



THE MODERATING EFFECT OF AGE ON PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' TRAIT EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN GREECE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESCHOOL HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

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Preschool teachers play a significant role in nurturing the social and emotional development of young children. Moreover, their own social and emotional skills can influence how they instruct their pupils in emotional intelligence (EI). This study aimed to examine the individual dimensions of trait emotional intelligence (TEI) for preschool teachers working in Ioannina, the capital city of Epirus in northwestern Greece, using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue–SF). The mean EI score of the participants was $4.98(\pm 0.57)$, with a small number having EI scores either below 4 (1.61%) or above 6 (1.76%), while the majority had a mean EI score between 4–5 (49.18%) and 5–6 (47.54%). Although no effect of age or experience on overall EI was found, age was negatively correlated with emotionality on the one hand and positively with sociability on the other. This trend toward a moderate increase in sociability as teachers grow older may reflect their different backgrounds and experiences. Educational administrators should direct resources toward safeguarding and enhancing the preschool teachers' EI at all stages of their careers.

Contribution/Originality: This study establishes the effect of age on certain aspects of preschool teachers' emotional intelligence in Greece. The results can be used for future developments and human resources management, particularly for monitoring, safeguarding, and enhancing preschool teachers' EI at all stages of their careers.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Greece, preschool education starts at an early age in nursery schools (either infant/child care centers or child care centers) that provide both day care and education for up to compulsory primary school age. Since the 2018–2019 school year, compulsory preschool education from 4 years of age has been implemented under Law 4521/2018 and will be completed in all municipalities by the 2020–2021 school year.

Preschool teachers are all graduates trained and qualified to work specifically in nursery schools; however, several studies indicate the potential psychological and educational benefits of improving the quality of preschool education in Greece (Kelesidou *et al.*, 2017; Birbili and Christodoulou, 2018; Grammatikopoulos *et al.*, 2018). In particular, emotional intelligence (EI) is emphasized as a significant factor in enhancing teachers', including preschool, performance (Cassidy *et al.*, 2017; Tuluhan and Yalcinkaya, 2018).

The concept of emotional intelligence was preceded by the concept of social intelligence: “the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls—to act wisely in human relations” (Thorndike, 1920, p.

228). Both emotional and social intelligence are viewed as significant personality traits, reflecting empathy—the ability to understand and cooperate with others (Gardner, 1993).

EI refers to the ability to acknowledge the emotions of not only themselves but also others, in addition to controlling their own feelings. For example, EI indicates how well an individual can perceive, assess, and express emotion, access or generate feelings, and understand and regulate emotion, resulting in emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

There are different approaches (models) to the concept of EI, including ability, mixed/emotional, social competence, and trait models. According to Mayer *et al.* (2008), these models can be categorized as either self-report or ability EI. The first conceptualizes EI as non-cognitive traits that can be self-assessed while the second visualizes it as cognitive ability that can be measured by tasks involving the cognitive processing of emotional information.

Depending on the model selected, EI can be viewed as either an array of non-cognitive skills that can enhance the ability to cope in a range of environmental challenges (Bar-On, 1997) or a sense of self and social awareness (Goleman, 1995,1998).

Boyatzis *et al.* (2000) pointed out that EI is composed of elements grouped into four clusters: (i) skills in recognizing and monitoring feelings, (ii) skills such as emotional control, (iii) skills related to resisting impulses, and (iv) skills around interacting with others.

According to Mayer and Salovey's EI definition, ability improves with age, and one feature of emotionally intelligent people is their potential to satisfactorily convey and talk about their feelings, and successfully reframe their emotions (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Mayer *et al.*, 2000). Further, Petrides *et al.* (2007) emphasize that EI is a component of personality—trait EI (TEI).

The TEI model (Petrides and Furnham, 2001) is a combination of personality traits and emotionally related abilities that can be evaluated through self-assessment questionnaires and rating scales (Drigas and Papoutsis, 2019). It is the ability to generate, express, think over, and manage emotion, and fostering emotional and intellectual growth through the development of such skills as the conscious adaptation of emotions in different situations, adversity, and social scenarios (Freudenthaler *et al.*, 2008).

With regard to preschool education, TEI aids children's social and emotional development, enabling them to form effective social relationships and achieve emotional resilience and control. It is thus essential for preschool teachers in terms of child development, perceiving their feelings, and handling sensitive information for cognitive development (Mavroveli *et al.*, 2007).

