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The Relationship between work motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Professional Ethics with Teachers' Professional Competence: The Moderating Role of Conscientiousness

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between work motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics with the teachers' professional competence, focusing on the moderating role of conscientiousness. Conducted as a descriptive-correlational study, it involved 250 teachers in Baghdad during the 2023-2024 academic year, selected via convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Gagné et al. (2015) work motivation questionnaire, Smith et al. (1969) job satisfaction questionnaire, Moradian (2017) professional ethics questionnaire, Molaeinejad (2011), professional competence questionnaire, and 12 conscientiousness items from McCrae and Costa (1992). Structural equation modeling was performed using SPSS-26 and smart PLS, revealing a well-fitting model. Results confirmed direct effects of work motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics on professional competence, with conscientiousness moderating the relationships involving job satisfaction and professional ethics. These factors interdependently enhance early childhood education quality, necessitating simultaneous focus on boosting motivation, competencies, ethics, and duty.

Key Words: Work motivation, Professional ethics, Job satisfaction, Individual professional competence, Conscientiousness, Teachers

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Introduction

The most fundamental element in the education system is the teacher, and the level of professional competence, enthusiasm, efficiency, and professional mastery of the teacher significantly impacts the quality of the teaching-learning process (Mohebi et al., 2022). Additionally, teachers play a vital role in shaping children's personality and social skills. They are responsible for creating a safe and vibrant learning environment and must be well-versed in child psychology to address children's emotional and educational needs effectively (Milton et al., 2023). Recent research indicates that teachers, by employing creative teaching methods and positive interactions with children, can enhance their motivation and interest in learning (Nikkola et al., 2024). Furthermore, teachers must possess classroom management skills and effective communication with parents to provide optimal support for children (Abdullah et al., 2023). Research findings suggest that teacher performance is strongly influenced by professional ethics, motivation, competence, and job satisfaction (Riyanti, 2023; Ratnasari & Adam, 2019).

Teachers' professional competence is a set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that teachers need to effectively perform their educational duties (Pasae et al., 2019). These competencies include cognitive abilities (knowledge and mental skills that enable teachers to identify and analyze issues related to education, such as understanding learners' interests and abilities), emotional competencies (teachers' inclinations and interests toward educational matters, such as a commitment to respecting students), and practical skills (scientific skills and abilities in the learning process, such as proficiency in preparing lesson plans), which collectively help teachers succeed in the teaching-learning process (Chekandi & Pourshafei, 2023). Research indicates that high levels of professional competence not only positively impact the quality of teaching but also contribute to students' academic growth and progress. Cognitive abilities and emotional-motivational characteristics (motivation, self-regulation, and professional beliefs about teaching, learning, and subject content) have been identified as two primary components of teachers' professional competence (Blömeke & Delaney, 2012). Research findings indicate that teachers' motivation and individual and organizational factors directly influence their professional competence (Momeni Mahmoudi & Rouhani, 2017). To enhance teachers' professional competence, attention must be given to these factors, and professional development programs should be designed to boost teachers' motivation and reduce unnecessary pressures. This enables teachers to continuously improve their skills and knowledge, ultimately enhancing the quality of education (Alimmudin, Basuki, 2022; Sriwahyuningsih, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

Teacher work motivation is a critical factor in efforts to improve performance, as motivation serves as the primary driving force for each teacher to carry out their professional duties in line with established goals. As educational professionals, teachers have varying work motivations, which lead to differences in their performance in enhancing the quality of education (Goni &

