

Understanding What Shapes Early Childhood Teachers’ Social and Emotional Competence: Evidence from South Korea

Hoewook Chung

Ewha Womans University

Eunhyeung Han¹⁾

Seoul Women’s University

Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing the social and emotional competence (SEC) of early childhood teachers in South Korea. It examines internal variables, including teaching experience, academic qualifications, SEC-related teacher education, and SEC awareness, as well as external variables such as institution type and class age group. A survey was administered to 227 teachers from kindergartens and childcare centers, and SEC was assessed using a validated instrument. Data were analyzed using t-tests and ANOVA to identify differences across background variables. The results indicate that teaching experience, SEC awareness, and SEC-related teacher education significantly contribute to teachers’ SEC, while institutional differences also exert an influence. These findings underscore the importance of structured SEC training in both pre-service and in-service teacher education and highlight the role of workplace conditions in shaping teachers’ SEC. Collectively, the study offers meaningful policy implications for enhancing teacher education and fostering institutional environments that support the development of SEC.

Keywords : *Social and emotional competence, Early childhood teacher, Early childhood education*

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ chloeh02210221@gmail.com

Introduction

Early childhood teachers play a crucial role in fostering the development of young children and supporting their growth as social beings. Early childhood is a critical period during which social, emotional, and cognitive development progresses, and the competencies acquired through diverse educational experiences form the foundation of social and emotional competence (SEC) (Blair & Raver, 2015). According to the OECD report ‘Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills’ (2021), SEC refers to the ability to regulate oneself and interact and collaborate with others through an understanding of oneself and others. This competence is a key determinant of long-term academic achievement, successful social adaptation, and overall life satisfaction (Durlak et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Although scholars categorize the components of SEC differently, it is generally understood to encompass self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship management, cooperation, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020; OECD, 2019). Consequently, early childhood teachers' educational practices that foster young children's social, emotional, and cognitive development are essential for enhancing their SEC.

The SEC of early childhood teachers significantly influences their ability to implement educational practices that support the SEC of young children. Young children develop SEC through experiences in a prosocial classroom climate (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), positive and supportive teacher-child relationships (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), diverse social interactions (Gueldner et al., 2020), and instructional practices (King & Paro, 2018) facilitated by their teachers. Early childhood teachers with high SEC demonstrate heightened sensitivity to social and emotional contexts (Buettner et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), enabling them to provide enriched educational experiences that foster young children's SEC.

Beyond its impact on young children's SEC, early childhood teachers' SEC also influences their professional competencies, including job satisfaction and teaching efficacy. Due to the nature of their work, early childhood teachers frequently encounter emotional labor, interactional pressures, and safety-related concerns, all of which can contribute to

psychological burnout (Jones et al., 2017). Furthermore, long working hours and inadequate compensation may diminish their intrinsic motivation for teaching (Zhang et al., 2024). SEC equips early childhood teachers with the ability to effectively manage professional challenges while maintaining instructional quality. Teachers with high SEC can regulate their emotions, utilize interpersonal skills proficiently, and make autonomous and constructive decisions (Billings, 2025; Lozano-Peña et al., 2021). Thus, SEC positively influences job satisfaction, teaching motivation, teaching efficacy, and burnout prevention (Zhang et al., 2024), ultimately empowering early childhood teachers to implement high-quality educational practices.

Given the critical role of SEC in early childhood education, identifying the variables contributing to its enhancement is essential for improving teacher effectiveness and child outcomes. Previous studies suggest that teachers' SEC is shaped by both internal variables related to personal characteristics and external variables associated with institutional environments. Internal variables include teaching experience (Kim et al., 2022a), academic qualification (Shanmugasundaram & Mohamad, 2011), SEC-related preservice and in-service teacher education experiences (Dung & Zsolnai, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2022; Lozano-Peña et al., 2021), and SEC awareness (Brackett et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). External variables, on the other hand, encompass the type of institution where early childhood teachers work (Collie, 2024; Ciucci et al., 2024).