TEI comprises the scores of the well-being, emotionality, self-control, and sociability dimensions, and is therefore based on well-established personality dimensions, among others, with the aim of capturing all affect-related personality traits. As such, it deals with the self-perceived ability to understand, manage, and express emotions, and consequently adapt to different situations while maintaining well-being (Petrides *et al.*, 2016).

As preschool years are considered a crucial period for the development of important lifelong abilities, such as attachment, social competence, and emotional control (Bodrova and Leong, 2007). As such, preschool teachers should act as a model for positive behavior, demonstrating adequate levels of EI (Ciucci *et al.*, 2015; Whitaker *et al.*, 2015), empathy, and sensitivity toward others (Molina *et al.*, 2019).

According to Castillo *et al.* (2017), teaching is one of the most stressful jobs, although the positive impact enthusiastic teachers on learners makes their work less stressful. Such positivity sustains enthusiastic teachers during difficult times.

Consequently, preschool teachers, specifically their social and emotional skills, play a significant role in the social and emotional development of their young pupils (Denham *et al.*, 2012). Preschool teachers' emotional resilience is likewise important for not only their own personal and professional well-being but also their pupils'

well-being and development (Molina *et al.*, 2019). In addition, EI appears to be a priority for employers in personnel selection and training (Nafukho and Muyia, 2014), including educational organizations.

Penrose *et al.* (2007) state that EI is essential in helping preschool teachers toward self-efficacy, self-control, and empathy to effectively motivate their pupils and communicate with parents. The potential benefits of improving teachers' EI include not only enhancing their efficacy and well-being (Vesely *et al.*, 2013) but also reducing professional burnout (Chan, 2006; Mérida-López and Extremera, 2017). Several studies have pointed out that emotional competence, such as EI, play an important role in dealing with stressful teaching conditions (Caires *et al.*, 2012; Day and Hong, 2016).

In conclusion, EI is crucial to teachers' success (Vesely *et al.*, 2013; Amirian and Behshad, 2016; Marinaki *et al.*, 2017; Mérida-López and Extremera, 2017). Therefore, to improve teachers' effectiveness and well-being, several countries have introduced special courses to enhance teachers' EI (Tuluhan and Yalcinkaya, 2018). Although EI is acquired and refined throughout life (Petrides *et al.*, 2016), teachers' current status must be evaluated to determine whether further improvements is required. To bridge the current gap in the literature regarding preschool teachers' TEI in Greece, this study aims to undertake such an assessment in northwestern Greece and determine the possible effect of demographic parameters.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted out in in the nursery schools of Ioannina, the capital city of the largest regional unit, also called Ioannina, in the Epirus Region of northwestern Greece. By means of randomized sampling, questionnaires were distributed to 65 preschool teachers across 25 nursery schools during a pilot study, along with information about its purpose and a reassurance that no identifying details of participants would be published. Only complete questionnaires (n=61; return rate: 93.84%) were included in the final analysis, which were all from women, whose age ranged from 24 to 64 years old with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 30 years.

TEI was measured using the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue–SF) from Petrides and Furnham (2001, 2003, 2006), which comprises 30 items on global TEI. It is based on the long form (TEIQue-LF), a 153-item questionnaire using 15 subscales that takes 25 minutes to complete.

The *TEIQue-SF* assesses the four EI traits located on the lower levels of the personality hierarchy: well-being (six items), self-control (six items), emotionality (eight items), and sociability (six items); the remaining four items contributed to the cumulative TEI score. This study also adopted the methodology described by Petrides and Furnham (2001) and Petrides *et al.* (2007) as self-report inventories, whereby teachers answered questions about themselves, using a 7-point scale

Using SPSS Version 14.01, the results were analyzed and tested for normal distribution: the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to investigate the relationships between the EI scores and demographic parameters, while ANOVA was used to evaluate the differences between teachers of different ages and years of experience. Results were considered significant if the p-values were below 0.05.

3. RESULTS

Considerably high EI scores (mean score 4.98 ± 0.57) were observed: Table 1 shows a small proportion of participants had EI scores either below 4 (1.61%) or above 6 (1.76%), while the majority had mean EI scores between 4 and 5 (49.18%) and 5 and 6 (47.54%).

