

The Impacts of Emotional Labor, Social Relationships, and Working Conditions on Psychological Burnout in Korean Childcare Teachers

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate the relative impacts of personal factors (marital status, age of children taught, type of childcare center, and emotional labor), work-related social relationships, and working conditions on psychological burnout in Korean childcare teachers. A total of 496 teachers working in various types of childcare centers were surveyed in South Korea. The following results were obtained: First, teachers' psychological burnout differed with their marital status, the age of the children taught, and the type of childcare center. Second, teachers' psychological burnout was positively associated with their emotional labor, but negatively associated with work-related social relationships and working conditions. Third, teachers' marital status, emotional labor, social relationships (with co-workers and parents), and working conditions affected their psychological burnout. Working conditions had the largest explanatory power on the variance of teacher burnout, followed by social relationships. The results suggest that efforts to improve working conditions along with social relationships among childcare teachers are most important to lessen the level of burnout in childcare teachers.

Keywords: Childcare teacher, psychological burnout, emotional labor, social relationship, working conditions

1. Introduction

Teaching is a profession that poses a relatively high risk of burnout (De Heus & Diekstra, 1999; Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Pines, 1977; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Ryu & Kim, 2020). It is highly likely that childcare teachers, who are responsible for both teaching and caring for young children, are at an especially high risk of burnout. It has been revealed that childcare teachers in Korea are experiencing low recognition by the society, with low salaries, long working hours, and excessive workload; the combination of all these disadvantages leads many childcare teachers to suffer from psychological burnout (Kim, Jang, & Cho, 2013; Seo, Lee, & Koo, 2006).

Psychological burnout refers to "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment" affecting individuals who work in some capacity with people (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion refers to the depletion of one's emotional resources and feeling overextended. Depersonalization refers to the development of negative, cynical, and impersonal attitudes, feelings, and perceptions toward clients. A reduced sense of personal accomplishment stems from individuals' negative self-evaluation of job performance and the belief that they are inadequate in work-related situations. Teachers' psychological burnout has been shown to lower the quality of education and care (Manlove, 1993; Maslach & Pines, 1977; McMullen & Krantz, 1988; Whitebook & Sakai, 2004), and reduce the efficiency of the organization through negative interactions with children, parents, and co-workers (Sandilos, Goble, & Schwartz, 2020). Thus, it is important to identify the factors mainly responsible for psychological burnout in early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers and design strategies to avoid teacher burnout in the field.

2. Significance of the Study

Prior research on childcare teachers' psychological burnout has investigated a variety of variables, including individual, social relational, and environmental variables. However, most prior studies have examined these variables separately. Consequently, it remains unclear how much the variables could explain the variance of psychological burnout when considering the variables together, and which variable has the largest impact on psychological burnout. The present study included all three domains of variables (individual, social relational, and environmental) and examined the relative effects of these variables on psychological burnout of childcare teachers. This study would shed light on the relative impacts of the variables that have been considered the main predictors of teacher psychological burnout.

3. Review of Related Studies

Previous studies on childcare teachers' psychological burnout have revealed a variety of associated factors. Individual factors include marital status, the age of children in the classroom, the types of center, and psychological traits, such as emotional labor. Teachers who were unmarried experienced higher burnout than teachers who were married in several studies across countries (Ahn & Kim, 2007; Cho, 2005; Fuqua & Couture, 1986; Han & Kim, 1998), although a few studies found no effect of marriage status (e.g., Oh, 2001). In addition, the age of children in the classroom has been shown to affect childcare teacher burnout. Teachers of 3- to 5-year-olds were likely to report higher levels of burnout than teachers of infants and toddlers (Ahn & Kim, 2007; Fuqua & Couture, 1986), particularly in emotional exhaustion (Rentzou, 2015). Moreover, teacher burnout differed among the types of centers. For example, burnout levels were higher in state preschools than in private preschools in terms of emotional exhaustion (Kabadavi, 2015). Similarly, in Korea, it was found that teachers working in public childcare centers showed higher levels of burnout than those working in home-based childcare centers (Kwon, Y. J., 2016; Lee, S. I., 2017).

