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The Role of Early Childhood Educators in Supporting the Mental Health and Emotional Regulation of Young Children: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Young children's mental health and emotion regulation develop within everyday relational environments, making early childhood teachers important agents in supporting emotional well-being, behavioral adjustment, and social competence. This systematic literature review aimed to identify, analyze, and synthesize empirical evidence concerning the roles of early childhood education teachers in promoting children's mental health and emotion regulation. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework and examined peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2026. Literature searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and SINTA/GARUDA. After identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and methodological appraisal, nine empirical studies were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The findings revealed five major dimensions of teachers' roles: emotion coaching and co-regulation, emotional modeling and socialization, emotionally supportive teacher–child relationships, teacher psychological well-being and self-regulation, and professional competence in emotion-focused teaching. Empirically, supportive teacher practices were associated with stronger emotion knowledge, social competence, attachment security, preschool adjustment, and increasingly independent emotion regulation. Conversely, teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, punitive responses, and disapproving classroom practices were associated with poorer social-emotional functioning and smaller gains in children's self-regulation. The review further showed that emotion-focused teaching can be strengthened through structured coaching and professional development. Overall, the findings support an integrated pathway in which teacher psychological well-being and emotional competence shape responsive teaching practices, relational quality, classroom emotional climate, and ultimately children's mental health and autonomous emotion regulation.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education; Emotion Regulation; Mental Health; Teacher Emotional Competence; Teacher-Child Relationship

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood represents a sensitive developmental period in which emotional, social, behavioral, and cognitive capacities are rapidly established. During these years, children gradually learn to recognize emotional experiences, communicate feelings appropriately, manage frustration, control impulses, and develop adaptive responses to interpersonal challenges. Emotion regulation is therefore not merely an affective competence but a developmental mechanism closely connected with social adjustment, classroom participation, school readiness, and subsequent learning. Reilly and Downer (2019) demonstrated that behavioral and emotional regulation in preschool children develops through the interaction of executive functioning, language competence, and environmental experiences. From a relational-developmental perspective, young children initially depend heavily on adults to regulate emotional arousal before gradually internalizing strategies for autonomous regulation.

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Within early childhood education and care (ECEC), teachers consequently occupy a position that extends considerably beyond the transmission of academic knowledge. They function as emotional models, attachment-related figures, co-regulators, observers of developmental difficulties, and architects of the psychosocial climate in which children spend substantial portions of their daily lives. Silkenbeumer et al. (2018) conceptualized teacher co-regulation as an interpersonal process through which educators provide emotional guidance that is progressively adjusted to children's developmental capacities. Their observational findings showed that teacher prompts and emotion coaching were systematically associated with children's emerging independent emotion regulation. More recent evidence confirms that emotion coaching, emotional validation, and metacognitive co-regulation can facilitate children's capacity to regulate negative emotions autonomously (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024).

The importance of this role becomes particularly evident because children's mental health is strongly embedded within everyday relational environments. Supportive teachers may provide emotional security, predictable routines, responsive communication, and opportunities for children to identify and express feelings safely. Conversely, emotionally insensitive, punitive, or highly disapproving interactions may compromise the development of self-regulation. Phillips et al. (2022), examining 1,020 preschool children, found that greater exposure to punitive and disapproving teacher behaviors was associated with smaller gains in children's self-regulation even after accounting for general classroom quality. Similarly, Jeon et al. (2019) reported that teachers' cumulative and occupational stress was associated with children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, including anger–aggression and anxiety–withdrawal. These findings indicate that the psychological quality of teachers themselves represents an important component of children's developmental environment.

Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes teacher emotional competence as a multidimensional professional resource involving emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, responsiveness, relationship management, and socially appropriate emotional expression. The Prosocial Classroom perspective, reflected in the recent meta-analysis by Xu et al. (2024), proposes that educators' social-emotional competence influences their well-being, teacher–child relationships, classroom management, and implementation of social-emotional learning. Their synthesis of 51 studies and 511 effect sizes involving 19,738 participants confirmed meaningful associations between early childhood educators' social-emotional competence and multiple dimensions of educational functioning.

