

Original Paper

Determinants of Emotional Labor for Rural Kindergarten

Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

Based on in-depth interviews with 12 rural preschool teachers and three-level coding analysis, this study finds that their emotional labor is a dynamic system formed by the interaction of multiple factors at the three levels of individual, organization and context. Among them, organizational factors such as the support from parents and children, work autonomy, and the support from peers and administrators play the most direct and core role, which significantly affect the positive emotional experience and emotional exhaustion of teachers. Contextual factors such as material security levels, social prejudice and family support provide macro sociocultural background and resource conditions for their emotional labor. While individual factors such as educational sentiment, emotional intelligence and emotional expression style act as internal regulatory mechanisms, jointly affecting teachers' understanding, response and adjustment to emotional needs. Therefore, coordinated efforts are needed from the levels of institutional guarantee, kindergarten support and individual capacity cultivation to systematically improve the emotional labor quality of rural preschool teachers.

Keywords

Rural preschool teachers, Emotional labor, Influencing factors, Qualitative research

1. Proposal of the Problem

Rural preschool education is an important pillar of the rural revitalization strategy. The professional quality and stability of the teaching force can affect its development quality. However, there are still obvious gaps in rural areas in terms of educational resource allocation, professional development opportunities, and material treatment, resulting in preschool teachers shouldering not only heavy teaching and caregiving burdens but also engaging in continuous, high-intensity emotional labor^[1].

The concept of emotional labor was originally proposed by the American sociologist Hochschild, who defined emotional labor as the individual's control over their own feelings and the adjustment of publicly

visible facial expressions and body language for expression^[2]. Teachers are typical emotional laborers, and preschool teachers, due to the particularity of the working population they face, are involved in higher-intensity emotional labor. Through emotional labor, teachers can establish intimate relationships with young children, understand and meet their emotional needs, and then promote children's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Although the existing research has focused on the issue of teachers' emotional labor, it mostly focuses on primary and secondary school or university teachers, and mainly uses quantitative methods to explore their relationship with professional burnout, job satisfaction and other variables. Therefore, it is difficult to deeply reveal the complex and dynamic emotional experiences and their internal underlying mechanisms of preschool teachers^[3], especially rural preschool teachers in specific situations. In view of this, this study adopts the qualitative research paradigm to systematically analyze the professional life experience of rural preschool teachers through in-depth interviews. It aims to explore the key factors affecting their emotional labor and their mechanisms of action, so as to provide a theoretical and practical basis for the construction of an effective emotional support system.

2. Research Design and Approach

2.1 Selection of Research Participants

This study adopted strategies of "purposive" sampling and "snowball" sampling, selecting samples that could provide the maximum amount of information for this research, and stopping the selection of research participants when information reached saturation. In the purposive sampling stage, first 2 teachers from a certain town in Sichuan and 1 teacher from a certain county in Sichuan were selected. Because these 3 teachers were "my" childhood playmates and schoolmates, they were relatively familiar with each other, which could provide better support and help, making the interaction between the researcher and the 3 teachers smoother and more natural, and enabling a deeper exploration of their inner feelings. In the snowball sampling stage, through interviews with the above 3 teachers, when "I" talked about certain issues or mentioned the selection criteria for this research participants, they actively suggested and recommended suitable interview candidates around them to "me". In the end, a total of 12 rural preschool teachers were selected, and their basic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Information of the 12 Rural Preschool Teachers

No.	Age	Educational background	Teaching years	Position	Workplace
T1	25	Bachelor's degree	2	Assistant teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T2	28	Junior college	6	Assistant teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T3	25	Junior college	6	Head teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T4	31	Junior college	11	Head teacher	A certain town in Sichuan