However, many of these studies have not specifically focused on early childhood teachers who educate 3- to 5-year-old children, a developmental stage in which social, emotional, and cognitive growth is particularly pronounced. Instead, prior research has primarily examined teachers working with children aged 6-10 years (Kim et al., 2022a; Kim et al., 2022b; Collie, 2024; Shanmugasundaram & Mohamad, 2011) or 11-15 years (Kim et al., 2022a; Kim et al., 2022b) or has combined early childhood teachers with those teaching older children (Brackett et al., 2012; Ciucci et al., 2024; Fitzgerald et al., 2022). Consequently, these studies have limitations in capturing the unique professional characteristics of early childhood teachers.

Early childhood teachers differ from educators at other levels in that they work with children at the initial stage of social, emotional, and cognitive development (Kostelnik et al., 2017). In South Korea, early childhood education for 3- to 5-year-olds is provided in two

types of institutions: kindergartens and childcare centers, where early childhood teachers are employed. Additionally, preservice teacher education varies widely, as training is offered through different institutions, including two-year colleges (ISCED Level 5) and four-year universities (ISCED Level 6). Therefore, research that incorporates these contextual variables within South Korea's early childhood education and teacher training systems is necessary.

This study aims to explore strategies contributing to the enhancement of early childhood teachers' SEC by identifying the internal and external variables that impact its improvement. To achieve this objective, the study assesses the general trends in early childhood teachers' SEC and examines differences in SEC according to background variables. The classification of internal variables follows prior studies (Brackett et al., 2012; Dung & Zsolnai, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022a; Lozano-Peña et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; Shanmugasundaram & Mohamad, 2011), which distinguish variables such as academic qualification, teaching experience, SEC awareness, and SEC-related preservice and in-service teacher education experiences. The classification of external variables is based on studies (Collie, 2024; Ciucci et al., 2024) that categorize early childhood teachers according to the type and characteristics of their institutions. The research questions guiding this study are as follows: 1. What are the general trends in the SEC of early childhood teachers in South Korea? 2. How do internal and external variables contribute to variations in SEC among early childhood teachers in South Korea? 2-1. Are there differences in SEC based on internal variables? 2-2. Are there differences in SEC based on external variables?

Method

Research Participants

This study targeted 227 early childhood teachers responsible for young children aged 3 to 5 years at kindergartens and childcare centers in South Korea. The general background of the participants is as follows.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information*

N = 227

Variable	n (%)
Age	
20s	110 (48.5)
30s	112 (49.3)
40s and above	5 (2.2)
Academic Qualification	
2–3 year college	80 (35.2)
4-year university	137 (60.4)
Graduate school or higher	10 (4.4)
Class Age Group	
3-year-olds	113 (49.8)
4-year-olds	70 (30.8)
5-year-olds	44 (19.4)
Teaching Experience	
1–2 years	71 (31.3)
3–5 years	75 (33.0)
More than 5 years	81 (35.7)

As presented in Table 1, the majority of participants were aged between 20 and 30 years (49.6%), with most having teaching experience of 3 to 5 years (45.6%). Regarding educational background, the highest proportion held a four-year university degree (53.9%). Additionally, the most frequently assigned age group was 3-year-olds (47.8%), and childcare centers (52.0%) represented the most common type of institution among the participants.

Research Instrument

A survey was conducted to assess the SEC of early childhood teachers. The survey was adapted from Merrell's (2007) "Strong Kids Units Test & SEARS," originally developed to measure children's SEC, and later translated and modified for adult use to fit the South Korean context (Oh et al., 2022).

