

Emotional Labor and Turnover Intention in Preschool Teachers: The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy and Moderating Influence of Perceived Social Support

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Abstract: *This study investigated the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention among preschool teachers, focusing on the mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of perceived social support. A total of 489 preschool teachers were selected and assessed using Emotional Labor Scale, Turnover Intention Scale, Self-Efficacy Scale, and Perceived Social Support Scale. The results indicated that deep acting and natural performance negatively predict turnover intention, while the influence of surface acting on turnover intention is not significant; Self-efficacy mediated the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention; Perceived social support moderated the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention.*

Keywords: *Emotional labor; Turnover intention; Self-efficacy; Perceived social support; preschool teachers*

1. Introduction

At a time when preschool education is flourishing, the stability of preschool teachers is crucial to the quality of education. However, preschool teachers have low social status and salary, limited development, and high pressure ^[1,2]. The high turnover rate of preschool teachers may have potential negative impacts on the emotional development and educational coherence of young children^[3,4]. In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in related research ^[5-7]. However, few studies have explored the mediating mechanism of self-efficacy and the moderating role of perceived social support in this context, particularly among preschool teachers.

1.1. The effect of emotional labor on the turnover intention

Turnover intention refers to the intention of employees to leave the organization, which is the psychological state before the departure behavior and has a direct predictive effect on subsequent departure behavior ^[8]. It is a psychological game of external pressure and perceived support, resulting from the combined effects of risk and protective factors. Research has shown that at the environmental level, factors such as compensation, social support, and organizational atmosphere are protective factors for turnover intention, while work pressure is a risk factor ^[9]; At the individual level, job satisfaction, engagement, self-efficacy, career adaptability, and occupational identity are protective factors, while occupational burnout is a risk factor ^[10]. However, previous studies have focused more on the impact of external environmental factors on the turnover intention of preschool teachers, and have less explored the influence of individual internal factors (such as cognitive, emotional, and psychological activity changes) on turnover intention ^[11].

Emotional labor refers to the individual's need to manage and regulate their emotions in accordance with organizational requirements during work, in order to demonstrate emotional performance that meets organizational expectations. Meanwhile, it is also an important factor in predicting individual turnover intention^[12], and emotional labor refers to three strategies including natural performance, deep acting, and surface acting ^[13]. Natural performance refers to the expression of emotions that are in line with organizational requirements; Deep acting is the process of adjusting internal emotional

experiences and altering external expressions; Surface acting only changes emotional expression and does not alter inner emotional feelings.

Previous studies have found a significant negative correlation between natural expression, deep performance, and depression at work^[14]. Preschool teachers need to put in a lot of emotional labor to regulate their own emotions and meet the needs of their positions and situations, mainly reflected in natural performance and deep acting^[15]. Nurses often adopt a deep role-playing strategy, which makes it easier for them to experience the value and significance of nursing, has higher professional identity, and lower willingness to resign^[16]. Studies on other groups have also shown that natural performance and deep acting have a negative predictive effect on turnover intention^[17].

In summary, current research has focused more on the impact of different emotional labor strategies on individual turnover intention, but has not delved into their internal mechanisms, especially the principles and influencing factors of deep acting and natural performance in reducing individual turnover intention. To better prevent and intervene in the turnover intention and behavior of preschool teachers, this study focused on exploring the internal mechanisms of deep acting and natural performance affecting turnover intention.

1.2. Self-enhancement values as a moderator

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's speculation and judgment regarding their capacity to accomplish a particular behavior. Research has indicated that self-efficacy can influence the choices of emotional labor strategies among individuals^[18]. On the one hand, the higher an individual's self-efficacy is, the stronger their confidence in job competence will be. Consequently, the consistency between their genuine emotional experience and professional requirements becomes higher, making them more prone to select natural performance strategies. On the other hand, when a disparity exists between their actual emotions and professional demands, individuals with high self-efficacy tend to adopt deep-level internal processing strategies to adjust their emotional cognition and reduce this gap. A study found a significant correlation between teaching efficacy and emotional labor strategies by Xu et al.^[19], with a notable predictive effect on the selection of these strategies in teachers.