Table-1. Dimensions of trait emotional intelligence for pre-school teachers in Ioannina, NW Greece.

| Parameter | Well-Being | Self-Control | Emotionality | Sociability | Global trait EI |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Min | 2.83 | 2.33 | 3.13 | 2.66 | 4.00 |
| Max | 6.83 | 6.66 | 6.63 | 6.66 | 6.53 |
| Average | 5.54 (± 0.79) | 4.55 (± 0.90) | 5.23 (± 0.82) | 4.26 (± 0.91) | 4.98 (± 0.57) |

Similarly, all four EI traits scored high values: the highest was well-being (5.54), followed by emotionality (5.23) and self-control (4.55), with sociability being the lowest (4.26).

Internal consistency was revealed by both the high global (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$) and four EI trait scores: well-being (6 items, $\alpha = 0.88$), emotionality (8 items, $\alpha = 0.82$), sociability (6 items, $\alpha = 0.79$), and self-control (6 items, $\alpha = 0.75$).

An ANOVA test was performed on the global EI trait and showed no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between three age groups, as presented in Figure 1. Likewise, there was no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between three periods of work experience, depicted in Figure 2. The results also indicated that while emotionality decreased, sociability increased with age (Table 2).

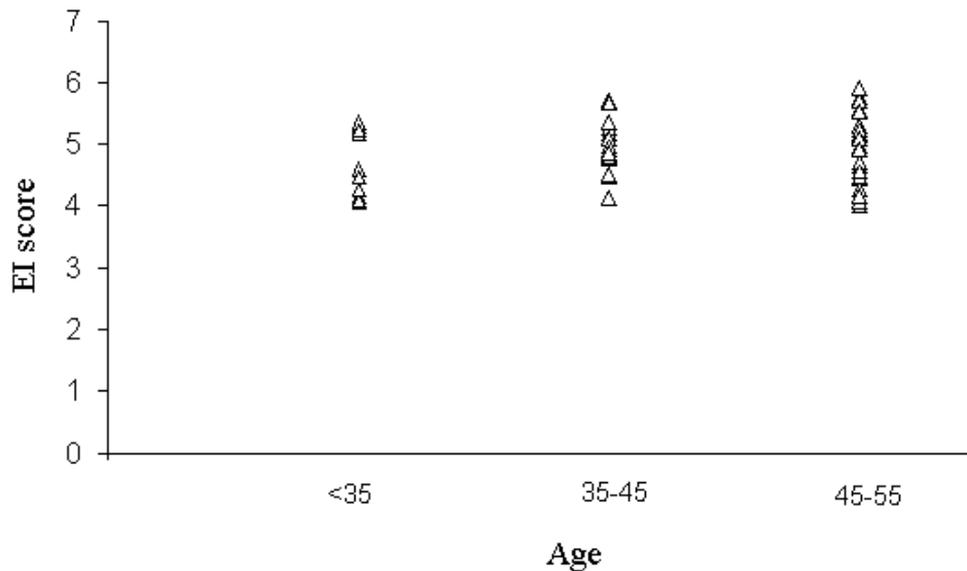


Figure-1. Emotional intelligence plotted against three age groups of teachers.