The SEC subdomains measured in this study included eight components: 'Self-Awareness (SA),' 'Positive Emotion Regulation (PER),' 'Negative Emotion Regulation (NER),' 'Self-

Management (SM), ‘*Social Awareness-Emotional Empathy (SA-EE),*’ ‘*Social Awareness-Cognitive Empathy (SA-CE),*’ ‘*Relationship Management (RM),*’ and ‘*Responsible Decision-Making (RDM).*’ Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale, where a score of 1 indicated ‘strongly disagree,’ and a score of 5 indicated ‘strongly agree.’ Higher scores represented a higher level of SEC. The composition of the instrument and the reliability (Cronbach’s α) in this study are presented below.

Table 2. *Instrument Structure and Reliability*

Subdomain	Definition	Cronbach’s α
<i>Self-Awareness (SA)</i>	Recognizing one's self-concept and emotions to develop a positive mindset	.92
<i>Positive Emotion Regulation (PER)</i>	Effectively expressing and managing positive emotions	.92
<i>Negative Emotion Regulation (NER)</i>	Effectively expressing and managing negative emotions	.93
<i>Self-Management (SM)</i>	Reflecting on and regulating one's behavior	.92
<i>Social Awareness-Emotional Empathy (SA-EE)</i>	Understanding others' emotions through consideration of their situations, actions, and intentions	.93
<i>Social Awareness-Cognitive Empathy (SA-CE)</i>	Cognitively understanding others' situations, actions, and intentions	.93
<i>Relationship Management (RM)</i>	Managing communication, conflict, and social participation	.93
<i>Responsible Decision-Making (RDM)</i>	Making constructive judgments for both individuals and the community based on various situations and problems	.93
Overall		.95

Research Procedure

A pilot study was conducted with 10 early childhood teachers working in kindergartens and childcare centers in South Korea. The pilot study confirmed the clarity and appropriateness of the survey items, requiring no further modifications. The main study was conducted between April and October 2024, and data collection was carried out via an online

survey using Google Forms. This study made the following efforts to comply with research ethics. First, participants were provided with an explanation of the study's purpose and asked to voluntarily consent before proceeding with the survey. Second, participants were informed in advance that they could withdraw their participation at any time during the study if they no longer wished to continue. Third, participants were informed about the progress and outcomes of the study, and they were continuously assured that anonymity would be strictly maintained throughout the entire research process. A total of 243 responses were collected; however, 16 responses with missing data were excluded, leaving 227 valid responses for analysis.

Data Analysis

To verify the reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's α was calculated. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to analyze the general background of participants and their perceptions and experiences related to SEC. To examine the first research question regarding the general trends of early childhood teachers' SEC, means and standard deviations were calculated. For the second research question, which explored differences in SEC based on various variables, t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted. If significant differences were found between groups, post hoc analyses using Scheffé's test were performed.

Results

General Trends in the SEC of Early Childhood Teachers in South Korea

To examine the overall trends in the SEC of early childhood teachers, the means and standard deviations for each SEC subdomain were analyzed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *General Trends in the SEC of Early Childhood Teachers in South Korea*

Subdomain	Mean	SD
<i>Responsible Decision-Making</i>	4.02	.79
<i>Social Awareness-Emotional Empathy</i>	4.01	.68
<i>Self-Awareness</i>	3.94	.78
<i>Positive Emotion Regulation</i>	3.89	.76
<i>Social Awareness-Cognitive Empathy</i>	3.88	.85
<i>Negative Emotion Regulation</i>	3.86	.85
<i>Self-Management</i>	3.86	.80
<i>Relationship Management</i>	3.70	.90
Overall	3.89	.70

As shown in Table 3, the overall mean SEC score was 3.89 ($SD = .70$) on a five-point scale, indicating a relatively high level of SEC among early childhood teachers. Among the subdomains, RDM ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .79$) had the highest mean score, followed by SA-EE ($M = 4.01$, $SD = .68$), SA ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .78$), PER ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .76$), SA-CE ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .85$), NER ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .85$), and SM ($M = 3.86$, $SD = .80$). RM ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .90$) had the lowest mean score among the subdomains.

