

Educational Value, Current Characteristics, and Improvement Strategies of Teacher Emotional Support

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Abstract

Teachers' emotional support plays a crucial role in enhancing both students' cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. Current characteristics of teachers' emotional support for students include: a focus on basic education while neglecting higher education; emphasis on providing emotional support without considering students' emotional perception; attention to students' overall needs while overlooking group-specific differences; and prioritization of academic achievement improvement over non-cognitive skill development. Concurrently, domestic and international research on teacher emotional support exhibits common characteristics in specific research contexts, themes, stages, and methodologies. However, it is crucial to note that beyond addressing existing issues in the provision of teacher emotional support, teachers themselves require corresponding emotional support. Currently, both students and teachers face corresponding challenges in the dimension of emotional support.

Keywords: Teacher Emotional Support, Student Emotional Needs, Emotional Labor, Teacher Competency

1. The Developmental Trajectory and Crucial Role of Teacher Emotional Support

Teachers and students are the two primary agents in the educational process and the prerequisite for educational activities. As the initiators of these activities, teachers occupy a dominant position in the educational process, and their behaviors significantly influence students. Teachers provide various forms of support to students during the educational process to enhance both their cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. Past research has focused on dimensions such as teacher professional behavior and student cognitive abilities. Currently, teacher support, particularly emotional support, has become a crucial entry point for studying educational issues like teacher-student relationships and students' social-emotional competencies.

1.1 Tracing the Origins of Teacher Emotional Support

Teacher emotional support constitutes a component of teacher support, which is defined in multiple ways. Compared to domestic research, international studies on teacher support originated earlier and are more deeply explored. Scholars categorize teacher support into two main types, unidimensional variables and multidimensional variables (Liang & Lü, 2021). Scholars Brewster and Bowen define teacher support as the expression of care, listening, understanding, affection, and encouragement toward students during the educational process (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Chinese scholars similarly propose that it refers to teachers' attitudes and behaviors demonstrating care toward students' academic lives, emotional well-being, and other aspects—a concept aligned with the above (Ouyang, 2005). All these definitions approach teacher support from a unidimensional perspective.

From a multidimensional perspective, teacher support can be categorized into distinct dimensions. For instance, it may be divided into emotional support and professional support (Shelton, 2003). Alternatively, teacher support may encompass three dimensions: affective support, instrumental support, and cognitive support (Chen, 2005). Chinese scholars have also defined teacher support, categorizing it into three dimensions: learning support, emotional support, and competency support (Li & Bai, 2018). Furthermore, based on the CEPS survey, teacher support can be divided into three dimensions: academic support, emotional support, and relational support (Yang et al., 2020). Similarly, Lei and Li argue that, based on existing classifications of teacher support dimensions, learning (academic) support and emotional (affective) support are the core indicators of teacher support (Lei & Li, 2020). Thus, teacher support as an abstract concept can be subdivided into various dimensions and types. While scholars' classifications differ, they all acknowledge the importance of teachers' emotional support. This paper leans toward categorizing teacher support into two dimensions—academic support and emotional support—and focuses on teachers' emotional support based on this framework.

1.2 The Journey of Exploring Teacher Emotional Support

The concept of "emotional support" was first introduced by Vosburg in the medical field. It primarily refers to the care and encouragement patients receive from medical staff, relatives, and friends during hospital treatment, which positively impacts their psychological well-being and health. Subsequently, emotional support gained widespread attention in education, psychology, and other fields (Vosburg, 1972). The concept of "emotional support" was formally introduced into education in the 1990s, describing how teachers provide emotional care through methods such as listening, attentiveness, and encouragement. Emotional support falls within the realm of a teacher's individual emotional capacity, reflecting how a teacher's "character" influences a child's "character" and how a teacher's "personality" shapes a child's "personality" (Lin et al., 2023).

