

TEACHERS' EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING: EVIDENCE FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS

JINGSHU WANG

TIANHUA COLLEGE OF SHANGHAI NORMAL UNIVERSITY, EMAIL: 664612251@QQ.COM

ZHENWU QIAO

WENZHOU UNIVERSITY, EMAIL: sharedemali@outlook.com

XUDONG LIU

UNIVERSITY OF THE CORDILLERAS, EMAIL: Z7726@OUTLOOK.COM

YING YAN

LUOYANG NORMAL UNIVERSITY

XI LAN

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

QUAN GONG*

SHANGHAI ACADEMY OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

Abstract:

Teachers' emotional support plays a crucial role in shaping young children's emotional experiences in early childhood education settings. However, empirical evidence examining its association with preschool children's emotional well-being using ethically low-risk, non-experimental designs remains limited. The present study investigated the relationship between teachers' emotional support and preschool children's emotional well-being using a cross-sectional, teacher-report survey design. Data were collected from 214 preschool teachers who reported on one focal child aged 3–6 years. Teachers' emotional support and children's emotional well-being were assessed using validated self-report measures. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that teachers' emotional support was a significant positive predictor of preschool children's emotional well-being after controlling for child age and teacher teaching experience. The findings underscore the importance of emotionally supportive teacher–child interactions in promoting children's emotional well-being in everyday classroom contexts. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting emotional support as a key contextual factor in early childhood education and by providing ethically sound evidence on the psychological significance of emotionally responsive teaching practices.

Keywords: teachers' emotional support; preschool children; emotional well-being; early childhood education; educational psychology

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is widely recognized as a critical period for emotional development, during which foundational emotional competencies are formed and consolidated (Denham & Liverette, 2019; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018; Lubans et al., 2010; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). During the preschool years, children experience rapid growth in emotional awareness, expression, and regulation, all of which are closely linked to later psychological adjustment and social functioning (Feldman, 2020). Emotional well-being in early childhood has been associated with a range of positive outcomes, including better peer relationships, adaptive classroom engagement, and reduced risk of emotional and behavioral difficulties (Shoshani, 2019). As children spend increasing amounts of time in early childhood education settings, the emotional quality of these environments has become an important focus of both psychological and educational research.

Within early childhood education contexts, teachers represent a central source of emotional input for young children. Beyond their instructional role, teachers help shape the emotional climate of the classroom through daily interactions characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and sensitivity to children's emotional needs (Arace et al., 2021). Emotionally supportive teacher–child interactions may foster a sense of security and emotional safety, enabling children to explore, express emotions, and cope with everyday challenges. In contrast, emotionally unresponsive or inconsistent interactions may heighten emotional distress and undermine children's psychological

well-being (Djambazova-Popordanoska, 2016; Oberle, 2018). As a result, teachers' emotional support has increasingly been viewed as a key dimension of educational quality in early childhood settings.

From a psychological perspective, teachers' emotional support can be understood as an important form of external emotional scaffolding (Hinkley et al., 2014; Oberle, 2018; Jennings et al., 2020; Cumming, 2017). Preschool children are still developing self-regulatory capacities and often rely on adults to help them manage emotional arousal and interpret emotional experiences. Through emotionally attuned responses—such as acknowledging feelings, providing reassurance, and offering comfort—teachers may support children's emerging emotional regulation skills (Barry, 2017; Guhn et al., 2016). Over time, these repeated interactions may contribute to more stable emotional functioning and positive emotional adjustment. This relational view aligns with developmental and ecological perspectives that emphasize the role of social environments in shaping children's psychological outcomes, particularly during early developmental stages.

Although a growing body of research has highlighted the importance of emotionally supportive teaching, several gaps remain in the existing literature (Amholt et al., 2020). First, many studies have focused on intervention-based or observational designs, which, while valuable, often raise practical and ethical challenges in early childhood research. There is a need for further evidence derived from non-experimental designs that capture naturally occurring emotional dynamics in everyday classroom contexts (Hurt et al., 2018; Mackenzie & Williams, 2018). Second, existing research has frequently emphasized children's emotional difficulties or problem behaviors, whereas fewer studies have examined emotional well-being as a positive psychological construct in its own right (Rafiyya et al., 2024). Third, some studies have conflated teaching experience with emotional competence, assuming that years of teaching necessarily translate into emotionally supportive practices, an assumption that warrants empirical scrutiny.