According to self-determination theory, an individual's motivations and behaviors are outcomes of their interactions with external environmental stimuli, directly influencing their perception and judgment of career growth opportunities^[20]. Richardson and Watt discovered that teacher self-efficacy is associated with their goal expectations, utilization of effective teaching strategies, probability of remaining in teaching, and positive teaching behaviors^[21]. Moreover, it impacts the development of teacher professional identity through these aspects. Wang et al. identified a significantly negative correlation between self-efficacy and turnover intention among preschool teachers^[22]. The higher the teacher's self-efficacy, the lower the likelihood of them leaving the teaching profession^[23]. Teachers' confidence in fulfilling teaching tasks can alleviate negative professional emotions, thus reducing their intention to quit and strengthening their willingness to stay in their positions^[24]. Teachers' teaching efficacy emerges during the teaching process and constitutes an essential part of self-efficacy.

Therefore, to explore the turnover intention of preschool teachers from a higher-dimensional perspective, this study posits self-efficacy as a mediator in the impact of emotional labor on turnover intention.

1.3. Perceived social support as a moderator

Perceived social support refers to an individual's emotional experience and satisfaction of being respected, supported, and understood, which is subjective social support. Compared to objective support, perceived social support has a greater impact on individuals' feelings and behaviors, and can better enhance their sense of happiness^[25]. Research has shown that Perceived social support can provide psychological energy, regulate negative emotions, buffer job burnout caused by work pressure, and reduce the likelihood of resignation^[26]. Moreover, the higher the individual's perceived social support, the more actively they can mobilize social resources to solve problems, and the stronger their self-efficacy^[27]. The selection of emotional labor strategies involves a series of cognitive processes, such as the use of deep acting strategies involving a series of regulatory processes within the individual, that require more cognitive processing and psychological effort to maintain consistency and harmony both within and outside the individual.

According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, individuals with high self-efficacy tend to engage in

challenging work, and completing such work can enhance their self-efficacy. Thus, the more social support an individual perceives, the stronger their sense of self-efficacy. Consequently, they become more likely to adopt more challenging deep acting strategies to successfully complete their daily work tasks, and the smooth progress of their work will, in turn, enhance their self-efficacy^[28].

Therefore, this study selected perceived social support as the moderating variable, Focus on exploring whether it can regulate the mediating role of self-efficacy in the influence of different emotional strategies on the resignation process.

Based on theoretical considerations and findings from the literature, we developed a model (see Figure.1) to explore potential relationships among these variables. Our investigation focused on the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Deep acting and natural performance negatively predict turnover intention, while surface acting positively predicts turnover intention.

Hypothesis 2: Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived social support moderates the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention.

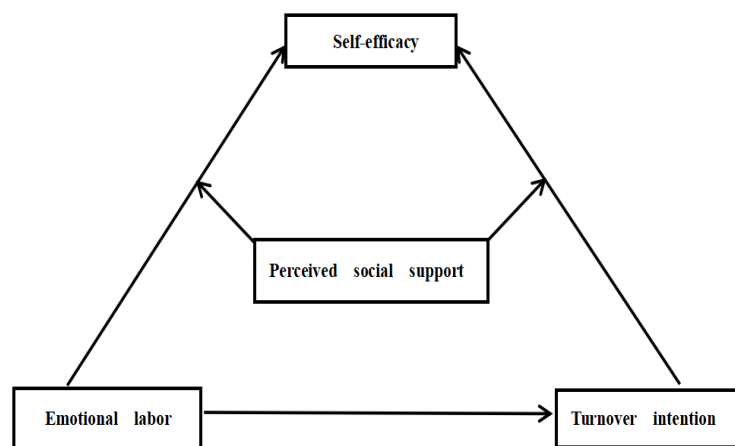


Figure 1. Model diagram of mediating effect based on self-efficacy and moderating effect of perceived social support

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

This study adopted a convenience sampling method to conduct an online survey of teachers from 30 kindergartens in Chongqing. Recruiters participated in this study with verbal consent and fully understood the purpose of the study. A total of 520 questionnaires were distributed; after discarding data with incorrect, missing, or too-brief answers, 489 valid responses were obtained, yielding a 94% response rate. There were 20 males and 469 females with an average age of 25.5 years. The average teaching tenure of the preschool teachers was 3.5 years. Publicly funded kindergartens accounted for 390 participants (79.8%), private institutions accounted for 99 (20.2%); 231 (47.2%) teachers were employed on the regular staff, and 258 (52.8%) were not on the regular staff.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Preschool Teachers' Work Emotional Scale