Empirical evidence further demonstrates that teacher emotion regulation is directly relevant to classroom decision-making. Loomis et al. (2023) found that greater emotional suppression among preschool teachers was associated with increased risk-related patterns concerning preschool expulsion, whereas cognitive reappraisal functioned differently in interactions involving challenging child behavior. Zhang et al. (2020), meanwhile, demonstrated that preschool teaching involves prolonged and intensive emotional labor requiring teachers continuously to regulate their emotional displays. Soydan et al. (2024) similarly linked preschool teachers' emotion-regulation abilities and cognitive flexibility with classroom-management strategies. Thus, teachers' capacity to manage their own emotions is not independent from child development; it influences how teachers interpret behavior and respond to children's emotional needs.

Teacher well-being represents another critical pathway. Byun et al. (2022) found meaningful relationships between early childhood teachers' psychological well-being and responsive teaching practices across United States and South Korean contexts. Cross-cultural evidence has subsequently indicated that emotional exhaustion, personal stress, perceived professional competence, and emotion-regulation strategies are interconnected with teachers' emotional responsiveness toward children. At the broader level, Qin et al. (2024), synthesizing 103 empirical studies, demonstrated that early childhood teacher emotions operate simultaneously at intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural levels. This multidimensional perspective suggests that emotionally supportive teaching cannot be understood solely as an individual teacher characteristic because it is shaped by professional conditions, social expectations, relational experiences, and institutional environments.

Intervention literature offers additional evidence. Blewitt et al. (2020) concluded that curriculum-based social-emotional learning programs can strengthen responsive and nurturing teacher–child interactions and classroom management, although evidence concerning teacher knowledge, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being remained comparatively limited. More recently, Curby et al. (2024) showed that coaching can improve preschool teachers' observed and self-reported emotion-focused teaching, including emotional

modeling, responding to children's emotions, and explicit emotional instruction. Systematic evidence also suggests that interventions targeting emotional regulation, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and reflective functioning can improve teachers' emotional competence and resilience while potentially reducing psychological strain (Cervellione et al., 2025).

Despite this expanding evidence base, several important gaps remain. First, much research examines teacher well-being, teacher emotional competence, teacher–child relationships, child emotion regulation, or children's mental health as separate domains, rather than explaining how these constructs operate as an interconnected developmental system. Xu et al. (2024), for example, found clear associations between educator social-emotional competence and several professional outcomes, but associations with children's overall emotional and behavioral outcomes were less consistent. This suggests that the mechanisms through which teacher competencies translate into child outcomes require more integrated interpretation. Second, existing reviews frequently concentrate either on teacher emotions (Qin et al., 2024), SEL interventions (Blewitt et al., 2020), teacher emotional competence and well-being (Cervellione et al., 2025), or children's emotional self-regulation. Consequently, there remains limited systematic synthesis specifically positioning the early childhood teacher as the central linking mechanism between mental-health support and children's emotion regulation. Recent interactionist evidence emphasizes secure social bonds and teachers' socio-emotional competence as developmental resources for children's self-regulation, yet this literature remains heterogeneous in definitions, research designs, cultural contexts, and outcome measures. Third, evidence from non-Western and Indonesian ECEC contexts remains comparatively underrepresented in the international synthesis. Emerging Indonesian studies indicate growing attention to children's social-emotional development, self-regulation, and the psychological demands experienced by PAUD teachers (Fitri et al., 2026; Jelita et al., 2026; Listiana et al., 2026). However, these strands have not yet been sufficiently integrated with the broader international literature concerning teachers as emotional socialization agents.