Differences in the SEC of Early Childhood Teachers Based on Background Variables

Differences in SEC Based on Internal Variables

To examine the impact of internal variables on the SEC of early childhood teachers, internal variables were categorized into educational qualification, teaching experience, SEC awareness, and experience in pre-service and in-service teacher education related to SEC. One-way ANOVA was performed to analyze differences in SEC across subdomains, and *Scheffé's* test was used for post hoc comparisons where significant differences were found. The results are presented in Table 4.

As shown in Table 4, significant differences in SEC were found based on teaching experience, SEC awareness, and SEC-related preservice and in-service teacher education experiences. First, teaching experience was significantly related to overall SEC ($F = 7.83$, $F < .01$) and to multiple subdomains, including SA ($F = 5.70$, $p < .01$), PER ($F = 6.56$, $p < .01$),

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Table 4. Differences in SEC Based on Internal Variables

M(SD), *N* = 227

Variables		SA	PER	NER	SM	SA-EE	SA-CE	RM	RDM	Overall
EQ	2–3 yr college (<i>n</i> = 80)	4.18 (1.62)	4.03 (2.53)	4.27 ^a (1.34)	4.06 ^a (2.05)	4.17 (1.49)	4.13 ^a (1.24)	3.99 ^a (2.81)	4.26 (1.33)	4.11 (11.89)
	4-year university (<i>n</i> = 137)	3.80 (2.63)	3.80 (3.29)	3.62 (1.95)	3.79 (2.50)	3.90 (2.28)	3.78 (1.90)	3.55 (3.91)	3.85 ^b (1.68)	3.75 (17.83)
	Graduate school or higher (<i>n</i> = 10)	4.03 (.73)	4.13 (1.90)	3.95 ^b (.56)	3.30 ^b (2.13)	4.20 (.96)	3.45 ^b (1.10)	3.38 ^b (2.54)	4.45 ^a (.56)	4.11 (6.55)
	<i>F</i>	4.34	2.07	9.64***	5.20*	3.20	4.33**	5.92***	5.92***	7.30
TE	1-3 years (<i>n</i> = 71)	3.74 ^b (.98)	3.78 ^b (.95)	3.64 ^b (1.01)	3.68 ^c (.98)	3.85 (.89)	3.73 ^b (.99)	3.56 ^b (1.04)	3.78 ^b (1.03)	3.71 ^b (.91)
	3-5 years (<i>n</i> = 75)	4.16 ^a (.72)	4.15 ^a (.57)	4.04 ^a (.94)	3.70 ^b (.54)	4.08 (.56)	4.18 ^a (.77)	4.03 ^a (.77)	4.24 (.55)	4.13 ^a (.58)
	More than 5 years (<i>n</i> = 81)	3.92 (.55)	3.78 (.66)	3.90 (.74)	4.19 ^a (.73)	4.07 (.52)	3.75 (.73)	3.50 (.80)	4.02 ^a (.69)	3.80 (.51)
	<i>F</i>	5.70**	6.56**	3.80*	10.56***	2.97	6.81**	8.48***	6.46**	7.83**
SEC-A	Aware (<i>n</i> = 157)	4.03 (.72)	3.96 (.67)	3.97 (.86)	3.97 (.72)	4.10 (.56)	4.00 (.78)	3.78 (.83)	4.14 (.67)	3.98 (.60)
	Unaware (<i>n</i> = 70)	3.74 (.92)	3.72 (.90)	3.64 (.98)	3.58 (.92)	3.76 (.85)	3.60 (.95)	3.51 (1.02)	3.76 (.98)	3.65 (.87)
	<i>t</i>	2.53*	2.21**	2.49*	3.26**	3.41***	3.20**	2.02***	3.30**	3.21**
PTE	Experienced (<i>n</i> = 31)	4.16 (.39)	4.20 (.44)	3.97 (.66)	4.02 (.53)	4.16 (.32)	3.99 (.66)	3.94 (.68)	4.15 (.54)	4.09 (.37)
	Not Experienced (<i>n</i> = 196)	3.83 (.81)	3.84 (.78)	3.84 (.95)	3.83 (.83)	3.91 (.71)	3.86 (.88)	3.65 (.93)	4.00 (.83)	3.84 (.73)
	<i>t</i>	1.67**	2.46**	1.69**	1.22**	2.26*	1.70**	1.65**	1.94*	1.81**
ITE	Experienced (<i>n</i> = 19)	4.25 (.35)	4.11 (.40)	3.79 (.85)	3.96 (.67)	4.30 (.33)	4.21 (.69)	3.75 (.81)	4.11 (.68)	4.06 (.34)
	Not Experienced (<i>n</i> = 208)	3.91 (.80)	3.87 (.78)	3.86 (.91)	3.85 (.81)	3.98 (.69)	3.85 (.86)	3.69 (.91)	4.01 (.80)	3.86 (.72)
	<i>t</i>	1.77	1.27*	-3.58	5.98	1.98*	1.76	.26	.49	1.11**