Kumolontang, 2022). Motivation is typically defined as an internal state that arouses, directs, and sustains behavior (Han & Yin, 2016). Numerous factors, including salary, school infrastructure, career advancement, achievement, job prestige, relationships with colleagues, working conditions, employment status, school management performance, and opportunities for professional training, can influence work motivation (Salim, 2023). Studies indicate that work motivation and individual professional competence are closely related, and enhancing one can lead to improvements in the other. Researchers have identified numerous outcomes (such as student outcomes, teachers' mental health, and well-being) associated with teacher motivation (Goni & Kumolontang, 2022., Abolmaali Hosseini et al., 2022). The findings of Goni and Kumolontang's (2022) research also indicate a significant relationship between work motivation and professional competence, stating that the higher a teacher's job motivation, the greater their professional competence. Motivation determines why individuals decide to undertake a task, how long they are willing to continue the activity, and how much effort they are prepared to invest in pursuing it (Han & Yin, 2016). To enhance teachers' professional development, emphasis should be placed on increasing job motivation, strengthening professional competencies, and creating conditions that foster job satisfaction and contentment (Tafonao et al., 2024). According to Self-Determination Theory, the developmental changes in teacher motivation include amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivation. Thus, motivation encompasses a continuum from external regulation to internal regulation (Sahrayi Sarmazdeh & Salehi, 2022). A necessary and essential factor for continued employment is the presence of work motivation; without interest and arousal for performing tasks, continuing work becomes burdensome. Conversely, when needs are met through the job, job satisfaction is fostered in the individual. Job satisfaction, performance, and motivation can be used interchangeably to some extent, but they differ in context and application, though they are interrelated (Jalagat, 2016). Therefore, given the significance of problems and issues in various work sectors, establishing a relationship between job satisfaction and motivation is highly important.

Due to the wide range of definitions related to job satisfaction, it is not easy to grasp its meaning. Teacher job satisfaction is defined as the emotional connection teachers have with their teaching performance, as well as the perceived alignment between their teaching expectations and the outcomes they achieve (Permana et al., 2021). Job satisfaction is defined as the joyful or positive emotions resulting from an individual's evaluation and work experience) Permana et al., 2021). When someone says they have high job

satisfaction, it means they genuinely enjoy their job and place great value on their work (Mehdad & Tahhanian, 2018). During employment, job satisfaction may fluctuate under the influence of mood states and emotions; consequently, emotionally charged workplace events are more readily recalled (Tabarsa & Nazari, 2016). Job satisfaction influences individuals' behavior such that the higher the job satisfaction, the better their behavior, the more they speak positively about their job, the greater their sensitivity to helping colleagues, and the higher their compliance with task-related decision-making. Additionally, job satisfaction can stem from the need to remain in the organization, driven by job choice, learning, and development opportunities (Permana et al., 2021). Therefore, conducting related psychological research is important from two perspectives: first, from a utilitarian perspective, satisfaction should lead to supportive employee behavior; and second, from a humanitarian perspective, fair and respectful behavior reflects exemplary treatment of employees. Research has shown that employee job satisfaction primarily consists of emotional and cognitive dimensions (Liu et al., 2021). The emotional dimension of job satisfaction is defined as "a pleasurable or positive feeling resulting from the evaluation of one's job or job experiences" (Locke, 1976), while the cognitive dimension encompasses the difference between an individual's perception of their job (situation) and a recognized standard or their expected level (Permana et al., 2021). Therefore, teacher satisfaction reflects both emotional and cognitive attitudes, focusing on whether a teacher is inclined to replace their teaching job with another and whether the advantages of the teaching profession outweigh its disadvantages (Liu et al., 2021). Job satisfaction is positively fulfilled when individuals' expectations align with actual outcomes. Putra et al. (2024) stated in their study that employees who are highly satisfied with their jobs lead healthier and happier lives. Bashir et al. (2020) also noted that job satisfaction is valuable and acts as an encouraging force for behavior, but only for those who have high motivation to work, as it enables them to fully benefit from favorable working conditions and achieve high performance. Previous research findings have shown that work motivation can influence individual professional competence (Hatamian et al., 2017; Bani Hashemi et al., 2017).

