



## Exploring how pay fairness perception affects preschool teachers' job performance in China: A moderated mediation analysis

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**Abstract:** This study constructed a moderated mediation model to examine how the social support received by teachers is associated with their work pay fairness perception in relation to their job satisfaction and job performance. Data were collected from 2411 preschool teachers in China (female = 98.01%; mean age = 29.12 years, SD = 6.28 years). These data were analyzed using structural equation modelling, bootstrapping and latent moderate structural equations. The results indicated that teachers' perception of pay fairness is directly associated with self-rated job performance. Additionally, pay fairness perceptions have an indirect effect on higher job performance through job satisfaction. The social support that teachers perceive moderates the relationship between pay fairness perception and job satisfaction: the more social support teachers receive, the weaker the impact of pay fairness perception on job satisfaction. These findings suggest that teachers' perception of pay fairness is related to their sense of quality of work life, as indicated by their job satisfaction and performance.

**Keywords:** pay fairness perception; job performance; job satisfaction; social support; preschool teachers

### Introduction

Employment compensation or pay is a crucial factor in attracting and retaining quality teachers (Tang & Hu, 2013), as those low pay teachers would choose to move to other workplaces or leave the profession. Moreover, teachers' pay perceptions would be associated with class quality of instruction they provided (Cassidy et al., 2017), of which Chinese preschool teachers experience significant pay disparities (Kang & Pang, 2014). Yet, the Chinese preschool teachers' pay perceptions are less well studied in relation to their job satisfaction and performance; hence the present study.

### Preschool teachers' pay fairness perception in the China context

In the field of preschool education in China: first, the overall pay level for teachers is low and lower than the social average and related industries; second, the pay distribution is not equitable, and there are significant differences in the pay of teachers with different statuses (Qin et al., 2011; Fu & Sha, 2020). It is essential to understand how Chinese preschool teachers currently feel about the low and unfair pay they receive. Pay fairness perception is an important feeling that individuals have about how they are being paid. For instance, Liu and Song (2022) found that preschool teachers' pay fairness perception was a significant predictor of teacher retention intentions. Teachers' low pay fairness perception are associated with teachers' burnout (Yin, 2019), and negative work behavior (Chen, 2016; Peng, 2022). However, studies have focused on teachers at other stages of education, and there is a lack of research on teachers at the preschool level. Thus, to provide theoretical and practical guidelines for preschool teachers' teaching careers, it is necessary

to explore this neglected population's perception of pay fairness and related variables.

### Pay fairness perception, teachers' job performance and job satisfaction

Equity theory suggests that if individuals perceive pay inequity, they will be motivated to eliminate or reduce inequity by changing their inputs, what they receive, and their perceptions of inputs and outputs or leaving the environment that creates the inequalities (Li et al., 2013). This means that teachers are likely to respond to pay inequities by doing less work and lowering the quality of their work. From the perspective of social exchange theory, which follows the principle of reciprocity, individuals determine their attitude towards work and the quantity and quality of work they complete based on the perceived level of pay (Wei & Rui, 2016). A higher pay fairness perception can lead to teachers gaining satisfaction from it and giving back to the organization with better quality work; conversely, a lower pay fairness perception can lead to poorer attitudes and a lower commitment to work. According to equity theory and social exchange theory, pay fairness perception affects teachers' attitudes and behavior at work. Job performance is an important concept that synthesizes the behavior and outcomes of teachers' work and reflects the positive behavior and outcomes that teachers demonstrate during their educational and teaching activities (Meng & Wu, 2013). Therefore, we consider it an important consequential variable influenced by pay fairness perception. Indeed, studies of workers in other industries have confirmed that pay is a strong driver of performance. There is a significant positive relationship between pay fairness perception and job performance, and that perception has good predictive power for job performance (Zhou, 2015). Therefore, the present study focused



on whether preschool teachers' pay fairness perception could affect their job performance directly or indirectly.

Work attitudes may serve as the mediator between pay fairness perception and job performance. Job satisfaction is a subjective psychological feeling of whether an individual is satisfied with the work he or she is doing and is an essential attitude towards work (Karapinar et al., 2013). In a study of 312 Chinese preschool teachers, findings indicated that the higher the teachers' job satisfaction was, the higher their job performance (He et al., 2019). Thus, it is reasonable to infer that teacher job satisfaction may be influenced by their pay fairness perception and thereby affect job performance.