Accordingly, this systematic literature review aims to identify, critically analyze, and synthesize empirical evidence concerning the roles of early childhood teachers in supporting children's mental health and emotion regulation. Specifically, the review examines teachers' roles as emotional models, emotion coaches, co-regulators, responsive relationship partners, facilitators of psychologically safe classrooms, implementers of social-emotional learning, and early identifiers of children's emotional difficulties. The novelty of this review lies in its integrated conceptual framework connecting teacher psychological well-being and emotional competence → teacher emotional and pedagogical practices → teacher–child relational quality and classroom emotional climate → children's emotion regulation and mental-health outcomes. Rather than considering mental health and emotion regulation as separate developmental outcomes, this framework positions them within a relational and ecological process in which teachers simultaneously function as individual emotional agents and components of the child's developmental environment. This approach also enables international evidence to be interpreted alongside emerging Indonesian PAUD scholarship, increasing its relevance for teacher education, professional development, curriculum design, and early-childhood mental-health promotion.

Overall, contemporary evidence establishes that supporting young children's mental health and emotion regulation cannot be separated from the emotional competence, psychological well-being, and relational practices of their teachers. Emotion coaching, co-regulation, responsive interaction, supportive classroom management, and emotionally secure teacher–child relationships constitute important pathways through which children progressively develop autonomous emotional competence. At the same time, teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, suppression, punitive responses, and inadequate professional preparation may weaken these developmental processes. A systematic synthesis is therefore needed to clarify the mechanisms, strategies, contextual factors, and evidence patterns that explain how early childhood teachers can effectively promote children's mental health and emotional regulation. Such synthesis can provide a stronger evidence base for developing psychologically responsive and developmentally appropriate early childhood education practices.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence concerning the role of early childhood education teachers in supporting young children's mental

health and emotion regulation. A systematic review was considered appropriate because it enables evidence from different studies to be collected through an explicit, transparent, and reproducible procedure while identifying patterns, inconsistencies, and knowledge gaps within an established body of research. The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework proposed by Page et al. (2021), which emphasizes transparent reporting across study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. The search procedure was additionally informed by PRISMA-S recommendations to strengthen the reproducibility of electronic literature searches (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Search Strategy and Information Sources

The literature search focused on peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2026, thereby capturing evidence from the most recent decade. Electronic searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and SINTA/GARUDA to incorporate both internationally indexed research and relevant Indonesian scholarship. Following contemporary systematic-review principles described by Higgins et al. (2024), combinations of controlled terms and free-text keywords were used to maximize sensitivity while maintaining thematic relevance. The principal search terms included combinations of "early childhood teacher," "preschool teacher," "early childhood education," "teacher role," "mental health," "emotional well-being," "emotion regulation," "emotional regulation," "emotion coaching," "co-regulation," "teacher-child relationship," and "social-emotional development." Boolean operators AND and OR were applied to combine concepts. Search strategies were adapted to the indexing conventions of each database, consistent with recommendations for transparent and reproducible systematic searching (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Eligibility Criteria and Study Selection

Studies were eligible when they: (1) were published between 2016 and 2026; (2) were peer-reviewed journal articles; (3) involved early childhood or preschool educational settings; (4) examined teachers or teacher-related practices; (5) addressed children's mental health, emotional well-being, emotion regulation, social-emotional competence, or closely related outcomes; (6) presented empirical qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method evidence; and (7) were available in English or Indonesian. Studies were excluded when they were conference abstracts, dissertations, book chapters, editorials, non-empirical papers, duplicates, or studies focusing exclusively on parents or clinical populations without a meaningful teacher-related component. Records were progressively screened through title and abstract review followed by full-text eligibility assessment. Duplicate identification and systematic screening principles were informed by procedures described by Ouzzani et al. (2016), whose Rayyan framework supports transparent management of study-selection decisions. After applying all eligibility criteria, nine articles constituted the final corpus of this systematic review.