Emotional labor means to manage one's emotions to fit the job or norms of the organization (Hochschild, 1983). It is "the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions" (Morris & Feldman, 1996, p. 987). Thus, emotional labor is well applied to childcare teachers. Childcare teachers interact with children, directors, co-workers, and parents on a regular basis, and experience negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and strain, yet must manage emotions during the interaction and all day long (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Hwang, 2008; Kwon, H. J., 2008; Lee, J. G., 2013; Lee, Y. M., & Min, 2011). Research shows that the continuous effort of emotional labor is a stressor for teachers and causes psychological strain and burnout (Carson, 2007; Cheung & Tang, 2007; Diestel & Schmidt, 2011). Nevertheless, extant studies on emotional labor have mostly focused on teachers of primary and higher schools (for example, Keller, Chang, Becker, Goetz, & Frenzel, 2014), with few addressing the emotional labor perceived by childcare teachers and its relations to teacher burnout (Kim, Y. E., 2012).

Another factor that may be important for childcare teachers' psychological burnout is the social setting of the teachers. At childcare centers, teachers' work is mostly performed through social interactions. Compared to other educational places such as schools, childcare centers are small, and the relationships with directors and colleagues are very close. Since it is a relatively small organization, the impact of social relations may be more direct and larger. Teachers also form relationships with parents through children (Kim, H. S., 2016). These relationships can be supportive variables or cause of stress (Kim, Park, Lim, & Ahn, 2011). Prior work has also shown that close and warm relationships with directors make teachers feel stable and experience less burnout (Kim, J. H., 2011). In addition, relationships with colleagues are important: uncomfortable relationships with colleagues due to personality differences and differences in values increase burnout (Kim, S. A., 2006). Similarly, teachers who receive much social and emotional support from parents and maintain positive, sociable relationships with parents experience less burnout (Kim, E. J., 2014). Together with others (Bonsutto, 1993; Chung, 2013; Jeon & Choi, 2013), these findings suggest that social relationship variables are important to affect psychological burnout in teachers.

Psychological burnout among childcare teachers is also influenced by environmental factors, such as working conditions. Long working hours (Fuqua & Couture, 1986; Joung, Choi, & Lee, 2013) and heavy workload (Ahn & Kim, 2007; J. Y. Kwon, Joung, & Park, 2013) have been shown to increase the level of burnout in teachers (Maslach & Pines, 1977). In addition, low welfare and excessive administrative workload increase the level of burnout (Chung, 2015). Given these findings, the ECEC working conditions are expected to affect the burnout of childcare teachers to a considerable extent.

4. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relative effects of three domains of variables (personal, social relationships, and working conditions) on psychological burnout of childcare teachers.

5. Hypotheses of the Study

- Personal variables (marital status, age of children taught, type of childcare center, and emotional labor) influence psychological burnout in childcare teachers.
- Social relationships with directors, co-workers, parents significantly affect psychological burnout in childcare teachers.
- Working conditions significantly impact psychological burnout in childcare teachers.
- Working conditions would have the largest impact on psychological burnout in childcare teachers.

6. Population and Sample

Participants were 496 childcare teachers working in childcare centers located in Seoul and a metropolitan area in Korea. Of these, 326 worked in infant/toddler classrooms (0- to 2-year-old children) and 176 in preschool classrooms. In terms of participant age, 126 (25.4%) were aged 26–30 years, 108 (21.8%) were aged > 46 years, 85 (17.1%) were aged 41–45 years, 63 (12.7%) were aged 31–35 years, 62 (12.5%) were aged < 25 years, and 52 (10.5%) were aged 36–40 years. Half were married (248, 50%). The majority (50.6%) were 4-year college graduates, followed by 2-year college graduates (38.5%). Teaching experiences varied widely: 53 (10.7%) had < 1 year of experience, 90 (18.1%) had 1–2 years, 102 (20.6%) had 3–4 years, 141 (28.4%) had 5–10 years, and 110 (22.2%) had > 10 years of experience. There were 116 public (23.4%), 149 private (30.0%), 144 workplace (29.0%), 63 home-based (12.7%), and 18 corporate (3.6%) centers.

6.1. Measures and Statistical Techniques Used in the Present Study

Psychological Burnout. To assess childcare teachers' level of burnout, we used the Korean translation (M. S. Lee, 2015) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory—Educators Survey (MBI-ES; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The inventory consists of 22 items with three subscales: emotional exhaustion (9 items), depersonalization (5 items), and a feeling of low personal accomplishment (8 items). For all items, a 5-point Likert scale was used. A higher score indicates higher levels of burnout. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for each subscale was .92 for emotional exhaustion, .77 for depersonalization, and .79 for personal accomplishment, respectively.