### ***Social support as a moderator of the mediation process***

Social support is the moral and material support individuals receive from their social relationships and consists of three components: subjective support, objective support and the extent to which they use the support they receive (Xiao, 1994). Good social support is beneficial to an individual's physical and mental health, provides protection from stressful situations, buffers the adverse effects of stressful events and is important for maintaining a positive emotional experience (Coyne & Downey, 1991). The social support that preschool teachers receive has been shown to significantly contribute to their job satisfaction (Zhou, 2021; Liu et al., 2017). Additionally, based on the buffering effect of social support, some researchers have found that social support moderates the relationship between teachers' cognitive factors and job satisfaction. For example, Hu and Sang (2013), using stratified regression analysis of data obtained from 192 Chinese preschool teachers, showed a moderating effect of subjective support in social support on the relationship between preschool teachers' professional affect and job satisfaction. Therefore, we believe that high social support may be able to enhance individual material and moral dignity, thus appropriately compensating for the negative effects of pay unfairness on job satisfaction. On this basis, we hypothesize that social support is a moderating factor in the mediated model of this study.

### ***Aim of study and a conceptual framework***

This study examined how preschool teachers' pay fairness perception is associated with their job performance and satisfaction. Two questions guided this study:

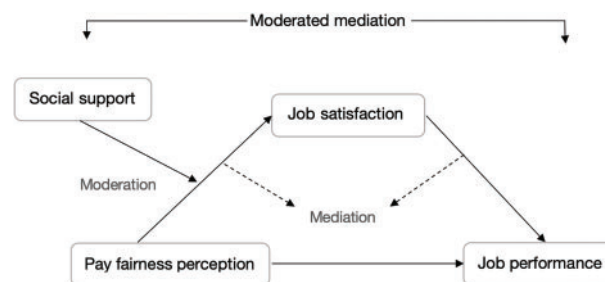
1. How teachers' pay fairness perception relate to their job performance and job satisfaction?
2. How the social support received by teachers affects the association between pay fairness perception and job satisfaction.

The conceptual framework that guided this study is shown in Figure 1.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and setting***

A total of 2411 preschool teachers from Jilin Province and Guangdong Province participated in this study. The sample characteristics are as in Table 1.



**Figure 1.** Proposed moderated mediation model

## **Measures**

### ***Teacher pay fairness perception scale***

The Pay Fairness Perception Scale (PFPS) was developed by Lin et al. (1994). The scale comprises 11 items, including three dimensions: 1) internal fairness (e.g., 'I am paid fairly compared to those in the same position in my preschool'); 2) external fairness (e.g., 'I am paid fairly compared to primary school teachers in my area'); and 3) personal fairness (e.g., 'I am paid fairly for the amount of work I do'). Items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *extremely inconsistent* to 5 = *extremely consistent*. The higher the score is, the higher the level of pay fairness perception. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for PFPS scores was 0.966.

### ***Teacher job performance scale***

The 4-item Teachers' Job Performance Scale (TJPS) (Pazy, 1988) is predictive in the Chinese preschool context (He et al., 2019). The scale uses 5-point Likert scoring system (1 = *extremely inconsistent* to 5 = *extremely consistent*), in which the higher the score is, the higher the degree of job performance. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for TJPS scores was 0.923.

### ***Teacher job satisfaction scale***

The 5-item Job Satisfaction Scale (JSS) was developed by Judge et al. (2001). Its predictive effect on Chinese preschool teachers' job satisfaction has been confirmed (Zhang & Jiang, 2018). This instrument is on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (extremely inconsistent) to 5 (extremely consistent). Of these, questions 4 and 5 require reverse scoring. A higher score indicates a higher level of job satisfaction. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the JSS scores in this study was 0.817.

### ***Social support scale***

The 10-item Social Support Scale (SSS) developed by Xiao (1994) comprises three dimensions: 1) subjective support (e.g., 'How many friends do you have who are close enough to receive support and help?'); 2) objective support (e.g., 'What sources of financial support or practical help have you received when you were in a difficult situation?'); and 3) use of support (e.g., 'How do you talk about your troubles?'). The scale has a total score of 51, with higher scores indicating a higher level of social support for the individual. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for SSS scores in this study was 0.777.

