PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' EMOTIONAL LABOR STRATEGIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

MING MEI, Y.[1] – PEK, L. S.[1,2*]

[1] *Faculty of Social Science, Arts and Humanities, Lincoln University College, Selangor, Malaysia.*

[2] *Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author*
e-mail: limsp[at]lincoln.edu.my

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Abstract. This study investigates preschool teachers' emotional labor strategies from the perspective of positive psychology, recognizing that emotional labor significantly impacts teachers' well-being and effectiveness. The research sample consisted of teachers from 25 kindergartens in Henan Province, China, with 425 questionnaires distributed. The results indicated that preschool teachers engage in emotional labor at a high level, with average scores of 3.37 for surface acting, 4.11 for deep acting, and 4.02 for natural acting; among these strategies, deep acting was the most frequently used, followed by natural acting, and surface acting, with statistically significant differences between the three; surface acting was significantly negatively correlated with psychological capital and hope dimension, but not significantly correlated with other dimensions; deep acting and natural acting were both significantly positively correlated with psychological capital and all four of its dimensions. The results of the regression analysis showed that the predictive power of the three emotional labor strategies on psychological capital was 24.2%.

Keywords: *China, preschool teachers, emotional labor, psychological capital*

Introduction

As psychological science delves deeper into the exploration of the human inner world, an increasing number of researchers are beginning to take notice of the significance of emotions in individuals' daily lives and work. Emotions are not only considered psychological factors that influence individuals' mental and physical health but also crucial variables affecting individual work performance (Zapf et al., 2021). Thus, practitioners in various sectors of today's society need to manage their emotions and express them according to the culture and requirements within different industry organizations. Based on this, many scholars have started to explore the role of emotional labor in specific work situations. The concept of "emotional labor" was first introduced by sociologist Hochschild (2019) in "Explorations in Emotion Management". Emotional labor is the "third type of labor" in addition to intellectual labor and physical labor, which means that individuals disguise and manage their internal and external emotions to conform to the rules of expression of the organization and to make the organization profitable (Hochschild, 2019). It has been widely used in sociology, management, and organizational behavior in studying service employees, social workers, or caregivers.

In recent years, the research of emotional labor in the field of teacher teaching has gradually increased. Emotion plays a crucial role in teachers' well-being and significantly impacts the learning and teaching process (Chen, 2019). Teachers are the

bridge between knowledge and students, and the guardians who care for students' hearts and minds (Ye and Chen, 2015). A related study showed that teachers' daily work involves a lot of emotional labor, especially classroom teaching work (Yin et al., 2019). Emotional labor is also an important aspect of the teaching profession to enhance teaching effectiveness and practice skills (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014). Teachers will display and exude a variety of emotional expressions in practice depending on the demands of their profession, showing emotional stability and vitality in the classroom and treating students with kindness and cheerfulness. Teachers' physical, mental health and professional development will face great challenges and risks in the long run. More importantly, teachers' emotional labor is a key factor affecting physical and mental health issues (Taxer and Frenzel, 2015). Long-term emotional labor for teachers is stressful for individual teachers, leading to an imbalance in their emotional resources, triggering burnout and reduced job satisfaction. Yin identified three emotion regulation strategies used by Chinese teachers: surface acting (feigning positive emotions or suppressing negative ones), deep acting (distraction or cognitive modification), and natural acting (expressing genuine emotions, like showing love or anger) (Yin, 2016).

Researchers have found preschool teachers require more emotional labor than other school teachers (Zhang et al., 2020a; 2020b; Hong and Zhang, 2019). The characteristics of their profession determine the emotional demands of preschool teachers. The roles of preschool teachers in China are not only limited to teaching, but also asked to perform more non-teaching tasks and daily childcare duties, and the work of preschool teachers requires stronger emotional engagement and closer interpersonal interactions. They have closer relationships with their colleagues and communicate, interact, and collaborate more frequently than primary and secondary school teachers (Zhang et al., 2020b). At the same time, children's emotions are exposed, changeable, and contagious during this period. Therefore, preschool teachers have a heavy care and teaching load and must pay more attention to their emotional expression. Emotional labor holds substantial importance due to its close association with preschool teachers' well-being, work engagement, and teaching effectiveness (Huang and Zhou, 2024; Zheng et al., 2023). Moreover, the ability to manage emotions effectively is directly linked to the quality of interactions between teachers and children. This relationship fosters a positive and conducive learning environment, essential for the children's cognitive and emotional development (Brown et al., 2018). Consequently, understanding and supporting Chinese preschool teachers' emotional labor is crucial for enhancing educational outcomes and promoting a healthy work environment.

