

## Article

# The Relationship between Chinese Teachers' Emotional Labor, Teaching Efficacy, and Young Children's Social-Emotional Development and Learning

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**Abstract:** The existing literature has established the effects of emotional labor on teachers' wellbeing indicators and teaching efficacy, leaving its impact on students' outcomes unexplored. Following Grandey's integrative model of emotional labor and social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, this study explored the relationship between teachers' emotional labor, teaching efficacy, and young children's social-emotional development and learning in early childhood settings. Thirteen preschools were recruited through stratified random sampling in Shenzhen, China. Altogether, 49 classrooms were involved, and three teachers and six children were sampled from each classroom, resulting in a sample of 124 teachers and 241 children. Teachers' emotional labor strategy, sense of efficacy, and children's social-emotional development and learning were surveyed. Structural equation modeling has confirmed that teachers' natural and surface acting predicted their teaching efficacy. Bootstrapped mediation analysis revealed that the mediation paths from teachers' emotional labor to children's learning approaches and social-emotional development varied significantly for teachers in different positions. The study implies that different guidelines and training are needed for teachers in different positions to help them cope with varied emotional labor at work and promote their teaching efficacy for young children's better development.

**Keywords:** emotional labor; teaching efficacy; child social-emotional development; learning approach



**Citation:** Xie, S.; Wu, D.; Li, H. The Relationship between Chinese Teachers' Emotional Labor, Teaching Efficacy, and Young Children's Social-Emotional Development and Learning. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 2205. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14042205>

Academic Editors: Jin Su Jeong, Hongbiao Yin, Ronnel Bornasal King and Guoxiu Tian

Received: 10 January 2022

Accepted: 14 February 2022

Published: 15 February 2022

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## 1. Introduction

During the past decade, research attention has been paid to the impact of teachers' emotions, emotional labor, and emotion regulation on students' achievement. As stated by the guest editors of this special issue, students' social-emotional development and learning also depend on schools' professional capital, including teachers' emotional and professional capacity [1,2]. This statement indicates that teachers' well-being and social-emotional skills might be the key factors influencing students' social and emotional development and learning. However, the existing studies have focused on primary and middle school teachers' emotional labor and their students' development; very few have focused on the association between early childhood teachers' emotional labor and young children's social-emotional development and learning [2,3]. In addition, Chinese early childhood teachers are usually overloaded but underpaid, which is a disadvantaged working condition for their mental wellbeing and thus needs urgent attention [4]. To fill these research gaps, this study adopted Grandey's integrative model of emotional labor and social learning theory [3,5,6] to explore the relationship between Chinese teachers' emotional labor, teaching efficacy, and children's social-emotional development and learning in early childhood settings. It

will provide empirical evidence of whether the theory of Grandey's integrative model of emotional labor and social learning applies to the early childhood setting. Its findings will also have implications for policymaking and practical improvement in early childhood teacher education.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Teachers' Emotional Labor and Teaching Efficacy

Emotional labor, a concept referring to emotional management in workplaces, was originally coined by American Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in 1983. This concept was introduced into the educational context as teaching is considered an emotional practice [7,8]. In addition, Grandey [9] noted that people could manage their emotions at work, based on which she proposed the integrative model of emotional labor. The integrative model consists of four parts: (1) the situational cues that cause the emotional labor, such as the interactional expectations and emotion-related activities; (2) the emotional regulation processes, which is reflected by the emotional labor strategies, including surface acting, deep acting, and natural acting; (3) personal (i.e., education, emotional intelligence) and organizational factors (i.e., support from company or co-workers) that influence people's emotion regulation; and (4) the long-term consequences of emotional labor, covering both the individual and organizational wellbeing [9]. This model has detailed descriptions of the existing studies' mechanisms underlying emotional labor in workplaces [10–12]. As an educational setting is an arena involving plenty of emotional activities, including emotional management, conveying, and interactions, teaching has been considered a form of emotional labor [7,13].

The relationship between emotional labor strategies and teaching efficacy has been empirically explored. For example, Brotheridge and Grandey [10] found that self-efficacy positively related to deep acting as people could change the cause of their feelings to display desirable emotions to meet social expectations. Naring et al. [14] found a negative association between efficacy and surface acting but a positive correlation between efficacy and deep acting. Yin, Huang and Lee [12] investigated 60 primary schools in Hong Kong and revealed that surface acting is more dysfunctional than deep acting and natural acting in teaching, irrespective of its impact on an individual or organizational wellbeing. However, very few studies have focused on the association between early childhood educators' emotional labor and teaching efficacy; thus, theoretically and practically, there is a need to examine their relationship.

Teaching efficacy refers to teachers' belief in their capacity to achieve the expected education results of learning and teaching, thereby significantly influencing students' academic outcomes [15]. Many studies found that teaching efficacy might relate closely to the emotion-related wellbeing of teachers, such as job satisfaction, professional commitment, burnout, and harmonious passion, all of which could have a remarkable impact on teachers' teaching and educational quality [16–18]. In particular, early childhood teachers are suffering from the heavy workload and unsatisfied incomes, especially in China [19,20], which may negatively impact teachers' wellbeing. Chinese early childhood teachers in this disadvantaged working condition might have different perceptions of their teaching efficacy, job satisfaction, and emotional labor. Therefore, research attention should be paid to Chinese early childhood teachers' emotional management and teaching efficacy in kindergartens. Unfortunately, this topic is under-explored. This study, thus, aims to tackle the relationship between Chinese early childhood teachers' emotional labor and their teaching efficacy.

