

Relationship between emotional labor and job satisfaction: a study on preschool teachers

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ABSTRACT

Teaching is a demanding profession that necessitates complex social and emotional skills. It has frequently been linked to negative outcomes such as tension, turnover, and job discontent. Every day, preschool educators interact with children and adults and must always maintain emotional control. This study aimed to examine the relationship between emotional labor and job satisfaction among preschool teachers. The study utilized a self-questionnaire; 280 first-line preschool teachers in Henan Province, Mainland, China, were selected to disseminate questionnaires. The overall mean score for emotional labor among preschool teachers was 3.90, indicating that these teachers are required to perform a great deal of emotional labor at work. Deep acting received the highest score, surface acting the second highest, and natural acting the lowest. There were considerable differences in emotional labor based on gender, kindergarten type, marital status, age, and job position. The correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between preschool teachers' emotional labor and job satisfaction. A regression analysis revealed that deep acting positively predicted job satisfaction by a mean of 28.4%.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Emotional labor is the “third type of labor” in addition to intellectual and physical labor, which means that individuals disguise and manage their internal and external emotions to conform to the organization’s rules of expression and make it profitable [1]. Teachers’ emotional labor can be conceptualized as how teachers manage their feelings according to organizationally defined rules and guidelines [2], [3]. Yin considered that Chinese teachers in the classroom always used three emotion regulation strategies: surface acting, which involves feigning positive emotions or suppressing negative emotions; deep acting, which refers to distraction or cognitive modification; and natural acting, which means showing love and caring for the student or expressing anger directly [3]. Teachers engage in emotional labor, which helps to form a cordial teacher-student relationship, safeguarding students’ physical and mental health development and elevating the effectiveness of teaching, but may also have negative effects on teachers’ mental health [4]. Teachers’ emotional labor can drain resources, cause stress, and lead to psychological burdens and physical illnesses, which can have negative consequences such as burnout [5], [6].

Nonetheless, most prior studies on teachers’ emotional labor have been carried out within school environments, with limited focus on the context of early childhood education (ECE) [7]. It is well known that ECE is crucial to the learning and development of young children. The emotional labor undertaken by

teachers, involving the management of their emotions and expressions to meet the emotional requirements of their profession, significantly influences early childhood education [8]. The emotional labor of preschool teachers may be more frequent and intense than at other stages [9]. Besides handling heavy teaching loads, preschool teachers are also tasked with the care of children, thus requiring frequent communication and interaction with children, colleagues, and parents, as well as more emotional inputs [10]. In addition, parents are becoming more demanding, and society has an increasingly idealized image of teachers [11]. Meanwhile, recent research has shown that preschool teachers all around the world are subjected to low salaries, low social standing, and low professional status [12], [13]. Especially in recent years, Chinese preschool teachers have been frequently exposed to malpractices that violate educational norms, such as beating and abusing children, and corporal punishment. People attribute these incidents to preschool teachers' low quality and lack of good teacher ethics. However, an in-depth analysis reveals that kindergarten teaching requires high emotional labor.

Public concern regarding preschool teachers' emotional labor and management has increased in light of recent media reports of child maltreatment by teachers in China and other regions [14]. Hong and Zhang [15] examined early childhood teachers' emotional labor in China and Norway from a cross-cultural qualitative analysis perspective. They demonstrated that all teachers exhibit emotional labor in their workplace, but early childhood teachers in China are required to perform emotional labor at a relatively higher rate. Early childhood educators, who have been marginalized, have experienced severe personal and professional development challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic when emotional labor demands for early childhood education have increased, and many early childhood institutions have closed or struggled to stay open [16]. Appropriate emotional labor regulation strategies can positively affect preschool teachers by building good teacher-child relationships [17], improving job satisfaction [18], and increasing professional well-being [19].