Luthans et al. (2007) building upon previous research and multiple refinements of existing studies, definitively defined psychological capital as the positive psychological state displayed by individuals throughout their development and growth processes, mainly including self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience. A study conducted on Saudi oil managers concluded that psychological capital can enhance organizational commitment and citizenship behavior (Idris and Manganaro, 2017). Psychological capital also plays a critical role in enhancing employee well-being and job satisfaction. According to a longitudinal study, employees with higher psychological capital report lower levels of burnout and higher performance (Lupșa and Vîrgă, 2020). Additionally, a study demonstrated that psychological capital significantly predicts work engagement, primarily through its impact on perceived organizational support and engagement (Tian et al., 2023). Similarly, within educational organizations, the outcomes align with those reported in business organizations. Gautam and Pradhan (2018) conducted a survey

among 210 students from rural area schools and discovered that psychological capital is not only positively correlated with academic performance but also mitigates the negative effects of stress. Viseu and his team conducted a study examining the relationship between psychological capital and teachers' motivation, finding a strong correlation between the two (Viseu et al., 2016). Psychological capital also has a negative predictive effect on job burnout, such that lower levels of psychological capital are associated with higher levels of job burnout (Demir, 2018). Both studies confirm that psychological capital can lead to a negative prediction regarding job burnout (Freire et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). For preschool teachers, psychological capital is reflected in their confidence in handling diverse situations, maintaining hope and motivation in educating young minds, fostering optimism despite challenges, and demonstrating resilience in the face of the emotional demands of their profession. Related research showed that psychological capital mediates and moderates early childhood teachers' emotional labor and job burnout (Peng et al., 2019).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the pursuit of high-quality development in preschool education has become a global consensus. China has also explicitly proposed the goal of "universalizing high-quality preschool education". In these three years, China has experienced a negative population growth. The direct result of low fertility rates is a decrease in the number of newborn children, leading to a series of changes in structural elements such as resource allocation, teacher-student ratios, and class sizes. Particularly, as teacher-child interactions continue to deepen, teachers' professional competencies in this area face more severe challenges. Against this backdrop, the emotional demands of preschool teachers are becoming increasingly intense, necessitating the consistent adoption of emotional labor strategies. However, domestic and international research on teachers' emotional labor has focused on primary, secondary, and university teachers, with relatively little research on preschool teachers (Yin, 2016). Additionally, previous research has predominantly examined the impact of emotional labor from a work-related perspective. This study, however, adopts a positive psychology approach to investigate the current emotional labor strategies employed by Chinese preschool teachers and to explore the relationship between these strategies and individual psychological capital. By providing valuable insights into the interaction between emotional labor strategies and psychological capital among preschool teachers, this study aims to contribute to the broader field of educational psychology. Ultimately, the goal is to improve educational outcomes and enhance the professional lives of preschool educators.

Materials and Methods

The study participants were recruited from 25 kindergartens located in five major cities in Henan Province, mainland China. A convenience sampling method was employed to select 425 preschool teachers to receive questionnaires through the "Questionnaire Star" platform. After screening, 76 invalid questionnaires were discarded, resulting in 349 valid questionnaires, with a validity rate of 82.1%. Using a total cohort, the results revealed that majority 310 (88.8%) of respondents were female and 39 (11.2%) were male. Most of teachers were found between the ages of 30 years and below constituted 234 (67.0%), 31-40 years 93 (26.6%) and the rest 22 (6.3%) were 40 years and above. Work experience showed a majority of 237 (67.9%) constituted teachers with 5 years and lower work experience and 112 (32.1%) represented teachers

with 6 years and lower work experience. The majority of the participants received a monthly income of ¥2,001-3,000 (44.7%) or ¥30,01-4000 (25.8%), and above ¥4,000(17.8%). Each survey was completed anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The Emotional Labor Scale by Diefendorff et al. (2005) measured the emotional expression behavior of service industry personnel at work. It consisted of 14 items, including three dimensions of surface acting (7 items, such as "I fake a good mood when interacting with customers"), deep acting (4 items, such as "I work hard to feel the emotions that I need to show to customers") and natural acting (3 items, such as "The emotions I show customers come naturally"), using a 5-point scale ranging from "very disagree" to "very agree". The higher the subscale score, the more emotional labor was used. In prior research, the Chinese adaptation of the emotional labor scale demonstrated strong reliability and validity (Hong et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2019). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the dimensions ranged between 0.740 and 0.771, and the overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was 0.802.