A job should be designed in a way that fosters sufficient motivation and satisfaction in the individual, ensuring the sustainability of both the job and the employee. To enhance productivity and maintain the teaching profession in the education system, there is a need for teachers' academic, specialized, professional, and ethical competencies, which are fundamental pillars of education. A good teacher encompasses two dimensions: educational and ethical, with the ethical dimension being superior to the educational one. The educational dimension pertains to teaching capacities for students and

prioritizes the teacher's professional competence, enabling them to facilitate the teaching and learning process. In contrast, the ethical dimension focuses on educational and nurturing activities aimed at supporting and aiding student learning (Rosales, 2021). Therefore, another variable that influences teachers' professional competence is professional ethics (Hoti et al., 2022). Ethics is a set of principles often used as a framework to facilitate affairs and guide actions (Ghorbani-Zadeh & Kariman, 2009). Professional ethics, grounded in specific principles, is a new branch of ethical science that addresses ethical issues in various professions (Brands et al., 2011; Antoniadou et al., 2023). For most teachers, teaching is not merely a job but a profession (Permana et al., 2021). It is a complex profession in which the teaching-learning process, whether in public or private schools, in at-risk social strata or affluent social sectors, has its own unique dynamics. The determining factor in creating an educational environment that provides the necessary conditions for achieving authentic and meaningful learning is teachers and their understanding of the educational process and professional ethics (Locquiao & DeSutter, 2024). Professional ethics fosters and strengthens teachers' professional development, bringing benefits such as improved relationships, increased teacher commitment and responsibility, reduced conflicts, and lower costs associated with oversight in the education system (Taherpour Kalantari & Pourshafei, 2022).

Given the significant relationship between professional ethics and job satisfaction, the more individuals perceive that their work environment is governed by higher ethical standards, the greater their sense of satisfaction and contentment in the workplace (Bani Hashemi & Alizadeh, 2017). When professional ethics are present among teachers, they tend to transfer these ethics to other teachers and strive for personal growth (Shakeri et al., 2020). The components of professional ethics include trust, commitment, belonging, transformation, continuity, expertise, and professional development (Saeidi et al., 2021). These components enhance individual performance, which serves as an indicator of job productivity and efficiency. On the other hand, job performance is influenced by motivation, individual abilities, task execution skills, and job-related activities. These factors also contribute to improving and empowering psychological factors such as self-efficacy. Therefore, by enhancing professional ethics, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs—i.e., their confidence in their ability to perform tasks and impact student progress—can be strengthened, which in turn increases their enthusiasm for work and scientific activities, thereby affecting their efficiency and professional competence (Barni et al., 2019). The results of ranking the dimensions of teachers' professional competencies indicate that professional ethics, personal, interpersonal, and specialized dimensions are prioritized in that order, ranking from first to fourth (Mirkamali et al., 2019).

In addition to motivational and cognitive aspects, the important personality trait of conscientiousness can be considered for predicting teachers' progress and professional competence. Research findings also indicate a relationship between higher levels of perceived efficacy and competence with elevated levels of experience and conscientiousness (Djigić et al., 2014). To achieve the

goals of any profession, it is essential to identify motivating factors. Due to individual differences, people's motivations vary, and variables such as motivation, personality traits, and cognition or skills are crucial for leveraging opportunities related to progress (Futterer et al., 2023). Conscientiousness has been defined as an individual's tendency to adhere to norms, rules, and high levels of responsibility (Kim et al., 2019). Job success, academic progress (Robert et al., 2014), and particularly the effectiveness of teachers' work (Kim et al., 2019) can be predicted by the variable of conscientiousness. Compared to other personality traits, conscientiousness is considered the most significant factor in academic and work-related contexts (He, 2019; Zell & Lesick, 2022). Furthermore, research results have shown a positive correlation between conscientiousness and job outcomes related to teachers' effort and work engagement (Futterer et al., 2023).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on each of the variables in the present research, no study has yet explored the role of these variables in predicting the professional competence of teachers in Baghdad, considering the moderating role of conscientiousness. The results derived from the combination of these variables may assist teachers in performing their duties more effectively in schools, thereby leading to improvements in their professional competence. Therefore, based on the findings of previous studies and the discussed content, it can be stated that conscientiousness is associated with professional competence and can be influenced by the variables of job motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics. Consequently, the aim of the present study was to determine the role of job motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics in predicting teachers' professional competence, taking into account the moderating role of conscientiousness.