T5	26	Junior college	7	Assistant teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T6	25	Secondary vocational school	6	Head teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T7	28	Junior college	1	Assistant teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T8	30	Bachelor's degree	5	Head teacher	A certain town in Sichuan
T9	25	Bachelor's degree	2	Assistant teacher	A certain county in Sichuan
T10	26	Bachelor's degree	5	Assistant teacher	A certain county in Sichuan
T11	28	Bachelor's degree	4	Head teacher	A certain county in Sichuan
T12	27	Bachelor's degree	5	Assistant teacher	A certain county in Sichuan

2.2 Collection of Research Data

This study adopted the in-depth interview method under the qualitative research paradigm and used a semi-structured interview approach to interview rural preschool teachers. Before the interviews, this study formulated a preliminary interview outline based on the influencing factors in Grandey's emotional labor mechanism model^[2]. The outline mainly included four main-line questions: 1. How is your recent emotional state at work? Can you use a few keywords to describe the main emotions at work? 2. Can you describe one or two profound events in your work that bring you positive emotions? 3. Can you describe one or two profound events at work that bring you negative emotions? 4. Do you regret choosing the profession of preschool teacher? Under the main questions, follow-up questions on details were asked to the teachers according to the specific interview situation to obtain the best interview information. This study adopted the semi-structured interview method, and a total of 12 teachers were interviewed. Six of them were interviewed offline, and the other six chose online voice interviews for personal privacy reasons, with further follow-up and supplementation via WeChat text or voice messages when necessary. After the interviews, the "Yuelu" software was used to transcribe the voice recordings, forming the original interview data of about 70,000 words. After eliminating invalid and duplicate data, 46,886 million words of valid interview data were finally obtained. Among them, the longest interview text had 7,656 words, and the shortest had 1,597 words.

2.3 Data Analysis and Processing

In terms of data processing and analysis, this study, based on the influencing factors in Grandey's emotional labor mechanism model, used the qualitative analysis software Nvivo12 plus to conduct three-level coding of the interview materials: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

2.3.1 Open Coding

Open coding is the process of establishing free nodes in Nvivo12 plus, with the free nodes corresponding to the initial categories below. In this study, the author repeatedly read the 12 interview transcripts and followed the steps of "raw data → labeling → conceptualization → categorization" to code the key words and phrases reflecting the influencing factors of teachers' emotional labor. A total of 115 labels were attached, forming 64 initial concepts and 26 initial categories. For ease of understanding, representative examples of the open coding process are listed below.

Table 2. Example of the Process of “Raw Data → Labeling → Conceptualization → Categorization”

Open coding	Open coding	Open coding	Raw interview data
C1 Initial teaching aspiration	D1 Professional original intention	E4 Firmness in initial aspiration	“I have never regretted choosing preschool teaching, and I still don’t regret it to this day. Because I think, since I have chosen this profession, I should do it well.” (T12)
C4 Prudence	D8 Being prudent in conduct	E11 Treading carefully	“I also always tread carefully, so others cannot find any faults in me.” (T3)
C8 Self-perception	D15 Professional competence	E18 Preschool teaching being a job one is relatively competent at	“As a preschool teacher, this job seems to be hard but also brings a bit of joy; it feels like I can continue doing it for a long time. I have also done many other kinds of jobs, and I really think preschool teaching is a job I am relatively competent at.” (T7)
C15 Colleague assistance	D33 Care from colleagues	E46 Care from childcare teachers for young teachers	“Our school’s childcare teachers are all older, so for heavy work like moving things, they are reluctant to let us, who are seen as ‘little girls’ in their eyes, do it. I am really comforted and touched.” (T5)
C24 Teacher-child ratio	D61 Low teacher-child ratio	E110 Teacher-child ratio not meeting standards	“For our current township kindergartens, we have not reached the state of two teachers and one childcare worker; we have one teacher and one childcare worker. The teacher leads the class from morning until school ends at 4 p.m.” (T8)

2.3.2 Axial Coding

Axial coding is the process of continuously integrating, reorganizing, and analyzing the initial categories formed on the basis of open coding, so as to form categories, attributes, and dimensions, and to develop and test the relationships among categories^[3]. Finally, a total of 10 main categories were derived, namely B1 educational sentiment, B2 emotional expression, B3 emotional intelligence, B4 work autonomy, B5 administrator support, B6 peer support, B7 parent and child support, B8 family support, B9 material security, and B10 social prejudice.

