



The Impact of Gratitude on Preschool Teachers' Work Stress: The Mediating Role of Social Support

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Abstract: The current study assesses the mediating role of social support in the relationship between gratitude and work stress. A sample of Chinese preschool teachers (N=200) at a public kindergarten completed the Gratitude Questionnaire Six-Item Form, the Subjective Work Stress Questionnaire, and the Perceived Social Support Scale. Findings showed that gratitude was positively associated with work stress and social support. Social support was also positively correlated with work stress. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed that social support partially mediated the relationship between gratitude and work stress. By highlighting social support as a crucial mediating mechanism, these findings advance our knowledge of the connection between work stress and gratitude among preschool teachers.

Keywords: gratitude, work stress, social support, preschool teachers

1. Introduction

China is a highly populated country with fierce competition in education [1]; thus, aside from students, teachers are also experiencing work stress. Preschool teachers play an important role in preschool education, with a crucial impact on children's growth [2]. With the continuous development of Early Childhood Education in Mainland China, parents and society have raised higher expectations for preschool teachers, leading to increased work stress [2]. Social support has become an essential influence on preschool teachers' work stress, and previous studies have shown that favourable social support is conducive to alleviating Chinese preschool teachers' work stress [3]. Therefore, positive emotions such as gratitude can be among the best ways to reduce teachers' stress. Gratitude refers to a state that results from acknowledging favorable opportunities, outcomes, and gifts provided by external factors such as friends, parents, or luck [4]. Although previous research shows that gratitude may reduce teacher stress [5], the underlying mechanism remains unclear. As gratitude is strongly related to social support, the extant literature shows that individuals with higher levels of gratitude generally perceive more social support [6]. Therefore, social support may explain how gratitude can reduce work stress. Although the mechanism underlying the relationship between gratitude and teacher stress is unclear, none of the studies have examined whether gratitude can affect teachers' work stress in non-Western cultural contexts. To fill this gap, this study aims to examine the impact of gratitude on preschool teachers' work stress and the mediating role of social support in Mainland China.

2. Literature review

2.1 Work stress among preschool teachers

Previous studies consistently report the increasing stress levels among preschool teachers. According to [7], 96% of preschool teachers in Romania reported that their work was "extremely stressful," and almost one-third considered abandoning their teaching positions due to high levels of stress. In addition, preschool teachers in Mainland China have been experiencing work stress over the years. [8] studied preschool teachers' work stress by investigating 152 preschool teachers in the central districts of Anshan city and found that preschool teachers' work stress was moderately high, with more than half of the teachers highly stressed. [9] sampled 600 preschool teachers from 23 public preschools in Fujian to explore the current situation of teachers' work stress in public preschools and suggested that the overall level of preschool teachers' work stress was high.

2.2 Gratitude and work stress among teachers

Gratitude is defined as "a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains" [10]. Research on gratitude and its relationship with stress is also gradually being explored among teachers. For example, [11] conducted a study in the United States and sampled 242 teachers, demonstrating that gratitude was negatively linked with teachers' stress. Also, [5] evaluated the effect of risk-for-stress on perceptions of gratitude among 23 teachers recruited from a school in Texas and found that

gratitude may reduce teachers' stress.

2.3 The present study

The current study explores the associations among gratitude, social support and, work stress among preschool teachers. Particularly, this study aims to test whether social support mediates the relationship between preschool teachers' gratitude and work stress. Accordingly, the following research questions are proposed: (1) What is the relationship between gratitude and work stress among preschool teachers? (2) Does social support mediate the relationship between gratitude and work stress? It is hypothesized that: (1) Gratitude is negatively correlated with preschool teachers' work stress; and (2) Social support mediates the association between gratitude and work stress among preschool teachers.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

A total of 200 preschool teachers (n = 53 males, n = 147 females) participated in this study. Participants were recruited from a public kindergarten in Mainland China. Every participant voluntarily and anonymously filled out the survey and gave their informed consent.

