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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Effects of Reflection on Preschool Teacher Efficacy and Stress Related to Caring for Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

As the demand for childcare increases, the expectations placed on preschool teachers has also been increasing; this has proliferated stress and led to burnout among many preschool teachers. The literature on stress among preschool teachers consists of several contributors and associated factors. In this study, I focused on the stress caused by the difficulty in understanding and managing children with special needs and examined the effects of preschool teacher reflection on preschool teacher efficacy and stress related to understanding and managing children.

For preschool teacher efficacy, as reflected by preschool teachers themselves, neither self-consideration nor self-consciousness had an effect on preschool teacher efficacy. Regarding reflection on children, child analysis had a significant positive effect on preschool teacher efficacy but child detection did not. For reflection through others, gathering information from others had a significant negative effect on preschool teacher efficacy but using other people's information did not. Conversely, for stress related to understanding and managing children, regarding reflection on preschool teachers themselves, indicated self-consideration had a significant positive effect on stress but self-consciousness did not. For reflection on children, child analysis had a significant negative effect on stress but child detection did not. Regarding reflection through others, neither using other people's information nor gathering information from others had an effect on preschool teachers' stress related to understanding and managing children.

These results suggest that preschool teachers' child analysis can lead to cyclical reflection through the awareness of essential aspects, such as the ALACT model proposed by Korthagen (2001). Further, it was suggested that this kind of reflection may improve the sense of efficacy among preschool teachers and reduce stress related to understanding and managing children with various issues and characteristics, leading to high-quality childcare.

<Key-words>

Preschool Teacher, Reflection, Preschool Teacher Efficacy, Stress, Children with Special Needs

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I. Introduction

In recent years, although there has been a decline in birth rates, the demand for childcare and the expectations of preschool teachers has been increasing because of the growing numbers of working parents, integrated childcare, and social demands for childcare support services^{1,2}). Besides the increased time constraints of extended day care and weekend care, diverse parent and child needs have increased the stress on preschool teachers³).

Many researchers have investigated stress among preschool teachers and identified numerous contributors and associated factors, such as difficulties in understanding and managing children, human relations at the workplace, heavy workloads, and lack of time^{1,3-5}). Matsumura classified stress among childcare providers into three categories: work environment and workplace relationships, dealing with children, and gaps between knowledge and the workplace⁶). In this study, I focused on difficulties in managing children.

Surveys have found that the rate of children with special needs enrolled in preschools with no specified diagnosis is 83%–88%^{7,8}). Researchers have characterized such children as follows: “There may be a disability but no diagnosis has been made, or it is difficult to know whether the behavior shown by the child is due to the disability or the environment”⁹). Further, researchers have endeavored to understand how to appropriately respond to these children with special needs¹⁰⁻¹³) because caring for children with undiagnosed developmental disability significantly contributes to burnout in preschool teacher¹⁴). Specifically, although there are similar challenges with developmental disabilities, individual children exhibit individual manifestations of their disabilities, making it even more difficult for preschool teachers to determine how best to manage their feeling¹⁵), which in turn increases their stress.

High untreated stress among preschool teachers of children with special needs can cause not only physical discomfort, such as back pain and fatigue, but also mental fatigue^{2,3}). Furthermore, Akada found that the stress of preschool teacher lowered quality of care¹⁶). Therefore, I believe it is necessary to examine factors that contribute to preschool teacher stress as well as those that reduce stress and improve their coping skills and stress responses.

Watanabe and Aoyama confirmed that preschool teacher expertise affects preschool teachers’ stress¹⁷). It has been found that the expertise of childcare providers can be improved through the accumulation of childcare practice; however, according to Ueyama and Sugimura, appropriate teaching methods, knowledge, and skills cannot be acquired with more years of experience¹⁸). Rather, improving expertise requires the ability to reflect on and learn from experience¹⁹⁻²¹). This suggests that reflection can increase the expertise of preschool teachers, enable them to assess children with various issues more accurately, and reduce stress related to understanding and managing children.

Additionally, Seki and Kodama identified that reflection had a positive impact on improving self-efficacy and self-esteem; although the subjects of their study were not preschool teachers, the results suggest that reflection can increase preschool teacher efficacy²²). In other words, reflection is a factor that should be emphasized because it affects both stress related to understanding and managing children and the improvement of preschool teacher efficacy.

