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The Current Status and Influencing Factors of Social Support for Rural Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract
The development of rural preschool education can not be separated from rural early childhood teachers. Research has indicated that social support is associated with better work performance of teachers. The social support scale was used to study the social support status of rural preschool teachers in Yunnan Province of China. The results show that the social support level of rural early childhood teachers is medium; the level of perceived social support is influenced by factors such as age, total monthly income, and educational level.

Keywords: Social Support; Rural Early Childhood Teachers; Influencing Factors

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1.0 Introduction

A crucial part of schooling is preschool education. For China, the growth of early childhood education in rural areas is significant. Every rural child's development can be more effectively supported by expanding early childhood education in the area. Rural early childhood educators are integral to the growth of rural early childhood education, and they are crucial to the program's success. At present, most rural early childhood teachers in China have long working hours, work demands, home-school cooperation is difficult to carry out, and work pressure is high. Some cross-cultural studies also indicate that many teachers report high levels of occupational stress (Maas et al., 2022). These will inevitably hurt the work of teachers. If the negative impact on teachers is not mitigated, it will affect the expansion plans of preschool education in China. Hence, there is an urgent need for social support to assist rural early childhood teachers in their work.

Recent research has shown the positive effects of social support for individuals. Good social support helps the individual alleviate stress and anxiety, improves terrible emotions, and has a favorable impact on the person's mental health (Coyne & Downey, 1991); It enables those who receive social support to feel that they are being paid attention and needed, and to feel the importance and significance of their existence. For teachers, when they perceived more social support, they also receive more respect, affirmation, and attention (Chi et al., 2014), thereby facilitating better work performance.

To efficiently assist in managing and advancing the careers of rural early childhood educators, the study aims to investigate the state and impact factors of social support for these educators in early childhood.

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2.0 Literature Review

Social support first emerged in clinical medical research conducted in the 1970s. (Chi et al., 2014). Nowadays, the research on social support has spanned many fields such as management, psychology, medicine, sociology, education, etc. because it has a beneficial impact on individuals. The existing research on social support focuses mainly on four areas: first, the study of the definition of social support. According to Cobb (1976), social support is an act or communication that a person perceives as coming from the members of their social network who show their concern, respect, and importance. According to Guralnick et al. (2008), supportive behavior or interpersonal care encompasses interactions with family, friends, coworkers, superiors, and other relatives. Social support is a support system for providing material and spiritual help or for getting out of trouble (Caplan, 1974). Secondly, the classification of social support. For example, Cutrona and Russell (1990) classified social support into four categories: emotional, material or message, self-respect, social integration or network, and passionate. Zhang (2017) further subdivided social support into four categories: instrumental, information, expressive, and assessment support. Thirdly, social support for measurement methods and tools. Many scholars have prepared or revised the social support scales. For example, the Social Support Questionnaire (Sarason et al., 1983), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988), etc. Fourthly, research on social support mechanisms. Currently, the primary role mechanisms are the main-effect mode, the buffering mode, and the dynamic mode (Orr, 2004).

Research indicates that educators can effectively increase their performance by receiving more social support (Salami, 2011). Additionally, instructors can improve their teaching performance through social support from peers, mentors, and families (Hsu & Tsai, 2013).

However, there are a lot of research studies conducted by the community of teachers in universities and primary and secondary schools, but fewer studies are aimed at early childhood teachers, especially in economically and educationally underdeveloped areas (Xiaozhou & Ying, 2014). This is consistent with the findings of the researcher's search for literature in 2023.

In this study, social support for early childhood teachers refers to the support system established in interaction with family, colleagues, leaders, friends, etc, that facilitates teachers' work.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Setting

Researchers conducted survey studies in Yunnan Province, China. Yunnan Province is a border province in southwestern China with a large rural population.

3.2 Sampling Method

The total number of rural preschool teachers in Yunnan Province exceeds 20,000. Given that probability samples are generally considered more representative than nonprobability samples(Babbie, 2020), this study adopted a probability sampling design. Also, taking into account the vast territory and administrative restrictions of Yunnan Province, obtaining a list of the entire population is not feasible. In this case, cluster sampling is an appropriate method (Babbie, 2020). Therefore, the researchers used cluster sampling to collect data from 530 rural preschool teachers across the province.