### 2.2. Early Childhood Teachers' Emotional Labor and Children's Development

Researchers have well documented that early childhood teachers play a key role in young children's social and emotional development [21,22]. According to the Social Learning Theory [23] and Social-Emotional Learning Framework, children develop their social behavior by observing and imitating the behaviors of others. Therefore, in the early

childhood educational setting, children are greatly influenced by teachers' emotional labor strategies, being the interactive party of teachers' emotions. For instance, researchers noted that preschoolers always seek and enjoy interactions with their teachers to engage in the classroom positively [24]. Accordingly, young children may also develop social competence by imitating their teachers' emotional expressions. Denham et al. [21] found that teachers in early childhood education settings might be the main socializers of young children's emotional experiences in the early years. Alamos and Williford [22] concluded that emotional talks between teacher and child could enhance children's sense of secure base to explore the learning and teaching setting. Therefore, there might be a possible link between early childhood teachers' emotional labor strategies and young children's social development.

However, this link has not yet been confirmed. For example, Madigan and Kim [25] conducted a systematic review exploring the consequences of teacher burnout for students. They revealed that teacher burnout could be associated with worse academic achievement and lower quality student motivation. Meanwhile, they also indicated that little evidence was found to support the link between teacher burnout and students' wellbeing. Besides, previous studies have extensively explored the relationship between teachers' emotional labor and wellbeing aspects, such as their mental wellbeing at work, psychological capital, social support, and so forth [26–29]. Still, very few studies focus on the relationship between teachers' emotional labor strategies and children's learning quality or outcome [12]. To fill this gap, this study aims to confirm the link by exploring the relationship between Chinese early childhood teachers' emotional labor strategies and children's learning qualities.

### 2.3. The Context of This Study

Since the Early Childhood Education Promoting Policy in 2010 by the Chinese Ministry of Education, Chinese kindergarten teachers have faced intense pressure at work due to high requirements for their teaching quality, professional development, and job performance [19]. With a high workload and low salary, Chinese early childhood teachers suffer from low mental well-being [20]. Although researchers have noted that teacher emotion plays a vital role in teachers' professional development, working performance and students' advancement [30,31], the disadvantage of the low mental wellbeing environment of Chinese early childhood teachers needs urgent attention. Therefore, understanding early childhood teachers' emotion management at work is significant to theoretical development and practical improvement.

Hong and Zhang [32] compared the early childhood teachers' emotional labor between China and Norway and found differences between Chinese and Norwegian teachers when regulating emotions at work. Their study indicated that Chinese early childhood teachers faced complex sources of negative emotions, from child safety concerns, teaching quality requirements, inspection, lower teacher-child ratio (the lowest with two teachers and 60 children in a classroom), interpersonal relationships among co-workers, and so forth. Therefore, Chinese early childhood teachers have a heavier emotional load than their Norwegian peers [32]. As a result, when investigating the correlation between Chinese early childhood teachers' emotional labor, their teaching efficacy, and children's development, multi-layers of related factors should be taken into consideration, including teachers' age, teaching years, educational degree, and their position (i.e., principal teacher, assistant teacher, care teacher). However, to our best knowledge, few studies have extensively explored the complex relationship between emotional labor, teaching efficacy, and children's learning outcome in a Chinese context, where early childhood teachers are overloaded, underpaid, and overstressed. Therefore, this study is dedicated to filling this research gap. Accordingly, we proposed a mediation model to explain the role of teaching efficacy between teachers' emotional labor and children's learning approaches and social development (see Figure 1). The following research questions guided this study:

1. Will teachers' emotional labor predict their teaching efficacy, controlling for teachers' education, years of teaching experience, and position?

2. Does teacher efficacy mediate the relationship between teachers' emotional labor and children's approaches to learning and social competence?

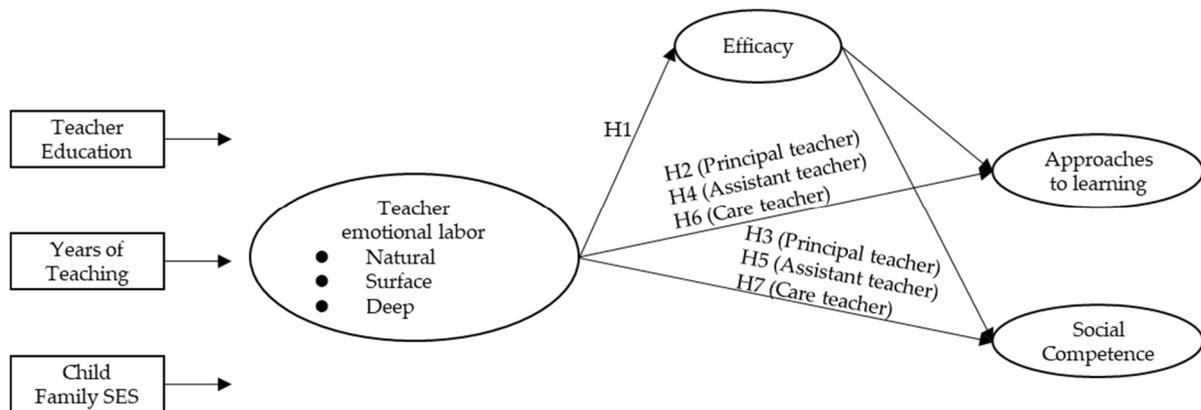


Figure 1. Proposed model for this study.