Tsumori stated that adding consideration to introspection is reflection²³). Reflection plays an important role in the practice and growth of preschool teachers²⁴). Sugimura et al. identified three types of reflection among preschool teachers: reflection on the preschool teachers themselves, reflection on the children, and reflection through others²⁴⁻²⁶). Sugimura et al.'s factor analysis findings revealed that reflection on the preschool teachers themselves had a two-factor structure of self-consideration and self-consciousness, reflection on the children had a two-factor structure of child analysis and child detection, and reflection through others had a two-factor structure in terms of using other people's information and gathering information from others²⁴⁻²⁶). Watanabe and Aoyama used a scale that measured reflection as expertise and analyzed its relationship with preschool teacher stress, but they excluded reflection through others¹⁷). However, Ueyama and Sugimura described the possibility that reflection through interaction with others can help preschool teachers rethink their objective views on children and childcare¹⁸).

Regarding reflection, preschool teachers must focus on interacting with the children in their care, and reflection on their actions is usually difficult in the moment²⁷). Additionally, childcare activities are always immediate, contingent, and situation specific; therefore, it is often difficult to predict and plan completely in advance²⁸). However, as Sugimura et al. indicated, in a narrow sense, reflection means looking back during and after practice, and it may not include prospecting before practice. Nevertheless, because the activities of planning and forecasting are often based on reflection, it is good to consider them without separating them from reflection²⁴).

Meanwhile, in teacher education, Korthagen^{29,30}) proposed the ALACT model (1. Action → 2. Looking back on the action → 3. Awareness of essential aspects → 4. Creating alternative methods of action → 5. Trial), wherein action and reflection occur alternatively, to explain the ideal process of experiential learning. In actual teacher education, reflection is the foundation of the ALACT model²⁹⁻³⁰). The act of reflection is not piecemeal in advance or after the fact; rather, it is defined as assessing the child with an outlook before practice, reflecting on the action, and developing childcare activities in a cyclical manner.

In consideration of the inconsistent findings I have just discussed, it is necessary to examine more specifically the relationships between reflection and preschool teacher efficacy and stress related to understanding and managing children. In light of the above, this study aims to test how the sub factors of reflection affect preschool teacher efficacy

and preschool teacher stress related to understanding and managing children. Thus, I tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Reflection sub factors have a positive impact on increasing preschool teacher efficacy.

H2: Reflection sub factors have a positive impact on reducing stress related to understanding and managing children.

II. Methods

1. Survey Targets and Timing

The survey target was 211 preschool teachers (187 women, 23 men, and 1 unknown) who participated in the training, and I asked them to respond questionnaire online after the training. Because the training content was related to counseling mindset, it was not expected to affect the results of the questionnaire. I conducted the study in July 2021. Overall, 201 respondents were included in the analysis, excluding 6 respondents with incomplete responses and 4 who showed ceiling/floor effects in their responses. The respondents' mean age was 32.9 ($SD = 9.15$), and years of service ranged from 1 to 42 years, with a mean of 10.12 ($SD = 7.77$).

2. Survey Procedures

I distributed a series of individual scales online via Google Forms to participants recruited from an online survey panel. The survey was conducted in accordance with our university's code of ethics, which required informed consent before a respondent could complete the survey. Our ethical considerations encompassed the following: The first page of the survey included the following information: (1) I would strictly control each respondent's data and not report any respondent's personal information to any outside parties, (2) I would be using the survey results only for research purposes, including publishing findings in conference presentations and academic papers, (3) I would destroy all survey results after a certain period of time beyond the study's completion, and (4) every participant had the right to stop answering the questionnaire at any time with no consequences.

3. Survey Details

1) Face sheet

The Google Forms survey face sheet collected the following basic preschool teacher attributes: age, gender, years of service, experience with children with disabilities, time spent participating in annual training sessions, and time spent interacting with parents.

2) Reflection

To measure preschool teacher reflection, I used Sugimura et al.'s²⁴⁾ scale, which is divided into the three categories: reflection on the preschool teachers themselves(11 items),reflection on the children(10 items),and reflection through others(11 items). Respondents rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = rarely to 5 = always; higher scores indicate greater preschool teacher reflection.

For reflection on the preschool teachers themselves, six items were related to self-consideration (e.g., "After talking with children, I sometimes consider whether my arguments were appropriate") and five to self-consciousness (e.g., "When talking with children, I sometimes pay attention to my own attitude"). Reflection on children comprised six items on child analysis (e.g., "I sometimes think about my child's future growth") and four items on child detection (e.g., "I sometimes pay attention to my child's behavior when I am with my child"). For reflection through others, six items were related to using other people's information (e.g., "I sometimes revise my own childcare policy after talking with others about childcare") and five related to gathering information from others (e.g., "I sometimes watch carefully how children in other classes interact with preschool teachers").