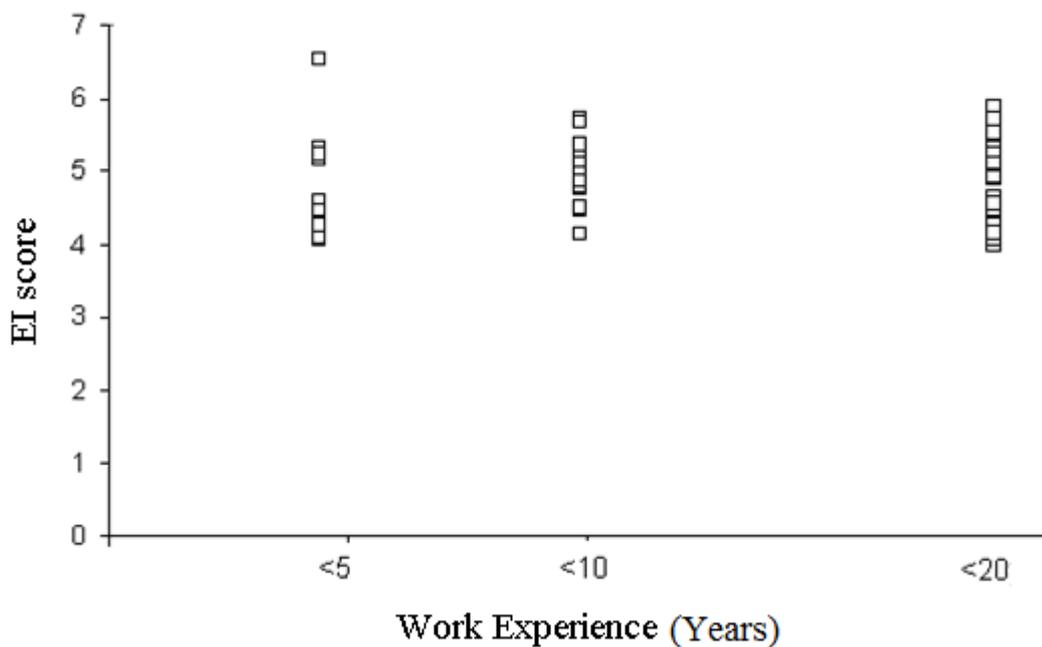


Figure-2. Emotional intelligence plotted against teachers with three periods of work experience (<5, <10, and <20 years).

Table-2. Pearson correlation coefficients between age of preschool teachers and emotionality and sociability. (Only dimensions showing significant correlation are presented.)

| | Emotionality | Sociability |
|-----|------------------|-----------------|
| Age | -0.029 (p<0.001) | 0.291 (p<0.001) |

4. DISCUSSION

TEI is essential for preschool teachers to support the emotional and social development of their pupils: helping young children to interact positively by sharing their opinions while respecting those of others.

A teacher's approach enables children to recognize and deal with emotions, while supportive language and gestures helps them express their emotions, all of which facilitates early childhood development (Nelis *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, teachers can encourage awareness by appropriately timed, verbally expressed emotions to point out possible outcomes (Pant and Yadav, 2016).

Teachers can also influence children through their response to and explanation of a child's mood, which assists them to connect with their feelings (Fernandez-Berrocal *et al.*, 2006) and encourages childhood motivation and social and emotional development. Consequently, sufficiently developed children can cope with negative emotions and resolve problems.

In addition, TEI is related to job satisfaction and motivation to adopt structure-based and child-centered learning approaches. Therefore, teachers should be able to identify and address their own personal and professional development needs so that, together with classroom setting, activities, and management strategies, they can support children's social and emotional development (Mestre *et al.*, 2006).

High EI scores correlate positively with teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and their job satisfaction (Yin, 2015), which demonstrates EI's protective effect against professional and occupational stress, and depersonalization (Mérida-López and Extremera, 2017). In this study, the results indicated that the participants had high levels of TEI. Furthermore, their high scores on all four EI traits were comparable with those reported from teachers working at higher educational levels (Marinaki *et al.*, 2017). Scoring highly on well-being and emotionality may help teachers be more successful; both EI traits are significant to preschool teachers' effectiveness (Cassidy *et al.*, 2017). In addition, well-being is associated with providing good-quality physical education, due to inclusive and active teaching practices (Shahzad and Bagum, 2012).

EI may (Shahin and Nasser, 2011) or may not (Nikoopour *et al.*, 2012) vary according to demographic parameters, such as age and work experience. The results of this study indicated that while the teachers' EI trait scores may vary according to some demographic variables, those for TEI did not vary with age or experience. The same outcome has been reported in other studies as well (Cakan and Altun, 2005).

The Pearson correlation coefficients for the four EI traits indicated that age affected emotionality and sociability.

The relationship between age and emotionality showed a negative correlation ($r=-0.029$: reducing as teachers grew older. However, teachers' emotionality plays a significant role in children's educational and emotional development. It enables teachers to help children understand their emotions (Brackett *et al.*, 2011) and how to control and manage those emotions in various social situations, so encouraging cognitive development. Evidently, self-control is crucial when dealing with children. This EI trait is a subjective measure of emotional experience and how teachers interpret emotions and adapt to various conditions in childhood development, irrespective of their attitude toward the concept of EI (Petrides, 2009). Nevertheless, neither self-control nor well-being were significantly correlated with overall EI.

With regard to sociability, a moderating effect ($r=0.291$) is exerted, increasing as teachers grow older (Stamatopoulou *et al.*, 2016), which could compensate for the negative effect of other parameters on overall EI.

