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Unveiling the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation among early childhood teachers: A cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Early childhood teachers face significant emotional demands in classroom interactions, emphasizing the value of emotion regulation as a critical professional competency. However, many teachers struggle to manage their emotions, which can affect their well-being and teaching effectiveness, leading to increased stress and burnout in their profession. Self-compassion has been recognized as a personal resource that may support adaptive emotional responses. This study aimed to examine the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation among early childhood teachers. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 250 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using validated self-compassion and emotion regulation scales distributed via an online questionnaire. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). The findings indicate that teachers with higher self-compassion tend to demonstrate better emotion regulation. These results suggest the importance of incorporating self-compassion into teacher development programs to enhance emotional competence and professional well-being.

Keywords

Cross-sectional study, emotion regulation, early childhood teachers, self-compassion, teacher well-being,

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as a critical stage in human development, laying the foundation for children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Within this context, early childhood teachers play a central role not only as educators but also as emotional regulators, shaping the classroom climate and children's socio-emotional experiences. Recent studies emphasize that teaching in early childhood settings involves substantial emotional labor, as teachers must continuously respond to children's diverse needs, manage behavioral challenges, and maintain positive interactions under varying levels of stress (Agyapong et al., 2022; Kim & Asbury, 2020). These demands make emotion regulation an essential competency for early childhood teachers. Emotion regulation refers to the processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional reactions to achieve adaptive outcomes (Gross, 2015; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). In teaching contexts, effective emotion regulation allows teachers to remain calm, supportive, and responsive, even in challenging situations. Conversely, poor emotion regulation has been associated with emotional exhaustion, burnout, and decreased teaching effectiveness (Burić et al., 2021; Fathi et al., 2021). In early childhood classrooms, where interactions are often emotionally intense and unpredictable, the ability to regulate emotions becomes even more critical for sustaining both teacher well-being and instructional quality.

Recent research highlights that many teachers experience significant difficulties in managing their emotions, particularly in high-demand environments. For example, studies conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed increased levels of stress, emotional fatigue, and psychological distress among teachers, including those in early childhood education (Collie, 2021; Pressley, 2021). Beyond pandemic-related stressors, structural challenges such as workload, limited institutional support, and role ambiguity, further intensify emotional strain among teachers (García-Carmona et al., 2019; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2020). These findings suggest an urgent need to identify protective psychological factors that can support teachers in coping with emotional challenges and maintaining professional well-being.

One psychological resource that has gained increasing attention recently is self-compassion. Self-compassion refers to an individual's ability to treat themselves with kindness, recognize shared humanity, and maintain mindful awareness during difficult experiences (Neff, 2023). Contemporary studies have demonstrated that self-compassion is strongly associated with adaptive emotional functioning, resilience, and psychological well-being across various populations, including educators (Ferrari et al., 2019; Marsh et al., 2018). Teachers with higher levels of self-compassion are more likely to respond to stress with emotional balance rather than self-criticism, which, in turn, enhances their capacity to manage classroom challenges effectively.

Importantly, self-compassion not only supports individual well-being but also contributes to professional functioning in educational settings. Teachers who demonstrate higher self-compassion tend to exhibit greater patience, empathy, and emotional availability toward students, which are critical components of effective early childhood teaching (Jennings et al., 2019). Moreover, self-compassion has been linked to reduced levels of teacher burnout and increased job satisfaction, suggesting its role as a buffer against occupational stress

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(Babenko et al., 2018; Fathi et al., 2021). This indicates that fostering self-compassion may have both personal and professional benefits for educators.

Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests a significant relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation. Self-compassion has been found to facilitate adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, acceptance, and emotional awareness while reducing maladaptive strategies such as rumination and emotional suppression (Finlay-Jones, 2017; Inwood & Ferrari, 2018). From a theoretical perspective, self-compassion enhances individuals' ability to face negative emotional experiences without avoidance or over-identification, thereby promoting more balanced emotional responses (Neff, 2023). In educational settings, this relationship is particularly important, as self-compassionate teachers tend to exhibit greater emotional stability, improved interpersonal relationships, and higher levels of professional satisfaction (Bing et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of research, studies specifically focusing on early childhood teachers remain limited. Most recent research has examined general teacher populations or pre-service teachers, leaving a gap in understanding how self-compassion and emotion regulation interact within early childhood education contexts. This gap is notable, given that early childhood teachers often face unique emotional demands, including managing young children's dependency, emotional expressions, and behavioral regulation needs (Jeon et al., 2021). In addition, the relational nature of early childhood education requires teachers to consistently engage in emotionally responsive practices, which further intensifies the need for effective emotion regulation skills.

In addition, there is a lack of empirical research exploring these relationships in non-Western contexts, including Indonesia. Cultural values, social expectations, and educational systems may influence how teachers experience and regulate emotions, as well as how they practice self-compassion (Montero-Marin et al., 2018). In collectivist cultures, for instance, individuals may be more inclined to suppress personal emotional struggles to maintain social harmony, which can affect both emotion regulation strategies and self-compassion practices. Therefore, examining these constructs within the Indonesian context provides important insights into culturally grounded approaches to teacher well-being.

Recent literature increasingly recommends integrating psychological resources, such as self-compassion, into teacher education and professional development programs. Interventions focusing on mindfulness and self-compassion have shown promising results in improving teachers' emotional regulation, reducing stress, and enhancing overall well-being (Emerson et al., 2017; Roeser et al., 2012). These findings underscore the practical relevance of exploring self-compassion as a key factor in supporting teachers' emotional competence.

Based on these considerations, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation among early childhood teachers using a cross-sectional design. By identifying the strength and direction of this relationship, this study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on teacher well-being and emotional competence. The findings are expected to provide practical implications for integrating self-compassion-based approaches into teacher training and professional development programs, ultimately enhancing teachers' well-being and improving the quality of early childhood education.

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Methodology

Research design

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to examine relationships between variables at a single point in time (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2014). In this study, the design was used to investigate the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation among early childhood teachers.

Participants

The participants in this study were 250 early childhood teachers working at various early childhood education institutions. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria. The criteria included (1) actively working as early childhood teachers, (2) having at least one year of teaching experience, and (3) being willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics of participants (n = 250)*

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentages (%)
Gender	Female	230	92.0%
	Male	20	8.0%
Age	20–25 years	40	16.0%
	26–30 years	70	28.0%
	31–35 years	65	26.0%
	36–40 years	45	18.0%
	> 40 years	30	12.0%
Teaching Experience	1–3 years	60	24.0%
	4–6 years	80	32.0%
	7–10 years	65	26.0%
	> 10 years	45	18.0%
Educational Level	High School (SMA/SMK)	30	12.0%
	Diploma (D3)	50	20.0%
	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	169	67.6%
	Master's Degree (S2)	1	0.4%
Type of Institution	Public ECE Center	90	36.0%
	Private ECE Center	160	64.0%

The participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of age, teaching experience, and educational qualifications, providing a comprehensive overview of early childhood teachers' emotional and psychological conditions.

Instruments

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire consisting of two main scales:

1. Self-Compassion Scale
   Self-compassion was measured using an adapted version of the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) developed by Neff (2003) and updated in recent studies. The scale includes three main components: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Respondents rated each item using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater self-compassion.
2. Emotion Regulation Scale
   Emotion regulation was measured using an adapted emotion regulation scale based on the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2015). The scale assesses individuals' ability to manage emotional responses, including strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and emotional control. Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.
3. Validity and Reliability of Instruments
   Both instruments were translated and adapted to the Indonesian context through a standard translation and back-translation procedure. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the instruments.