Emotional Labor. To assess childcare teachers' emotional labor, we used a modified version of the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS; Grandey, 2000), which is a Korean translation version of ELS and further adjusted for childcare teachers (J. W. Lee & Park, 2008). It consists of 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. It has two sub-factors: surface acting (8 items; either suppressing the actual yet undesired emotion, or faking a desired emotion to keep up the idealized image) and deep acting (7 items). Higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of emotional labor in the teacher.

Social Relationships. The perceived relationship with the director was assessed by an adapted version of the Leader–Member Exchange (LMX7; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) for childcare settings (Y. J. Kim et al., 2011). Relationship with co-workers was measured using “co-worker relations” factor of Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey (ECJSS; Bloom, 2010). Relationships with children's parents were measured using the Teachers' Relations with Parents Scale (E. J. Kim, 2014). All were 5-point Likert scales, with higher scores indicating better relationships.

Working Conditions. A 5-point Likert scale with eight items was used. The items were extracted from the Working Condition Scale used by the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (E. Y. Kim et al., 2013). Higher scores indicated high-quality working conditions.

To test the appropriateness of the questionnaire and the time needed to complete the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with five teachers. The questionnaires were then distributed to 496 teachers from May to August 2018. Data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS 21.0. First, we examined whether teachers' psychological burnout differed by marital status, age of children taught, and center type. Then, bivariate correlations were calculated to test the associations among teachers' individual factors, social relationship factors, and working condition factors. Finally, to examine the variables that affect teachers' psychological burnout, a two-step hierarchical regression analysis was conducted.

6.2. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table.1. Teachers' Psychological Burnout by Marital Status.

| | | Unmarried | Married | <i>t</i> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------|
| | | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | |
| Psychological Burnout | Emotional exhaustion | 25.93 (7.06) | 23.20 (6.09) | 4.61*** |
| | Depersonalization | 9.23 (3.11) | 8.71 (2.62) | 2.00* |
| | Personal accomplishment | 16.35 (4.02) | 15.55 (3.31) | 2.44* |

| | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Overall burnout | 51.52 (11.93) | 47.47 (9.97) | 4.10*** |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|---------|

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Interpretation of table-1.

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of psychological burnout (for the three facets and the total) for unmarried and married teachers. As shown, unmarried teachers reported significantly higher levels of burnout than their married colleagues.

Table.2. Teachers' Psychological Burnout by Age of Children Taught.

| | | 0- to 1-yr-olds ^a | 2-year-olds ^b | 3- to 5-yr-olds ^c | <i>F</i> | Scheffe |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|----------|----------|
| | | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> | | |
| Psychological Burnout | Emotional exhaustion | 23.60 (6.21) | 24.39 (6.58) | 26.54 (7.35) | 7.957*** | a, b < c |
| | Depersonalization | 8.55 (2.66) | 9.07 (2.91) | 9.48 (3.12) | 4.319* | a < c |
| | Personal accomplishment | 15.80 (3.72) | 15.86 (3.66) | 16.23 (3.76) | 0.578 | - |
| | Overall burnout | 47.96 (10.36) | 49.31 (11.73) | 52.24 (11.53) | 6.04* | a < c |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Interpretation of table-2.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the subscales and total burnout for teachers who were in charge of 0- to 1-year-olds, 2-year-olds, and 3- to 5-year-olds, respectively. Teachers' level of burnout significantly differed with the age of the children taught. Specifically, teachers who worked with 3- to 5-year-old children reported significantly higher levels of burnout than those who worked with 0- to 1-year-old children. Of the facets of burnout, a reduced sense of personal accomplishment did not vary with the age of the children taught.

Table.3. Teachers' Psychological Burnout by Center Type.

| | | Public ^a | Private ^b | Home-based ^c | Workplace ^d | <i>F</i> | Scheffe |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------|-------------|
| Psychological Burnout | Emotional exhaustion | 25.78 (7.23) | 24.85 (5.80) | 21.46 (5.74) | 24.72 (6.72) | 6.33*** | a, b, d > c |
| | Depersonalisation | 9.47 (3.27) | 9.08 (2.72) | 8.06 (2.42) | 8.80 (2.82) | 3.55* | a > c |
| | Personal accomplishment | 15.98 (3.80) | 16.23 (3.58) | 15.22 (3.66) | 15.70 (3.66) | 1.27 | - |

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------|----------|
| Overall burnout | 51.23 (12.27) | 51.15 (9.61) | 44.75 (10.17) | 49.22 (11.05) | 5.2 4** | a, b > c |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------|----------|

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Interpretation of table-3.