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Gratitude

Participants' gratitude was assessed by The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 [9]. Participants responded to each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.2.2 Work stress

Preschool teachers' work stress in this study was measured by the subjective work stress [12]. Each response was scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree".

3.2.3 Social support

The Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS) was used to assess the social support of preschool teachers in China [13]. Participants' responses were assessed on a scale of 1 to 7, from 1 representing completely disagree to 7 representing completely agree.

3.3 Statistical Analyses

The 29th version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to initially calculate the mean, standard deviations, and correlations between gratitude, social support, and work stress. PROCESS macro version 3.4.1 (Model 4) was used to conduct the mediation analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlational coefficients for the variables. Correlation analysis indicates a significant association among gratitude, social support, and work stress. Gratitude was positively correlated with social support ($r = .37, p < 0.01$) and work stress ($r = .27, p < 0.01$). Social support also showed a positive relationship with work stress ($r = .42, p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and Pearson Correlations Analyses

	M	SD	1	2	3
Gratitude	3.32	.71	-	.369**	.274**
Social support	3.02	.50		-	.423**
Work stress	6.38	3.05			-

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

4.2 Mediation analysis

According to Figure 1 and Table 2, the bootstrapping analysis, controlling for age and gender, found that gratitude had a substantial direct effect on work stress ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). A significant direct effect was also observed when gratitude was used as a predictor of social support ($\beta = .37, p < .001$). A Sobel test was used to examine the mediating role of social support in the relationship between work stress and gratitude, and the results were statistically significant ($z = 3.89, p < .001$). The

findings imply that social support partially mediated the correlations between gratitude and work stress.

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis on the mediating effect of social support

Outcome variable	Predictor variable	β	SE	B	P	R ²
Work stress	Gratitude	.27	.29	1.18	< .001	.08
Social support	Gratitude	.37	.05	.29	< .001	.14
Work stress	Gratitude	.14	.30	.59	< .05	.16
	Social support	.37	.42	2.29	< .001	

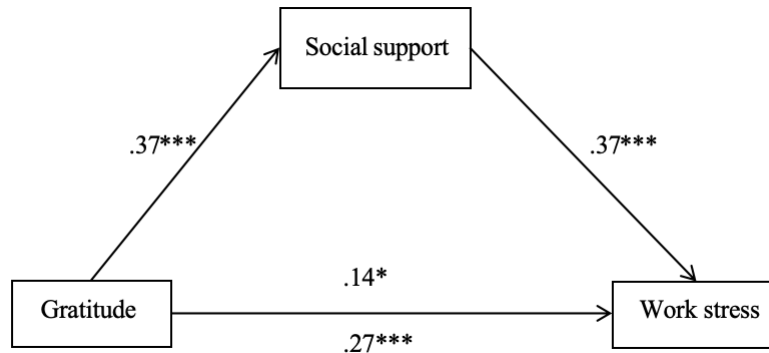


Figure 1. The mediating effect of social support on the relationship between gratitude and work stress. (Note: * p < .05, *** p < .001)

4.3 Discussion

The study's results supported the hypothesis that gratitude relates to work stress through a partial mediating effect of social support. Contrary to the previous study [5] that reported negative associations between gratitude and work stress, this study found that gratitude was positively associated with work stress. The work environment of preschool teachers may be one reason for these surprising positive correlations. Higher feelings of thankfulness may make teachers more emotionally invested in their workplace, making them more perceptive of workplace demands and difficulties. In addition, gratitude was positively correlated with social support, consistent with earlier empirical research [6]. However, this study found a favorable correlation between social support and work stress, which is different from findings from the previous study [3].

5. Conclusions

This investigation uses preschool teachers as research participants and explores the impact of gratitude on their work stress and the underlying mechanisms. By elucidating the mediating function of social support in the relationship between gratitude and work stress, the findings offer new empirical support for our understanding of preschool teachers' occupational well-being. Furthermore, the findings imply that, when developing successful interventions to reduce work-related stress and support preschool teachers' mental health, policymakers, school administrators, and early childhood education professionals should place greater emphasis on cultivating gratitude and strengthening social support networks.

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