Item validity was examined using Pearson product-moment correlation between each item score and the total score. The results showed that all items had correlation coefficients (r) higher than the critical value (r-table = 0.30), indicating that all items were valid and suitable for use in this study. A sample of the validity test results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Validity test results (sample)*

Item Codes	r-count	r-table	Status
SC1	0.52	0.30	Valid
SC2	0.61	0.30	Valid
SC3	0.48	0.30	Valid
ER1	0.55	0.30	Valid
ER2	0.63	0.30	Valid
ER3	0.50	0.30	Valid

Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results indicated that the self-compassion scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.89, while the emotion regulation scale showed a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.87. These values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating that both instruments have good internal consistency and are reliable for measuring the intended constructs. The reliability test results are presented in Table 3.

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Table 3. *Reliability test results*

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Self-Compassion	20	0.89	Reliable
Emotion Regulation	18	0.87	Reliable

These findings indicate that the instruments used in this study meet the psychometric requirements and are appropriate for further statistical analysis.

Data collection procedure

Data were collected using an online survey administered through Google Forms. The questionnaire link was distributed via teacher networks, social media platforms, and professional groups in early childhood education. This approach was chosen to reach participants efficiently across different institutions. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with brief information about the study's purpose and assurances regarding confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. Only those who agreed to participate proceeded to fill in the survey, indicating their informed consent. The data collection process took place over a defined period and remained open until the targeted number of responses (N = 250) was reached. Throughout this process, no identifying personal information was collected, ensuring that participants' responses remained anonymous.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using statistical software. Initially, descriptive statistics were calculated to provide an overview of participants' demographic characteristics and the general distribution of the main variables. These included measures such as mean scores and standard deviations. To examine the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. This method was considered appropriate given the study's objective of identifying the direction and strength of the association between the two variables. Statistical significance was determined using a threshold of $p < 0.05$. The strength of the relationship was interpreted using the correlation coefficient (r), with values closer to 1 indicating a stronger positive relationship. Before conducting the analysis, the data were checked to ensure they met the basic assumptions for a correlation analysis.

Findings

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to examine the overall distribution of self-compassion and emotion regulation among early childhood teachers. The results showed that the participants demonstrated moderate to high levels of both self-compassion and emotion regulation.

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Table 4. *Descriptive statistics of research variables (n = 250)*

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Categories
Self-Compassion	2.10	4.85	3.72	0.54	Moderate–High
Emotion Regulation	2.05	4.90	3.68	0.57	Moderate–High

As shown in Table 4, the mean self-compassion score was 3.72 (SD = 0.54), indicating that most teachers possess a relatively high level of self-kindness, mindfulness, and awareness of shared humanity. Similarly, the mean emotion regulation score was 3.68 (SD = 0.57), suggesting that participants generally have adequate ability to manage their emotional responses in teaching contexts.

Categorization of variables

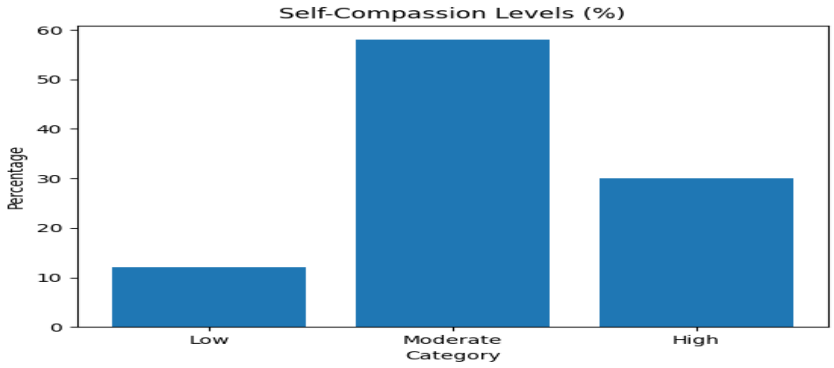
To provide a clearer picture, the data were categorized into three levels: low, moderate, and high.