Research question

Does work motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics influence teachers' professional competence, considering the moderating role of conscientiousness?

Methodology

+This study was descriptive and correlational in nature. The research population consisted of secondary school teachers in the city of Baghdad during the academic year (2023-2024). From this population, 250 individuals were selected using the convenience sampling method. The sample size was determined to be 250 based on Kline's (2016) recommendation for modeling studies. To measure intrinsic work motivation in this study, the intrinsic motivation subscale (3 items) of the Gange et al. (2015) questionnaire was used. This questionnaire has 19 items and 6 subscales. Responses to the questionnaire items are based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" to "completely." According to the developers, the validity of this questionnaire was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis and has been utilized in several countries. In Iran, it was first employed by Mirzarian and Mehdad (2017). In the research of Moghtaderi Esfahani and Mehdad (1400), convergent validity using the average variance extracted (AVE) criterion and discriminant

validity using the Fornell-Larker criterion were used to examine the validity of the questionnaire, which showed that the validity of the questionnaire was acceptable. Also, the final value of this questionnaire using the Cronbach's alpha method in the research of them was obtained as 0.893. The reliability of the questionnaire in this study was obtained as 0.88.

The Job Satisfaction Questionnaire, developed by Smith, Kendall, and Hulin in 1969, comprises 30 questions across 5 components: The work itself (1 to 6), supervision (7 to 12), co-workers (questions 13 to 18), promotion opportunities (19 to 24), and pay (25 to 30). The questionnaire items are designed based on a five-point Likert scale (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). The reliability of this questionnaire, obtained using Cronbach's alpha method, was 0.817 (Moghtaderi Isfahani, & Mehdad, 2021). The reliability of the questionnaire in this study was obtained as 0.91.

The Professional Ethics Questionnaire was developed by Moradian (2017). This questionnaire includes 15 closed-ended items with responses based on a 5-point Likert scale (Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never), scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The questionnaire provides a total score, with a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 75, where a higher score indicates greater professional ethics. The reliability of the questionnaire in this study was obtained as 0.90.

The Professional Competence Questionnaire was developed by Molaeinejad (2012). It comprises 39 items and three subscales: 14 items (questions 1 to 14) related to cognitive competence, 9 items (15-23) related to attitudinal competence, and 16 items (24-39) related to managerial competence. This questionnaire is designed on a 5-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "Very Low" to "Very High". The reliability of the questionnaire in this study was obtained as 0.87.

To measure conscientiousness, 12 items from the conscientiousness subscale of the Costa and McCrae (1992) questionnaire were used, featuring a 5-point Likert response scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree). This questionnaire has been widely used in various studies, all of which confirm its satisfactory validity and high reliability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the questionnaires used in this study were as follows: work motivation (0.768), job satisfaction (0.840), professional ethics (1.0), professional competence (0.759), and conscientiousness (1.0), indicating high reliability of the questionnaires. The reliability of the questionnaire in this study was obtained as 0.83. The data in this study were analyzed using structural equation modeling with SPSS-26 and smart PLS software.

Research Findings

The results of the descriptive findings of the study indicate that the sample consists of 105 women (42%) and 145 men (58%). The majority of the sample, 137 individuals (54.8%), were aged between 31 and 40 years. The highest level of education for most participants, 138 individuals (55.2%), was a bachelor's degree. The majority of participants in the study (83 individuals, 33.2%) had 11 to 15 years of service experience. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix of the Research Variables presented in Table (1).