In response to these gaps, the present study examines the association between teachers' emotional support and preschool children's emotional well-being using a cross-sectional, teacher-report design. By focusing on adult-reported perceptions and avoiding direct intervention with children, the study aims to provide ethically sound and contextually grounded evidence on how emotionally supportive classroom interactions relate to children's emotional functioning. Specifically, the study investigates whether teachers' emotional support predicts preschool children's emotional well-being beyond basic background factors such as child age and teacher teaching experience. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of emotional processes in early childhood education and to highlight the significance of emotionally responsive teaching for supporting young children's psychological well-being.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based research design to investigate the relationship between teachers' emotional support and preschool children's emotional well-being in early childhood education settings. The research focused exclusively on adult-reported perceptions and did not involve any direct interaction, intervention, or experimental manipulation with children. By adopting a non-experimental design, the study aimed to explore naturally occurring associations between classroom emotional environments and children's psychological well-being within routine educational contexts.

2.2 Participants

Participants were preschool teachers recruited from public and private kindergartens. Each participating teacher was asked to report on one focal child from their classroom to ensure independence of observations and to avoid clustering effects. Teachers selected the focal child based on regular classroom interaction rather than any specific behavioral or emotional characteristics. A total of 214 preschool teachers participated in the study. The children assessed ranged in age from 3 to 6 years ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.87$). The sample included 109 boys (50.9%) and 105 girls (49.1%). Teachers had an average of 7.36 years of teaching experience ($SD = 4.12$). All participating teachers reported daily interaction with the focal child for at least six months. Participation in the study was voluntary. Teachers were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and would be used solely for academic research purposes.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Teachers' Emotional Support

Teachers' emotional support was measured using a 12-item teacher-report scale assessing emotionally supportive behaviors in classroom interactions. The scale covered dimensions such as emotional warmth, sensitivity to children's emotional needs, responsiveness to emotional cues, and the creation of a supportive classroom climate. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated higher levels of perceived emotional support. In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .91$.

2.3.2 Preschool Children's Emotional Well-being

Preschool children's emotional well-being was assessed using a 10-item teacher-report scale measuring children's emotional stability, positive emotional expression, and ability to cope with everyday challenges in the classroom. Items focused on observable behaviors such as emotional calmness, adaptability, and absence of persistent emotional distress. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting better

emotional well-being. The scale showed good internal consistency in the current study, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .88$.

2.4 Procedure

Data were collected using an online survey platform. After providing informed consent, participating teachers completed the questionnaire independently. Teachers were instructed to base their responses on their routine observations of the focal child over the previous three months, ensuring that ratings reflected stable emotional patterns rather than isolated incidents. No direct assessment, observation, or interaction with children was conducted by the researchers. The study did not modify classroom routines, instructional practices, or teacher-child interactions in any way. All data were obtained solely through teacher self-report questionnaires.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version 26.0). Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics and reliability analyses for all study variables. Pearson correlation analyses were performed to examine bivariate relationships between teachers' emotional support and preschool children's emotional well-being. To further examine the predictive role of teachers' emotional support, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. Child age and teacher teaching experience were entered in the first step as control variables. Teachers' emotional support was entered in the second step to assess its unique contribution to children's emotional well-being. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for all study variables are presented in Table 1. Teachers' emotional support showed a relatively high mean level ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.53$), indicating that teachers generally perceived themselves as providing emotionally supportive classroom environments. Preschool children's emotional well-being was also reported at a moderately high level ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.56$). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association between teachers' emotional support and preschool children's emotional well-being ($r = .48$, $p < .001$). Child age was weakly but significantly correlated with emotional well-being ($r = .15$, $p < .05$), whereas teacher teaching experience was not significantly associated with children's emotional well-being ($r = .07$, $p > .05$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Child Age (years)	4.52	0.87	—			
2. Teacher Experience (years)	7.36	4.12	.09	—		
3. Teachers' Emotional Support	4.12	0.53	.11	.18*	—	
4. Children's Emotional Well-being	3.98	0.56	.15*	.07	.48***	—

3.2 Regression Analysis

To examine whether teachers' emotional support significantly predicted preschool children's emotional well-being beyond background variables, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results are summarized in Table 2. In Step 1, child age and teacher teaching experience were entered as control variables. The model was statistically significant, $F(2, 211) = 4.21$, $p = .016$, explaining 3.8% of the variance in children's emotional well-being. Child age emerged as a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .14$, $p = .031$), whereas teacher experience was not significant ($\beta = .06$, $p = .342$). In Step 2, teachers' emotional support was added to the model. The inclusion of emotional support significantly improved the model fit, $\Delta R^2 = .22$, $p < .001$. The final model explained 26.1% of the variance in children's emotional well-being, $F(3, 210) = 24.67$, $p < .001$. Teachers' emotional support was a strong positive predictor of preschool children's emotional well-being ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$), whereas child age remained a weaker but significant predictor ($\beta = .12$, $p = .042$). Teacher experience remained non-significant.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Preschool Children's Emotional Well-being