This scale was developed by Diefendorff et al. in 2005 and revised by Sun et al. in 2013. To better align with the real-life situations of the participants, the preschool teacher version, revised by Lin et al., was used in this study to assess the emotional labor strategies employed by preschool teachers in their work. The scale comprises 14 items, covering three dimensions: surface acting (e.g., expressing

appropriate emotions during interactions with work targets, which feels akin to performing), deep acting (e.g., endeavoring to regulate negative emotions and treating work targets with warmth and enthusiasm), and natural performance (e.g., naturally expressing emotions to work targets). All items are scored on a Likert 5-point scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; higher scores indicate a higher level of emotional labor, suggesting that preschool teachers are more inclined to engage in that form of emotional labor.

2.2.2. General Self-Efficacy Scale

This scale was initially developed by Schwarzer et al. and subsequently revised by Wang et al. in 2001. Due to its robust reliability and validity demonstrated in multiple studies, it has been extensively used in China for assessing self-efficacy across various age groups. The scale comprises 10 items (e.g., "I can calmly confront difficulties because I have faith in my ability to tackle them"), scored on a Likert 4-point scale from 1 = completely incorrect to 4 = completely correct. Higher scores indicate a higher general self-efficacy (Luszczynska et al., 2005). In this study, the scale's Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.82.

2.2.3. Perceived Social Support Scale

This scale was developed by Blumenthal et al. in 1987 and subsequently translated into Chinese by Jiang et al. The scale comprises 12 items, divided into three dimensions: family support (e.g., "my family offers practical and tangible assistance"), friend support (e.g., "my friends genuinely assist me"), and support from others (e.g., "teachers, classmates, and relatives in my life show concern for my feelings"). All items are scored on a 7-point scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived social support. In this study, the scale's Cronbach's coefficient was 0.91.

2.2.4. Turnover Intention Scale

This scale was developed by Fan Jingli et al. to measure the turnover intention of newly hired preschool teachers. Given its high reliability and validity, which have been repeatedly validated in previous studies, the scores from this scale were used as the dependent variable's measurement indicator. The scale comprises four items (e.g., "I often think about resigning from my current job") scored on a Likert 5-point scale, from 1 = very inconsistent to 5 = very consistent. Higher scores indicate a higher turnover intention among preschool teachers.

2.2.5. Data analysis

This study used SPSS 26.0 software for data preprocessing, including descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, to ensure the reliability and normality of the data. Furthermore, Model 4 and Model 59 in the PROCESS macro program were used to test the mediation effect and moderation effect, respectively. This program is based on the Bootstrap method and can effectively handle complex statistical models, improving the accuracy and robustness of mediation effect testing.

3. Results

3.1. Correlations among the Investigated Variables

The results of the correlation analysis are showed (see Table 1). Emotional labor and its dimensions exhibited a significant positive correlation with general self-efficacy and perceived social support ($p < 0.05$), but the impacts of the different dimensions of emotional labor on turnover intention were varied. Specifically, both deep acting and natural performance negatively predicted turnover intention in preschool teachers ($p < 0.05$), whereas there is no significant correlation between surface acting and turnover intention ($p > 0.05$). There was also a significant positive correlation ($p < 0.05$) between perceived social support and self-efficacy, and both factors exhibited a significant negative correlation ($p < 0.05$) with turnover intention.

Considering that the influence of surface acting on turnover intention is not significant. Therefore, in the subsequent mediation effect test, this study only used deep acting and natural performance as independent variables for statistical analysis.

Table 1. Correlations among the investigated variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Deep acting	1					
Surface acting	0.125*	1				
Natural performance	0.743**	0.192**	1			
Perceived social support	0.613**	0.197**	0.593**	1		
Self-efficacy	0.560**	0.280**	0.564**	0.534**	1	
Turnover intention	-0.476**	-0.043	-0.401**	-0.490**	-0.376**	1