Table 1- Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix of the Research Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4	5
1. work motivation	25.79	2.88	1				
2. Job Satisfaction	115.48	10.72	0.347**	1			
3. Professional Ethics	64.68	6.26	0.384**	0.582**	1		
4. Conscientiousness	40.30	5.33	0.353**	0.632**	0.673**	1	
5. Professional Competence	168.52	14.94	0.383**	0.645**	0.656**	0.671**	1

**P<0/001

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the research variables and the correlations between them. The results of the correlation coefficients indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between work motivation and individual professional competence ($r = 0.383$), between work motivation and conscientiousness ($r = 0.353$), and between work motivation and individual professional competence mediated by conscientiousness ($p < 0.001$). To test the validity of the theoretical model of the study and calculate the effect coefficients, the structural equation modeling method was used through the SmartPLS software. By performing the bootstrap procedure, the significance of path coefficients and factor loadings can be examined.

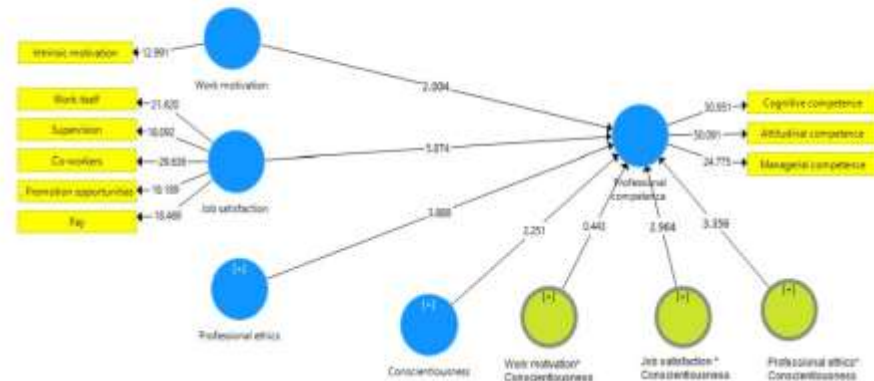


Figure 1. Tested Model of Research Variables Based on t-value

As shown in Figure 1, the t-value quantities for all paths are greater than 1.96 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant relationship between the research variables. The t-values between the variables are as follows: for work motivation and professional competence ($t=2.004$); for job satisfaction and professional competence ($t = 5.874$); for professional ethics and professional competence ($t = 3.888$), and for conscientiousness and professional competence ($t = 2.251$) which demonstrate a significant relationship between the research variables.

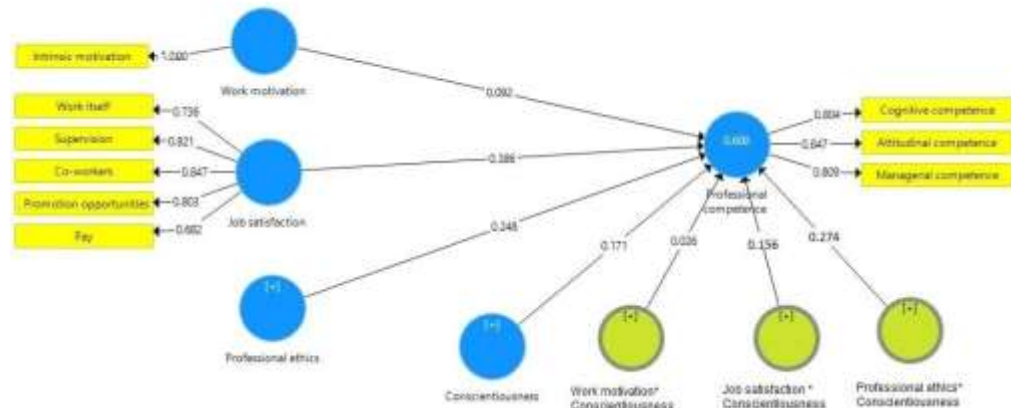


Figure 2. Factor Loading Coefficients

Additionally, Figure 2 displays the path coefficients indicating the strength of relationships. Job satisfaction, with a path coefficient of 0.386, impacts individual professional competence. Work motivation, with a path coefficient of 0.092, affects individual professional competence. Professional ethics, with a path coefficient of 0.248, influences individual professional competence. Conscientiousness, with a path coefficient of 0.171, impacts individual professional competence. It should be noted that the numbers inside the circles for endogenous variables represent R^2 . The R^2 determination coefficients indicate the extent to which the dependent variable is explained by the independent variable. Based on the R^2 value in Figure 2, it can be stated that 60% of the variance in individual professional competence is explained by work motivation, job satisfaction, professional ethics, and conscientiousness.