Drawing from the research questions, we proposed the following seven hypotheses for this study:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Teachers' emotional labor significantly relates to teachers' teaching efficacy.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *The relationship between principal teachers' emotional labor and children's approaches to learning is mediated by teachers' teaching efficacy.*

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *The relationship between principal teachers' emotional labor and children's social competence is mediated by teachers' teaching efficacy.*

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *The relationship between assistant teachers' emotional labor and children's approaches to learning is mediated by teachers' teaching efficacy.*

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *The relationship between assistant teachers' emotional labor and children's social competence is mediated by teachers' teaching efficacy.*

**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** *The relationship between care teachers' emotional labor and children's approaches to learning is mediated by teachers' teaching efficacy.*

**Hypothesis 7 (H7).** *The relationship between care teachers' emotional labor and children's social competence is mediated by teachers' teaching efficacy.*

These hypotheses are considered by each emotional labor strategy: surface acting (s), deep acting (d), and natural acting (n). Therefore, we present these hypotheses as H1(s), H1 (d), and H1 (n), etc.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants were from a larger longitudinal study on children's school readiness. Ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee was obtained before inviting the target participants. Stratified random sampling was used to select the target preschools, and thirteen preschools were invited to the study. From each of the preschools, all the K3 (ages 5–6) classes were selected. Of the K3 classes, six children were randomly selected, and three teachers were invited to the study. Altogether, 147 teachers and 294 children from 49 classes were invited, and 124 teachers and 241 children con-

sented to participate in the study, resulting in 84% and 82% return rates for teachers and children, respectively.

All the participating teachers were female, and more than half were younger than 30 years old ( $M_{\text{age}} = 31.0$ ,  $SD = 9.02$ ). The educational attainment of the participants also varied from middle school (24 teachers), associate's (51 teachers), bachelor's (48 teachers), to master's degree (1 teacher), and 99 of them attained ECE degrees. The teachers also varied in their years of teaching experience, from less than one year to more than 20 years (see Appendix A). Teachers from the three positions were evenly sampled, with 37 principal teachers who oversaw the administrative and teaching of the whole class, 47 assistant teachers who were mainly assistants to the principal teachers, as well as 40 care teachers who took charge of the caring and nursing responsibility of all the children in the classroom. Among the participating children, 52.5% were boys, and 47.5% were girls. Their age ranged from 64 to 88 months ( $M = 75.43$ ,  $SD = 4.13$ ). The children's family socioeconomic status also varied, with parents' different educational attainment, occupation, and family income.

### 3.2. Measurement

#### 3.2.1. Teacher Emotional Labor

Teacher Emotional Labor Strategy Scale (TELSS) was a 13-item scale developed by Diefendorff et al. [33] and validated by Yin [28] in the Chinese context. The validated scale had moderate to high values of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient ( $\alpha_{\text{surface}} = 0.79$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{deep}} = 0.69$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{natural}} = 0.65$ ). It was a five-point Likert scale and was used to measure the three emotional labor strategies: surface acting (six items; e.g., "I put on a 'mask' to display the emotions I need for the job"), deep acting (four items; e.g., "I work at developing the feelings inside of me that I need to show to students or their parents"), and expression of naturally felt emotions (three items; e.g., "The emotions I express to students or their parents are genuine"). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for the current study were:  $\alpha_{\text{surface}} = 0.75$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{deep}} = 0.65$ , and  $\alpha_{\text{natural}} = 0.71$ .

#### 3.2.2. Teacher Sense of Efficacy

The Teacher Sense of Efficacy (TSE) was developed by Gibson and Dembo [34] and validated by Huang [35] in the Chinese context. The validated scale had a moderate Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ). The personal teaching efficacy subscale was a six-point Likert scale and was used to measure teacher's perceptions of their influence, power, and impact on teaching and learning situations (nine items; e.g., "When a student does better than usual, many times it is because I exerted a little extra effort"). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the current study was  $\alpha = 0.88$ .

#### 3.2.3. Children's Social-Emotional Development

The Social Competence & Behavior Evaluation Short Form (SCBE-30) was a 30-item measure developed by LaFreniere and Dumas [36] and validated by Liu et al. [37] in the Chinese context. Item 4 was moved from the angry-aggressive to the anxious-withdrawal factor, and item 16 was removed. The validated scale had moderate to high values of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient ( $\alpha_{\text{anxious-withdrawal}} = 0.81$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{angry-aggressive}} = 0.66$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{sensitive-cooperative}} = 0.79$ ). It includes positive and negative statements about a child's behavior and its effects on peers and adults. It was a six-point Likert scale to measure the three domains of children's social development: Anxious-withdrawal (11 items; e.g., "The child easily gets frustrated"), angry-aggressive (8 items; e.g., "The child easily gets into conflict with other children"), and sensitive-cooperative (10 items; e.g., "The child considers other's points of view"). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for the current study were:  $\alpha_{\text{anxious-withdrawal}} = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{angry-aggressive}} = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{sensitive-cooperative}} = 0.92$ .

#### 3.2.4. Children's Approaches to Learning

The Preschool Learning Behaviors Scale was used to evaluate children's approaches to learning. It was developed by McDermott et al. [38] and examined by Wu et al. [39] on its

cross-cultural validation. The validated scale had moderate to high values of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient ( $\alpha_{\text{competence motivation}} = 0.88$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{attention/persistence}} = 0.75$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{attitudes towards learning}} = 0.80$ ). It was a 5-point Likert scale with 24 reverse-coded items in three domains: competence motivation (11 items; e.g., "Says tasks too hard, makes no attempt"), attention/persistence (8 items; e.g., "Tries but concentration soon fades"), and attitude towards learning (5 items; e.g., "Aggressive or hostile when frustrated"). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for the current study were:  $\alpha_{\text{anxious-withdrawal}} = 0.92$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{angry-aggressive}} = 0.93$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{sensitive-cooperative}} = 0.85$ .