Table 3. Axial Coding and Its Reference Points

Main category	Initial categories
B1 Educational sentiment	C1 Initial teaching aspiration, C2 Professional identity
B2 Emotional expression	C3 Extroversion, C4 Prudence, C5 Optimism, C6 Frankness, C7 Impatience
B3 Emotional intelligence	C8 Self-perception, C9 Self-regulation
B4 Work autonomy	C10 Work atmosphere, C11 Work content, C12 Working time
B5 Administrator support	C13 Work arrangement, C14 Attitude toward others
B6 Peer support	C15 Colleague assistance, C16 Colleague conflict
B7 Parent and child support	C17 Parent support, C18 Child support
B8 Family support	C19 Parental support, C20 Husband support, C21 Child influence
B9 Material security	C22 Salary and benefits, C23 Facilities and equipment, C24 Teacher-child ratio
B10 Social prejudice	C25 Low educational level, C26 Low professionalism

2.3.3 Selective Coding

In selective coding, the coder systematically analyzes all discovered conceptual categories to select the “core category”^[4]. Therefore, this study closely revolves around the core theme of “influencing factors of teachers’ emotional labor” to sort out the logical relationships among the main categories, and based on the influencing factors in Grandey’s emotional labor mechanism model, concludes that the influencing factors of rural preschool teachers’ emotional labor can be viewed as the result of the combined action of individual factors, organizational factors, and contextual factors.

Table 4. Selective Coding and Its Reference Point Percentages

Core category	Total percentage (%)	Main category	Total percentage (%)
A1 Individual factors	23.04%	B1 Educational sentiment	12.04%
		B2 Emotional expression	5.24%
		B3 Emotional intelligence	5.76%
		B4 Work autonomy	17.80%
A2 Organizational factors	56.02%	B5 Administrator support	8.38%
		B6 Peer support	10.99%
		B7 Parent and child support	18.85%
		B8 Family support	5.76%
A3 Contextual factors	20.94%	B9 Material security	9.95%
		B10 Social prejudice	5.24%

3. Research Results and Analysis

3.1 Individual Factors: The Dual Role of Inner Beliefs and Emotional Competence

At the individual level, rural preschool teachers' emotional labor is first driven by their inner beliefs and emotional competence. The data show that individual factors account for 23.04% of the total, among which educational sentiment contributes the most (12.04%), reflected in the adherence to the original dedication and professional identity in the cause of preschool education. Many teachers choose and stick to their posts because they "like children". T12 also responds to setbacks with the mentality of "since I have chosen it, I must do it well", which constitutes the starting point and psychological buffer of emotional labor. Emotional intelligence accounts for 5.76%, which is mainly reflected in self-perception and emotional regulation. Some teachers use cognitive reappraisal to stabilize their emotions. For example, T3 reduces interpersonal pressure by reminding herself that "going to work is work" and enhances her sense of competence through self-affirmation (T7 thinks that she is more suitable for pre-school education). Emotional expression accounts for 5.24%. Different personality characteristics lead to differences in explicit styles. Extroverted teachers express themselves more directly, while cautious teachers express themselves more restrainedly. This expression style in turn affects the quality of interaction with children, parents and colleagues, thus changing the intensity of emotional input and the risk of exhaustion. In general, individual factors constitute an internal regulatory system, which motivates teachers to understand emotional needs, choose coping strategies and maintain investment.