Quality Appraisal and Data Extraction

Methodological quality was examined before synthesis to reduce the risk of interpreting findings without considering study rigor. Because the eligible literature could include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies, appraisal principles were based on the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) developed by Hong et al. (2018). MMAT permits methodological assessment across heterogeneous study designs using design-specific quality criteria. A standardized extraction matrix recorded authors, publication year, country, participants, research design, sample characteristics, teacher-related variables, mental-health or emotion-regulation outcomes, principal findings, and methodological limitations. Such structured extraction facilitated cross-study comparison while preserving contextual distinctions between the nine studies.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Due to variation in study designs, measurement instruments, participants, and outcome constructs, statistical pooling was not considered appropriate. Instead, findings were synthesized using narrative and thematic synthesis, consistent with the Synthesis Without Meta-analysis (SWiM) framework of Campbell et al. (2020). The extracted findings were coded, compared, and grouped according to recurring conceptual patterns. Thematic development was informed by contemporary reflexive thematic-analysis principles emphasizing systematic coding, iterative interpretation, and coherent theme construction (Byrne, 2022).

The synthesis ultimately focused on major dimensions of teachers' roles, including emotional modeling, emotion coaching and co-regulation, teacher-child relational support, creation of psychologically safe

classroom environments, implementation of social-emotional learning, early identification of emotional difficulties, and the influence of teachers' own psychological well-being. Integration across these domains enabled the review to generate an evidence-based conceptual interpretation of how early childhood teachers contribute to children's mental health and emerging capacity for emotion regulation.

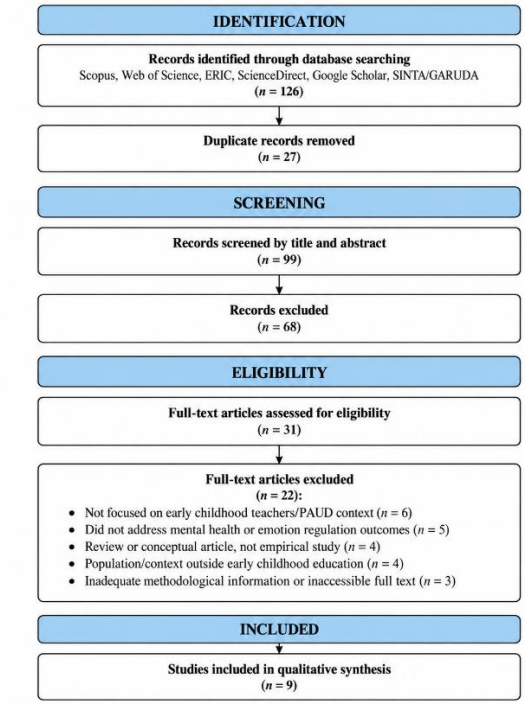


Figure 1. Prisma 2020 Flow Diagram of study selection

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

Characteristics of the Included Studies

Following the PRISMA 2020 selection procedure, nine empirical studies published between 2018 and 2024 met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The studies represented different methodological approaches, including naturalistic classroom observation, longitudinal and correlational designs, multilevel modeling, cross-national comparative analysis, and intervention-based research. Sample sizes ranged from nine preschool teachers and 28 children in intensive observational research to 1,451 early childhood teachers in a cross-national study involving the United States and South Korea. Collectively, this methodological diversity provided evidence concerning both teacher-level psychological characteristics and teacher–child interaction processes.

Table 1. Characteristics and Main Findings of the Nine Included Studies

Author(s), Year	Participants/ Context	Design/ Analysis	Main Variable/ Teacher Role	Principal Empirical Findings
Silkenbeumer et al. (2018)	9 teachers; 28 children aged 4–6 years; 3 preschool classrooms	Naturalistic video observation; multilevel analysis	Emotion coaching and co-regulation	Teachers adjusted co-regulation according to children's age and regulatory competence. Teacher co-regulation was systematically related to children's observed independent self-regulation.
Jeon et al. (2019)	103 teachers; 54 classrooms; 329 children	Three-level multilevel analysis	Teacher stress and emotional exhaustion	Greater teacher personal stress was associated with higher perceived anger–aggression, whereas work-related emotional exhaustion was associated with anxiety–withdrawal and social competence.