Following this conceptual introduction, scholars began defining "emotional support" within specific contexts. For instance, it encompasses teachers providing proactive care and attention to students, understanding their needs, and offering assistance. Alternatively, it can be defined as teachers demonstrating concern and understanding, listening respectfully, and expressing encouragement during educational interactions. Similarly, some view teacher emotional support as the care, understanding, and respect conveyed through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). Domestic scholars propose that teacher emotional support manifests as love, care, sympathy, understanding, and trust expressed toward students and perceived by them. It primarily manifests across three dimensions: classroom atmosphere, teacher sensitivity, and student attention (Xu et al., 2014). Lu also contends that teacher emotional support constitutes an interactive action between teachers and students, becoming effective only when students perceive the various forms of emotional support provided by teachers (Lu, 2023). As research deepens, teacher emotional support has increasingly been linked to multiple aspects of student development, expanding its scope of influence.

1.3 Understanding the Significance of Teacher Emotional Support

Teacher emotional support plays an important role in students' academic and psychological development. It is often expressed in subtle ways and is therefore difficult to quantify. Centered on emotional expression, it is conveyed through verbal, physical, and facial expressions, requiring students to perceive it to be effective. Similar to teacher expectations, its impact on student academic performance is not direct but achieved by influencing students' perceived learning ability and academic achievement motivation (Du, 2002).

Teachers' emotional support impacts students primarily on two levels. First, it enhances learning by elevating cognitive functioning. Research indicates a significant positive correlation between adolescents' perceived emotional support from teachers and their academic performance and achievement levels (Becker & Luthar, 2007). Perceiving teacher emotional support effectively reduces academic burnout among secondary students, enhances self-evaluations of learning abilities and behaviors, and stimulates learning motivation (Li et al., 2019). Research on online learning indicates that teacher emotional support enables undergraduate nursing students to experience greater enjoyment during online learning while reducing negative emotions (Li et al., 2022).

Second, teachers' emotional support benefits students' psychological development while enhancing their non-cognitive abilities. Numerous studies reveal that the more emotional support students perceive from teachers, the higher their positive psychological capacities such as self-esteem become. They also experience more harmonious interpersonal relationships and fewer depressive or lonely emotional experiences (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Barber & Olsen, 2004). Adolescents who perceive greater teacher emotional support

experience fewer emotional problems (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010). A study on teacher support for middle school students found that teacher emotional support enhances students' social interaction skills, fostering more active, optimistic, inclusive, and open-minded attitudes while protecting mental health (Wu et al., 2023). Some scholars summarized that teacher emotional support positively impacts numerous aspects of students, including school adaptation, emotional competence, teacher-student relationships, prevention of problem behaviors, social skills, academic achievement, mental health, and learning motivation (Ji et al., 2016). Thus, extensive research indicates that teacher emotional support influences both students' academic and psychological development.

Furthermore, some studies indirectly demonstrate the role of teacher emotional support. Analyses of classroom silence in universities categorize it into inability (knowledge-related) and reluctance (motivation-related) (Zhang, 2019). Research on classroom silence reveals that teacher-student relationships are crucial for establishing mutual trust, and this trust significantly enhances student expression and participation (Zhang & Shi, 2020). Teacher care and emotional support play a key role in building this trust-based relationship.

Therefore, teacher support promotes the development of both students' cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. The concept of non-cognitive abilities first emerged in human capital theory. It refers to stable patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that individuals exhibit when responding to different situations. These abilities are difficult to measure through intelligence tests or academic performance but can be acquired through formal or informal learning experiences. In actual educational practice, teachers do not directly cultivate students' non-cognitive abilities. Instead, they influence these abilities through daily teaching practices, using knowledge transmission as a vehicle to enhance students' cognitive abilities. Additionally, teachers' personal styles and affective qualities also influence students. However, existing research on teacher emotional support has predominantly focused on cognitive abilities such as academic performance and classroom behavior, often neglecting the cultivation of non-cognitive skills. Therefore, this paper examines the current state and challenges of teacher emotional support in China, specifically focusing on the dimension of teacher support and the aspect of emotional support, to provide recommendations for improving teacher emotional support in China.