Note. EQ = Education Qualification; TE = Teaching Experience; SEC-A = SEC awareness; PTE = pre-service teacher education experience related to SEC; ITE = in-service teacher education experience related to SEC; SA = Self-Awareness; PER = Positive Emotion Regulation; NER = Negative Emotion Regulation; SM = Self-Management; SA-EE = Social Awareness-Emotional Empathy; SA-CE = Social Awareness-Cognitive Empathy; RM = Relationship Management; RDM = Responsible Decision-Making
^{*}*p* < .05, ^{**}*p* < .01, ^{***}*p* < .001, b < a

NER ($F = 3.80, p < .05$), SM ($F = 10.56, p < .001$), SA-CE ($F = 6.81, p < .01$), RM ($F = 8.48, p < .001$), and RDM ($F = 6.46, p < .01$). Post hoc analysis indicated significant differences in SEC levels among teachers with varying years of experience, with more experienced teachers demonstrating higher SEC. These findings indicate that early childhood teachers with longer teaching experience exhibit higher levels of SEC.

Second, SEC awareness showed significant differences in overall SEC ($t = 3.21, p < .01$) and all subdomains, suggesting that teachers with higher awareness of SEC exhibited higher SEC scores. These findings indicate teachers who are aware of SEC demonstrate higher SEC levels.

Third, pre-service teacher education experience related to SEC significantly influenced overall SEC ($t = 1.81, p < .01$) and all subdomains. It indicates early childhood teachers who have received SEC-related education during their pre-service teacher education exhibit higher levels of SEC.

Similarly, in-service teacher education experience related to SEC was associated with significant differences in overall SEC ($t = 1.11, p < .01$), particularly in PER ($t = 1.27, p < .05$) and SA-EE ($t = 1.98, p < .05$). It shows that teachers who have participated in in-service teacher education related to SEC exhibit greater overall SEC. Specifically, they demonstrate higher levels of PER and SA-EE, which are subdomains of SEC.

On the other hand, educational qualification did not show a significant effect on overall SEC. However, differences were found in several subdomains, including NER ($F = 9.64, p < .001$), SM ($F = 5.20, p < .05$), SA-CE ($F = 4.33, p < .01$), RM ($F = 5.62, p < .001$), and RDM ($F = 5.92, p < .001$). Post hoc analysis revealed significant differences in specific SEC subdomains based on academic qualifications. NER, SM, SA-CE, and RM differed significantly between teachers enrolled in or beyond graduate school and those with a two- or three-year college degree. Additionally, RDM showed a significant difference between teachers enrolled in or beyond graduate school and those with a four-year university degree.