Denham et al. (2020)	85 teachers; 327 preschool children	Longitudinal/hierarchical linear modeling	Emotion socialization, emotional language, and teacher reactions	Positive emotional expression, emotion coaching, and conversations about negative emotions contributed to children's emotion knowledge, although associations differed by socioeconomic context. Punitive reactions were negatively related to adaptive emotional development.
Arace et al. (2021)	223 educators; 563 children; mean child age = 25.98 months	Correlational study	Educator emotional competence and coaching style	Emotion-coaching style was associated with children's attachment security and social skills and was positively related to educators' emotional self-efficacy and communication with families.
Phillips et al. (2022)	1,020 low-income 4-year-old children	Longitudinal observational study	Supportive versus punitive classroom behavior	Greater exposure to teachers' disapproving and punitive behavior-management practices predicted smaller improvements in children's self-regulation, beyond global classroom-quality measures.
Bailey et al. (2022)	312 children aged 32–68 months; 44 classrooms; 16 centers	Multilevel structural equation modeling	Consistency of teacher emotional support	Children with the weakest initial regulatory capacities showed better preschool adjustment when teachers provided more consistent warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness.
Byun and Jeon (2023)	1,129 U.S. teachers; 322 South Korean teachers	Cross-national multigroup path analysis	Teacher psychological well-being, emotion regulation, emotional responsiveness	Teacher well-being, cognitive reappraisal/suppression, and responsiveness toward children's emotions were significantly interconnected. Pathways differed between the U.S. and South Korean samples.
Silkenbeumer et al. (2024)	48 teachers; 213 children aged 2–6 years; 19 groups	Video observation; multilevel analysis	Emotion coaching and metacognitive co-regulation	Initial emotion coaching and metacognitive prompts were associated with children's independent regulation of negative emotion; teacher responses varied according to emotional intensity, type of emotion, and child characteristics.
Curby et al. (2024)	65 preschool teacher residents	Pre–post observational and self-report evaluation	Coaching and emotion-focused teaching	Observed emotion-focused teaching increased from M = 35.74 to M = 40.07 ($p < .001$; $\delta = .79$), while self-reported practices increased from M = 112.98 to M = 117.58 ($p < .001$) following the training period.

The studies consistently positioned teachers as active contributors to children's emotional development rather than merely as providers of instructional content. Silkenbeumer et al. (2018), for example, directly observed that teacher co-regulation was related to children's subsequent self-regulatory behavior during emotionally challenging classroom episodes. Their later study involving 48 teachers and 213 children strengthened this conclusion by showing that emotion coaching and metacognitive co-regulation were associated with independent regulation of negative emotions.

Evidence concerning teacher psychological functioning was equally important. Jeon et al. (2019), using data from 103 teachers serving 329 children, found that teachers' personal stress and work-related emotional exhaustion were associated with children's anger–aggression, anxiety–withdrawal, and social competence. In

the cross-national analysis conducted by Byun and Jeon (2023), 1,129 U.S. teachers and 322 South Korean teachers demonstrated significant pathways linking psychological well-being, emotion-regulation strategies, and emotional responsiveness to children, although the pattern and strength of these associations varied by national context.

Thematic Synthesis of Teachers' Roles

The thematic analysis generated five interrelated dimensions of teachers' roles in supporting young children's mental health and emotion regulation: (1) emotion coaching and co-regulation; (2) emotional modeling and emotion socialization; (3) emotionally supportive teacher–child relationships; (4) teacher psychological well-being and self-regulation; and (5) professional competence and emotion-focused teaching. These domains were not mutually exclusive because individual studies frequently provided evidence across more than one dimension.