**Table 1.** Introduction to sample ( $N = 2411$ )

	Items	%		Items	%
Province	Jilin	55.3%	Preschool type	Public preschool	86.2%
	Guangdong	44.7%		Private preschool	13.8%
Gender	Male	2.0%	Preschool location	Urban	34.4%
	Female	98.0%		County-seat	21.1%
Status	With <i>bianzhi</i>	47.5%		Town	33.8%
	Without <i>bianzhi</i>	52.5%		Rural	10.7%
Working years	Less than 2 years	16.9%	Qualification	High school and below	7.8%
	2–5 years	21.9%		Associate	48.7%
	5–15 years	30.5%		Bachelor and above	43.5%
	15–30 years	21.0%			
	More than 30 years	9.7%			

*Note.* *Bianzhi* represents official employment by the Chinese government. It is similar to the American concept of teacher tenure. Teachers with *bianzhi* receive a stable salary and additional benefits, such as reliable medical insurance and public housing allowances/subsidies (Hu et al., 2016).

### Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the research ethical board of Nanjing Normal University (NNU), Nanjing, Jiangsu (Research Ethics Clearance Number: NNU202310002). Participants consented to the with assurance of their right to decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any stage of the study. Data were collected through online questionnaires utilizing the channels of local education authorities in Jilin Province and Guangdong Province.

### Analytical strategy

We employed SPSS 23.0 and Mplus 8.3 to execute all analyses. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed to test the mediation model of pay fairness perception effects on teachers' job performance through their job satisfaction. Bootstrapping was used to elaborate on the relation of the constructs across the paths included in the mediation model (Hayes, 2015). Furthermore, latent moderate structural equations (LMS) were used to test the effects of social support on the mediation model (Fang & Wen, 2018). Prior to running the matched-pairs moderation analysis, we first ensured that the 'main effects only models' fit the data well. Indices used to determine model fit included Loglikelihood<sub>0</sub> = −37707.791, RMSEA = 0.063 (RMSEA ≤ 0.08), CFI = 0.971 (CFI ≥ 0.9), TLI = 0.963 (TLI ≥ 0.9), SRMR = 0.060 (SRMR ≤ 0.08) (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Wen & Liang, 2015). We excluded chi-square ( $X^2$ ) because it is sensitive to sample size (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). Next, we further evaluated the fitness of the model to the data by including a latent conditioning interaction term. Loglikelihood<sub>0</sub> = −37716.327 for the model with the latent conditioning interaction term, a difference of 8.536 compared to the loglikelihood value of the baseline model, with a degree of freedom of 2. Checking the chi-square distribution table gives a significant difference at this point with probability  $p < 0.05$  (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000; Maslowsky et al., 2015). Therefore, this study's moderated mediation model fits the data well.

### Results

#### *Profiles of teachers' pay fairness perception, job performance, job satisfaction and social support*

We conducted descriptive and correlation analyses for each variable (see Table 2) to present the profiles of preschool teachers' pay fairness perception, job performance, job satisfaction and social support. The descriptive analysis results indicated that preschool teachers experienced moderate levels of pay fairness perception (3.24 out of 5), job performance (3.63 out of 5), job satisfaction (3.84 out of 5) and social support (31.34 out of 51). The correlation analysis results showed that the correlations between pay fairness perception and job performance ( $r = 0.228$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), job satisfaction ( $r = 0.439$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and social support ( $r = 0.187$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) were statistically significant. Additionally, statistically significant correlations were found between job performance and job satisfaction ( $r = 0.312$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and social support ( $r = 0.310$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), as well as between job satisfaction and social support ( $r = 0.328$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

#### *Testing the mediated effects model*

To address the first and second research questions, SEM was used to analyse the nature of the relationships in the mediation model (see Figure 2). The results indicate a slight direct effect of teachers' pay fairness perception on their job performance ( $\beta = 0.060$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and a moderate direct effect of teachers' pay fairness perception on their job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.432$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, job satisfaction was found to have a moderate direct effect on job performance ( $\beta = 0.310$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This pattern of significant direct and indirect effects supports the hypothesized 'partial mediation model' of pay fairness perception on job performance.

