonging via environmental adjustments, and drive teachers to proactively cooperate with the implementation of independent management work.

6. Conclusion

Taking the three core psychological needs of Self-Determination Theory as the analytical framework and anchoring the institutional particularity of public institutions for public kindergartens, this paper systematically demonstrates the preschool educational and organizational managerial value of endowing frontline preschool teachers with independent class management rights, and analyzes three major restrictive factors: centralized administrative control, rigid quantitative assessment and hierarchical communication barriers. The research verifies that the implementation effectiveness of teachers' independent management rights is essentially determined by the matching degree between the external administrative environment of kindergartens and teachers' intrinsic psychological needs. Satisfying teachers' three psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness serves as a core breakthrough to address weak management authority, occupational burnout and homogenization of preschool education quality among teachers in public kindergartens. Moving forward, public kindergartens shall balance campus administrative control and grassroots teacher authorization and empowerment based on institutional characteristics, and continuously optimize authorization systems, tiered empowerment mechanisms and flat organizational communication environments. Follow-up research can further conduct large-sample empirical investigations integrating regional disparities among public kindergartens to refine relevant governance models.

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