The Impact of Social Work Relationships on Preschool Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence

Xintong Zhou[1,a,*]

[1]Tianshui Normal University, Jihe South Road, Qinzhou District, Tianshui City, Gansu Province, China

a. Zhouxintong998@outlook.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: In recent years, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) initiated a survey focused on the social and emotional competence (SEC) of educators, garnering significant attention across the educational community. Despite this interest, there remains a notable gap in research concerning the development of SEC among preschool teachers within the context of various social relationships. Addressing this gap, our study examines the influence of leadership trust, collegial relationships, pro-teacher relationships, teacher-child interactions, and self-efficacy on the SEC of preschool educators. This investigation aims to elucidate the role these social relationships play in shaping the SEC of preschool teachers. The study sample consisted of 223 Chinese preschool teachers, with data analyzed through hierarchical regression techniques. Findings reveal that leadership trust, pro-teacher relationships, and self-efficacy are significant predictors of teachers' SEC. These results underscore the importance of fostering a positive, trust-based, and supportive social work environment as a pivotal strategy for enhancing preschool teachers' SEC, thereby contributing to the broader understanding of how social relationships influence educators' emotional and social capabilities.

Keywords: preschool teachers, social and emotional competence, hierarchical regression techniques

1.   Introduction

Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) are pivotal to human development [1], with international organizations like the European Union, the United Nations, and the OECD recognizing their significance and incorporating them into international conventions and treaties [2]. Schools, as social venues, offer an interactive platform for the relational aspects of education, making early childhood a crucial phase for nurturing young children's social competencies [3-4]. Within this context, preschool teachers play a fundamental role in guiding the physical and emotional growth of children, facilitating the development of their social and emotional skills through meaningful interactions and experiences.

Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) encompasses their ability to understand and manage emotions, solve problems, and function effectively within family, school, and societal contexts [5]. This competence is shaped and honed through diverse social and relational interactions, influenced by both organizational and individual-level dynamics. Recent scholarly inquiry, drawing

on ecological systems theory, has illuminated the multifaceted factors impacting teachers' SEC [6], revealing how these competencies are molded by interactions across different environmental levels. At the individual level, variables such as years of teaching experience, age, and academic discipline have been identified as influencers of SEC development [7]. Furthermore, Carmen highlights a positive correlation between SEC and teachers' self-efficacy [8], suggesting that belief in one's capabilities plays a crucial role in emotional and social proficiency. At the mesosystem level, the interplay between various environmental factors, such as principals' leadership styles, school climate, and instructional leadership, is closely linked to teachers' SEC [9-10]. Notably, interactions with colleagues emerge as significant contributors to daily emotional regulation and problem-solving [11]. The intimacy of teacher-child relationships also positively correlates with teachers' ability to regulate emotions and apply social-emotional teaching practices effectively [12]. The pro-teacher relationship, encompassing interactions with parents, is shown to exert a dual influence on teachers' emotional development, underscoring the complexity of these dynamics [13]. The exosystem level acknowledges the broader environmental influences on individuals, pointing out that all school stakeholders, including administrators and staff, play essential roles in nurturing teachers' SEC [14]. Moreover, the macrosystem level, reflecting the broader cultural and societal context, reveals significant disparities in the social-emotional support provided by teachers across different countries and regions, as evidenced by international assessments such as PISA and TALIS [15]. Despite the recognized importance of SEC for teachers, current research predominantly focuses on the impact of training and developmental interventions on SEC, with limited exploration of how varied social relationships influence these competencies. This gap is particularly notable in the context of preschool education, where the influence of different social relationships on teachers' SEC development warrants further attention. Research in this area has traditionally concentrated on primary, secondary, and tertiary educators, highlighting a need for increased focus on preschool teachers to fully understand and support their SEC development.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the impact of various social work relationships on the SEC of kindergarten teachers. Utilizing hierarchical regression analysis within an ecological systems framework, it hypothesizes that relationships with colleagues, leadership trust, teacher-child interactions, and teachers' self-efficacy positively predict SEC outcomes. This approach aims to shed light on the complex interplay of social relationships in the development of preschool teachers' social and emotional competencies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study employed a random sampling strategy to recruit 223 Chinese preschool teachers. Out of 223 distributed questionnaires, 215 were returned and deemed valid, yielding an effective response rate of 96.4%. The gender distribution within the sample comprised 24 males (11.2%) and 191 females (88.8%). Regarding teaching experience, 88 teachers (40.9%) had less than 3 years, 48 teachers (22.3%) between 4 and 6 years, 45 teachers (20.9%) between 7 and 25 years, 25 teachers (11.6%) between 25 and 34 years, and 9 teachers (4.2%) over 34 years of experience.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

2.2.1. Preschool Teacher Social Emotional Competence Scale

This instrument is adapted from the "Teacher Social Emotional Competence Scale" developed by Li Mingwei, originally part of the "Comprehensive Change Research on School Management for the Development of Chinese Students' SEC" project. Tailored to the specific context of preschool

education, the scale comprises six dimensions: self-awareness (4), self-management (4), others' cognition (4), others' management (3), collective cognition (3), and collective management (4), with a total of 22 items. Responses are captured on a Likert 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), where higher scores indicate greater SEC. The scale demonstrates high reliability, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.847.