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Step 1				
Child Age	.14	.05	2.16	.031
Teacher Experience	.06	.04	0.95	.342
R ²	.038			
F	4.21	.016		
Step 2				
Child Age	.12	.05	2.04	.042
Teacher Experience	.04	.04	0.72	.473
Teachers' Emotional Support	.47	.06	8.91	< .001
R ²	.261			
ΔR ²	.223	< .001		

F	24.67	< .001		
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4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of the role of teachers' emotional support in shaping preschool children's emotional well-being by situating teacher-child interactions within a psychological and educational framework (Zinsser et al., 2016; Pakarinen et al., 2020). Rather than viewing emotional well-being as a stable individual trait, the results underscore its contextual and relational nature, particularly during early childhood, when children's emotional competencies are still in formative stages (Cassidy et al., 2017; King et al., 2016). One important theoretical implication of the present findings lies in the conceptualization of teachers as key emotional agents within early educational environments. From a developmental psychology perspective, preschool children rely heavily on external emotional scaffolding to regulate affective states. Emotionally supportive teachers—characterized by warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness—may function as co-regulators who help children navigate emotional challenges in everyday classroom situations. Through repeated emotionally attuned interactions, children may gradually internalize adaptive emotional regulation strategies, contributing to greater emotional stability and well-being.

The strength of the association between teachers' emotional support and children's emotional well-being also aligns with socio-emotional learning theories, which emphasize the importance of emotionally safe environments for psychological development. In emotionally supportive classrooms, children are more likely to experience a sense of security and acceptance, which may reduce emotional distress and promote positive affect. Such environments may also encourage children to express emotions openly and seek support when needed, thereby fostering healthier emotional adjustment over time.

Importantly, the findings suggest that emotional support operates beyond developmental maturation alone. Although child age was modestly associated with emotional well-being, teachers' emotional support remained a strong predictor even after controlling for age differences (Amholt, 2020). This pattern highlights that emotional development during the preschool years is not merely a function of chronological age but is actively shaped by daily interpersonal experiences within educational settings. Emotional well-being, therefore, should be understood as an outcome of ongoing interaction between developmental capacities and environmental emotional inputs.

The non-significant role of teacher teaching experience further refines our understanding of how emotional support functions in early childhood classrooms. While teaching experience is often assumed to enhance classroom management and instructional competence, the present findings suggest that emotionally supportive practices are not automatically acquired through years of service. Emotional support may instead reflect teachers' emotional awareness, beliefs about children's emotions, and relational orientations, which may vary independently of teaching tenure. This distinction highlights the need to conceptualize emotional support as a specific professional competence rather than a byproduct of experience.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the association between teachers' emotional support and preschool children's emotional well-being within early childhood education settings using a non-experimental, adult-report design. The findings indicate that emotionally supportive teacher-child interactions are closely linked to children's emotional functioning in the classroom, highlighting the importance of emotional dimensions of teaching during the preschool years. By focusing on teachers' emotional support as a contextual factor, the study contributes to a growing body of research that emphasizes the role of everyday relational experiences in shaping young children's psychological well-being.

More broadly, the study reinforces the view that early childhood education should be understood as an integrated developmental context in which emotional and psychological processes are inseparable from educational practice. Teachers' emotional responsiveness and sensitivity appear to constitute an essential component of the classroom environment that supports children's emotional adjustment and well-being during a critical period of development.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions regarding the direction of the relationship between teachers' emotional support and children's emotional well-being. Although emotionally supportive teaching is associated with better child outcomes, it is also possible that children with higher emotional well-being elicit more supportive responses from teachers.

Second, the study relied exclusively on teacher-reported measures, which may introduce common method variance and potential reporting bias. While teachers are well positioned to observe children's emotional behavior in classroom settings, future research could strengthen measurement validity by incorporating multiple informants, such as parents, or observational assessments.

Third, the sample was drawn from urban preschool settings, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to rural or socioeconomically diverse contexts. Differences in educational resources, classroom structures, and cultural expectations may influence the nature and impact of teachers' emotional support across settings.

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