3.3 Research Instruments

The researchers used the MSPSS designed by Zimet et al. The 12-item measure consists of three dimensions: support from friends, family, and significant others. The MSPSS measures the support teachers perceive from critical stakeholders, such as leaders, colleagues, family, and friends (Ho, 2016; Ho & Chan, 2017). Participants were asked to rate the social support they received on a seven-point Likert scale. The reliability of this scale is 0.88. Before the fieldwork, this scale was checked and evaluated by five educational experts.

3.4 Data Analysis

The researchers collected 530 questionnaires. After data cleaning, statistical analysis was conducted using data from 523 questionnaires. All the data obtained were analyzed using the SPSS software.

4.0 Findings

4.1Personal Basic Information

There are four questions related to the demographics of the respondents, which are age, gender, educational level, and total monthly income. Table 4.1 presents the demographics of the rural early childhood teachers (n = 523).

Table 4.1 The respondents' demographic characteristics

	Group	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	30	5.7	5.70
	Female	493	94.3	100

Age	24 Years Old and under	111	21.22	21.22
	25-34 Years Old	241	46.08	67.30
	35-44 Years Old	118	22.56	89.86
	45- 54 Years Old	53	10.13	100.00
Educational Level	High School and below	104	19.9	19.90
	Junior College	232	44.4	64.20
	Bachelor's Degree	187	35.8	100.0
	Master's Degree	0	0	
	Ph.D. Degree	0	0	
Total Monthly Income	below 4000 CNY	160	30.6	30.6
	4001-8000 CNY	334	63.9	94.5
	above 8000 CNY	29	5.5	100.0

According to Table 4.1, there are more female teachers (94.3%) than male teachers (5.7%) among preschool teachers in rural areas. The 25-34 age group has the highest proportion of teachers (46.08%), followed by the 35-44 age group (22.56%). Among them, 67.3% of the total number of teachers are under 34 years old. Regarding educational level, the largest proportion of teachers (44.4%) have a college degree. The largest number of teachers has a monthly total income between 4,001 and 8,000 CNY (63.9%), followed by less than 4,000 CNY (30.6%), and the smallest number of teachers has a monthly total income of more than 8,000 CNY (5.5%).

4.2 Level of social support for rural early childhood teachers

The mean value of perceived social support for rural early childhood teachers in Table 4.2 shows that the median social support for rural early childhood teachers is 4.526, indicating that the social support level of rural early school teachers in Yunnan province is moderate.

Table 4.2 Levels of Social Support (N=523)

	Level (Mean)	Std. Deviation
Social Support	4.526	0.795

4.3 Analysis of influencing factors

The researchers employed a one-way analysis of variance and independent samples t-tests (T-tests) in IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 to examine the social support-influencing components.

4.3.1Gender

To determine whether there is a significant difference between the social support received by male and female teachers, the researchers utilized the T-test. Table 4.3.1 displays the findings.

Table 4.3.1 T-test based on gender

	N	Mean	SD	T-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Social Support	30	4.547	0.677	0.149	0.881
	493	4.525	0.803		

Table 4.3.1 indicates that the mean value of social support for male teachers is 4.547 (SD = 0.677), and the mean value for female teachers is 4.525 (SD = 0.803). The social support that male and female teachers receive is not significantly different (t = 0.149, p = 0.881 >.05). That is, the social support that rural early childhood teachers receive is not influenced by their gender.

4.3.2 Age

In this study, rural early childhood teachers were divided into five different age groups. After analyzing the statistics, it was found that the number of teachers in the age group above 55 years old was zero. The researchers used ANOVA to test the significance of differences among the data from the four age groups.