Table 2. Thematic Synthesis of Teachers' Roles

Theme	Teacher Practices/Mechanisms	Child-Related Outcomes	Synthesis of Evidence
Emotion coaching and co-regulation	Labeling emotions, validating children's feelings, providing regulatory prompts, guiding problem solving, metacognitive questioning	Independent emotion regulation; management of negative affect; self-regulation	Consistently positive evidence indicates that developmentally adjusted teacher support facilitates the transition from externally supported regulation to autonomous regulation.
Emotional modeling and emotion socialization	Appropriate emotional expression, emotion language, discussion of causes/consequences of emotions, supportive reactions	Emotion knowledge; emotional awareness; social competence	Teachers function as socialization agents whose verbal and behavioral emotional responses provide models through which children learn to understand and manage emotions.
Emotional support and teacher–child relationships	Warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness, relational consistency, psychologically safe interaction	Preschool adjustment; attachment security; social competence; emotional security	Consistency of emotional support appears particularly valuable for children with weaker baseline regulatory capacities.
Teacher psychological well-being and self-regulation	Stress management, emotional reappraisal, limited suppression, management of emotional exhaustion	Reduced behavioral risk; greater positive responsiveness; healthier classroom emotional climate	Teacher well-being functions as an upstream condition affecting the teacher's capacity to respond sensitively to children's emotional needs.
Professional competence and emotion-focused teaching	Coaching, professional development, explicit emotion instruction, reflective practice	Improved teacher emotional practices and potential improvement in children's emotional learning opportunities	Emotion-supportive teaching is trainable rather than merely dispositional; structured coaching can improve observable classroom practice.

Theme 1: Teachers as Emotion Coaches and Co-Regulators

The strongest recurring pattern concerned teachers' role as co-regulators of children's emotions. In this function, teachers did not simply terminate unwanted emotional behavior; rather, effective teachers helped children recognize emotional states, identify their causes, evaluate possible responses, and gradually assume responsibility for regulating those emotions. Silkenbeumer et al. (2018) demonstrated that teachers adapted the level of regulatory support to children's developmental competence. Younger children received more direct emotion coaching, whereas increasingly competent children were more frequently supported through less directive or metacognitive prompts. This developmental scaffolding pattern was replicated and extended by Silkenbeumer et al. (2024). Based on 19 preschool groups, 48 teachers, and 213 children, the study found that emotion coaching such as mirroring negative affect, labeling emotions, and validating emotional experiences and metacognitive prompts were associated with independent self-regulation. Importantly, teacher responses varied according to the quality and intensity of children's emotions, indicating that effective co-regulation is responsive rather than standardized.

Theme 2: Teachers as Emotional Models and Socialization Agents

A second major finding concerned teachers' role in emotion socialization. Denham et al. (2020) examined 85 teachers and 327 preschool children and found that teachers' emotional expressiveness, reactions to children's emotions, beliefs about emotional socialization, and emotion-related language contributed to children's developing emotion knowledge. Emotion coaching and discussion of negative emotions were particularly relevant within higher socioeconomic-risk contexts, whereas punitive emotional reactions were generally less adaptive. Arace et al. (2021) provided complementary evidence among younger children. In a sample of 563 children and 223 educators, educators' emotion-coaching style was associated with attachment security and social skills. Coaching was also positively associated with educators' emotional self-efficacy and stronger communication between early childhood centers and families. Thus, emotional socialization appears to operate through both direct classroom interaction and the broader relational ecosystem surrounding the child.

