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Exploring the relationship among teachers' emotional intelligence, emotional labor strategies and teaching satisfaction

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A second-order factor structure of teachers' emotional intelligence is supported.
- Emotional intelligence impacts deep acting and expression of naturally felt emotion.
- Emotional intelligence has a positive impact on teaching satisfaction.
- Expression of naturally felt emotion is the most adaptive emotional labor strategy.
- The nature of emotional labor strategy mediates the role of emotional intelligence.

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ABSTRACT

The results of a survey of 1281 Chinese school teachers support a second-order factor structure of emotional intelligence. It is found that teachers' emotional intelligence has a significant impact on teaching satisfaction and their use of two emotional labor strategies, i.e., deep acting and expression of naturally felt emotions, but it is not a significant predictor of surface acting. Among the three emotional labor strategies, only expression of naturally felt emotion significantly influences teaching satisfaction. These findings could be explained by differences in the nature of various emotional labor strategies. Implications for teaching and teacher education are put forward.

1. Introduction

In recent years, emotion in teachers' work has become a topic of much interest in educational research. From a position where emotion was viewed as peripheral to teaching, researchers into teacher emotion have reached a consensus that emotion is at the heart of teaching and teachers' lives (Hargreaves, 2001; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). It plays an important role in teacher development (Hargreaves, 1998; Yin & Lee, 2011), teacher education (Hayes, 2003; Intrator, 2006), and the formation and transformation of teachers' identity or self-understanding (Hamachek, 2000; Zembylas, 2003). As a result, the relevance of emotional intelligence and emotional labor to teachers' work has been internationally recognized. Results of many studies have shown that the ways teachers emotionally experience the context of teaching significantly relate to the ways they approach their teaching, with positive emotions being associated with a student-focused teaching approach and negative emotions with transmission approaches (Trigwell, 2012). Teachers consider emotional expression in front of students as a skill, and high-quality teachers can effectively use emotional competence in teaching (Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011). As proposed by Harvey and Evans (2003), teachers' emotional skills, which are required in the classroom, can be organized into a five-dimensional model consisting of emotional relationships, interpersonal awareness, emotional intrapersonal beliefs, emotional interpersonal guidelines and emotional management, and this model has been generally supported by Harvey and his

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colleagues' recent validation work (Harvey, Bimler, Evans, Kirkland, & Pechtel, 2012). Though teachers' competence in perceiving and regulating emotions is important for teaching and learning in classrooms, it has been found that pre-service teachers' emotional intelligence is below the average (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012). In addition, although emotional labor is an integral part of teachers' work within a school or classroom, it is not easily identified because emotional rules are often disguised as ethical codes or professional norms. Therefore, in-service teachers' ability of utilizing emotions for performing emotional labor still needs to be improved (Fried, 2011).

Although these studies have led to the increased recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence and emotional labor in teachers' work, researchers are only beginning to examine various manifestations of the transactions between teaching and emotion, which indicates the urgent need of more research on teacher emotion (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). This is especially true for the quantitative examination of teachers' emotional intelligence and emotional labor. With very few exceptions (e.g., Karim & Weisz, 2011), research into the relationship between emotional intelligence and emotional labor, and their impact on teachers' psychological well-being has rarely been presented in the literature. The present study, using a structural equation modeling approach, attempts to address this gap by exploring teachers' emotional intelligence, emotional labor strategies and their influence on teachers' sense of job satisfaction in China.

2. Literature

2.1. Emotional intelligence and teachers' work

According to the pioneering work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), emotional intelligence (EI) can be seen as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p. 189). Subsequently, Mayer and Salovey (1997) have reformulated their definition to include "the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulated emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (p. 10). As proposed by Goleman (1995), EI involves abilities that can be categorized as self-awareness, empathy, managing emotions, self-motivation, and handling relationships with others.