Job satisfaction refers to an individual's overall satisfaction with the work environment, compensation, and expectations [20]. Job satisfaction can do much more than retain teachers; it can also enhance their teaching skills, which all parties desire. This indicates that satisfied teachers can contribute significantly to the development of the student's academic achievement and improve the school's effectiveness [21]. As an important component of the professional psychological quality of preschool teachers, job satisfaction is an individual's positive evaluation of the overall job. When job satisfaction is high, job performance is also high, and individuals are more willing to engage in their work and interact with children. Conversely, low job satisfaction can lead to negative behaviors like quitting and leaving early [22]. Emotional labor is significantly and positively related to job satisfaction, and deep acting and natural acting increase teachers' job satisfaction [7], [23], [24], while surface acting has a significant negative predictive effect on job satisfaction [25], [26]. Surface acting corresponds with lesser external job satisfaction, whereas deep acting is associated with greater internal job satisfaction [27]. However, researcher has also found that emotional labor is not significantly correlated with job satisfaction [28].

However, previous studies have found that emotional labor is also a double-edged sword that can have negative consequences for preschool teachers, such as emotional exhaustion [29], [30], burnout [6], [31], [32], increased intention to leave [33], and psychological problems [13], [34]. Whether emotional labor should be accepted or heeded in future jobs is uncertain. In addition, domestic and international research on teachers' emotional labor has focused on primary, secondary, and university teachers, with relatively little research on preschool teachers [14]. In turn, preschool teachers are important others in the developmental process of young children; therefore, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of Chinese preschool teachers' emotional labor. Job satisfaction is the outcome variable of emotional labor; however, the available studies have concentrated on the service, healthcare industries and business units. Research between emotional labor and job satisfaction among teachers has been relatively limited, and there is even less research focusing on preschool teachers. And there are inconsistent conclusions from different researchers about the relationship between the two. Thus, this study was intended to answer the following three research questions:

- What is the current status of using emotional labor strategies among preschool teachers?
- How does emotional labor vary on demographic variables among preschool teachers?
- How is the relationship between emotional labor and job satisfaction among preschool teachers?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Participants

The participants were from 20 kindergartens across five cities in Henan Province of Mainland China: Zhengzhou, Pingdingshan, Nanyang, Luoyang, and Xuchang. According to the education career bulletin in Henan province, as of March 2023, there were approximately 0.254 million full-time preschool

teachers, 280 teachers received questionnaires by using convenience sampling. A total of 270 valid questionnaires were received, indicating a valid response rate of 96.4%. The study sample comprised 43 (15.9%) males and 227 (84.1%) females. The percentage of teachers aged 21–30 was 47.8%, 31–40 35.2%, 20 and under 3.3%, 41–50 11.1%, and 51 and over 2.6%; nearly half of the teachers were married (49.6%); 96 (35.6%) were from public kindergartens, and the remaining 174 (64.4%) were from private kindergartens; in terms of job positions, 31 (11.5%) of them were carers, 107 (39.6%) were matched teachers, and 132 (48.9%) were main teachers; The majority of the participants received a monthly salary of ¥2,001- 3,000 (41.5%) or ¥2,000 and below (23.3%), above ¥4,000 (20%). Each survey was completed anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

2.2. Instrumentation

2.2.1. The emotional labor strategy scale

The emotional labor strategy scale by Zhu [35] measured the emotional labor of preschool teachers, drawing on Sun's development of the "emotional labor strategy scale for preschool teachers" [30]. The scale consists of 12 items, including three dimensions of surface acting (4 items), deep acting (4 items), and natural acting (4 items), using a 5-point scale ranging from "very disagree" to "very agree". The higher the subscale score, the more emotional labor is used. "I will explode my true emotions when I am in conflict with someone I work with" is a reverse-scoring question. The higher the score, the lower the level of emotional labor strategy use. As verified in this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the dimensions ranged from 0.623–0.825, and the overall alpha coefficient was 0.773. The dimensions of the KMO values ranged from 0.658–0.801, and the overall KMO value was 0.825, supporting acceptable construct validity.

2.2.2. Minnesota satisfaction questionnaire (short-form)

Job satisfaction was measured using the short-form of Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). MSQ is a widely accepted gauge of job satisfaction [36]. In recent years, it has been widely utilized by researchers in education setting, and its good reliability and validity have all been verified [18], [37], [38]. The questionnaire consists of 20 items and was scored on a five-point scale ranging from 1 "very disagreeable" to 5 "very agreeable". The higher the score, the higher the job satisfaction of preschool teachers. For this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89.