### 3.2.5. Teacher Demographic Variables

The teachers' demographic information included age, educational attainment, and years of teaching experience, as well as the position that describes whether the teacher was a principal teacher, assistant teacher, or care teacher. In Table 1, we present the descriptive statistics of the variables used in this study.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of study variables.

	Min	Max	Mean	Sd	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Teacher</b>						
Natural acting	2.00	5.00	4.37	0.57	−1.09	2.45
Deep acting	2.50	5.00	4.02	0.62	−0.53	0.05
Surface acting	1.17	5.00	3.30	0.78	0.09	−0.19
Teaching efficacy	3.00	6.00	4.69	0.64	0.06	−0.13
<b>Children</b>						
Competence motivation	2.09	5.00	4.08	0.64	−0.43	−0.19
Attention/persistence	1.63	5.00	3.88	0.77	−0.42	−0.20
Attitudes towards learning	1.00	5.00	4.19	0.70	−1.06	1.54
Anxious-withdrawal	1.00	4.00	1.82	0.61	0.58	0.21
Angry-aggressive	1.00	5.60	1.80	0.71	1.92	6.23
Sensitive-cooperative	1.30	6.00	4.07	1.07	−0.06	−0.53

### 3.3. Procedure

First, ethical approval was obtained from the first author's University Human Research Ethics Committee. Second, the thirteen preschools were recruited through stratified random sampling in June 2020, just before the school year ended. Third, the preschool principals were contacted and introduced to the purpose and procedure of this study. Fourth, after their approval, the teachers of all the K3 classes from these preschools were briefed and invited to participate in this study. Fifth, all the participating teachers received a link to an online questionnaire platform, "Wenjuanxing" (Questionnaire Star), to fill out the teacher questionnaire. Next, the child consent form was sent to the parents, who gave consent for their child to participate and finished questionnaires concerning family demographics. Last, teachers also rated children's social competence and approaches to learning on printed questionnaires. The data collection was finished before the school year ended by mid-July 2020.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

First, the measurement models for teachers' and children's measures were explored using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Mplus 8.0. The CFA results for teachers' measures included teachers' emotional labor and teaching efficacy, and the results were satisfactory:  $\chi^2/df$  (360.02/203) = 1.77, RMSEA = 0.073, CFI = 0.823, TLI = 0.798, and SRMR = 0.075. The CFA results for children's measures included social-emotional development and approaches to learning, and the results were satisfactory:  $\chi^2/df$  (2438.608/1309) = 1.86, RMSEA = 0.059, CFI = 0.840, TLI = 0.831, and SRMR = 0.069.

Next, a set of structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to explore the teacher and child consequences of teachers' emotional labor. Given the clustered nature of the

data, Type = Complex was used in Mplus to account for the cluster variable “class” [40]. Missingness ranged from 2% to 15%, and Monte Carlo integration was used to account for the missing data [40]. For the first research goal, the three emotional labor strategies (surface acting, deep acting, and expression of naturally felt emotions) were used to predict teachers’ professional identity, controlling for teachers’ educational attainment, years of teaching experience, and position. For the second research goal, after each teacher’s data were mapped to the children who belonged to the same class, three separate mediation analyses with a bias-correct bootstrap confidence interval approach [41] were used to explore whether teachers’ efficacy mediated the relationship between teacher’s emotional labor and children’s anxious-withdrawal, angry-aggressive, and sensitive-cooperative emotions, controlling for teachers’ education, years of teaching experience, the nature of the kindergarten (public or private), as well as children’s family SES.