Table 5. *Categorization of self-compassion and emotion regulation*

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Self-Compassion	Low	30	12.0%
	Moderate	145	58.0%
	High	75	30.0%
Emotion Regulation	Low	35	14.0%
	Moderate	140	56.0%
	High	75	30.0%

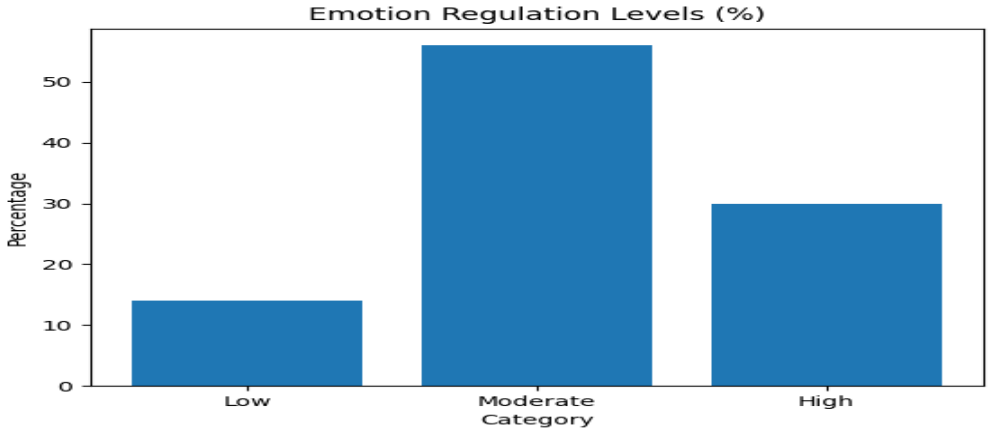
The categorization results indicate that most participants fall within the moderate category for both self-compassion (58.0%) and emotion regulation (56.0%). Approximately 30% of participants demonstrated high levels in both variables, while a smaller proportion showed low levels. These findings suggest that although most teachers have adequate emotional competencies, there is still room for improvement.

Figure 1. *Distribution of self-compassion levels among early childhood teachers*



The figure illustrates that most participants fall within the moderate category (58%), followed by high (30%) and low (12%).

Figure 2. *Distribution of emotion regulation levels among early childhood teachers*



The figure shows that most participants are in the moderate category (56%), followed by high (30%) and low (14%). The graphical representation further confirms that both self-compassion and emotion regulation are predominantly distributed within the moderate category. The similarity in distribution patterns between the two variables visually supports the correlation findings, suggesting a consistent relationship between self-compassion and emotional regulation among early childhood teachers.

Correlation analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation.

Table 6. *Pearson correlation analysis*

Variables	R-value	Sig. (p-value)	Interpretation
Self-Compassion ↔ Emotion Regulation	0.62	0.000	Strong Positive

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that higher levels of self-compassion are associated with better emotion regulation among early childhood teachers. The correlation coefficient suggests a strong relationship, indicating that self-compassion plays an important role in helping teachers manage their emotions effectively.

Visualization of data

The visual examination of the data provides additional insight into the distribution and relationship between the variables. The histogram of self-compassion scores suggests a generally normal distribution, with most participants clustered within the moderate to high

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range. A similar pattern is observed for emotion regulation, indicating that the majority of teachers demonstrate relatively consistent levels of emotional competence.

Furthermore, the scatter plot illustrates a clear upward trend, reflecting a positive linear relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation. As self-compassion scores increase, emotion regulation scores also tend to rise, suggesting a consistent pattern across participants. Although individual variations are present, the overall distribution of data points forms a reasonably linear pattern. This visual trend aligns with the statistical findings and provides additional support for a positive association between the two variables.

Discussion

Self-compassion and emotion regulation

The findings indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a moderate-to-strong association. In practical terms, teachers who report higher levels of self-compassion also tend to demonstrate a greater ability to manage their emotional responses in classroom settings. This relationship becomes particularly meaningful in early childhood education, where teachers are regularly required to respond to emotionally intense and unpredictable situations.