Table 4.3.2.1 Descriptives of Gender

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Support	24 Years Old and under	111	3.989	0.708
	25-34 Years Old	241	4.511	0.774
	35-44 Years Old	118	4.984	0.647
	45- 54 Years Old	53	4.700	0.680
	Total	523	4.526	0.795

Table 4.3.2.1 shows that the mean social support of teachers of different ages is different. The 24 and under age group had the lowest average, while the 35 to 44 age group had the highest average.

Table 4.3.2.2 One-Way ANOVA Test of Age

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.

Social Support	Between Groups	58.329	3	19.443	37.109	0.000
	Within Groups	271.925	519	0.524		
	Total	330.254	522			

The ANOVA test showed that the F value of social support was 37.109 (p = 0.000<.05), reaching a significant level. This indicates that age variables can affect teachers' social support levels.

Table 4.3.2.3 Post Hoc Tests of Age

Dependent Variable	(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference(I-J)	Sig.
Social Support (Tukey HSD)	24 Years Old and under	25-34 Years Old	-0.522*	0.000
		35-44 Years Old	-0.994*	0.000
		45-54 Years Old	-0.710*	0.000
	25-34 Years Old	35-44 Years Old	-0.473*	0.000
		45-54 Years Old	-0.189	0.316
	35-44 Years Old	45-54 Years Old	0.284	0.084

Table 4.3.2.3 shows the post hoc multiple comparison results of social support in different age groups. The data shows that the average level of the 24 and under age group is significantly lower than the average level of the other three age groups, and the average level of the 25 to 34 age group is much lower than the 35 to 44 group.

4.3.3 Educational Level

The study found that the number of teachers in the doctoral degree group and master's degree group was zero. Most of them are teachers who have graduated from junior college. To assess how significant the differences in the data from the four groups are, the researchers employed an analysis of variance.

Table 4.3.3.1 Descriptives of Educational Level

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Support	High School and below	104	4.090	0.731
	Junior College	232	4.431	0.752
	Bachelor's Degree	187	4.886	0.728
	Total	523	4.526	0.795

Table 4.3.3.1 shows the average social support values of groups with different education levels. Among them, the mean value of teachers in the high school and below group is the lowest, while the mean value of the bachelor's degree group is the highest.

Table 4.3.3.2 One-Way ANOVA of Educational Level

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Social Support	Between Groups	46.078	2	23.039	42.158	.000
	Within Groups	284.176	520	.546		
	Total	330.254	522			

The F values are 42.128 (p=.000<.05), reaching the significant threshold, as Table 4.3.3.2 demonstrates. This suggests that groups with varying educational degrees have significantly varied means. Put another way, teachers' educational level affects the degree of social support.

Table 4.3.3.3 Post Hoc Tests of Educational Level

Dependent Variable	(I) Educational level	(J) Educational level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Social Support (Tukey HSD)	High School and below	Junior College	-.342*	.000
		Bachelor's Degree	-.796*	.000
	Junior College		-.454*	.000

* The mean difference was significant at the 0.05 level.

The results of post hoc multiple comparisons between groups with different educational levels are shown in Table 4.3.3.3. The results showed that compared with other groups, the average value of the high school and below group was significantly lower than the average value of the other two groups. Moreover, the mean value of the junior college group was significantly lower than the mean value of the bachelor's degree group.

4.3.4 Total Monthly Income

In the study, rural early childhood teachers were divided into five different total monthly income groups. The researchers used analysis of variance to conduct a significance test.

It can be seen from the results in Table 4.3.4.1 that there are differences in the average monthly total income of rural preschool teachers. The group with a monthly total income of less than 2,000 CNY has the lowest mean, and the group with a monthly total income of more than 8,000 CNY has the highest mean.

Table 4.3.4.1 Descriptives of Total Monthly Income

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Support	below 4000 CNY	160	4.266	.779
	4001-8000 CNY	334	4.598	.773
	above 8000 CNY	29	5.138	.643
	Total	523	4.526	.795

Table 4.3.4.2 One-Way ANOVA for Social Support Based on Total Monthly Income

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Social Support	Between Groups	23.373	2	11.687	19.803	.000
	Within Groups	306.881	520	.590		
	Total	330.254	522			

The output of the one-way analysis of variance is displayed in Table 4.3.4.2. The F value is 19.803 (p=0.000<.05), reaching a significant level. The data show significant differences in the average social support for rural early childhood teachers in different total monthly income groups. In other words, total monthly income affects the social support level of rural early childhood teachers.