2. Characteristics of Emotional Support in Chinese Teaching

2.1 Focusing on emotional support in basic education while de-emphasizing it in higher education.

Both educational theory and practice predominantly observe teacher emotional support in basic education, primarily in kindergarten and elementary school settings. Research on emotional support in higher education remains relatively scarce. This aligns with the

developmental characteristics of children across different age groups. Younger children require greater teacher support, particularly emotional support.

During the preschool stage, emotional support from kindergarten teachers holds unique significance. Children at this age are in a sensitive period of emotional development, characterized by partial, unstable, and passive cognitive and emotional responses to life experiences. When teachers provide emotional support during interactions, children receive positive emotional guidance and appropriate emotional modeling.

Primary school also demands substantial emotional support from teachers. For children in this stage, particularly during the school adaptation period, teacher behavior becomes critically important. Establishing a trusting teacher-student relationship is essential, with trust, security, and attachment serving as prerequisites for both the relationship and the educational process (Liu & Zhu, 2018). At this stage, teacher emotional support emphasizes assistance with students' non-cognitive abilities, significantly influencing character development and self-awareness. Therefore, beyond academic performance, primary education requires robust emotional support for students.

As students age and enter middle and high school, teachers increasingly prioritize academic support, focusing on enhancing cognitive abilities while significantly reducing emotional attention. Notably, research both domestically and internationally has generally neglected the emotional support provided by teachers during the high school years. The increased academic pressure in secondary school often leads to reduced communication with teachers. This creates a mismatch between adolescents' emotional needs and the emotional support available in the classroom environment. Students increasingly perceive external pressure and control. Paradoxically, it is during secondary school that students most crave teachers' trust and support. As a period marked by heightened self-awareness and intensified psychological conflicts, receiving emotional support from teachers is critically important (Qiao, 2015). In recent years, concerns regarding student anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges have received increasing attention.. Therefore, even though students at this stage are relatively more mature, focusing on their mental health remains vital. Teacher emotional support can significantly alleviate students' stress, anxiety, and other emotional burdens.

Current research on teacher emotional support primarily focuses on the K-12 education stage. Undergraduate and graduate students possess more developed personal judgment and value systems, and the university training model differs significantly from K-12 education. Additionally, higher education faculty often shift their primary focus to research, potentially reducing teaching enthusiasm within limited time and energy constraints (Jia, 2012). However, due to factors like the pandemic, online education became the predominant teaching model for a period. Against this specific backdrop, online teacher emotional support emerged as a major topic of interest. In higher education, particularly at the graduate level,

the extent of faculty emotional support correlates with the advisor's personality and teaching style. It is worth noting that while students at this stage no longer rely solely on faculty feedback to define themselves, such emotional support still significantly influences their psychological well-being and self-evaluation. Therefore, university faculty should remain attentive to and provide appropriate emotional support to their students.

2.2 Focusing on Teacher Emotional Provision While Neglecting Student Emotional Perception

As the education sector increasingly emphasizes students' social and emotional competencies, faculty support extends beyond respect and understanding to significantly influence students' social engagement abilities such as interpersonal communication and social interaction. Current educational practices, however, still face challenges. These include limited measurement tools, insufficient empirical research, and room for improvement in localization. Some studies collect data on teacher emotional support through questionnaires administered solely to teachers, which presents limitations. Particularly due to differences in teacher-student perceptions and cultural backgrounds, relying solely on teachers' perspectives offers a partial view of emotional support and may fail to accurately capture students' actual perceptions.

Given the inherent difficulty in quantifying teacher emotional support, which is embedded within daily teaching behaviors and activities achieving fully objective monitoring remains challenging. Consequently, research typically assesses teacher emotional support through classroom behaviors, defining its conceptual framework and manifestations. Examples include verbal praise, rewards, and fostering a harmonious classroom atmosphere that makes students feel respected, joyful, and confident. This approach embeds positive emotional experiences within the learning process.