Note: $N = 489$. *. $p < 0.05$; **. $p < 0.01$; ***. $p < 0.001$

3.2. Mediating Role of Self-efficacy

Deep acting as an independent variable, this study used Model 4 in the PROCESS macro program to examine the mediating effect of self-efficacy. The results showed (see Table 2) that under the control of age and teaching experience, deep play significantly predicted turnover intention ($\beta = -0.38$, $P < 0.001$). After adding the mediator variable of self-efficacy, the predictive effect remained significant, indicating the validity of the direct effect pathway. In addition, deep acting significantly and positively predicted self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.59$, $P < 0.001$), while self-efficacy had a significant negative predictive effect on turnover intention ($\beta = -0.13$, $P < 0.001$), indicating the validity of the indirect effect pathway. The bias-corrected bootstrap test confirmed a significant mediating effect of self-efficacy in the link between emotional labor and turnover intention ($\beta = -0.077$, $P < 0.001$), with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.14, -0.013]$ that excluded 0. The indirect effect value accounted for 16.93% of the total effect, suggesting that self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between deep acting and turnover intention.

Natural performance as an independent variable, this study examined the mediating role of self-efficacy. The results showed that under the control of age and teaching experience, natural performance significantly predicted turnover intention ($\beta = -0.32$, $P < 0.001$). After adding the mediator variable self-efficacy, the predictive effect remained significant, indicating that the direct effect pathway was established. In addition, natural performance significantly positively predicted self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.60$, $P < 0.001$), while self-efficacy significantly and negatively predicted turnover intention ($\beta = -0.16$, $P < 0.001$), indicating the validity of the indirect effect pathway. The bias-corrected bootstrap test confirmed that self-efficacy significantly mediated the link between emotional labor and turnover intention ($\beta = -0.097$, $P < 0.001$), with a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.161, -0.031]$ that excluded 0, representing 23% of the total effect, indicating that self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between natural performance and turnover intention.

Table 2. Analysis of the mediating effects of different emotional strategies.

path	Effect	Boot SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
path 1: Deep acting→Self-efficacy→Turnover intention	-0.077	0.032	-0.140	-0.013
Path 2: Natural performance→Self-efficacy→Turnover intention	-0.097	0.033	-0.161	-0.031

Note: $N = 489$. *. $p < 0.05$; **. $p < 0.01$; ***. $p < 0.001$

3.3. Moderated Mediation Model

To explore the moderating role of perceived social support in this mediation pathway, the PROCESS macro program's Model 59 was used to investigate the impact of perceived social support on self-efficacy when deep acting and natural performance strategies were set as the independent variables (see Figure.2).

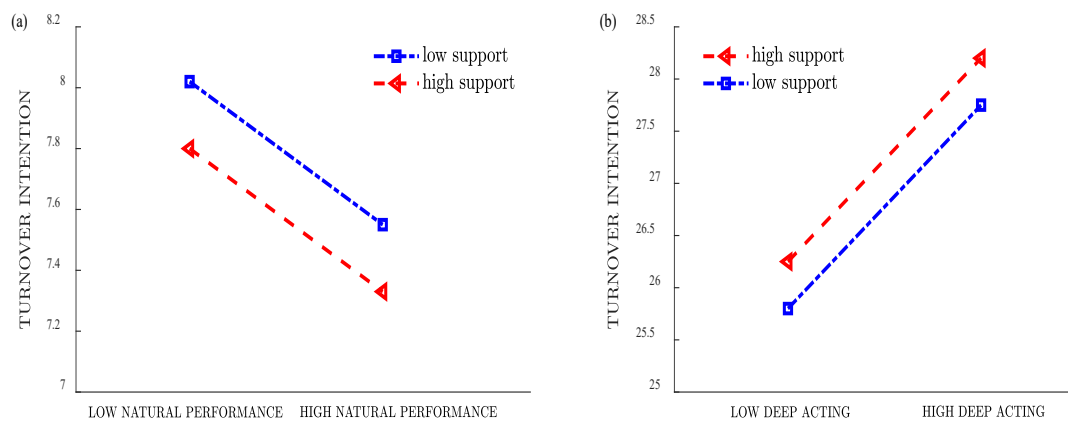
First, deep acting as an independent variable, after controlling for age and teaching experience, the results are shown (see Table 2) . Deep acting significantly enhances positive self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.97$, $P < 0.001$), and perceived social support positively predicted self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.18$, $P < 0.001$) .The interaction between deep acting and perceived social support also significantly positively predicted

self-efficacy ($\beta=0.01$, $P<0.05$), with a 95% confidence interval of $[0.003, 0.02]$ that excluded 0. This indicated that perceived social support moderates the first half of the mediated relationship between deep acting and self-efficacy. Simple slope analysis revealed that under high levels of perceived social support, deep acting significantly predicted self-efficacy ($B=1.12$, $P<0.001$), whereas under low levels, its predictive effect on self-efficacy was diminished ($B=0.81$, $P<0.001$). As the level of perceived social support increased, the predictive effect of deep acting on preschool teachers' self-efficacy intensified (see Table 3).