In addition, there were significant differences in teachers' burnout levels according to the type of childcare center. As shown in Table 3, teachers who worked in home-based childcare centers reported significantly lower levels of burnout than those working in other types of childcare centers.

Table.4. Correlations Among Teachers' Psychological Burnout, Emotional Labor, Social Relationships, and Working Conditions.

| | Bur nout | EL* | Social Relation- ships | Dire ctors | Co- workers | Pare nts | Wor king Condi tions | Emoti onal Exhaustio n | D epers onaliz ation | P A* |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|
| Burnout | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| EL | .21* ** | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| Social relation ships | -.58 *** | .04 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| Director s | -.41 *** | -.04 | .75** * | 1 | | | | | | |
| Co- workers | -.49 *** | .07 | .80** * | .42* ** | 1 | | | | | |
| Parents | -.43 *** | .05 | .77** * | .37* ** | .42* ** | 1 | | | | |
| Workin g conditions | -.51 *** | -.26 *** | .38** * | .42* ** | .28* ** | .20* ** | 1 | | | |
| Emotio nal exhaustion | .88* ** | .30* ** | -.38** * | -.33 ** | -.31 *** | -.25 *** | -.60 *** | 1 | | |
| Deperso nali- sation | .81* ** | .10* * | -.55** * | -.35 *** | -.49 *** | -.43 *** | -.31 *** | .54** * | 1 | |
| PA | .76* ** | .01 | -.60** * | -.36 *** | -.52 *** | -.50 *** | -.23 *** | .41** * | .6 5*** | 1 |

EL, emotional labor; PA, personal accomplishment

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Interpretation of table-4.

Prior to testing the relative effects of the predictor variables on teachers' psychological burnout, we examined bivariate correlations among the variables: teachers' psychological burnout, emotional labor, social relationships (with directors, co-workers, and parents), and working conditions. As presented in Table 4, teachers' psychological burnout was positively associated with emotional labor, but negatively associated with social relationships and working conditions.

To examine the contribution of the predictor variables to the explanation of childcare teachers' psychological burnout, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed. Based on the results from our first and second sets of analyses, we included significant categorical and continuous variables in the regression model to predict childcare teachers' total psychological burnout. A two-step hierarchical regression analysis was performed. In Step 1, teachers' marital status, the age of children taught, and the type of childcare center were entered. Emotional labor, relationships with directors, co-workers, and parents, as well as working conditions were entered in Step 2. The predictor variables were examined for collinearity prior to hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

Table.5. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Teachers' Psychological Burnout.

| Variables | Step 1 | | Step 2 | |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| | B | β | B | β |
| Marital status | 3.50 | .15** | 2.30 | .10** |
| Age of children taught | 2.47 | .10* | 1.18 | .05 |
| Center type | 3.07 | .10 | -.77 | -.02 |
| Working conditions | | | -.64 | -.31*** |
| Emotional labor | | | .28 | .15*** |
| Relationship with co-workers | | | -.68 | -.28*** |
| Relationship with directors | | | -.19 | -.07 |
| Relationship with parents | | | -.57 | -.23*** |
| <i>F</i> | 9.23*** | | 53.71*** | |
| <i>R</i> ² | .06 | | .50 | |
| Adjusted <i>R</i> ² | .05 | | .49 | |
| Durbin-Watson | | | 1.956 | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Interpretation of table-5.

Table 5 presents the results of the hierarchical regression analysis. The results of Step 1 indicated that the explained variance was 5%, which was significantly different from zero. The marital status and age of the children taught were significant independent variables. In Step 2, the change in variance accounted for 44%, which was significantly different from zero. Marital status, emotional labor, relationships with parents and co-workers, and working conditions contributed significantly to the psychological burnout of the teachers. Finally, among the significant predictor variables, working conditions had the largest effect on the variance of teacher burnout, followed by social relationships with co-workers and parents. Thus, better working conditions, more positive relationships with colleagues and parents, and less emotional labor contributed to the teachers' lower levels of psychological burnout.

Discussion.