2.2.2. Leadership and Colleague Trust Scales

Derived from Xu Bixiang's "Organizational Trust Scale" (2007), these scales focus on the dimensions of "Leadership Trust" and "Colleague Trust", each with 4 items. Responses are measured on a Likert 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater trust. The scales exhibit good reliability, with Cronbach's α coefficients of 0.783 and 0.757, respectively.

2.2.3. Pro-teacher Relationship Scale

Originating from Zhang Huimin's "Pro-teacher Relationship Questionnaire", this scale evaluates cognitive (10), emotional (6), and behavioral aspects (6) of professional relationships through 22 items. It utilizes a Likert 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores denoting more positive relationships. The scale's reliability is confirmed with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.874.

2.2.4. Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale

A modified version of the "Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale" by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) was used, encompassing efficacy in teaching strategies, classroom management, and student engagement. The scale contains 12 items, divided equally among the three dimensions, and employs a Likert 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). High scores indicate higher self-efficacy, supported by a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.854.

2.2.5. Teacher-Child Relationship Scale

Inspired by Whitaker et al.'s revised "Teacher-Child Relationship Scale", this study selected the teacher-child intimacy dimension, consisting of 11 items. Utilizing a Likert 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), higher scores suggest better intimacy between teacher and child. The scale is reliable, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.746.

2.3. Data Collection Process

The data for this study were collected during the fall semester of 2023. Before initiating data collection, participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and be used exclusively for research purposes. Moreover, participants were given the liberty to withdraw from the study at any time. Participation was entirely voluntary, with all preschool teachers providing informed consent before responding to the survey. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 9 minutes for each participant.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. An initial examination was carried out to check the accuracy of the data, identify any missing values, and detect outliers. The analysis of minimum

and maximum values for each variable, alongside frequency distributions, confirmed that data were within anticipated ranges. A singular missing data point was imputed to maintain data integrity. Descriptive statistics were applied to compute frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for demographic variables, including gender, age, and teaching experience of the preschool teachers. Correlational analyses were conducted to determine the relationships between the social-emotional competence of preschool teachers and their interactions with colleagues, leaders, and the effectiveness of teacher-child and teacher-parent relationships, as well as their self-efficacy. Gender and teaching experience were treated as dummy variables to facilitate the analysis of these categorical data in hierarchical regression, thereby enhancing the model's accuracy and reliability. This approach also provided clearer insights into the research findings. Hierarchical regression analysis was utilized to explore the predictive influence of leadership trust, relationships with colleagues, teacher-parent relationships, teacher-child interactions, and self-efficacy on the social-emotional competence of preschool teachers. A Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) below 5 was considered indicative of an absence of collinearity issues among the independent variables. A significance level (p-value) less than 0.05 was interpreted as evidence of a statistically significant predictive relationship between the variables.

3. Results

3.1. Correlation Among All Measures

The analysis of mean values, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients between all independent variables (Leadership Trust, colleague relationships, pro-teacher relationships, teacher-child relationships, and self-efficacy) and the Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) of preschool teachers is presented in Table 1. A p-value of less than 0.05 was deemed statistically significant. Consequently, the data indicate that the SEC of preschool teachers significantly correlates with Leadership Trust, colleague relationships, pro-teacher relationships, teacher-child relationships, and self-efficacy.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

M（SD）	1	2	3	4	5	6
93.893 （9.179）						
16.176 （2.817）	.451***					
16.400 （2.385）	.540***	.482***				
9.403 （.681***）	.681***	.368***	.533***			
49.781 （5.617）	.630***	.268***	.506***	.621***		
45.427 （4.707）	.544***	.264***	.477***	.584***	.684***	

N = 215 ; *p ＜ 0.05 ; **p ＜ 0.01 ; ***p ＜ 0.001 ; SEC = Social emotional competence ; LT = Leadership Trust ; CR = Colleagues relationship ; PR = the pro-teacher relationship ; EF = self - efficacy ; TC = teacher-child relationship.