Differences in SEC Based on External Variables

To examine the impact of external variables, SEC was analyzed based on institution type and class age group. One-way ANOVA was conducted, and post hoc analyses were performed when significant differences were identified. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Differences in SEC Based on External Variables

M(SD), *N* = 227

Variables	SA	PER	NER	SM	SA-EE	SA-CE	RM	RDM	Overall
Kindergarten (<i>n</i> = 109)	4.08 (.62)	4.02 (.61)	4.09 (.84)	4.04 (.66)	4.14 (.47)	4.11 (.73)	3.86 (.78)	4.22 (.59)	4.05 (.56)
IT Childcare center (<i>n</i> = 118)	3.79 (.91)	3.74 (.87)	3.59 (.91)	3.64 (.89)	3.85 (.83)	3.61 (.91)	3.50 (.99)	3.79 (.94)	3.68 (.79)
<i>t</i>	2.84***	2.80***	4.31	3.86***	3.20***	4.60***	3.07***	4.11***	4.06***
3-year-olds (<i>n</i> = 113)	3.84 (2.61)	3.80 (3.34)	3.81 (2.00)	3.71 ^b (2.72)	3.88 ^b (2.38)	3.77 (1.85)	3.55 ^b (3.95)	3.89 ^b (1.81)	3.76 (18.84)
4-year-olds (<i>n</i> = 70)	4.17 (1.74)	4.10 (2.26)	3.92 (1.46)	4.08 ^a (1.55)	4.17 ^a (1.54)	4.07 (1.44)	3.98 ^a (2.57)	4.10 (1.10)	4.08 (9.67)
5-year-olds (<i>n</i> = 44)	3.85 (2.19)	3.81 (3.05)	3.91 (1.90)	3.88 (2.43)	4.06 (1.51)	3.89 (1.64)	3.61 (3.74)	4.23 ^a (1.55)	3.87 (15.44)
<i>F</i>	4.41	3.71	.38	4.74*	4.26*	2.82	5.27**	3.48*	4.51

Note. IT = Institution Type; CAG = Class Age Group; SA = Self-Awareness; PER = Positive Emotion Regulation; NER = Negative Emotion Regulation; SM = Self-Management; SA-EE = Social Awareness-Emotional Empathy; SA-CE = Social Awareness-Cognitive Empathy; RM = Relationship Management; RDM = Responsible Decision-Making

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, ^b a

As shown in Table 5, significant differences in SEC were found based on institution type, with kindergarten teachers showing higher SEC than childcare center teachers ($t = 4.05$, $p < .001$), as well as in all subdomains except NER. Specifically, significant differences were observed in SA ($t = 2.84$, $p < .001$), PER ($t = 2.80$, $p < .001$), SM ($t = 3.86$, $p < .001$), SA-EE ($t = 3.20$, $p < .001$), SA-CE ($t = 4.60$, $p < .001$), RM ($t = 3.07$, $p < .001$), and RDM ($t = 4.11$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that the institution type in which early childhood teachers work influences their SEC. Overall, teachers working in kindergartens exhibit higher SEC levels than those working in childcare centers.

On the other hand, class age group did not show a significant effect on overall SEC. However, significant differences were found in the subdomains of SM ($F = 4.74$, $p < .05$), SA-EE ($F = 4.26$, $p < .05$), RM ($F = 5.27$, $p < .05$), and RDM ($F = 3.48$, $p < .05$). Post hoc analysis indicated significant differences among age groups. SM, SA-EE, and RM differed significantly between the four-year-old and three-year-old groups, while RDM showed a significant difference between the five-year-old and three-year-old groups. These findings indicate that although the class age group may affect specific dimensions of SEC, its overall impact on SEC levels appears to be negligible.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the variables influencing early childhood teachers' SEC by categorizing background variables into internal and external groups and analyzing their impact on SEC. The discussion and implications derived from the findings are as follows.