3) Preschool teacher efficacy

I measured efficacy with Miki and Sakurai's childcare worker efficacy scale, which was based on the Teacher Efficacy Scale³¹⁾. Respondents rated each scale on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = hardly agree, 5 = strongly agree); higher scores indicate higher personal efficacy.

4) Preschool teacher stress

To measure stress among children's preschool teachers, I used Akada's¹⁶⁾ Preschool Teacher Stress Rating Scale; specifically, for the purpose of this study, I extracted stress related to the understanding and managing children sub factor. Respondents answered these items on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very much to 5 = not at all; higher scores indicate higher stress.

To reduce the burden on the survey participants, I shortened the measurement scales as follows: I used 32 items with factor loadings of .40 or higher for reflection, 9 items with loadings of .40 or higher for stress related to understanding and managing children, and 7 items with loadings of .50 or higher for preschool teacher efficacy. The factor loadings for each item of the aforementioned scale were taken from the figures produced by previous studies.

The analysis was performed with IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25).

III. Results

1. Reflection, preschool teacher efficacy, and stress related to understanding and managing children

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of each sub factor of reflection, preschool teacher efficacy, and child management stress.

<Table 1> Means and Standard Deviations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
self-consideration	3.82	.61
self-consciousness	3.84	.62
child analysis	3.87	.53
child detection	3.95	.58
use of other people's information	3.71	.56
gathering information from others	3.15	.68
preschool teacher efficacy	3.08	.58
stress related to understanding and managing children	2.51	.57

2. Relationships between reflection and preschool teacher efficacy

To examine the relationships between the sub factors of reflection and preschool teacher efficacy, I calculated the correlation coefficients using the means for each sub factor. Table 2 presents these findings. Table 2 shows significant positive correlations of preschool teacher efficacy with self-consideration ($r = .15, p < .05$), self-consciousness ($r = .32, p < .001$), child analysis ($r = .39, p < .001$), child detection ($r = .24, p < .001$) and use of other people's information ($r = .16, p < .05$).

<Table 2> Correlations Between Reflection Sub factors, Preschool Teacher Efficacy, and Stress Related to Understanding and Managing Children

	self-consideration	self-consciousness	child analysis	child detection	use of other people's information	gathering information from others	stress related to understanding and managing children
preschool teacher efficacy	.15*	.32**	.39**	.24**	.16*	-.01	.44**
stress related to understanding and managing children	-.04	.11	-.17*	-.11	-.03	-.01	

** $p < .001$ * $p < .05$

Next, to examine the effects on preschool teacher efficacy, I performed multiple regression with stepwise method using the scores of the six sub factors as the independent variables and preschool teacher efficacy score as the dependent variable; Table 3 shows these results. Regarding reflection on preschool teachers themselves, neither self-consideration nor self-consciousness had an effect on preschool teacher efficacy. For reflection on children, child analysis had a significant positive effect on preschool teacher efficacy ($\beta=.528, p<.001$) but child detection did not. Regarding reflection through others, gathering information from others had a significant negative effect on preschool teacher efficacy ($\beta = -.262, p < .001$) but using other people's information had no effect.

<Table 3> Multiple Regression Effects of Reflection Sub factors on Preschool Teacher Efficacy and Stress Related to Understanding and Managing Children

	self-consideration	self-consciousness	child analysis	child detection	use of other people's information	gathering information from others	F / R ²
preschool teacher efficacy	-.132	.096	.528***	.068	.023	-.262***	25.599 / .205***
stress related to understanding and managing children	.301**	.149	-.370***	.024	-.091	.043	7.936 / .272***

*** $p<.001$ ** $p<.01$

3. Relationships between reflection and stress related to understanding and managing children

The correlation coefficient findings in Table 2 show that in the relationships between the reflection sub factors and preschool teachers' stress related to understanding and managing children, child analysis had a significant negative correlation with child management stress ($r = -.17, p < .05$). In other words, preschool teachers who could analyze their children better reported less stress related to managing them.