The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24) for preschool teachers was designed by Lee (2009), who referenced the psychological capital questionnaire by Luthans et al. (2007). On a scale of one to six, with responses ranging from strongly disagreeing (1) to strongly agreeing (6), it consisted of 24 items that were available for evaluation. There are six items in each subscale of the PCQ-24, which allows for measurement in four different dimensions, including self-efficacy, optimism, resiliency, and hope. The sum of all item scores was the total psychological capital score, and a higher score indicated a higher level of psychological capital. Most of the studies on teachers' psychological capital used the PCQ-24, as confirmed by Burhanuddin et al. (2019) in a systematic literature review of psychological capital. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in this study was 0.957 and the dimensions were 0.879, 0.896, 0.880, and 0.848 respectively. The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 23.0. Initially, the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments were assessed to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the data collected. Following this, descriptive statistical analyses were performed on each variable to summarize and describe the basic features of the data. Both correlation and regression analyses were employed. Correlation analysis was used to identify and quantify the strength and direction of the associations between pairs of variables. Subsequently, regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive relationships between the variables.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistical analysis of their emotional labor, along with the dimensions of surface acting, deep acting, and natural acting, is performed using SPSS, with the statistical outcomes presented in *Table 1*. *Table 1* shows the mean and standard deviation of emotional labor and the dimensions. Overall, the mean values for emotional labor and all three dimensions for preschool teachers were above the median 3, indicating that these teachers needed to perform a lot of emotional labor in their daily teaching and life. Specifically, the mean value for deep acting is the highest, at 4.11, while surface acting has the lowest mean value, at 3.37. The average values for the three dimensions are ranked from highest to lowest as follows: deep acting>natural acting>surface acting. Pairwise comparisons are conducted between surface acting, deep acting, and natural acting to test if the differences in mean values between the

paired groups are statistically significant. The results of these tests are presented in *Table 2*.

Table 1. *The overall status of preschool teachers' emotional labor (n=349).*

Variable	Max	Min	Mean	SD
Surface acting	1.29	5	3.37	0.61
Deep acting	1.25	5	4.11	0.58
Natural acting	1.33	5	4.02	0.67
Emotional labor	1.34	5	3.84	0.41

Table 2. *Paired samples t-test for dimensions of emotional labor (n=349).*

Variable	t	df	P
Surface acting - Deep acting	-18.066***	348	0.000
Surface acting - Deep acting	-12.249***	348	0.000
Deep acting - Natural acting	2.544*	348	0.011

*Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.*

The results indicate that the differences between surface acting and deep acting (t=-18.066, df=348, P<0.001), surface acting and natural acting (t=-12.249, df=348, P<0.001), and deep acting and natural acting (t=2.544, df=348, P<0.05) are all statistically significant. This suggests that preschool teachers are more inclined to employ deep acting strategies in their emotional labor, followed by natural acting strategies, with surface acting strategies being used the least. This indicates that when faced with a discrepancy between actual emotional feelings and the expected emotional expression, preschool teachers tend to adjust their feelings from within to display appropriate emotions, rather than merely altering their external emotional expressions to artificially show warmth and enthusiasm toward children. However, early childhood educators also use strategies that are in-congruent with their inner feelings to mask their true emotional state, albeit to a lesser extent. In summary, the average values for the choice and use of each strategy by preschool educators are on the higher end, categorizing them as individuals engaged in high emotional labor. The current emotional labor of preschool teachers is at a high level, which is largely consistent with the findings of previous studies (Yin et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2020b; Peng et al., 2019). Considering the actual work conditions of preschool teachers, their job indeed exhibits certain peculiarities compared to teachers of other educational levels. Thus, the study results indicate that preschool teachers are undoubtedly engaged in emotional labor, and their emotional and psychological states form a crucial part of their professional development. Therefore, both in theoretical research and practical work, it is imperative to significantly enhance the focus on the emotional labor of preschool teachers.

Among the three emotional labor strategies, deep acting is most frequently utilized, followed by natural acting, and lastly, surface acting, aligning with the research of Hong and Zhang (2019), Lennard et al. (2019) as well as Peng et al. (2019). The predominance of deep acting may arise from its lesser reliance on "pretending", unlike surface acting, where there is often a disconnect between a teacher's internal feelings and external emotional expressions, potentially leading to internal conflict and higher psychological resource expenditure. Deep acting and natural acting strategies circumvent such conflicts by aiming for harmony between internal feelings and external expressions, enhancing job satisfaction and a sense of identity. These strategies serve as

a replenishing resource, beneficial for both the educational objectives and the professional growth of early childhood educators. To examine the relationships between emotional labor strategies, psychological capital, and dimensions, correlation analyses were conducted. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to represent these relationships. *Table 3* presents the correlation matrix for these variables.