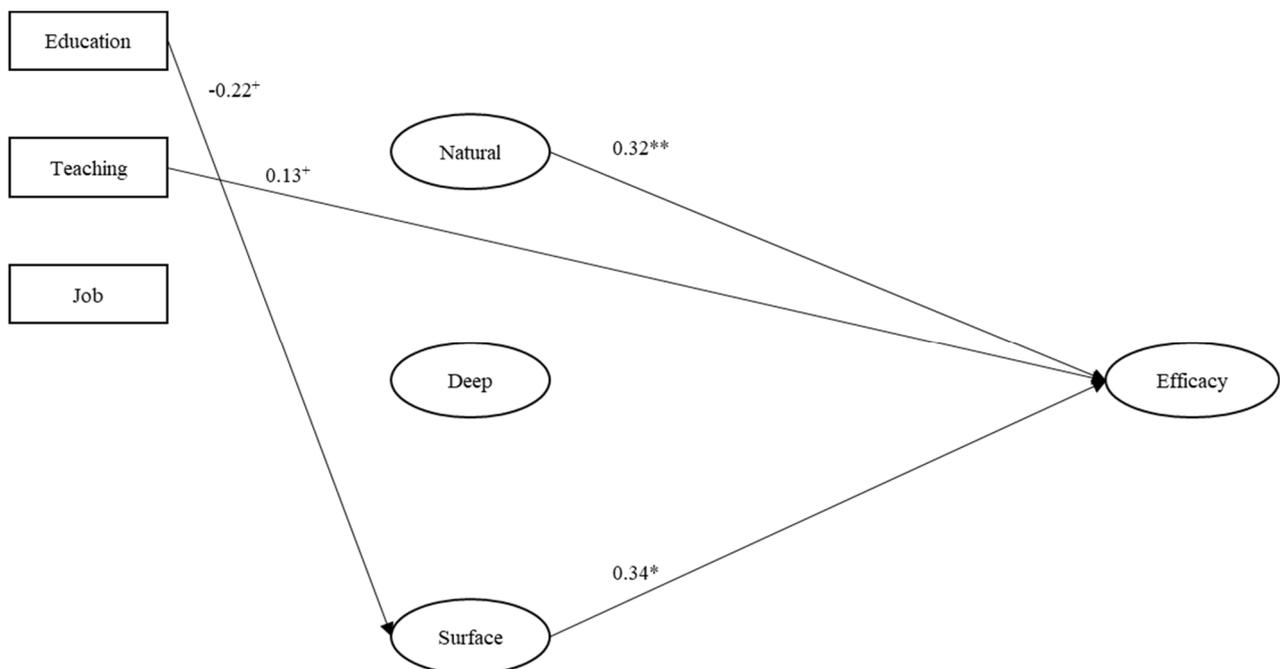
## 4. Results

### 4.1. Teacher Emotional Labor and Teaching Efficacy

Figure 2 displays the results of bootstrapped SEM for teachers’ emotional labor and teaching efficacy. It showed that teachers’ expression of naturally felt emotions and surface acting significantly and positively predicted their teaching efficacy, respectively ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ;  $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Teachers’ years of teaching experience marginally and positively predicted their teaching efficacy ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ), while teacher’s educational attainment marginally and negatively predicted teacher’s surface acting ( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ). Thus, H1(n) and H1(s) were supported, but H1(d) was not supported.

### 4.2. Children’s Social-Emotional Development and Learning

Three sets of bootstrapped mediation analyses showed that for teachers in different positions (principal teacher, assistant teacher, and care teacher), their emotional labor related to children’s social-emotional development and learning through different paths, controlling for family SES, the nature of the preschool, teachers’ education and years of teaching experience. In Tables 2 and 3 we showed that principal teachers’ expression of naturally felt emotions had indirect effect on children’s competence motivation ( $\beta = 0.87$ , 95% CI [0.024, 0.162]), attention/persistence ( $\beta = 0.102$ , 95% CI [0.038, 0.179]), attitude towards learning ( $\beta = 0.099$ , 95% CI [0.036, 0.188]), anxious-withdrawal emotions ( $\beta = -0.082$ , 95% CI [-0.172, -0.015]), and angry-aggressive emotions ( $\beta = -0.085$ , 95% CI [-0.180, -0.028]), indicating full mediation via teaching efficacy. Principal teachers’ surface acting had direct effect on children’s attitude towards learning ( $\beta = 0.478$ , 95% CI [-0.134, 0.620]) and angry-aggressive emotions ( $\beta = -0.495$ , 95% CI [-0.624, 0.235]). Principal teachers’ deep acting had an indirect effect on children’s competence motivation ( $\beta = 0.184$ , 95% CI [0.041, 0.352]), attention/persistence ( $\beta = -0.608$ , 95% CI [-0.787, 0.106]), and anxious-withdrawal emotions ( $\beta = -0.174$ , 95% CI [-0.356, -0.031]), indicating full mediation via teaching efficacy. Their deep acting also had both indirect and direct effect on child’s attitude towards learning ( $\beta = 0.211$ , 95% CI [.060, 0.431];  $\beta = -0.608$ , 95% CI [-0.787, 0.106]) and angry-aggressive emotions ( $\beta = -0.180$ , 95% CI [-0.400, -0.049];  $\beta = 0.653$ , 95% CI [-0.156, 0.820]), indicating partial mediation through teaching efficacy. The results support hypotheses H2(n) and H2(d), and partially supported H3(n) and H3(d). However, H2(s) and H3(s) was not supported given the direct effect of principal teachers’ surface acting on children’s attitude towards learning and angry-aggressive emotions.



**Figure 2.** Results of bootstrapped SEM for teacher consequences. Only marginally significant and significant paths are shown in the figure. Note. <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ ; <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 2.** Bootstrap mediation for the paths from teacher emotional labor to children’s learning for the principal teacher.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Natural → Competence Motivation	-0.173	[-0.368, -0.005]
Natural → Attention/Persistence	-0.119	[-0.383, 0.035]
Natural → Attitudes towards Learning	-0.049	[-0.330, 0.083]
Deep → Competence Motivation	-0.258	[-0.519, 0.266]
Deep → Attention/Persistence	-0.481	[-0.686, 0.292]
Deep → Attitudes towards Learning	-0.608 <sup>**</sup>	[-0.787, 0.106]
Surface → Competence Motivation	0.236	[-0.223, 0.447]
Surface → Attention/Persistence	0.396	[-0.294, 0.575]
Surface → Attitudes towards Learning	0.478 <sup>*</sup>	[-0.134, 0.620]
Natural → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	0.087 <sup>*</sup>	[0.024, 0.162]
Natural → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.102 <sup>**</sup>	[0.038, 0.179]
Natural → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	0.099 <sup>*</sup>	[0.036, 0.188]
Deep → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	0.184 <sup>*</sup>	[0.041, 0.352]
Deep → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.217 <sup>*</sup>	[0.066, 0.403]
Deep → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	0.211 <sup>*</sup>	[0.060, 0.431]
Surface → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	-0.019	[-0.111, 0.071]
Surface → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	-0.023	[-0.124, 0.082]
Surface → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	-0.022	[0.0146, 0.080]

Note: <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ .

In Tables 4 and 5, we show that assistant teachers’ natural acting had an indirect effect on children’s competence motivation ( $\beta = 0.079$ , 95% CI [0.018, 0.172]) and anxious-withdrawal emotions ( $\beta = -0.089$ , 95% CI [-0.169, -0.029]), indicating full mediation through teaching efficacy. The results partially support H4(n) and H5(n). However, H4(d), H4(s), H5(d), and H5(s) are not supported.

**Table 3.** Bootstrap mediation for the paths from teacher emotional labor to children’s social-emotional development for the principal teacher.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Natural → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.103	[−0.076, 0.286]
Natural → Angry/Aggressive	−0.024	[−0.015, 0.283]
Natural → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.112	[−0.110, 0.262]
Deep → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.197	[−0.116, 0.480]
Deep → Angry/Aggressive	0.653 **	[−0.156, 0.820]
Deep → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.077	[−0.333, 0.424]
Surface → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.111	[−0.338, 0.153]
Surface → Angry/Aggressive	−0.495 *	[−0.624, 0.235]
Surface → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.151	[−0.285, 0.344]
Natural → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.082 *	[−0.172, −0.015]
Natural → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	−0.085 *	[−0.180, −0.028]
Natural → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.003	[−0.053, 0.066]
Deep → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.174 *	[−0.356, −0.031]
Deep → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	−0.180 *	[−0.400, −0.049]
Deep → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.007	[−0.116, 0.116]
Surface → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.018	[−0.065, 0.116]
Surface → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	0.019	[−0.066, 0.139]
Surface → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.001	[−0.028, 0.035]

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 4.** Bootstrap mediation for the paths from teacher emotional labor to children’s learning for assistant teacher.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Natural → Competence Motivation	−0.017	[−0.299, 0.141]
Natural → Attention/Persistence	0.035	[−0.350, 0.183]
Natural → Attitudes towards Learning	0.028	[−0.346, 0.174]
Deep → Competence Motivation	−0.241	[−0.422, 0.301]
Deep → Attention/Persistence	−0.354	[−0.528, 0.439]
Deep → Attitudes towards Learning	−0.387	[−0.570, 0.379]
Surface → Competence Motivation	0.112	[−0.310, 0.270]
Surface → Attention/Persistence	0.248	[−0.418, 0.411]
Surface → Attitudes towards Learning	0.306	[−0.349, 0.473]
Natural → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	0.079 *	[0.018, 0.172]
Natural → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.047	[−0.007, 0.129]
Natural → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	0.052	[−0.001, 0.135]
Deep → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	0.045	[0.006, 0.106]
Deep → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.026	[−0.009, 0.073]
Deep → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	0.029	[−0.003, 0.083]
Surface → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	0.021	[−0.017, 0.072]
Surface → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.013	[−0.011, 0.054]
Surface → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	0.014	[−0.011, 0.053]

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

In Tables 6 and 7 we show that care teachers’ natural acting had direct effect on children’s competence motivation ( $\beta = -0.184$ , 95% CI [−0.342, 0.008]), attention/persistence ( $\beta = -0.225$ , 95% CI [−0.394, 0.063]), and sensitive-cooperative emotions ( $\beta = -0.341$ , 95% CI [−0.476, −0.195]). Care teachers’ surface acting had direct effect on children’s sensitive-cooperative ( $\beta = -0.221$ , 95% CI [−0.374, −0.017]). Their deep acting had direct effect on children’s competence/persistence ( $\beta = 0.386$ , 95% CI [0.033, 0.571]), attention/persistence ( $\beta = 0.297$ , 95% CI [0.009, 0.524]), and sensitive-cooperative emotions ( $\beta = 0.430$ , 95% CI [0.255, 0.565]). The results fail to supported H6(n), H7(n), H6(s), H7(s), H6(d) and H7(d).

**Table 5.** Bootstrap mediation for the paths from teacher emotional labor to children’s social-emotional development for assistant teacher.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Natural → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.118	[−0.051, 0.280]
Natural → Angry/Aggressive	−0.063	[−0.206, 0.328]
Natural → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.115	[−0.161, 0.281]
Deep → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.01	[−0.226, 0.227]
Deep → Angry/Aggressive	0.41	[−0.421, 0.591]
Deep → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.093	[−0.135, 0.516]
Surface → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.047	[−0.188, 0.277]
Surface → Angry/Aggressive	−0.37	[−0.528, 0.349]
Surface → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.035	[−0.364, 0.244]
Natural → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.089 *	[−0.169, −0.029]
Natural → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	−0.024	[−0.093, 0.021]
Natural → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.018	[−0.075, 0.047]
Deep → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.05	[−0.111, −0.008]
Deep → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	−0.014	[−0.053, 0.016]
Deep → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.01	[−0.048, 0.031]
Surface → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.024	[−0.081, 0.020]
Surface → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	−0.007	[−0.037, 0.010]
Surface → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.005	[−0.033, 0.016]