One possible explanation lies in how self-compassion influences internal emotional processing. Teachers who are more self-compassionate may be less likely to judge themselves harshly when facing difficulties and instead adopt a more balanced and accepting stance (Neff, 2023). This tendency may help reduce emotional escalation, allowing individuals to pause, reflect, and respond more thoughtfully. In contrast, individuals with lower self-compassion may experience stronger emotional reactions, such as frustration or self-doubt, which can interfere with effective regulation.

Another aspect worth considering is that self-compassion may create a sense of psychological safety within the individual. When teachers feel less threatened by their mistakes or limitations, they may be more open to reflecting on their experiences and adjusting their responses. This openness can support the development of more adaptive emotional strategies over time. However, it is important to emphasize that this relationship is not deterministic. Multiple interacting factors shape emotional regulation, and self-compassion is only one part of a broader psychological framework that includes emotional awareness, social support, and coping strategies.

Moderate emotional competence

The descriptive findings show that most participants fall within the moderate category for both self-compassion and emotion regulation. This suggests that teachers generally possess functional emotional skills, although these competencies may not yet be fully developed or consistently applied across situations. Emotional competence, in this sense, appears adequate for day-to-day functioning but still leaves room for improvement.

This pattern may reflect the complex nature of teaching in early childhood settings. Teachers are expected to manage not only their emotions but also the spontaneous, intense

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emotional expressions of young children. Such demands require continuous attention and regulation, which can gradually strain emotional resources (Burić et al., 2021; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015), potentially leading to burnout and reduced teaching effectiveness. Even when teachers have the necessary skills, maintaining them consistently can be challenging under conditions of fatigue or stress.

It is also important to interpret the moderate level carefully. Rather than indicating a deficiency, it may reflect a realistic balance between competence and contextual demands, suggesting that teachers are navigating the complexities of their roles while managing external pressures such as fatigue and stress. Emotional regulation is not a static skill; rather, it is a fluid process shaped by contextual variables. The variation observed among participants suggests that some teachers may have developed stronger coping strategies, while others may still be in the process of adapting. This reinforces the idea that emotional competence should be supported as an ongoing developmental process rather than viewed as a static outcome.

Self-compassion as a coping resource

The findings suggest that self-compassion may serve as an internal coping resource, helping teachers manage emotional challenges. Teachers who treat themselves with understanding and patience may be better able to navigate stressful situations without becoming overwhelmed. This internal resource becomes especially valuable in early childhood education, where emotional interactions occur frequently and require immediate responses.

From a theoretical perspective, self-compassion may facilitate the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and emotional awareness (Gross, 2015). For example, when faced with a disruptive classroom situation, a teacher with higher self-compassion may see it as a learning opportunity rather than a personal failure. This shift in interpretation can reduce emotional intensity and allow for more constructive action. Over time, such patterns may contribute to more stable emotional functioning.

Additionally, self-compassion may help buffer against the cumulative effects of stress. Teaching involves repeated exposure to emotionally demanding situations, and without effective coping mechanisms, such experiences can lead to burnout. By fostering a more forgiving, balanced internal dialogue, self-compassion may reduce the long-term impact of these stressors. However, it should not be viewed as a complete solution. External support systems, including collegial relationships and institutional policies, remain essential in shaping teachers' overall well-being, as they provide necessary resources and emotional backing that complement the benefits of self-compassion.

Cultural context

The relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation should also be interpreted within the Indonesian cultural context. Cultural values influence how individuals perceive and respond to emotional experiences, and these influences may shape the role of self-compassion in meaningful ways. In collectivist societies, maintaining social harmony is often prioritized, which can affect both emotional expression and regulation.

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Teachers may feel pressured to control or suppress negative emotions to maintain professional relationships and avoid conflict. While this approach can support social cohesion, it may also limit opportunities for authentic emotional processing, leading to increased stress and burnout among individuals who feel they cannot express their true feelings. In this context, self-compassion may provide an alternative pathway that allows individuals to acknowledge personal difficulties without disrupting social expectations (Montero-Marin et al., 2018). This balance may be particularly relevant for teachers who must navigate both personal and professional emotional demands, as they often face unique challenges in managing their own emotional well-being while also supporting their students' needs.