Table 2. Results of the Structural Equation Modeling of the Research Variables

Paths	Effect Coefficient (β)	Squared Effect Coefficient	t-Statistic	Significance	Result
Work motivation → Professional Competence	0.092	0.008	2.004	0.047	Approved
Job Satisfaction → Professional Competence	0.386	0.149	5.874	0.001	Approved
Professional Ethics → Professional Competence	0.248	0.061	3.888	0.001	Approved
Conscientiousness → Professional Competence	0.171	0.029	2.251	0.031	Approved
Work motivation × Conscientiousness → Professional Competence	0.026	0.001	0.443	0.448	Rejected
Job Satisfaction × Conscientiousness → Professional Competence	0.156	0.024	2.964	0.005	Approved
Professional Ethics × Conscientiousness → Professional Competence	0.274	0.075	3.356	0.001	Approved

The findings of Table 2 indicate that the relationship between work motivation and professional competence ($\beta = 0.092$, $t = 2.004$), as well as the relationship between job satisfaction and professional competence ($\beta = 0.386$, $t = 5.874$), and professional ethics with professional competence ($\beta = 0.248$, $t = 3.888$), are statistically significant. Based on these results, the relationships among the research variables are confirmed. Moreover, the indirect effect of job satisfaction on professional competence with conscientiousness as a moderating variable ($\beta = 0.156$, $t = 2.964$), and the indirect effect of professional ethics on professional competence with conscientiousness as moderator ($\beta = 0.274$, $t = 3.356$), are also significant. However, conscientiousness does not play a moderating role in the relationship between work motivation and professional competence ($\beta = 0.026$).

In evaluating a model using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the first factor that must be considered is the unidimensionality of the indicators. This means that each indicator should load significantly onto only one latent variable with a sufficiently high factor loading. Specifically, the factor loading should be greater than 0.60 to be considered acceptable. It is also important to note that factor loadings below 0.30 are considered weak and such indicators should be removed from the model. In practice, indicators with factor loadings below 0.40 are manually eliminated to improve model fit (Gefen and Straub, 2005). In the current model, the factor loadings for all items were calculated, and the results showed that all items had loadings above 0.30, thus none were excluded from the analysis.

Table 3. Reliability and Validity Indices of the Measurement Models and Structural Model Evaluation

Variable	Composite Reliability	AVE	Discriminant Validity(Fornell–Larcker)	R ²	Q ²
work Motivation	0.822	0.697	0.835	–	–
Job Satisfaction	0.887	0.612	0.782	–	–
Professional Ethics	1.000	1.000	1.000	–	–
Professional Competence	0.862	0.675	0.822	0.664	0.410
Conscientiousness	1.000	1.000	1.000	–	–

As shown in Table 3, all variables demonstrate high composite reliability within the model. Both composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceed 0.70, indicating an acceptable level of model fit based on these two criteria. Therefore, construct reliability and convergent validity are established, confirming the convergent validity of the model and the adequacy of the measurement model fit.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was conducted with the overall aim of examining the relationship between job motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics with individual professional competence among secondary school teachers, considering the moderating role of conscientiousness. The results indicated that the relationships among these variables were statistically significant. The findings are presented in detail below. The results showed that work motivation has a direct and significant effect on teachers' individual professional competence, but this relationship is not influenced by the moderating role of conscientiousness. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies by Sriwahyuningsih (2022) and Zhang et al. (2021).