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 6.** Bootstrap mediation for the paths from teacher emotional labor to children’s learning for care teachers.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Natural → Competence Motivation	−0.184 *	[−0.342, 0.008]
Natural → Attention/Persistence	−0.225 *	[−0.394, 0.063]
Natural → Attitudes towards Learning	−0.164	[−0.332, 0.013]
Deep → Competence Motivation	0.386 **	[0.033, 0.571]
Deep → Attention/Persistence	0.297 *	[0.009, 0.524]
Deep → Attitudes towards Learning	0.184	[−0.125, 0.395]
Surface → Competence Motivation	−0.153	[−0.379, 0.159]
Surface → Attention/Persistence	−0.04	[−0.279, 0.240]
Surface → Attitudes towards Learning	0.057	[−0.157, 0.347]
Natural → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	−0.019	[−0.085, 0.070]
Natural → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.017	[−0.058, 0.129]
Natural → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	−0.038	[−0.117, 0.053]
Deep → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	0.014	[−0.060, 0.076]
Deep → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	−0.012	[−0.117, 0.052]
Deep → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	0.028	[−0.043, 0.111]
Surface → Efficacy → Competence Motivation	−0.031	[−0.159, 0.104]
Surface → Efficacy → Attention/Persistence	0.028	[−0.108, 0.193]
Surface → Efficacy → Attitudes towards Learning	−0.064	[−0.212, 0.086]

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 7.** Bootstrap mediation for the paths from teacher emotional labor to children’s social-emotional development for care teachers.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Natural → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.072	[−0.004, 0.140]
Natural → Angry/Aggressive	0.106	[−0.084, 0.272]
Natural → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.341 ***	[−0.476, −0.195]
Deep → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.179	[−0.471, 0.235]
Deep → Angry/Aggressive	−0.12	[−0.345, 0.178]
Deep → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.430 ***	[0.255, 0.565]
Surface → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.063	[−0.435, 3252]

Table 7. Cont.

Paths	Effect	95% CI
Surface → Angry/Aggressive	−0.11	[−0.368, 0.104]
Surface → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.221 *	[−0.374, −0.017]
Natural → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.072	[−0.004, 0.140]
Natural → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	0.043	[−0.046, 0.128]
Natural → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.003	[−0.049, 0.050]
Deep → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	−0.053	[−0.136, 0.018]
Deep → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	−0.032	[−0.112, 0.040]
Deep → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	0.002	[−0.046, 0.037]
Surface → Efficacy → Anxious/Withdrawal	0.122	[−0.004, 0.254]
Surface → Efficacy → Angry/Aggressive	0.072	[−0.080, 0.226]
Surface → Efficacy → Sensitive-Cooperative	−0.005	[−0.085, 0.087]

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## 5. Discussion

Teachers' emotional labor has caught much attention since the 2010s, yet how teachers' emotions would facilitate or impede students' development, especially in the early childhood education setting, has been under-explored. This study took a step forward by examining the emotional labor of early childhood teachers from different positions and how it related to their teaching efficacy and children's social-emotional development and learning.

The first research goal is to explore whether the relationship between teacher emotional labor and teaching efficacy shares similar characteristics in other contexts [12,32]. The modeling results suggest that early childhood teachers' natural acting was positively related to their teaching efficacy, corroborating the existing literature. Naturally felt emotions in teaching indicated that teachers became experienced and skillful in following social expectations to express the required emotions, which was positively related to teaching efficacy [10,12]. Interestingly, surface acting was also positively related to teaching efficacy in the current study, as existing literature implied that individuals' emotional display was not "efficacious" in meeting social expectations [10]. However, the emotional labor required in early childhood settings might differ from other teaching occupations, as the limited studies on early childhood teachers did not reach concluding results [42,43]. The positive relationship between surface acting and teaching efficacy implied that Chinese early childhood teachers considered making themselves "look as respectable as possible" as important in teaching, which is also embedded in the Chinese culture, corroborating with a qualitative, cross-culture study by Hong et al. [32]. It was also interesting that deep acting was not related to teaching efficacy in this study, as early childhood teachers' first choice might be trying to tolerate [32]. These results shed light on the universal and unique aspect of emotional labor displayed by Chinese early childhood teachers. However, more cross-cultural comparisons are urgently needed to further clarify the complicated relationship between emotional labor and teaching efficacy in early childhood settings to confirm the universal and unique features.

Few studies have provided empirical evidence that teachers' emotional labor was related to students' outcomes, despite the claim that teacher emotions play an important role in students' advancement [30,31]. The current study was one of the few to examine the relationship between emotional labor and young children's social-emotional development and learning through the mediation of teaching efficacy. Furthermore, it elucidated teachers' various effects on children's outcomes in the Chinese context. The existing studies mostly assumed that teachers were similar in their emotional strategies and teaching efficacy and that their effects on children were homogeneous. However, the present study's findings show that for early childhood teachers in the same class, their effect on children's learning approaches and social-emotional development could vary.

For a start, principal teachers were responsible for the overall teaching planning and delivery and teacher-parent communication, who should carry the heaviest burden. The results show that principal teachers' natural acting and deep acting were related to children's

learning approaches and social development through their teaching efficacy. Still, their surface acting was directly related to children's learning approaches and social development. This finding highlighted the SEL framework and social learning theory as early childhood teachers are the main socializers of young children's emotional experiences [21]. It also suggested that principal teachers' emotional labor strategies can affect children's learning approaches, both directly and indirectly, which conforms with the existing understanding that emotional support from the teacher was the strongest motivation for students' learning [44]. However, for assistant teachers, only their natural acting was related to children's learning approaches and social-emotional development through teaching efficacy. This might be explained by the "assisting" roles that assistant teachers play in class. Despite curriculum reform in mainland China, large group learning is still an inevitable form of teaching in the preschool curriculum, usually led by headteachers and assisted by assistant teachers. Therefore, the impact of assistant teachers on children might be limited to the scarce individual learning or small group learning activities. Finally, it was surprising that care teachers' natural acting, surface acting, and deep acting directly affected children's learning approaches and social-emotional development. This finding is unique to Chinese early childhood settings, which feature full-day arrangements and a low teacher-child ratio that normally has 60 children and two teachers in one classroom. Care teachers shoulder the most caring responsibilities in this unique classroom context, particularly during nap time. However, they have been neglected in educational research, yet the current study found the profound influence of care teachers on children's social-emotional development and learning. This result corroborates with the theory of "Education for Life" by Tao [45] and underscores that every activity and routine is an educational moment for children. Therefore, every teacher in the classroom, including the care teachers, plays an important role in sustaining children's holistic development. Care teachers should be recognized as "educare" teachers, and more studies are needed to examine their importance in early childhood educational settings. This also implies that these "assisting" roles in early childhood classrooms worldwide should not be neglected and are worthy of more in-depth study.