Table 3 presents the multiple regression analysis with stepwise method findings for the contributions of each reflection sub factor on preschool teacher stress related to understanding and managing children. Table 3 shows that for reflection on preschool teachers themselves, self-consciousness had no effect on stress related to understanding and managing children but self-consideration had a significant positive effect ($\beta = .301, p < .01$). Regarding reflection on children, child detection had no effect on stress related to understanding and managing children but child analysis had a significant negative effect ($\beta = -.370, p < .001$). For reflection through others, neither using other people's information nor gathering information from others had an effect on reducing preschool teachers' stress related to understanding and managing children.

IV. Discussion

1. Hypothesis 1 testing

In the multiple regression analysis of the six reflection sub factors and their contributions to preschool teacher efficacy, I found that child analysis (reflection on the child) had positive impacts on preschool teacher efficacy and gathering information from others (reflection through others) had negative effects. Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

Based on these findings, I connect child analysis to the ALACT model's awareness of essential aspects^{29,30}). In other words, carefully observing children's behaviors and changes allows us to better understand their needs, and through cyclical assessment processes, such as the ALACT model, preschool teachers can formulate long-term childcare activities tailored to our understanding of our children's unique characteristics. It is possible that through this kind of reflection, the preschool teachers in this study can interact more smoothly with the children and promote high-quality, tailored activities such that these skills in turn increase the preschool teachers' efficacy.

Conversely, collecting information from others might not increase reflection through awareness of essential aspects of caring for children with special needs. Preschool teachers can collect information by carefully observing how other preschool teachers interact with their children; however, it is not always possible to meaningfully apply this information. Sometimes, observation of others can lead to unconscious comparisons and feelings of deficiency, and under emotional exhaustion, reflection becomes rumination. In turn, ruminations, which are motivated by threats and losses to the self³²), have negative impacts on self-efficacy and self-esteem²²), which could have led to the present results.

2. Hypothesis 2 testing

In the multiple regression analysis of the six reflection sub factors and their contributions to stress related to understanding and managing children, child analysis (reflection on children) had a negative impact on child management stress and self-consideration (reflection on preschool teacher themselves) had a positive impact. The higher the score on the "stress related to understanding and managing children" scale, the higher the stress. In other words, the results indicate that stress may be reduced by "child analysis," which has a negative impact on stress related to understanding and managing children, and that stress may be increased through "self-consideration," which has a positive impact on stress related to understanding and managing children. Thus, this finding partially supports H2.

From the aforementioned findings, I infer that when preschool teachers reflect as they analyze the children in their care, before, during, and after interactions with the children, their cyclical reflections increase their awareness of essential aspects of caring for the children. In turn, better understanding these essential aspects should allow for a more

accurately assessment of the individual needs of children with special needs, which will increase the efficacy of caring for them. Preschool teachers' cyclical reflection processes also increase their overall experience and expertise, which could decrease the stress related to managing children with special care needs.

Conversely, and as was the case with preschool teacher efficacy, preschool teacher self-consideration did not have an impact on preschool teachers' stress related to managing their children with special needs. Self-consideration does not mean that preschool teachers consciously pay attention to their own words and actions; rather, it refers to their thinking about their own ways of being, the impacts of their words and actions on children, and their feelings in dealings with children. I contend that excessive self-consideration can lead to questioning one's abilities and a decrease in self-confidence and efficacy, which then makes the process of reflection on the learning process stagnant; it is thought that it became more and more difficult to carry out childcare activities. Given that Akada¹⁶⁾ found that preschool teacher efficacy alleviates preschool teacher stress, I think it is reasonable that the decreased efficacy and self-confidence from heightened self-consideration would likely increase stress related to caring for and managing children with special needs.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Studies

The aforementioned results suggest that among the acts of reflection performed by preschool teacher, "child analysis" can lead to cyclical reflection through awareness of essential aspects, such as the ALACT model proposed by Korthagen^{29,30)}. Furthermore, this kind of reflection may help preschool teachers acquire the skills to learn from their own experiences, improve their ability to continue growing, enhance their sense of efficacy, and reduce the stress caused by the difficulty of dealing with and understanding children with various issues and characteristics, including children with special needs.

However, although I did establish the relationships between preschool teacher reflection and efficacy and stress related to managing children with special needs, this study did not examine any potential mediating effects of preschool teacher efficacy in the relationship between reflection and stress related to understanding and managing children. Additionally, because preschool teachers' years of experience is an important indicator of expertise¹⁸⁾, it is necessary to further examine the relationships between reflection, efficacy, and stress and preschool teachers' background, including age, work experience, and experience in caring for children with disabilities.

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