Next, bootstrapping was used to gain additional insight into relationships among the constructs in the partial mediation model. As indicated in Table 3, the bootstrap analysis verified this pattern of slight direct effects of pay fairness perception on job performance ( $\beta = 0.072$ , 95% CI [0.025, 0.121]) and more significant indirect effects of pay fairness perception on job performance through teachers' job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.131$ , 95% CI [0.107, 0.156]). According to

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and intercorrelation matrix for key variables

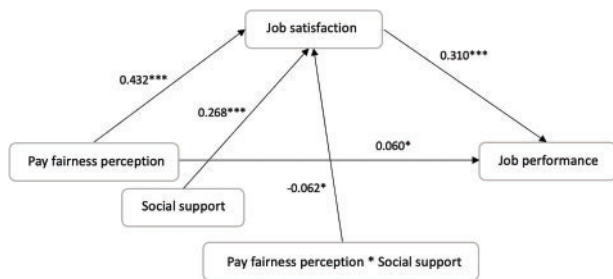
	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Pay fairness perception	3.24	0.85	/			
2 Job performance	3.63	0.70	0.228**	/		
3 Job satisfaction	3.84	0.74	0.439**	0.312**	/	
4 Social support	31.34	6.83	0.187**	0.310**	0.328**	/

Notes: \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 3.** Bootstrapping results for the direct, indirect and total effects of pay fairness perception on job performance

	Estimate	SE	Percentile 95% CI		Two-tailed Sig
			Lower	Upper	
Total effect	0.203	0.022	0.158	0.247	***
Indirect effect	0.131	0.013	0.107	0.156	***
Direct effect	0.072	0.024	0.025	0.121	**

Note. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Figure 2.** Examination of moderated mediation with latent variables. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

the bootstrap test, 35.47% of the total effect of pay fairness perception on job performance was obtained through the direct path, and 64.53% was obtained indirectly through job satisfaction.

### Testing the moderating effects of social support the teacher received

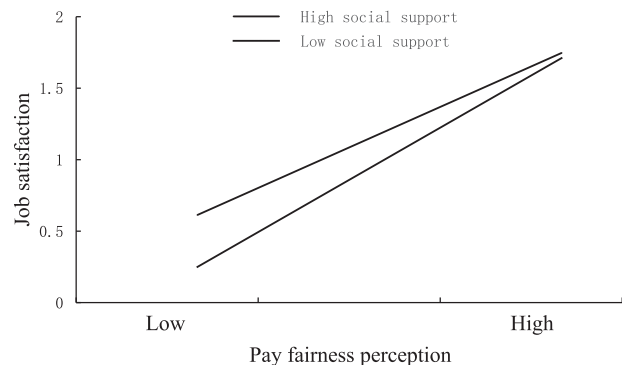
For the third research question, we conducted latent moderate structural equations to assess the influence of social support teachers received on the mediation model. The results revealed a negative moderating effect of social support on the relationship between pay fairness perception and job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.062$ , 95% CI  $[-0.119, -0.008]$ , not crossing zero; SE = 0.028,  $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that the impact of teachers' pay fairness perception on their job satisfaction was lower when teachers received 'higher social support'. Conversely, when teachers received less social support, pay fairness perception effects on their job satisfaction and indirectly on job performance were enhanced (see Table 4).

To visualize this moderating effect of social support that teachers received, we calculated simple regression slopes (see Figure 3). This visualization shows that as the social support teachers receive increases (higher), the effects of pay fairness perception on teachers' job satisfaction tend to decrease.

**Table 4.** Conditional indirect effects of pay fairness perception on job performance at various levels of moderator social support

	Estimate	SE	Percentile 95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Mean + 1 SD	0.117***	0.013	0.095	0.146
Mean	0.134***	0.013	0.111	0.163
Mean - 1 SD	0.151***	0.018	0.121	0.193

Note. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Figure 3.** Interaction between pay fairness perception and job satisfaction by social support the teacher received

### Discussion

We found that there are two paths through which teachers' pay fairness perception influences their job performance. First, teachers' pay fairness perception exerts a statistically significant effect on both their job satisfaction and job performance. Such findings are consistent with previous literature. For example, high levels of pay fairness perception are beneficial for enhancing individual responsibility (Zhang & Yang, 2011) and engagement (Dong & Wang, 2020). Conversely, when individuals perceive that they are not being paid fairly comparatively, they are prone to counterproductive behaviors, breeding dissatisfaction and



negativity and sabotaging cooperation (Han & Li, 2013). Studies have also found that more than half of Chinese public preschool teachers are dissatisfied with their current salary levels, which greatly demotivates teachers and reduces their motivation (Fu & Sha, 2020).