There are some limitations to this study. First, only five to six children from each classroom were sampled in the study, and their developmental outcomes were teacher-reported. Future studies should include more samples and use hierarchical linear modeling to tease out the effect from each level. Directly measuring children's outcomes would provide a more subjective description of the relationship between teachers' emotional labor, teaching efficacy, and children's development. Second, the study is nonrepresentative, comprising only female teachers. It is well-known that male early childhood teachers suffer more emotional load than female teachers [46]. Future studies should include male teachers to understand how their emotional labor was related to teaching efficacy and children's sustainable development.

## 6. Conclusions

First, this research has extended the existing literature by confirming the mediation role of teachers' sense of efficacy. The best-fit SEM model indicated that teachers' natural and surface acting could predict their teaching efficacy. Additionally, the mediation analysis found that the mediation paths from teachers' emotional labor to children's learning approaches and social development varied significantly for teachers in different positions. In particular, care teachers' natural acting, surface acting, and deep acting directly impact children's learning approaches and social-emotional development.

Second, the findings of this study might have some policy implications. For instance, care teachers play an important role in young children's social-emotional development and learning, but they have been neglected by policymakers and the public. Currently, they have low educational levels, low social status, and low salaries, which have jointly affected their emotional labor, self-image, and self-efficacy. Eventually, this disadvantaged situation will have a negative impact on young children's socio-emotional development and learning. Therefore, more policy attention should be paid to this neglected group to

thoroughly change this situation. More resources should be earmarked to promote care teachers' educational levels, salaries, and social status. Additionally, their professional titles could be changed to recognize their important role in early childhood education. In addition, more in-service training and professional development activities should be provided to care teachers in Chinese kindergartens.

Third, the findings of this study indicated some further research directions. The first research focus should be on the care teachers and their emotional labor, self-efficacy, self-image, and the influences on young children's development. Additionally, the second research focus should be shifted to the other factors associated with emotional labor, such as teachers' professional identity and children's holistic development. Finally, if possible and available, some cross-cultural comparisons should be conducted to identify the unique features of Chinese teachers and the universal findings shared by all early childhood teachers.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, and writing—original draft preparation, fund acquisition, S.X.; validation and writing—original draft preparation, D.W.; Methodology, writing—review and editing, supervision, H.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by Shenzhen Science Innovation Committee, grant number 20200828112725001, and Guangdong Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science, grant number GD21YJY09. The APC was funded by Shenzhen Science Innovation Committee, grant number 20200828112725001.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Shenzhen University (PN-2021-021 and date of approval 9 June 2021).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the ethical requirement.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study, in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data, in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

## Appendix A. Demographic Descriptive of Participants

Child Demographics			Teacher Demographics	
Kindergarten			Kindergarten	
Public	156 (64.5%)		Public	80 (67.6%)
Private	85 (35.5%)		Private	44 (32.4%)
Gender			Age	
Male	123 (52.5%)		<30 years old	72 (58.1%)
Female	118 (47.5%)		30–45 years old	42 (33.9%)
Parent education	Father	Mother	>45 years old	10 (8.1%)
Junior middle school	9 (3.7%)	4 (1.7%)	ECE degree	
Senior middle school	17 (7.0%)	28 (11.6%)	Yes	99 (79.8%)
Associate	57 (23.6%)	70 (28.9%)	No	25 (20.2%)
Bachelor	126 (52.1%)	116 (47.9%)	Teacher education	
Master and above	23 (9.5%)	13 (5.4%)	Junior middle school	7 (5.6%)

Child Demographics			Teacher Demographics	
Parent occupation			Senior middle school	17 (13.7%)
Stay-at-home/Free-lancer	13 (5.4%)	81 (33.5%)	Associate	51 (41.1%)
Non-technical	7 (2.9%)	5 (2.1%)	Bachelor	48 (38.7%)
Technical worker	22 (9.1%)	17 (7.0%)	Master and above	1 (0.8%)
Semi-professional	50 (20.7%)	62 (25.6%)	Year of teaching experience	
Professional	121 (50.0%)	64 (26.4%)	<1 year	3 (2.4%)
High-level professional	16 (6.6%)	1 (0.4%)	1–5 years	61 (49.2%)
Parent annual income			6–10 years	46 (37.1%)
30 k and below	4 (1.7%)	28 (11.6%)	11–15 years	8 (6.5%)
30–60 k	5 (2.1%)	14 (5.8%)	16–20 years	4 (3.2%)
60–120 k	30 (12.4%)	50 (20.7%)	>20 years	2 (1.6%)
120–360 k	65 (26.9)	61 (25.2%)	Position	
360–600 k	61 (25.2%)	27 (11.2%)	Principal teacher	37 (29.8%)
600 k–1 m	25 (10.3%)	10 (4.1%)	Assistant teacher	47 (37.9%)
1 m–3 m	12 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	Care teacher	40 (32.3%)

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