There are two different models of EI in the existing literature, namely the ability model and the trait model. In the ability model, EI is seen as a mental ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions in the self and others, which is typically assessed by maximum performance tests, including Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence scale (MSCEIS; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). In the trait model, EI is conceptualized as a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions and behavioral dispositions concerning one's ability to recognize and utilize emotion-related information (Shi & Wang, 2007), which locates at the lower levels of personality taxonomies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). For assessing trait EI, self-report measures are usually adopted using instruments such as the Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS; Schutte et al., 1998) and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS; Wong & Law, 2002).

In the context of teaching and teacher research, the trait EI model has been adopted by many scholars. For example, when adapting the EIS developed by Schutte et al. (1998), Chan (2004, 2006) suggested that teachers' EI consisted of four dimensions, namely, emotional appraisal, positive regulation, empathic sensitivity, and positive utilization; Platsidou (2010) categorized EI into four factors including optimism/mood regulation, managing self-relevant information, managing others' emotions, and regulation of emotions. Following the line initiated by Wong and Law (2002), some researchers (e.g., Karim & Weisz, 2011; Wong, Wong, & Peng, 2010) found that teachers' EI comprised four distinct aspects: appraisal of emotion in the self; appraisal or recognition of emotion in others; regulation of emotion in the self; and use of emotion to facilitated performance. In addition, some recent studies on the validation of WLEIS in college students across countries also supported this four-factor structure (e.g., Li, Saklofske, Bowden, Yan, & Fung, 2012; Libbrecht, De Beuchelaer, Lievens, & Rockstuhl, 2012; Ng, Wang, Zalaquett, & Bodenhorn, 2008). Utilizing this wealth of knowledge, the present study mainly focuses on the trait EI model and measures teachers' EI through the self-report questionnaire developed by Wong and Law (2002).

As Bar-On (2010) argues, EI is an integral part of positive psychology which has a significant impact on human performance, sense of happiness, and subjective well-being. The relevance of trait EI to teachers' work has been examined in some studies which focused on the relationship between EI and teachers' burnout or job-related stress, but the results show some inconsistency. For example, Platsidou (2010) found that EI moderately but significantly correlated with three burnout components, suggesting that teachers with high perceived EI were likely to feel less emotional exhaustion, experience low levels of depersonalization and had a high sense of personal accomplishment. However, a more complicated association was revealed by Chan's (2006) structural equation modeling analysis of the relationship between EI and burnout components. That is, in addition to some desirable relationships between EI factors and burnout components, e.g., positive regulation decreases teachers' emotional exhaustion; empathic sensitivity decreases teachers' sense of depersonalization; and positive utilization improves teachers' sense of personal accomplishment, teachers' emotional exhaustion was found to increase with emotional appraisal. In a very recent study on the effect of EI on teachers' negative feelings, Karakuş (2013) found that there were gender related differences in the relationships among teachers' EI, burnout, stress and depression. Specifically, though EI decreased teachers' sense of burnout and depression in both male and female groups, it relieved stress of male teachers rather than that of females.

2.2. Emotional labor, emotional labor strategies and teaching

As defined by Arlie Hochschild (1983), emotional labor (EL) refers to "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). Though it was initially used to describe the nature of work conducted by service sector workers such as flight attendants, bill collectors, and clerical workers, EL has now been extensively applied to the examination of some higher-level professional groups including lawyers and doctors (Wharton, 2009). Recently, it has been suggested that teaching also fulfills Hochschild' (1983) three criteria for work that requires emotion labor, namely, (a) teaching requires face-to-face contact between teachers and others, especially their students; (b) teaching requires teachers to produce some emotional state (e.g., joy or fear, excitement or anxiety) in their students or other people around them; and (c) there is a degree of external control over teachers' emotional labor, which usually comes in the form of cultural expectations or professional norms (Winograd, 2003).

In the context of teaching, emotional labor is primarily perceived as the process by which teachers make an effort to inhibit, generate, and manage their feelings and expression of