Table 5. Summary of Main Categories, Initial Categories, and Reference Point Percentages under Individual Factors (A1)

No.	Individual factors	Percentage	Key components	Textual examples
1	Educational sentiment	12.04%	Initial teaching aspiration, professional identity	Choosing and persisting because of "liking children"; T12: since I have chosen it, I must do it well
2	Emotional intelligence	5.76%	Self-perception, self-regulation	T3: reminding herself that "going to work is just work"; T7: sense of self-competence
3	Emotional expression	5.24%	Expressive styles such as extroversion/cautiousness/frankness	Extroverts more direct; cautious ones more restrained, affecting interaction and exhaustion risk
4	Total for individual factors	23.04%	Educational sentiment, emotional intelligence, emotional expression	Constituting the internal regulatory system of teachers' emotional labor

3.2 Organizational Factors: The Core Influence of Kindergarten Environment and Interpersonal Interaction

The kindergarten, as the main site where rural preschool teachers' emotional labor occurs, its institutional arrangements and interpersonal interactions have a more direct impact on emotional experience and exhaustion. Organizational factors account for the highest proportion among the three types of influences (56.02%). Among them, support from parents and children is the most critical positive source (18.85%). Parents' understanding, trust, and cooperation, as well as children's developmental feedback, can significantly enhance teachers' professional well-being and sense of value. For example, T11, when receiving affirmation from parents that "the class is taught very well," generates obvious pleasure and motivation; conversely, distrust and poor communication easily induce negative emotions and accumulate into burnout. Work autonomy comes next (17.80%). When non-teaching tasks are heavy, meetings are frequent, or insufficient resources squeeze professional space, teachers' sense of control over work pace and content decreases. The high-intensity, low-control state described by T8 as "having to teach two types of classes every day" is more likely to trigger emotional exhaustion. Peer support (10.99%) and administrator support (8.38%) together constitute the internal emotional support network within the kindergarten. Collaboration and mutual assistance can buffer pressure, but if colleague conflicts occur or management styles tend to be authoritarian, negative experiences will be amplified and emotional consumption will be aggravated.

Table 6. Summary Table of Main Categories, Initial Categories, and Reference Point Percentages under Organizational Factors (A2)

Core category (A2)	Main category (B)	Initial category (C)	Reference point percentage
Organizational factors (total)	—	—	56.02%
Organizational factors (A2)	Parent and child support (B7)	Parent support (C17), Child support (C18)	18.85%
Organizational factors (A2)	Work autonomy (B4)	Work atmosphere (C10), Work content (C11), Working time (C12)	17.80%
Organizational factors (A2)	Peer support (B6)	Colleague assistance (C15), Colleague conflict (C16)	10.99%
Organizational factors (A2)	Administrator support (B5)	Work arrangement (C13), Attitude toward others (C14)	8.38%

3.3 Contextual Factors: Systematic Constraints of Social Structure and Family Support

At the macro level, the social and family environment provides “boundary conditions” for rural preschool teachers’ emotional labor. Contextual factors account for 20.94% of the total, among which material security is the most prominent constraint (9.95%). Low salaries, outdated facilities, and insufficient teacher-child ratios reduce job satisfaction and willingness to persist. T5 believes that the input-output ratio is imbalanced, while the ratio issues such as “one teacher and one childcare worker” described by T8 also superimpose workload and emotional pressure. At the same time, social prejudice accounts for 5.24%, mainly reflected in stereotypical evaluations of preschool teachers as having “low educational level and low professionalism,” which weakens professional dignity and affects self-identity, thereby indirectly reducing the quality of emotional investment. In contrast, although family support accounts for only 5.76%, it is a key emotional buffer. Family members’ understanding, encouragement, and sharing help teachers maintain resilience in difficult situations. T8 also emphasizes that “her husband’s comfort, companionship, guidance, and listening” is an important support for her continued teaching.