3.2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis

To further explore the predictive impact of Leadership Trust, colleague relationships, pro-teacher relationships, teacher-child relationships, and self-efficacy on the SEC of preschool teachers, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed (Table 2). Initially, the background variables of the preschool teachers (gender, teaching experience) were controlled, revealing these variables accounted for 0.21% of the variance in SEC. After adjusting for the effects of these control variables, Model 2 achieved statistical significance ($p < 0.001$), with an R^2 of 0.59. This finding suggests that Leadership Trust, colleague relationships, pro-teacher relationships, teacher-child relationships, and self-efficacy together explain 59% of the variance in SEC. Specifically, Leadership Trust ($\beta = 0.106$, $p < 0.05$), the pro-teacher relationship ($\beta = 0.342$, $p < 0.05$), and self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.232$, $p < 0.05$) were found to positively predict the SEC of preschool teachers. Conversely, the effects of colleague relationships and teacher-child relationships on SEC were not statistically significant, as indicated by p-values greater than 0.05.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Model for Predicting the SEC of Preschool Teachers Based on Independent Variables

argument	SEC	
	Model 1	Model 2
(Constant)	4.181	0.998
Gender 1=Female	-0.051	-0.067
Teaching experience: 4-6 years	-0.123	-0.057
Teaching experience: 7-25 years	-0.042	-0.041
Teaching experience: 25-34 years	-0.088	-0.036
Teaching experience: over 34 years	-0.175	-0.118
LT	/	0.106[***]
CR	/	0.061
PR	/	0.342[***]
EF	/	0.232[***]
TC	/	0.041
R^2	0.021	0.590
$\triangle R^2$	0.021	0.569
F	0.876	29.343[***]

Note . [***]p<0.001,[**]p<0.01,[*]p<0.05

4. Discussion

4.1. The Positive Impact of Leadership Trust on Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence

Our findings demonstrate a significant positive relationship between preschool teachers' trust in leadership and their Social and Emotional Competence (SEC). This aligns with existing literature, which posits that organizational support and trust play a crucial role in shaping teachers' SEC, with strong Leadership Trust forming a key component of this support framework [16]. A supportive and trust-filled relationship between preschool teachers and their leaders fosters a secure work environment, encouraging the use of emotional intelligence, boosting engagement and participation, and alleviating work stress. Leadership Trust serves as a foundational pillar, providing teachers with the psychological resources necessary for SEC development. It reduces perceived uncertainties and

work-related risks, allowing for more open and meaningful social connections. This nurturing environment is indispensable for enhancing teachers' SEC.

4.2. The Positive Influence of Pro-teacher Relationships on Teachers' SEC

The study reveals that pro-teacher relationships—interactions between teachers and parents—significantly predict preschool teachers' SEC, corroborating prior research. Effective engagement with parents is a crucial aspect of a preschool teacher's role, with past studies indicating that communication and relationship management with parents are key stressors for teachers [17]. The complexity and diversity of tasks involved in parental engagement demand not only significant effort but also superior interpersonal skills for efficient execution [18]. Moreover, literature suggests a strong link between healthy interpersonal relationships and enhanced SEC [19]. Thus, positive pro-teacher relationships, through improved understanding and cooperation with parents, offer essential emotional support. Regular interactions with parents enhance communication skills, foster trust, and reduce potential conflicts, thereby contributing to a teacher's emotional and cognitive growth. Feedback from parents also acts as a reflective tool, enabling teachers to refine their social interaction strategies, which in turn facilitates their personal and professional development.

4.3. The Significant Predictive Effect of Self-efficacy on Teachers' SEC

The analysis indicates a strong positive correlation between teachers' self-efficacy and their SEC, aligning with previous findings that underscore the link between self-efficacy and emotional competence [20]. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more adept at managing their emotions and engaging actively in complex social work scenarios. Furthermore, self-efficacy fosters resilience and confidence among teachers, enhancing their ability to persevere through challenges. This study highlights the role of positive emotions and behavioral patterns, attributed to high self-efficacy, in establishing constructive work relationships. Consequently, self-efficacy not only empowers teachers to navigate the intricacies of their professional relationships more effectively but also contributes significantly to the development of their SEC.

5. Conclusion

The Social and Emotional Competence (SEC) of teachers is developed through intricate networks of relationships and interactions, significantly influenced by both individual and organizational elements. Despite this understanding, research focusing specifically on the impact of social work relationships on the SEC of preschool teachers remains limited. This study employed hierarchical regression analysis to examine how trust between preschool teachers and leadership, relationships with colleagues, pro-teacher relationships (interactions with parents), teacher-child interactions, and self-efficacy influence SEC. The findings highlight that leadership trust, pro-teacher relationships, and teacher self-efficacy exhibit a substantial positive predictive impact on enhancing SEC. Conversely, relationships with colleagues and teacher-child dynamics do not significantly affect preschool teachers' SEC. From these results, two principal insights emerge. First, any effort to bolster teachers' SEC must thoroughly account for the influence of social and professional relationships. Second, it is imperative for organizational leaders to cultivate a supportive and trusting social work environment, facilitating the development of positive relationships among preschool teachers. These strategies are essential for promoting the growth of SEC among preschool educators, thereby enriching their ability to foster a nurturing and emotionally intelligent learning environment for young learners.

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