First, the SEC of early childhood teachers in South Korea was found to be relatively high overall. However, when compared to SEC scores of teachers in other countries assessed using a similar measurement tool (Merrell, 2007), the level appeared lower. For example, SEC scores among teachers in the United States ranged from 4.13 to 4.58 on a 5-point scale (Weisman, 2022), while those of teachers in various European countries averaged 4.04 (Cavioni et al., 2023). In contrast, South Korean early childhood teachers exhibited lower SEC scores. Although direct comparisons between studies are challenging, it is noteworthy that SEC scores among South Korean elementary school teachers, measured using the same tool, were also similar to the findings of this study, averaging 3.79 (Ko et al., 2015). This suggests that South Korean teachers' SEC is relatively lower than that of teachers in other countries. As SEC is shaped by cultural contexts that influence self-perception, consideration for others, and community perspectives (CASEL, 2019; Kostelnik et al., 2017), an in-depth examination of the cultural and emotional contexts affecting South Korean teachers is essential to explore strategies for enhancing their SEC.

Second, differences in SEC were examined based on internal variables of early childhood teachers, revealing variations in SEC depending on teaching experience, SEC awareness, and pre-service and in-service teacher education experience related to SEC. However, academic qualifications did not show a significant effect. The discussion of these findings is as follows.

Early childhood teachers with longer teaching experience demonstrated higher levels of SEC. Group comparisons indicated that teachers with 3 to 5 years of experience exhibited higher SEC than those with 1 to 3 years of teaching experience. Additionally, for certain subdomains (e.g., self-management and responsible decision-making), early childhood teachers with more than 5 years of teaching experience scored the highest, followed by those with 3–5 years and 1–3 years of teaching experience. These findings align with Kim et al. (2022a), who identified variations in SEC across different stages of teachers' professional

development. Early childhood teachers often experience anxiety and uncertainty due to unpredictable situations and dilemmas encountered in educational settings. However, as teaching experience accumulates, they gradually develop a sense of stability and confidence in their profession, progressing through advanced stages of professional growth (Katz, 1972). The accumulation of diverse professional experiences plays a critical role in enhancing their SEC. In particular, variables such as teaching efficacy and resilience, which improve with teaching experience, positively influence SEC (Jennings et al., 2019; Styles & Williams, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). Through classroom management and institutional responsibilities, early childhood teachers continuously build practical knowledge and expertise, increasing their engagement and professional competence (Schaack et al., 2022; Sumsion, 2003). These experiences enhance teaching efficacy (Lipsomb et al., 2021), and higher teaching efficacy, in turn, reinforces resilience (Collie & Perry, 2019), ultimately leading to greater job satisfaction and engagement. Thus, it can be inferred that the SEC of early childhood teachers is strengthened through teaching efficacy and resilience as their experience increases.

At the same time, early childhood teachers may also encounter various negative emotions, such as job stress and burnout, throughout their careers. Higher levels of SEC are essential for effectively regulating these emotions (Körkkö & Lutovac, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024), contributing to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intention (Collie & Perry, 2019). This suggests that SEC both influences and is influenced by teaching experience. Therefore, further research is needed to elucidate the mediating variables in the relationship between teaching experience and SEC and to examine the pathways through which these variables interact.

Moreover, early childhood teachers who were aware of SEC demonstrated higher SEC, with significant differences observed across all subdomains. These findings align with Rodriguez et al. (2020), who demonstrated a correlation between teachers' awareness of SEC and their SEC levels. Several prior studies have emphasized the necessity of incorporating SEC-related education into teacher education programs to enhance awareness. In line with these findings, the results of this study indicate that educational efforts are required to enhance early childhood teachers' awareness of SEC to strengthen their competencies.

Particularly, integrating education related to SEC into pre-service early childhood teacher

training is crucial to fostering foundational competencies from the earliest stages of professional development. The results of this study further support this notion, as early childhood teachers with pre-service teacher education related to SEC demonstrated significantly higher SEC. The findings suggest that both SEC awareness and pre-service teacher education contribute to higher SEC levels. While SEC awareness can be developed through teaching experience, pre-service teacher education plays a particularly crucial role. This formative period is when prospective early childhood teachers acquire pedagogical knowledge and establish their professional beliefs (Santo et al., 2017). Therefore, integrating SEC-related courses into early childhood teacher education programs is essential to provide them with a comprehensive foundation in SEC.