However, a disconnect exists between the emotional support teachers provide and students' actual perceptions, creating a gap in transmission and reception. Consequently, it becomes crucial to understand students' most needed emotional support points from their perspective. This provides direction for teachers in offering emotional support. Research on teacher emotional support should prioritize examining students' current perceptions and needs, enabling targeted support delivery to find a balance and reduce emotional exhaustion.

In recent years, student perceptions have gained attention. Numerous studies analyze teacher emotional support from the student perspective, defining teacher emotional support in these articles as the emotional support perceived by students, thereby conducting research relevant to the theme. This shift emphasizes the importance of consistency between teacher and student perceptions of emotional support and aids in its provision.

2.3 Focusing on Overall Student Needs While Overlooking Perceptual Differences Among Groups

Research on student perceptions of teacher emotional support also faces limitations. Previous studies primarily employed questionnaires and interviews to gauge student perceptions. While some studies mention perceptual differences among student groups, a clearer understanding of these variations and their characteristics could guide teacher emotional support. This insight could direct the equitable distribution of support, potentially reducing teachers' unseen workload.

The internal differences currently observed among students include disparities in the needs of struggling learners versus high-achieving students, as well as differences in the needs of students of different genders. Research on the perceived emotional support from teachers among students with varying learning abilities reveals that high-achieving and struggling students in different subjects have distinct needs for teacher emotional support, and the emotional support provided by teachers also varies. This is primarily manifested in academically strong students perceiving significantly higher levels of emotional support from mathematics teachers than struggling students, while struggling students exhibit a far greater need for respect from mathematics teachers than their academically strong peers (Liu et al., 2016). Beyond these two groups, the majority of students in a class are average learners. Evidently, this group receives less teacher attention and emotional support.

Additionally, female students exhibit higher sensitivity and greater demand for teachers' emotional support compared to male students. Particularly among female struggling learners, a heightened sense of disappointment is observed, accompanied by a stronger desire for increased teacher care and assistance. Similar conclusions apply to visually impaired children as a vulnerable group. Visually impaired students perceive significantly greater levels of learning support and emotional support from teachers than capability support, with female students perceiving significantly higher levels of teacher support than male students. This indirectly reflects girls' greater emphasis on teachers' emotional support and evaluations compared to boys. Girls exhibit relatively higher sensitivity to teachers' emotional support. Scholars have proposed a possible explanation for this disparity, suggesting that gender traits may play a role girls tend to be more emotionally attuned and thus more receptive to teachers' care and emotional support.

2.4 Focusing on Academic Achievement While Neglecting Non-Cognitive Skill Development

Teachers primarily deliver emotional support through instructional activities, such as classroom behaviors. They also provide emotional support outside the classroom via methods like after-school conversations. Clearly, these efforts are oriented toward students' academic performance. However, educational practice relatively lacks attention to students'

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interpersonal skills and psychological development. In educational theory research, teachers' emotional support has gradually become a hot topic in recent years, with extensive studies on its crucial role in students' academic performance and knowledge acquisition. Yet research on non-cognitive abilities remains relatively scarce.

Conversely, for special-needs children such as those with visual or hearing impairments, research on teacher emotional support is more prevalent and exhibits a common focus: the development of non-cognitive abilities in these groups. Taking left-behind children as an example, rural left-behind children demonstrate significantly lower non-cognitive abilities than non-left-behind children, and teacher support has a significant impact on the non-cognitive abilities of left-behind children. The higher the level of teacher support, the stronger the non-cognitive abilities of left-behind children. Given the distinct circumstances of this group compared to typical students, teacher emotional support can partially compensate for deficiencies in mental health education and character development. Teacher behaviors can help vulnerable children enhance social skills and prosocial behaviors, improving their agreeableness and extraversion. Consequently, research on emotional support tends to concentrate on its impact on students' non-cognitive abilities.