Second, natural performance as an independent variable, after controlling for age and teaching experience, the interaction between natural performance and perceived social support did not significantly predict self-efficacy ($\beta=0.01$, $P>0.001$). By contrast, the interaction term between self-efficacy and perceived social support has a significant predictive effect on turnover intention ($\beta=-0.003$, $P<0.05$). This suggests that, with natural performance as an independent variable, perceived social support moderated the latter half of the mediating pathway linking self-efficacy to turnover intention. Further simple slope analysis showed that, at low levels of perceived social support, self-efficacy had no significant predictive effect on turnover intention ($\beta=0.02$, $P>0.001$), but as the level of individual perceived social support increased, the predictive effect of self-efficacy on turnover intention among preschool teachers intensified ($\beta=-0.07$, $P<0.001$).

Table 3. Simple Slope Analysis.

Predictive variables	Effect	Boot SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
deep acting				
M+1SD	0.809	0.121	0.572	1.047
M	0.968	0.112	0.748	1.188
M-1SD	1.126	0.133	0.864	1.387
natural performance				
M+1SD	0.022	0.034	-0.045	0.088
M	-0.027	0.026	-0.078	0.025
M-1SD	-0.075	0.035	-0.144	0.006



(a) The moderating effect of perceived social support on self-efficacy and turnover intention;
(b) The moderating effect of perceived social support on the relationship between deep acting and self-efficacy

Figure 2. The moderating role of perceived social support in the mediation model.

4. Discussion

This study explored the impact of different emotional labor strategies on the turnover intention of preschool teachers, providing empirical support for the relationship between them. The results confirmed the positive role of deep acting and natural performance in reducing the turnover intention of them, which is consistent with existing research. However, surface acting did not show the expected effect. The mediating role of self-efficacy and the moderating role of perceived social support have

explained the impact of emotional labor strategies on turnover intention, bringing a new perspective to educational management. These findings not only support the theory of emotional labor, but also provide empirical basis for the management of emotional labor by preschool teachers.

Firstly, the research findings confirmed Hypothesis 1, deep acting and natural performance negatively affect the turnover intention of preschool teachers. According to the theory of resource conservation, individuals tend to acquire and protect valuable resources to avoid resource loss. Preschool teachers who are accustomed to deep acting and natural performance use self-regulation to align emotional expression and behavior with inner feelings, reducing the psychological resource depletion caused by cognitive dissonance^[29]. In addition, this study found no significant relationship between surface acting and turnover intention, which is different from previous research. The study by Qian et al.^[30] on manufacturing employees and the study by Xie et al.^[15] on kindergarten teachers both indicate that surface role-playing has a significant positive impact on turnover intention. For the different results of this study, the speculated reasons are as follows: firstly, the average teaching experience of preschool teachers in this study is 3.5 years, which is in the stage of transition from novice to old teachers. Novice teachers tend to play on the surface^[31], and when they first joined, they were in the stage of high education investment, so they were more conservative in considering the issue of leaving their jobs. Secondly, Steinnes et al. found that interacting with infants and young children with high levels of cuteness can generate positive emotions and increase willingness to take care of them^[32]. According to the revocation hypothesis theory^[33], positive emotions can revoke the subsequent effects of negative emotions, rebuild positive psychological resources, suppress long-term negative effects on the surface, and reduce the likelihood of resignation behavior.