2.3. Data analysis

SPSS 22.0 was used to record and analyze the data for processing. To answer question 1 and 2, descriptive statistics, t-tests, analysis of variance were performed. Correlation analysis and regression analysis were used to answer question 3.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of emotional labor and the dimensions. The total average score was 3.90, indicating that these teachers needed to perform a lot of emotional labor in their daily teaching and life. It was found that of the three emotional labor strategies, these teachers displayed the highest inclination towards deep acting ($M=4.17$, $SD=0.59$), followed by surface acting ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.59$), and natural acting ($M=3.57$, $SD=0.44$) used the least.

Table 1. The overall status of preschool teachers' emotional labor (N=270)

	Mean	SD	Max	Min
Total emotional labor score	3.90	0.45	4.75	2.00
Natural acting	3.57	0.44	4.75	1.50
Deep acting	4.17	0.59	5.00	2.00
Surface acting	3.95	0.59	5.00	2.00

In order to test whether there are differences in preschool teachers' emotional labor in terms of gender, marital status, kindergarten type, job position, and age, independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA were applied. The findings indicated significant gender-based differences in the emotional labor of preschool teachers ($t=2.462$, $p<0.05$), with males ($M=4.05$, $SD=0.53$) significantly higher than females ($M=3.87$, $SD=0.42$). The emotional labor of married preschool teachers ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.39$) was significantly higher than that of unmarried teachers ($M=3.79$, $SD=0.48$). The emotional labor of private kindergarten teachers was significantly higher than public kindergarten teachers ($t=2.253$, $p<0.05$). There were significant differences in different job positions in the kindergarten ($F=3.565$, $p<0.05$), and the scores of

carers were higher than those of teachers of the main and supporting classes. The analysis of the variance of the different ages of teachers showed that there were also very significant differences in emotional labor ($F=7.412$, $p<0.001$). The highest mean score for using natural acting was found in the 31–40 age group; the 51 and over age group was more biased towards using deep acting.

Table 2 shows the relationship between emotional labor strategies and job satisfaction. It should be noted that the three dimensions of emotional labor reflect the three strategies of emotional labor. Numerous previous studies exploring the roles of surface acting and deep acting have shown that these two strategies predict outcome variables in opposite directions [39]–[41]. In order to examine more specifically the effects of different emotional labor strategies on job satisfaction, the present study draws on the design of existing studies. Also, it examines the relationship between emotional labor and other variables from the perspective of the three dimensions. Table 2 shows that natural acting, deep acting, surface acting, and job satisfaction are all significantly and positively correlated ($r=0.367$, $p<0.01$; $r=0.536$, $p<0.01$; $r=0.493$, $p<0.01$).

Table 2. Correlation between preschool teachers' emotional labor and job satisfaction

	1	2	3	4
1. Natural acting	—			
2. Deep acting	.437**	—		
3. Surface acting	.505**	.622**	—	
4. Job satisfaction	.367**	.536**	.493**	—

** $p<0.01$.

To further explore the relationship between the two, a stepwise multiple regression analysis was used. Job satisfaction as dependent variable, natural acting, deep acting and surface acting as independent variables, the result is shown in Table 3. Deep acting entered the regression equation, and had a positive effect ($\beta=0.492$, $p<0.001$) on job satisfaction. Moreover, Table 3 shows that there was a significant linear relationship between deep acting and job satisfaction ($F=107.478$, $p<0.001$), the effective predictive power was 28.4%.