This study aimed to investigate the impacts of teachers' individual factors (marital status, age of children taught, type of center, and emotional labor), social relationships, and working conditions on childcare teachers' psychological burnout, with a particular interest in examining the relative effects of the variables.

Our results confirm previous findings indicating that childcare teachers' burnout varies with their marital status, age of children in the classroom, and type of centers (Ahn & Kim, 2007; Cho, 2005; Fuqua & Couture, 1986; Han & Kim, 1998; Kabadayi, 2015; Y. J. Kwon, 2016; S. I. Lee, 2017; Rentzou, 2015). However, the question remains as to why it does so. For example, might the higher levels of burnout in married teachers compared to single teachers be explained by higher psychological stability and richer experiences of child-rearing among married teachers? Similarly, it is unclear why teachers working with older preschoolers report greater burnout than their colleagues working with infants and toddlers. Possibly, higher levels of physical activity in 3- to 5-year-old children relative to 0- to 2-year-olds might cause more burnout. Teachers for preschool-aged children may be also expected to prepare and run more activities related to academic lessons, compared to teachers for infants and toddlers. In addition, the higher levels of burnout among teachers working in public childcare centers may be related to the fact that public childcare centers are regularly monitored by local and central governments in Korea. It is possible that teachers in public centers have additional paperwork and preparation for receiving the monitoring, which in turn leads to more workload and burnout. Further investigation is needed to elucidate the underlying reasons for current findings. At the same time, it should be noted that a combination of teachers' marital status, age of children in the classroom, and type of centers explains the variance of teachers' psychological burnout only to a small degree.

The current findings reveal important predictors mainly responsible for the psychological burnout of childcare teachers: working conditions, social relationships, and emotional labor. In particular, our findings highlight the importance of working conditions, which have the largest impact on psychological burnout among the variables tested in the current study. Although our findings do not tell us specific factors of working conditions that strongly affect the burnout of childcare teachers, the finding is in line with prior findings that the burnout of childcare teachers is associated with their long working hours (Ahn & Kim, 2007; J. Y. Kwon et al., 2013; Maslach & Pine, 1997), low salary (Ahn & Kim, 2007), lack of challenge opportunities, excessive workload, and ambiguous work role (N. Y. Kwon & Lee, 2012). Further, it is consistent with the finding that poor working conditions in many nurseries are the crucial stress source and burnout among German nursery school teachers (Jungbauer & Ehlen, 2014). Qualitative research using case study, ethnography, and action research can deepen our understanding of the impact of working conditions on teacher burnout as it can provide detail on the lived experience of burnout. Particularly, qualitative research may reveal new stressors in the current working conditions of childcare teachers, in addition to the long-known factors, such as low salary, long working hours, and work overload. For example, having a closed circuit television (CCTV) camera in classrooms, which records teachers' and children's daily activities may increase the strain on teachers. Moreover, external pressures from parents, supervisors and experts to integrate technologies into class activities (Chung, Hong, & Kang, 2016; Y. D. Lee et al., 2016; Y. S. Lee & Moon, 2020; Hwang & Paek, 2016), along with continuous external competitive evaluations may cause a reduction of teachers' sense of autonomy in the classroom (Alvarado & Bretones, 2018).

The current findings also support the findings of other studies that noted the importance of social relationships in the prevention of teacher burnout (E. J. Kim, 2014; H. S. Kim, 2016). Relationship with parents and colleagues had the second largest effect on the psychological burnout of childcare teachers in the present study. As childcare teachers have to work together with parents and co-workers continuously, positive relationship with them is likely to impact teacher' psychological well-being greatly. It should also be noted that social support has been considered a powerful protective factor against burnout in prior work (e.g., Greenglass, Roland, & Konarski, 1998). Moreover, the work of childcare teachers is emotionally intense (e.g., having close relationship with children and maintaining positive climate in the classroom). Our findings indicate that emotional labor influences teacher burnout although the effect size is smaller than those of working conditions and social relations.

7. Recommendations

- Efforts to improve working conditions along with social relationships among childcare teachers are needed to lessen the level of burnout in childcare teachers

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present findings indicate that working conditions and social relationships have greater impacts on psychological burnout of childcare teachers than teachers' characteristic factors, such as emotional labor. Thus, strategies are needed to improve working conditions and social relationships in childcare settings to avoid teachers' burnout, such as reducing work demands and hours, and developing programs to enhance relationships with colleagues and parents.

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