Table 7. Summary Table of Main Categories, Initial Categories, and Reference Point Percentages under Contextual Factors (A3)

Core category (A3)	Total percentage	Main category (B)	Main category percentage
Contextual factors	20.94%	Material security (B9)	9.95%
Contextual factors	20.94%	Family support (B8)	5.76%
Contextual factors	20.94%	Social prejudice (B10)	5.24%
Total of contextual factors	20.94%	—	—

4. Research Suggestions

4.1 Contextual Level: Constructing an External Support System That Emphasizes Both “Compensation and Respect”

At the contextual level, on the one hand, local governments and education authorities should strengthen material security, establish an incentive mechanism inclined to the grass-roots level and difficult areas, and improve teachers’ income level and professional gain through differentiated salary subsidies, honorary commendation and other measures. At the same time, they should continue to increase the infrastructure investment in public rural kindergartens and inclusive private kindergartens, and clarify the identity rights and career promotion pathways of rural preschool teachers through legislation or normative documents, which ensures the implementation of basic standards such as teacher-child ratios and school conditions, so as to fundamentally optimize their working environment. On the other hand, they should strengthen the publicity of social values and create an atmosphere of respecting teachers and valuing teaching. The education department and the media can highlight the professional contribution of teachers through means such as selecting advanced models and telling stories of rural preschool education,

gradually eliminating social prejudice, and improving the professional dignity and social recognition of rural preschool teachers.

4.2 Organizational Level: Building a “Supportive” Professional Community within Kindergartens

At the organizational level, kindergartens should be committed to building a “supportive” professional community in the kindergarten. Kindergarten managers should return more working time and professional decision-making space to front-line teachers by optimizing internal management processes and streamlining unnecessary inspections and meetings, so as to ensure their professional autonomy and focus on the core task of childcare and education^[4]. At the same time, kindergartens should improve the allocation of teaching facilities and resources to provide teachers with a safe, convenient and relatively sufficient working environment. Principals and the management team should advocate a leadership style that attaches equal importance to democracy and care, take the initiative to pay attention to the emotional needs of teachers, and promote collaboration and emotional mutual assistance among colleagues through normalization mechanisms such as team building, experience sharing and mentor-apprentice pairings. In addition, as the organizer of home-kindergarten communication, kindergartens should build a high-quality family-kindergarten co-education platform, such as regular parents’ open days, workshops and special lectures. This help parents establish a scientific concept of parenting and deepen their professional understanding, and build a home relationship of mutual trust and mutual assistance, so as to reduce the emotional labor burden caused by poor communication at the source.

4.3 Individual Level: Stimulating and Cultivating Teachers’ Inner Initiative

At the individual level, the education authorities and kindergartens should jointly cultivate teachers’ educational feelings. By organizing activities such as “Initial Aspiration Story Sharing” and professional belief special seminars, teachers are guided to constantly examine the original dedication of teaching in communication through exchanges with peers and senior teachers, so as to enhance the sense of professional identity and mission. At the same time, teachers themselves should also draw meaning from the growth and progress of children and the achievements in daily work, so as to consolidate the spiritual motivation to devote themselves to rural preschool education for a long time^[5]. In addition, kindergartens and training institutions should integrate emotional intelligence into the core content of teachers’ professional development, and systematically integrate courses on emotional management, stress response and communication skills into training at all levels and kindergarten-based teaching and research. Through case discussion, role-playing and reflective writing, teachers’ emotional awareness, understanding of emotional expression rules and ability to cope with complex situations can be improved, thus helping them manage emotional labor more effectively.

5. Conclusion

The emotional labor of rural preschool teachers is a dynamic system formed by the interaction of external contextual factors that set boundaries, organizational factors in kindergartens that play the most direct primary role, and individual factors that provide internal regulation. Among them, organizational factors

such as support from parents and children and work autonomy are particularly important. Material security, social prejudice and family support constitute the constraints and resource background at the macro level. While educational sentiment, emotional intelligence and emotional expression styles determine the way teachers understand, respond and adjust emotional needs, thus jointly shaping their positive emotional experience and emotional exhaustion level.

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