Secondly, previous studies on the mediating effect of emotional labor on turnover intention have mostly focused on occupational burnout, job satisfaction^[34], with less exploration from an individual perspective. This study revealed the mediating mechanism between emotional labor and turnover intention of preschool teachers, and identified the mediating role of perceived social support. This is consistent with previous research and confirmed Hypothesis 2, which states that self-efficacy mediates the effect of emotional labor on turnover propensity. According to the theory of self-efficacy, individuals with high self-efficacy have stronger achievement motivation than those with low self-efficacy. They often choose challenging tasks that are beyond their ability level, work harder when faced with difficulties or challenges, and tend to adopt different effective strategies. They can also utilize or create beneficial resources to solve problems. Therefore, when the real emotional experience does not match the professional requirements, high self-efficacy preschool teachers will adopt deep role-playing strategies to regulate emotions and behavioral expression. This strategy requires more psychological processing, more effort, and better performance effects^[18]. In addition, research has found that the level of self-efficacy of primary and secondary school teachers has a negative predictive effect on the level of occupational burnout^[35]. According to Job Demands-Resources model, job resources have a motivating effect on job engagement and performance, promoting employee self-growth and learning, and reducing job burnout^[36]. Self-efficacy, as an important internal resource of individuals, is a key factor affecting their work engagement^[27]. Individuals with high self-efficacy have more confidence in their own abilities and believe that they can mobilize resources to solve their own problems^[37]. Therefore, when facing job burnout caused by high work pressure and emotional exhaustion, they can more actively coordinate resources to regulate negative emotions, thereby reducing their intention to resign.

In addition, this study confirmed Hypothesis 3, perceived social support moderates the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention. Specifically, when deep acting is used as a variable, the interaction term between perceived social support and deep acting moderated the impact of deep acting on self-efficacy (i.e., the first half of the mediation pathway). The higher the individual's understanding of social support, the more significant the impact of deep acting on self-efficacy, which was consistent with previous research. As related studies have found, the more individuals perceive social support, the more psychological support and resources they can obtain in interpersonal communication^[27]. Deep acting is an emotional labor strategy that involves multiple aspects of self-regulation, so the more an individual perceives social support, the more problem-solving abilities and resources they have, and the higher their self-efficacy. When nature performance as a variable, the mediating effect of perceived social support was moderated in the latter half, where the higher the individual's perceived level of social support, the more significant the impact of self-efficacy on turnover intention. Yang et al. found in their study of intern medical students that individuals with a high level of perceived social support experience a stronger sense of general self-efficacy and use it to combat setbacks encountered in their work, enhancing their work adaptability^[38]. This result was supported by the social support theory. The social support

network theory model suggests that the stronger an individual's social support, the stronger their ability to cope with external challenges, which not only enhances self-efficacy, improves professional identity, but also reduces turnover intention^[39]. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, individuals with high self-efficacy have strong work confidence, low stress, and tend to express their emotions more truthfully. Natural performance has lower psychological resource consumption compared to other emotional labor strategies^[18].

Therefore, with the dual resource investment of external psychological support and effective internal regulation, preschool teachers can more smoothly solve the problems they face in their work and reduce the possibility of their ultimate intention to resign.

Based on this, the following suggestions are proposed: First, the principal should attach importance to the cultivation of teachers' emotional skills and guide preschool teachers to actively adopt deep acting and natural performance strategies in daily work situations; Second, preschool teachers should strengthen their self-development, continuously improve their professional skills and problem-solving abilities, and enhance their levels of self-efficacy. Finally, kindergarten principal should create a support atmosphere, attach importance to the construction and optimization of employee care systems, so that preschool teachers can feel sufficient psychological and material support in high-intensity work, fill the loss of their own internal resources, and improve their sense of professional belonging and identity.

5. Limitations and Prospects

This study validated the impact of emotional labor strategies on the turnover intention of preschool teachers, but there are still limitations. Firstly, This study only selected a sample from a limited number of kindergartens, with an average teaching experience of 3.5 years and a large proportion of novice teachers. In the future, the sample size should be expanded to cover teachers from different regions and teaching experience, in order to enhance the universality of the results. At the same time, the impact of external environmental factors such as changes in national policies and socio-economic conditions on teachers should also be considered. Secondly, this study only investigated the impact of self-efficacy on emotional labor strategies and turnover intention, as well as the moderating role of perceived social support in this process. Although personal internal perspectives have been expanded, turnover intention is influenced by both internal and external factors. In the future, we can explore the impact of the interaction between internal and external factors on turnover intention from a macro perspective.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study explored the impact of different emotional labor on the turnover intention of preschool teachers and verified the existence of a moderated mediation model. Deep acting and natural performance negatively predict turnover intention, while the influence of surface acting on turnover intention is not significant; Self-efficacy mediated the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention; Perceived social support moderated the mediating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between emotional labor strategies and turnover intention.

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