In explaining these findings, it can be stated that work motivation and individual professional competence are two essential and influential elements in enhancing the efficiency and progress of teachers. These factors not only affect the quality of instruction and teacher-student interactions, but also play a significant role in determining job satisfaction and psychological well-being of educators. A comprehensive understanding of the connection between these two variables can facilitate improved teacher performance and, consequently, elevate school educational standards. Given that work motivation encompasses a set of factors that foster interest, commitment, and enthusiasm in one's professional role, teachers in school environments who exhibit high levels of work motivation often demonstrate characteristics such as enthusiastic classroom presence, use of innovative and engaging teaching strategies, active participation in institutional and social efforts, and continuous striving to enhance their expertise and competencies. Regarding the lack of confirmation of the moderating role of conscientiousness in the relationship between work motivation and individual professional competence, it can be argued that although conscientiousness is an important personality trait and is expected to influence this relationship, there are several reasons why such a connection may not be observed. One key factor is the variation in how conscientiousness, work motivation, and professional competence are defined and measured across different studies. These inconsistencies may affect research outcomes and make it appear that the relationship between these variables is weak or nonexistent. Additionally, other elements such as organizational support, job satisfaction, working conditions, and other personality traits may influence or moderate the relationship between work motivation and professional competence. Moreover, the type of occupation and the level of job responsibilities can also affect the impact of conscientiousness as a moderating variable in this context. In certain professions compared to others, conscientiousness may play a more significant role. Additionally, organizational culture can influence the importance of conscientiousness. In organizations that emphasize collaboration and mutual support, the role of conscientiousness may be less pronounced than in organizations that emphasize competition. Moreover, many studies in this field may have limitations that affect their results. For example, small sample sizes,

inadequate measurement tools, or weak research designs may prevent researchers from accurately identifying the relationships between variables.

The findings of the study also revealed that job satisfaction has both a direct and an indirect effect—through the moderating role of conscientiousness—on teachers' individual professional competence. This result aligns, in a general context, with aspects of the findings from the studies by Hatamian et al. (2017) and Riyanti (2023).

In explaining these findings, it can be stated that job satisfaction and professional competence are two key components of successful teacher performance. These two constructs influence each other both directly and indirectly, with conscientiousness acting as a significant moderating factor. Regarding the effect of job satisfaction on professional competence, it can be said that teachers who are satisfied with their jobs are more motivated to learn new teaching methods, participate in training programs, and update their knowledge. This directly contributes to the enhancement of their professional competence. Moreover, satisfied teachers tend to feel a greater sense of commitment to their profession and strive to perform their duties with high quality. This commitment motivates them to improve their skills and increase their professional competence. Additionally, satisfied teachers hold a more positive attitude toward their work, which positively influences their classroom performance. They engage with students with greater energy and enthusiasm, creating a more engaging and effective learning environment. High job satisfaction reduces the risk of occupational burnout. Burned-out teachers often lack the energy and motivation to develop their professional competencies. Additionally, conscientiousness, as a personality trait, can influence the relationship between job satisfaction and professional competence. In other words, conscientiousness can moderate the strength or weakness of this relationship. If a teacher, in addition to being satisfied with their job, also has a high level of conscientiousness, their motivation to enhance professional competence will increase significantly. A conscientious individual is naturally inclined to fulfill their responsibilities in the best possible way and seeks to improve their knowledge and skills to do so. Conversely, a teacher who is satisfied with their job but has low conscientiousness may show less interest in professional development—for example, by avoiding participation in training courses due to laziness or lack of responsibility. In conclusion, job satisfaction and professional competence are interrelated concepts that mutually influence each other. Conscientiousness, as a moderating factor, can affect the strength and direction of this relationship. To improve the quality of education, it is essential to focus simultaneously on enhancing teachers' job satisfaction and fostering their professional development.