***Table 3**. Correlation Matrix of emotional labor and psychological capital among preschool teachers.*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Surface acting	—							
Deep acting	0.190**	—						
Natural acting	-.189**	0.461**	—					
Self-efficacy	-0.105	0.386**	0.314**	—				
Optimism	-0.076	0.404**	0.358**	0.653**	—			
Resiliency	-0.052	0.366**	0.336**	0.706**	0.752**	—		
Hope	-0.163*	0.384**	0.391**	0.780**	0.774**	0.799**	—	
Psychological capital	-0.111*	0.428**	0.390**	0.869**	0.887**	0.905**	0.934**	—
Mean	3.374	4.111	4.022	4.803	4.593	4.587	4.693	4.669
SD	0.613	0.584	0.668	0.777	0.836	0.801	0.838	0.731

*Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01.*

As indicated in the above table, the surface acting of preschool teachers' emotional labor is significantly negatively correlated with psychological capital and hope dimension (r=-0.111, P<0.05; r=-0.163, P<0.05), but not significantly correlated with other dimensions. Deep acting is significantly positively correlated with psychological capital and all four of its dimensions (correlation coefficients ranging from 0.366 to 0.428, P<0.01); similarly, natural acting is also significantly positively correlated with psychological capital and each of its dimensions (correlation coefficients ranging from 0.314 to 0.391, P<0.01). An analysis was conducted to determine the contribution of different emotional labor strategies to the psychological capital of preschool teachers. Surface acting, deep acting, and natural acting were used as independent variables, with psychological capital as the dependent variable. A forced entry method was employed for multiple linear regression analysis. The results of this analysis are presented in *Table 4*. The results indicate that surface acting has a significant negative impact on psychological capital, whereas deep acting and natural acting both have significant positive effects on psychological capital. Together, these emotional labor strategies explain 24.2% of the total variance (F=37.982, P<0.001). The estimated standardized coefficients are -0.171 for surface acting, 0.458 for deep acting, and 0.212 for natural acting.

***Table 4**. Regression analysis of preschool teachers' emotional labor on psychological capital.*

Dependent variable	B	t	R^2	Adjust R^2	F
Constant	2.510	7.718***	0.248	0.242	37.982***
Surface acting	-0.171	-2.862**			
Deep acting	0.458	6.596***			
Natural acting	0.212	3.496**			

*Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.*

The findings of this study indicate a significant negative correlation between surface acting and psychological capital among preschool teachers, whereas deep acting and natural acting both show significant positive correlations with psychological capital.

Regression analysis further reveals that surface acting has a significant negative predictive effect on psychological capital, while deep acting and natural acting significantly positively predict psychological capital, corroborating previous research findings (Peng et al., 2019; Hur et al., 2016; Cheung et al., 2011). This suggests that when preschool teachers more frequently employ surface acting strategies, their levels of psychological capital tend to decrease; conversely, when they engage more in deep acting and genuine acting strategies, their levels of psychological capital are enhanced. There are several possible reasons for this. Surface acting involves the external display of emotions that are not felt internally, which often leads to emotional dissonance. This dissonance can contribute to psychological strain, thereby reducing psychological capital, which encompasses resilience, optimism, hope, and self-efficacy (Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011). The negative impact of surface acting on psychological capital is significant because it undermines genuine emotional engagement and satisfaction, which are critical components of psychological well-being and efficacy in the workplace.

Conversely, deep acting and natural acting involve aligning one's internal feelings with external expressions, thereby reducing the likelihood of experiencing emotional dissonance. Emotional labor is essentially a process whereby teachers adjust their emotional behaviors under professional demands (Zhang et al., 2020b). This process necessitates a certain expenditure of effort and the consumption of internal energy or resources. When teachers employ deep acting and natural acting strategies, greater consistency between their internal experiences and external expressions is achieved, which can lead to an increased emotional activation that facilitates the acquisition of psychological resources. Deep acting requires the modification of inner feelings to match the required emotional output, whereas natural acting naturally aligns internal and external emotions without the need for adjustment (Huang and Zhou, 2024). These strategies not only prevent the erosion of psychological resources but can enhance them by fostering a greater sense of personal authenticity and emotional congruence (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002). By facilitating a more genuine connection with one's work and interactions, these forms of emotional labor can significantly predict and build psychological capital. Furthermore, teachers who engage in deep and natural acting are likely to feel more efficacious and hopeful about their ability to impact their students positively, which directly contributes to their psychological capital. These positive associations suggest that interventions aimed at reducing surface acting and promoting deeper and more genuine forms of emotional labor could enhance teachers' psychological capital, thereby improving their overall job satisfaction and effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study examines the current use of emotional labor strategies among preschool teachers from the perspective of positive psychology. It concludes that emotional labor among Chinese preschool teachers is at a relatively high level, with deep acting being the most frequently utilized strategy among the three emotional labor strategies. Positive emotional labor strategies, such as deep acting and natural acting, correlate positively with psychological capital dimensions like self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, and hope. In contrast, surface acting shows a negative relationship with psychological capital. This also suggests that preschool teachers exhibit higher levels of psychological capital when they employ deep acting and natural acting more frequently, whereas higher levels of

surface acting are associated with lower levels of psychological capital. These findings underscore the importance of promoting adaptive emotional labor strategies and enhancing psychological capital through targeted interventions to support preschool teachers' professional development and overall effectiveness in early childhood education.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research.

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