Table 4.3.4.3 Post Hoc Tests of Total Monthly Income

Dependent Variable	(I) Total Monthly Income	(J) Total Monthly Income	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Social Support (Tukey HSD)	below 4000 CNY	4001-8000 CNY	-0.331*	0.000
		above 8000 CNY	-0.872*	0.000
	4001-8000 CNY	above 8000 CNY	-0.540*	0.001

* The mean difference was significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4.3.4.3 shows the results of post hoc multiple comparisons between different total monthly income groups. The results showed significant differences between average gross monthly income groups, and the level of social support for rural early childhood teachers also increased significantly with the increase in total monthly incomes.

5.0 Conclusion

In rural preschool education, there is a notable gender disparity, with a predominance of female teachers. Additionally, most of these teachers are relatively young, with over half of them aged under 30. Furthermore, a significant portion of these educators hold a bachelor's degree. Regarding income, more than half of rural preschool teachers earn a monthly salary ranging from 4,001 to 8,000 CNY. This is consistent with statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education (2023).

The level of perceived social support for rural early childhood teachers in Yunnan Province is at a medium level. This means that teachers already feel a certain level of support, but there is still a need to give teachers more social support.

Age, education level, and total monthly income significantly affect the social support level of rural preschool teachers. Age reflects teachers' work and life experiences in the field of education. Younger teachers may need more support and guidance, while older teachers may be more independent and may have different needs for social support. Teachers with higher levels of education may have more professional knowledge and skills and be better able to cope with work challenges, and therefore are more likely to be recognized and supported by colleagues, leaders, and family members at work. A teacher's monthly salary is usually related to the teacher's professional status. Teachers with high monthly wages tend to have high professional status. This may make it easier for these teachers to gain recognition and support from others. Interestingly, early education teachers in rural areas report the same level of social support regardless of gender. This reflects that in education, male and female teachers have similar opportunities and resources for professional development.

In light of the study's findings, the researchers believed that increased social support for rural early childhood teachers is critical. The family is one of the most important sources of social support for teachers. Families should understand the peculiarities of the work of rural early childhood teachers and be able to give them support and encouragement promptly. Colleagues can share experiences

and difficulties in their work, help each other, learn from each other, and build learning communities. Apart from that, this study also shows that the lowest levels of social support for rural early childhood teachers are in the age group under 24 and teachers with high school education and below. These teachers either lack educational experience and skills or have little professional knowledge and weak professional abilities. They may encounter relatively more difficulties at work. Hence, the management should pay more attention to support this particular group of teachers. At the same time, the Chinese government should continue to improve the level of social support for rural early childhood teachers so that they can devote themselves to work with a more proactive and positive attitude.

In addition, the number of female teachers in rural kindergartens in China far exceeds that of male teachers. The social support that male and female instructors receive is essentially the same. However, as we all know, in the growth of young children, "male roles" are indispensable. Increasing the number of male preschool teachers will help children's overall development. The question is how do we make more men willing to become preschool teachers? Researchers believe that male teachers can be given more social support to enhance the attractiveness of kindergarten work to male teachers. This is an exciting subject that awaits further study.

In summary, perceived social support is critical to improving teacher job performance. The perceived social support can reduce teachers' work pressure, improve job satisfaction, stimulate more tremendous enthusiasm for educational work, and thereby improve the quality of education. Social support comes from a variety of sources, including care and encouragement from leaders, colleagues, and family, as well as professional training provided.

6.0 limitation

Due to research time and resource constraints, this study used only quantitative methods, which limited the acquisition of rich contextual data that could also have been obtained through qualitative methods. In addition, teachers' needs and feelings about social support may differ under different cultural backgrounds, and the generalizability of the research results may be limited.

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