Sociability involves the relationship between the working and personal lives. This EI trait enables teachers to understand and use emotional information on children that will influence their job performance. The daily processes

of preschool education includes various emotional experiences, such as a child leaving their parents and learning to take their turn and share toys (Hubscher-Davidson, 2016). A teacher's social competence therefore enables them to support children in engaging with others and managing certain behaviors and cognitive actions, developing their socialization (McGrath and Huntington, 2007).

In Greece, formal undergraduate and robust pre-service training of preschool teachers shows positive results for their EI. In addition, sociability is expected to improve with maturity (Goleman, 1995), which may also reflect different backgrounds, experiences, and formal education. For example, different generations of teachers may have received different formal training, shaped a different culture, system of beliefs, and professional attitudes, contributing to the age-related variability in sociability observed in this study.

Although teachers in Greece experience little burnout and considerable job satisfaction, working conditions can affect their well-being and lead to emotional stress and burnout (Tsigilis *et al.*, 2006; Anastasiou and Papakonstantinou, 2014). Nevertheless, EI can ameliorate the level of teachers' burnout (Chan, 2006) and enhance job satisfaction (Mousavi *et al.*, 2012). Thus, certain personality traits, such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional control, sociability, and well-being, influence teachers' performance and professionalism (Cakan and Altun, 2005; Pool, 2017).

Training teachers to enhance their EI through pre- and in-service training is possible (Fer, 2004; Vesely *et al.*, 2014; Dolev and Leshem, 2016; Hodzic *et al.*, 2018; Mattingly and Kraiger, 2019), and they are already participating in such programs to improve other professional skills. Moreover, distance learning programs offer the same opportunities to teachers in remote locations (Hlapanis and Dimitracopoulou, 2007; Kalantzi *et al.*, 2016; Zervas, 2016). Consequently, the infrastructure exists to implement training programs for enhancing their EI. In fact, EI training for many professionals, including teachers, has been successful for many years in several countries (Cherniss and Adler, 2000; Mattingly and Kraiger, 2019).

EI is a significant factor in effective human resources management. In terms of organizational effectiveness and excellence (Drigas and Papoutsis, 2019), it is associated with corporate development, team and leadership effectiveness, and job performance (Goleman *et al.*, 2002; Van Rooy and Viswesvaran, 2004; Elflein, 2005; Chang *et al.*, 2012), particularly in emotionally demanding jobs (Mikolajczak *et al.*, 2007). Such is the preschool teachers' role, spending considerable time and interacting physically and emotionally with children, which means EI is a desirable personality trait (Cejudo and López-Delgado, 2017), especially with its positive effect on professional satisfaction (Singh and Kumar, 2016).

A review of the current literature reveals that a successful human resources policy should include EI in personnel selection and training (Nafukho and Muyia, 2014; Pant and Yadav, 2016; Pool, 2017; Mattingly and Kraiger, 2019). Further, successful organizations implement such policies to improve their workforce's EI and so improve their job performance and satisfaction (Pant and Yadav, 2016; Drigas and Papoutsis, 2019).

There are several reasons for assessing, monitoring, and even attempting to improve teachers' EI: in addition to the expected benefits on job performance and satisfaction, it can improve teachers' attitudes and effectiveness (Li *et al.*, 2018), as well as minimizing the possibility of professional burnout. There is evidence that teachers working at all educational levels may suffer occupational stress, (Kokkinos, 2000; Panagopoulos *et al.*, 2014, 2016; Ismail *et al.*, 2019; Perrone *et al.*, 2019) but can be ameliorated by their level of EI (Chan, 2006).

Reducing occupational stress is a priority for successful human resources management (Anastasiou and Papakonstantinou, 2014; Pool, 2017), because it is highly likely that at some stage in their career, teachers will experience occupational stress that could negatively affect their job performance. However, EI apparently plays a protective and preventive role in relation to the development of working conditions that result in burnout. For instance, it facilitates teachers' interactions with their pupils and colleagues, leading to desirable outcomes for not only professional satisfaction but also their pupils' emotional development and lifelong skills (Seaman and Giles, 2019). In conclusion, as the result of this study provides an estimate of preschool teachers' TEI in Greece, it can be

used as a reference for future developments, particularly in relation to effective human resources management in education. It is thus recommended that educational administrators direct resources toward monitoring, safeguarding, and even increasing preschool teachers' EI at all stages of their careers.

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