3. Reflections and Recommendations for Enhancing Teacher Emotional Support

Beyond focusing on the emotional support teachers provide to students, attention should also be directed toward the emotional needs of the teaching profession itself. The root cause of current issues in teacher emotional support lies in the unmet needs of teachers themselves. Therefore, addressing the challenges teachers face is the key to improving their emotional support.

3.1 Practical Challenges in Teachers Providing Emotional Support

Teachers' challenges stem from both internal and external factors. They face educational pressures within teaching activities while also enduring external oversight. These pressures make it difficult for teachers to provide comprehensive and effective emotional support. While the ideal of education is noble—hoping teachers can address every need—reality often presents numerous obstacles. Internally, teachers are required to invest significant time in subject instruction and place extreme emphasis on improving students' academic performance. Heavy administrative burdens further divert frontline educators' energy away from core teaching duties. These pressures leave teachers struggling to manage their own needs. Many educators experience varying degrees of professional burnout as their tenure lengthens. Teacher burnout is a significant factor hindering the provision of quality emotional support. Teachers experience reduced burnout when they perceive increased social support both within and outside the school. Improving teachers' social and emotional support thus places certain demands on schools.

Second, social pressures outside educational activities such as parental skepticism exacerbate teachers' stress. The uncertainty inherent in educational work leaves teachers feeling vulnerable and helpless, while the complexity of educational interactions contributes to "emotional dysregulation." Simultaneously, strict professional constraints on emotional management and expression, issues of emotional reciprocity, and interpersonal challenges with colleagues, administrators, and parents collectively overload teachers' emotional capacity (Dai, 2023).

While teachers educate students, cultivating moral character, shaping sound values, fostering healthy psychological development, and promoting normal interpersonal relationships are arguably more crucial than merely enhancing academic abilities. However, if teachers first lose their sense of happiness and fulfillment, they naturally cannot provide effective emotional support to students. Currently, frontline teachers indeed face significant difficulties and challenges. Enhancing teachers' emotional support requires their energy investment, making stress reduction an essential measure.

3.2 Suggested Strategies for Enhancing Teachers' Emotional Support

Teachers' emotional support must be built upon their sense of professional identity and happiness. Improvements can be made from both internal and external perspectives.

First, the external environment. One approach is to reduce teachers' workload by decreasing non-instructional administrative tasks. Such cumbersome administrative duties are a major source of teacher burnout and stress. Workloads unrelated to teaching negatively impact teachers' normal instructional activities. Improving administrative efficiency and reducing repetitive tasks is essential. Second, prioritize teacher mental health by regularly assessing emotional needs. While student psychological well-being receives attention, educators are often overlooked. Yet teachers, enduring prolonged high-intensity, high-pressure teaching environments, equally require understanding and care. Schools can foster this through regular teacher consultations, introducing recreational programs, and organizing themed activities to understand their inner world.

Second, teachers themselves must practice self-regulation. First, promptly identify emotional issues, release stress, and adjust their state. Teachers should prioritize monitoring their own emotional well-being. When emotional difficulties arise, they should employ various methods to vent and reduce perfectionist tendencies. Second, train observational skills to enhance emotional sensitivity. Improve attention to detail through techniques like facial expression recognition and empathy to interpret students' inner worlds. Teachers should consciously monitor student states during instruction, particularly those often overlooked or less expressive. Thus, cultivating "emotional resilience" is crucial. Effective emotional support training includes setting realistic expectations, consciously shifting thought patterns, proactively learning about emotions, and enriching emotional experiences.

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Teachers' emotional literacy impacts both their personal well-being and the quality of their educational work. Facing numerous challenges and emotional pressures, educators must develop robust psychological preparedness—a significant undertaking. Teaching has never been a simple or effortless task; it demands genuine empathy for students' perspectives, while teachers themselves are often overlooked or undervalued. Thus, a strong yet sensitive inner resilience is an essential asset in education. No matter how advanced science becomes, humanistic education rooted in teacher-student connection remains paramount. To provide meaningful emotional support to teachers, we must first address their own struggles and challenges. Only by establishing a solid foundation can we genuinely improve teachers' emotional well-being.

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