At the same time, cultural interpretations of self-compassion may differ. Some individuals may initially perceive self-compassion as overly self-focused, especially in environments that emphasize modesty and collective responsibility. This highlights the importance of culturally sensitive implementation. Rather than presenting self-compassion as an unfamiliar concept, it might be more effective to frame it within the context of prevailing cultural values, such as empathy, patience, and collective human experience.

Implications for teacher development

The findings suggest that self-compassion could be considered as one component in efforts to strengthen teachers' emotional competence. Although the study does not establish causality, the observed relationship suggests that self-compassion may be relevant to how teachers manage emotional demands. This opens the possibility of integrating self-compassion into teacher development initiatives.

Programs that incorporate mindfulness and self-compassion practices have shown potential to improve emotional regulation and reduce stress among educators (Emerson et al., 2017; Roeser et al., 2012). Such programs often focus on increasing awareness of emotional experiences and encouraging more balanced responses. In practice, such programs could involve reflective exercises, guided mindfulness sessions, or discussions about coping strategies in professional settings.

However, it is important to approach these implications with a balanced perspective. Enhancing individual skills is only one part of the solution. Teachers operate within broader institutional contexts that also influence their emotional experiences. High workloads, limited resources, and organizational pressures can undermine even well-developed coping skills. Therefore, efforts to support teachers should address both individual and systemic factors. Combining personal development with supportive working conditions is likely to produce more sustainable outcomes.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to determine causal relationships between self-compassion and emotion regulation. While a significant association was identified, it remains unclear whether self-compassion leads to better regulation, whether effective regulation enhances self-compassion, or whether other variables influence both. Longitudinal or experimental studies would help clarify these possibilities.

Second, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for response bias. Participants may have provided responses that reflect socially desirable behaviors rather than

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their actual experiences. This is particularly relevant in studies involving emotional and psychological constructs, as self-report measures can lead to skewed data that does not accurately capture participants' true feelings or behaviors. Future research could benefit from incorporating additional data sources, such as observations or qualitative interviews, to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample provides valuable insights, it may not fully represent all early childhood teachers. Expanding the sample across different regions and contexts would strengthen the applicability of future research. In addition, exploring other related variables, such as organizational support or teacher well-being, could provide a more complete picture of the factors influencing emotional competence, particularly in how these variables interact with the diverse experiences of early childhood teachers across various settings.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between self-compassion and emotion regulation among early childhood teachers using a cross-sectional design. The findings revealed a strong, significant positive association between the two variables, indicating that teachers with higher levels of self-compassion tend to demonstrate better emotion regulation. This highlights the important role of self-compassion as a psychological resource in supporting teachers' emotional competence.

In the context of early childhood education, where emotional demands are particularly intense, effective emotion regulation is essential for maintaining a positive learning environment and supporting children's socio-emotional development. The results of this study suggest that self-compassion can serve as an internal mechanism that helps teachers manage emotional challenges more adaptively, reducing emotional distress while enhancing professional functioning.

Furthermore, the results contribute to the growing literature on teacher well-being by emphasizing the relevance of self-compassion in non-Western contexts, particularly within the Indonesian educational setting. This underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches in promoting teachers' psychological resources.

In practice, this study emphasizes the need to integrate self-compassion-based interventions, such as mindfulness and emotional awareness training, into teacher education and professional development programs. Such efforts may not only improve teachers' emotional regulation skills but also enhance their overall well-being and teaching effectiveness.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, and non-random sampling technique. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ longitudinal or experimental designs, incorporate multi-method approaches, and involve more diverse samples to validate further and extend these findings.

In conclusion, fostering self-compassion among early childhood teachers represents a promising pathway to strengthen emotion regulation, promote teacher well-being, and ultimately improve the quality of early childhood education.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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