Table 3. Regression analysis of emotional labor and job satisfaction

Dependent variable	β	t	R	R ²	Adjust R ²	F
Constant	1.647	8.233***	0.536	0.287	0.284	107.478***
Deep acting	0.492	10.367***				

*** $p<0.001$.

According to the results in Table 1, preschool teachers' emotional labor is medium [42], and deep acting is utilized more frequently, consistent with earlier findings [15], [30], [35]. The following outcomes are possible: To begin, demanding work demands and the overall pressure of "safety awareness is greater than heaven". Second, while dealing with developing children, teachers should be full of love, patience, and responsibility and maintain a positive emotional state throughout the conservation education process to carry out a lot of emotional labor in conservation activities [9]. As preschool teachers, we must be good at controlling our emotions to avoid negative interference in teaching and interpersonal interaction. However, in the interpersonal interaction with children, colleagues, leaders, and parents, preschool teachers also experience negative emotions. In order to avoid the negative impact on children and teaching, preschool teachers generally adopt deep acting of self-restraint, restraining negative emotions, and maintaining a positive emotional state [14]. It can be seen that preschool teachers mostly adopt deep acting and natural acting in emotional labor. They are trying to pay as much attention to the state of each child as possible and bring more positive energy to the children. At the same time, society should show more concern, understanding, and tolerance for preschool teachers.

There are significant differences in the emotional labor of teachers by gender. With regard to the impact of gender on the emotional labor of teachers, the role played by gender may be different for different groups of teachers [43]. The reasons may be as: First, the number of male preschool teachers is relatively small, and they are in a special position of "scarcity is precious". Colleagues and leaders often help them, but they also face contradictions when dealing with the work of multiple colleagues simultaneously. Second, female teachers are still required to be hands-on in many aspects of childcare and routines, and male teachers are often in a state of avoidance, needing to demonstrate behaviors consistent with the image of a preschool teacher through deep acting. Third, male preschool teachers are more visible in the group and need to

mobilize more positive emotions when dealing with young children, colleagues, leaders and parents of young children.

There are also significant differences in the marital status of preschool teachers. The finding was consistent with Qin [44] and Wang [45], who also concluded that marital status is an important factor influencing preschool teachers' level of emotional labor. It may be that differences in social roles contribute to this discrepancy. Although most preschool teachers are able to do their best in their work, for the group of preschool teachers where women are in the majority, married teachers take on the social role of mothers in addition to their role as teachers. A good marriage brings more maturity and patience to the individual [42]. As a result, married teachers use more strategies in their work to satisfy the expectations of their occupation, leading to higher emotional labor scores than unmarried preschool teachers.

Emotional labor differed significantly by type of kindergarten. Chinese scholar Xiao also showed that private kindergarten teachers' emotional labor was significantly higher than that of public kindergarten teachers [46]. It is generally believed that public kindergarten teachers are better than private kindergarten teachers in terms of social status, welfare benefits, and working environment [47], which makes them more patient in their work. So, they are willing to take the initiative to relieve themselves of any emotional problems they may encounter, to divert their attention, and to face their work with a more positive and enthusiastic mindset. The state's financial support for private kindergartens is small, so private kindergartens are facing the problem of insufficient students, mainly at the request of parents, and teachers are under greater pressure. The heavy workload, but little welfare benefits, more job instability, leading to private kindergarten teachers' internal emotions and external performance of the contradiction between the use of surface acting. Therefore, the emotional labor of private kindergarten teachers deserves more attention.

Preschool teachers showed significant differences in deep acting used in different job roles, with carers having the highest mean values. The same conclusion was reached in Xiao's study [46]. Carer teachers have more contact with children, need more love and patience to adjust their emotions and make reasonable and correct emotional labor. When getting along with children, they devote more love and are more willing to care for them sincerely and accompany their growth by adjusting their emotions [30]. At the same time, because of the different job responsibilities, carer teachers' pay more attention to children's teaching activities and the cultivation of life routines, teachers in the main class pay more attention to the all-round exercise of children's thinking ability, and teachers in the assigned class help teachers in the main class participate in the management of class work.