Furthermore, in-service early childhood teachers who had received SEC-related education also exhibited higher SEC. Participation in such education program enhances early childhood teachers' understanding of SEC concepts and its significance (Chung & Han, 2024), and their awareness of SEC is positively correlated with their SEC levels (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Accordingly, structured SEC-focused teacher education programs should be developed and widely implemented. Additionally, emotional and psychological support programs should be designed to reinforce early childhood teachers' SEC. Since SEC serves as a protective factor against psychological exhaustion and burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024), such programs could be instrumental in strengthening SEC. Notably, previous studies have reported positive effects of programs such as 'Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education' (Jennings et al., 2019) and 'Making a Difference No Matter What' (Styles & Williams, 2020) in enhancing teachers' SEC. Based on these findings, multi-dimensional early childhood teacher education programs should be developed to provide both emotional support and SEC training.

Third, differences in SEC based on external variables were examined, revealing that SEC varied depending on the institution type. Specifically, kindergarten teachers demonstrated higher SEC than childcare center teachers. This disparity may be attributed to differences in institutional characteristics, including quantitative aspects such as salary and qualitative aspects such as organizational climate. In South Korea, as of 2024, kindergartens operate under the Ministry of Education, while childcare centers operate under the Ministry of Health

and Welfare, with distinct certification systems and differing salary structures. As financial compensation influences job satisfaction and teaching efficacy (Jones et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2024), lower salaries may lead to lower job satisfaction and teaching efficacy among early childhood teachers (Schaack et al., 2020), ultimately affecting their SEC. Additionally, early childhood teacher salaries influence overall job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Roberts et al., 2023).

However, even in low-paying environments, early childhood teachers may perceive their SEC positively if they experience psychological fulfillment and social support within their organizations (Daraku et al., 2025; Jones et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2024). In particular, early childhood teachers are exposed to the risk of emotional exhaustion due to the nature of their work, but they also report that a supportive atmosphere within the organization encourages them. The study by Purper et al. (2023), which highlights the importance of a supportive atmosphere and organizational climate through the voices of early childhood teachers, further supports this discussion. This suggests that organizational climate also significantly impacts SEC. Therefore, rather than interpreting the differences in SEC solely as an institutional distinction, it is essential to consider contextual variables such as organizational climate. Future qualitative research exploring various dimensions of organizational climate may offer valuable insights into strategies for cultivating a supportive work environment that fosters early childhood teachers' SEC.

Lastly, the limitations of this study and directions for future research are as follows. First, this study identified the internal and external variables influencing early childhood teachers' SEC and highlighted the potential role of mediating variables in these relationships. Future research should further examine the mediating mechanisms that directly influence SEC based on the identified variables and explore the structural relationships among them. Such investigations could inform the development of a systematic support framework to enhance early childhood teachers' SEC.

Second, this study focused on early childhood teachers working in South Korean kindergartens and childcare centers, which limits its applicability to broader systemic, social, and cultural contexts. Given that the internal and external variables identified in this study are shaped by socio-cultural perspectives and systemic characteristics of early childhood

education, future research should incorporate diverse national and cultural contexts. A cross-cultural approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective strategies for strengthening early childhood teachers' SEC.

Third, further research is needed to examine the qualitative dimensions of external variables influencing early childhood teachers' SEC. The institutional type variable identified in this study may reflect complex interactions between organizational climate and teachers' individual characteristics. Therefore, qualitative investigations into the organizational climates and classroom environments experienced by early childhood teachers with high SEC could yield valuable insights into the multifaceted contextual factors that contribute the enhancement of SEC.

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