The findings of the study also revealed that professional ethics has both a direct and an indirect effect—through the moderating role of conscientiousness—on teachers' individual professional competence. This result is generally consistent with aspects of the findings from the studies by Mirkamali et al. (2019), Bani Hashemi & Alizadeh (2017), and Momeni Mahmoudi & Rouhani (2017).

In explaining these findings regarding the direct effect of professional ethics on professional competence, it can be stated that teachers with high levels of professional ethics demonstrate greater commitment to their profession and actively seek to enhance their knowledge and skills. This sense of commitment motivates them to develop their professional competencies. Moreover, ethically minded teachers view students as valuable individuals and respect their rights and needs. Such a perspective encourages them to teach with patience and care, employing more effective teaching methods. Teachers with strong ethical values foster a safe and supportive learning environment, which enables students to engage in learning with greater confidence. High professional ethics also promotes effective communication with parents and colleagues, resulting in stronger support systems that help teachers perform their duties more effectively. Additionally, conscientiousness, as a personality trait, can influence the strength and direction of the relationship between professional ethics and professional competence. Teachers who are highly conscientious are more likely to adhere to ethical principles and strive for professional growth. They possess a strong sense of responsibility toward their role and aim to perform at their best. However, in some cases, teachers with strong ethical values but low conscientiousness may be unable to fully apply their competencies. Conversely, teachers who are highly conscientious but lack professional ethics may be hardworking and committed, yet potentially harmful to students due to a lack of ethical sensitivity. Ultimately, teachers who demonstrate both high professional ethics and high conscientiousness not only treat students with respect and provide equal learning opportunities, but also consistently seek out new teaching methods and strive to improve their professional skills.

The findings of the study also indicated that work motivation, job satisfaction, and professional ethics have a significant effect on teachers' individual professional competence, with conscientiousness acting as a moderating variable. Although no previous research was found to be directly aligned with the current findings despite repeated searches, the results are generally consistent with aspects of the studies conducted by Alimmudin, Basuki (2022), Bashir et al. (2020), Bani Hashemi & Alizadeh (2017), and Jalagat (2016).

These findings can be interpreted as evidence that the relationship between work motivation, job satisfaction, professional ethics, and professional competence among teachers is complex and multifaceted. Each of these factors influences the others and ultimately affects the quality of early childhood education. Teachers with high work motivation are typically more inclined to enhance their knowledge and skills, which directly contributes to their professional competence. A sense of commitment and job satisfaction also serves as a powerful driver for professional development. Teachers with a high level of professional competence are often more satisfied with their jobs, as they feel capable of fulfilling their responsibilities effectively and making a positive impact on children's lives. Satisfied teachers are more motivated to improve their professional competencies. They approach the classroom with greater enthusiasm and actively seek out new methods to enhance the quality of instruction. Conscientiousness, as a personality trait, can also influence the

strength and direction of the relationships between work motivation, job satisfaction, and professional competence. Teachers who are highly conscientious are more likely to adhere to ethical principles, take professional development seriously, and feel a strong sense of responsibility toward their role, striving to perform their duties at the highest possible level. In some cases, teachers with high work motivation may be unable to fully utilize their professional competencies due to a lack of conscientiousness. Various factors can influence these relationships. For example, organizations that support teachers and provide a safe and supportive environment can help increase their work motivation and promote the development of professional competence. School culture can also affect teachers' professional ethics and conscientiousness. Initial teacher education plays a crucial role in shaping both professional ethics and competencies. Other personality traits, such as self-efficacy, curiosity, and flexibility, may also impact these relationships. Ultimately, work motivation, job satisfaction, professional ethics, and conscientiousness are four key components that mutually influence one another and collectively impact the quality of education. To improve the quality of education, it is essential to simultaneously focus on enhancing teachers' work motivation, developing their professional competencies, strengthening professional ethics, and reinforcing conscientiousness among teachers. It is recommended that conscientiousness and professional ethics be integrated into teacher training through in-service training courses from the initial stage of teacher preparation. Furthermore, their continuous reinforcement throughout service should be regarded as an inseparable part of the teacher's professional identity.

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