There are significant differences in all dimensions of emotional labor among preschool teachers of different ages. Previous research has shown that younger individuals are more likely to use surface acting, while older individuals are more likely to adopt deep acting [48]. First, in the natural acting, preschool teachers aged 31–40 account for a relatively high proportion. They are in the golden stage of life development, facing multiple roles such as teachers, parents, children, and social people. At the same time, they feel the importance of cultivating children [49]. Compared with teachers of other ages, they are more likely to show sincere care for children and use more natural acting. Secondly, preschool teachers aged 51 and above often use deep acting at a higher average. This basically agrees with earlier research's conclusions [30], [35], [50], the teachers who work more longer are found to be most favorable to deep acting. In a word, different age stages influence preschool teachers to adopt different emotional strategies.

There is a significant positive correlation between emotional labor and job satisfaction among preschool teachers. The result of the present study is consistent with prior researches and validate the previous hypotheses [7], [41]. Meanwhile, the finding re-validates that teaching is also a form of emotional labor [37], preschool teachers need not only a wealth of teaching skills, but also the ability to carry out emotional labor. Children's innocence brings more true feelings to preschool teachers, so they use more natural acting strategy and have a sense of pursuit for their work. It can effectively improve teachers' teaching satisfaction, especially when children express their love for teachers [26]. In addition, from the perspective of interpersonal relationships, it will bring some events to which preschool teachers need to adjust their emotions. Through constant adjustment, the natural acting of positive emotions can also effectively improve job satisfaction and make teachers love children more. Yin *et al.* [7] provided some basis for natural acting as one of the strategies for emotional labor.

On this basis, through Table 3, we gradually enter the multiple regression analysis and delete the excluded variables. We can see that deep acting can positively and significantly predict job satisfaction. The result shows that the higher the frequency of emotional labor used by preschool teachers, the higher the possibility of teachers using deep acting strategy in teaching, which can bring more sense of value identity to preschool teachers and constantly encourage preschool teachers to adjust their state.

4. RECOMMENDATION

This study found that the pressure of teachers' negative emotions mostly comes from their communication with parents, their own family affairs, social recognition and understanding. For a long time, preschool teachers' work has not been recognized and respected, and their low salaries and heavy work have caused preschool teachers' mobility and lack of professional happiness. In order to increase the positive emotional labor of preschool teachers, improve social acceptance, and enhance their sense of work value, satisfaction, and happiness, some recommendations are summarized.

First, all society should attach high importance to improve the social status of preschool teachers. More support and respect should be given to them to strengthen the sense of professional identity and enhance the motivation of preschool teachers to engage in positive emotional labor. Second, the state should increase the input of manpower, financial resources, and material resources, raise the proportion of funds, vigorously support the development of preschool teachers themselves, and constantly encourage preschool teachers to adopt positive emotional strategies by formulating relevant policies and improving welfare benefits. Third, kindergartens should pay attention to the specific understanding of teachers' pressure, provide corresponding solutions to the reasons, and understand the recent status of preschool teachers through regular conversations with teachers. Multiple ways to ease teachers' workload, such as assigning additional interns or teachers to each class, providing teachers with sufficient and reasonable rest time. It could provide sufficient conditions and time to replenish teachers' emotional resources.

Moreover, the state needs to strengthen the management of private kindergartens, establish more inclusive kindergartens, improve the kindergarten management mode, and narrow the gap between them. At the same time, preschool teachers should improve their professionalism and reasonably regulate their emotions. When encountering bad emotions, take the initiative to accept themselves and actively establish a compensation mechanism for their own emotions. Correct work attitude, maintain a good state of mind, treat young children with a positive mindset, and build a lifelong teaching philosophy.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, through the questionnaire method, it was found that the overall emotional labor of preschool teachers was at an upper middle level, with deep acting being higher than surface acting and natural acting strategies. All three strategies of emotional labor were significantly correlated with job satisfaction, and the deep acting had a significant predictive effect on job satisfaction. It can be seen that emotional labor has an important value in enhancing teachers' job satisfaction and their teacher team management. Therefore, this paper explores a new path to enhance teachers' job satisfaction by improving their emotional labor. For example, it pays attention to regulating preschool teachers' emotional strategies, increases male teachers' participation, solidifies the teaching force, and enhances occupational well-being. Thus, to continuously appeal to society to enhance preschool teachers' understanding and support, it is important to promote job satisfaction with positive emotions.

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