Second, the indirect effects of teachers' pay fairness perception on their job performance through job satisfaction accounted for a somewhat higher proportion of the effects in the model (64.53%) than the direct effects (35.47%). This highlights the importance of strengthening teachers' positive experiences in preschool and enhancing their satisfaction with their work. Previous research on job satisfaction has consistently concluded that 'satisfaction is productivity' and that job satisfaction, as an important work attitude, largely influences individual behavior and performance (Meng et al., 2009). For preschool teachers responsible for the complex work of education and care, a high level of job satisfaction can inspire teachers to work with enthusiasm and dedication and to be more involved in day-to-day activities, thus providing children with higher-quality preschool education.

We also found that the social support the teacher received had a small but statistically significant effect on the mediation model. More specifically, our results indicate that when teachers received 'more social support', the indirect effects of pay fairness perception on job performance through job satisfaction were lower. Regarding the specific model, social support moderates the relationship between the first half of the mediated pathway, i.e., pay fairness perception and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is more significantly affected by pay fairness perception for teachers with less social support than for those with high levels of social support. The reason for this may be that for teachers with low social support, the pay they receive is more important because of the limited moral and material support available (Tian et al., 2020). The results of this study are consistent with the buffer model of the mechanism of action of social support as an essential protective factor for job satisfaction. The current pay fairness perception for preschool teachers in China is not high, and the issue of teacher pay unfairness is more prominent. Based on the findings of this study, attention should be given to increasing the level of social support for preschool teachers and buffering the negative impact of low pay fairness perception on some teachers' job satisfaction and performance.

### Implications for Practice

This study confirms that pay is one of the most critical levers for motivating teachers' work attitudes and performance. The higher the pay fairness perception of teachers, the greater their job satisfaction and the better their job performance. For this reason, building a quality workforce of preschool teachers requires providing them with a salary package that meets their livelihood needs. Given that inadequate and unfair teacher salaries may have a negative impact on their daily educational work, efforts should be made at the policy level to provide competitive compensation so that the average salary of preschool teachers realistically reflects their qualifications, years of experience, and job titles.

Social support may buffer the negative impact of low pay fairness perception on job satisfaction. Therefore, it is important to provide preschool teachers with the social support they need to manage their perceptions of low pay fairness in relation to their work attitudes and behavior over time.

### Strengths, Limitations, Future Direction and Conclusions

Teacher pay fairness perception has increasingly attracted researchers' attention. However, few studies have focused on preschool teachers' pay fairness perception, and an even smaller pool of studies has examined the effect of teachers' pay fairness perception on their work attitudes and behavior. A particular strength of this study is the application of a moderated mediation model to examine whether teachers' pay fairness perception affects their job performance, with job satisfaction as a mediating variable and social support that teachers received as a moderator.

There are limitations to this study. On the one hand, this is a cross-sectional study, and no causal relationship can be drawn from the findings. In the future, a cross-lagged model analysis could be employed to further explore the cause-and-effect relationship between teachers' pay fairness perception and their job satisfaction and job performance. On the other hand, teachers' perceptions of the fairness of the pay they receive are complex. This study focuses solely on teachers' perceptions of fairness in pay distribution. The perception of pay fairness also encompasses other aspects, such as procedural, information, and interpersonal fairness. In future research, we should also further examine the current state of different aspects of perceptions of pay fairness and the impact on teachers.

The findings of this study support both equity theory and social exchange theory's account of the relationship between fairness perception and job performance, namely, that high pay fairness perception leads to high job performance, while low pay fairness perception tends to lead to lower job performance. To a certain extent, these findings can also support the view that low pay and poor treatment of preschool teachers directly affect the quality of preschool education development as a whole. Meanwhile, teachers who have low social support would be more sensitive to perceptions of pay levels and fairness, and these perceptions will be more likely to influence their attitudes and behavior at work.

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**Availability of Data and Materials:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Ethics Approval:** This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Nanjing Normal University (NNU202310002), in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

**Informed Consent:** The researcher sought and gained the consent of the participants to take part in the study. Out of the 2411 sampled participants, all 2411 accepted and voluntarily participated in the study after the researcher assured them of anonymity and that their responses were solely for academic purposes.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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