Theme 3: Teachers as Providers of Emotional Safety and Relational Stability

The third theme concerned the quality and consistency of emotional support. Bailey et al. (2022) found that among 312 preschool children in 44 classrooms, children with the lowest regulatory capacities demonstrated better preschool adjustment when teachers were consistently warm, sensitive, and responsive. Importantly, consistency contributed beyond the average level of emotional support, suggesting that predictable relational experiences may be particularly protective for children who have difficulty regulating emotion and behavior. The importance of emotionally safe classroom interaction was also demonstrated from the opposite direction. Phillips et al. (2022) studied 1,020 low-income four-year-old children and found that greater teacher reliance on disapproval and punitive behavioral management was associated with smaller gains in children's self-regulation across the pre-kindergarten year, even after accounting for global measures of classroom quality. These findings indicate that children's emotional development depends not only on the presence of positive support but also on the absence of emotionally harmful interaction patterns.

Theme 4: Teachers' Mental Health as a Foundation for Children's Emotional Support

Teacher mental health emerged as an important upstream factor. Jeon et al. (2019) reported that cumulative personal and occupational stress among early childhood teachers was significantly associated with children's social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Lead teachers experiencing greater personal stress perceived greater anger–aggression among children, while work-related stress was associated with anxiety–withdrawal and social competence. Byun and Jeon (2023) further demonstrated that psychological well-being cannot be separated from teachers' emotion-regulation strategies. Across 1,451 early childhood teachers, teachers with healthier psychological profiles generally showed healthier emotion-regulation patterns and more desirable emotional responsiveness. However, the pathways varied across U.S. and South Korean contexts, indicating that institutional and cultural factors influence how teacher well-being translates into classroom interaction. Conceptually, these findings suggest a pathway in which: Teacher psychological well-being → teacher emotion regulation → emotional responsiveness → classroom emotional climate → child mental health and emotion regulation. Teacher mental health should therefore not be interpreted only as an occupational welfare issue; it represents a potential component of the developmental environment experienced by young children.

Theme 5: Professional Development and Emotion-Focused Teaching

The final theme indicates that emotionally responsive teaching can be developed through professional learning. Curby et al. (2024) evaluated 65 early childhood teacher residents receiving coaching related to social-emotional development. Observed emotion-focused teaching increased from 35.74 (SD = 5.45) at baseline to 40.07 (SD = 4.89) at the end of the semester, representing a statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.001$; $\delta = 0.79$). Self-reported emotion-focused teaching similarly increased from 112.98 (SD = 11.02) to 117.58 (SD = 9.12; $p < 0.001$). The finding is important because it demonstrates that emotion-focused teaching is not exclusively dependent on personality or naturally occurring teacher sensitivity. Instead, competencies involving emotional modeling, responding to children's emotions, and explicit emotional instruction can be strengthened through structured professional coaching.

Integrated Empirical Findings

Across the nine studies, the evidence converged toward an integrated developmental mechanism. At the teacher level, psychological well-being, emotional competence, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation

influenced educators' readiness to respond constructively to children's emotions. At the interaction level, emotion coaching, co-regulation, warmth, sensitivity, emotional language, and consistent responsiveness constituted the principal mechanisms through which teachers supported children. At the child level, these processes were associated with independent emotion regulation, emotion knowledge, social competence, attachment security, behavioral adjustment, and reduced risk of maladaptive emotional responses. Conversely, the evidence also identified risk pathways. Teacher stress and emotional exhaustion were associated with less desirable child social-emotional functioning, while punitive and disapproving teacher behaviors predicted smaller improvements in children's self-regulation. These negative pathways demonstrate that the role of early childhood teachers is bidirectional in developmental significance: teachers can function as protective resources when interactions are responsive and emotionally supportive, but unsupportive emotional practices may simultaneously constitute developmental risks.

Overall, the results support a four-stage conceptual pathway: Teacher Mental Health and Emotional Competence → Emotionally Responsive Teaching Practices → Supportive Teacher–Child Relationship and Classroom Climate → Child Mental Health and Autonomous Emotion Regulation. This pathway represents the central integrative finding of the systematic review. It indicates that the contribution of early childhood teachers to children's mental health and emotion regulation is best understood not as a single instructional strategy, but as a multilevel process involving teachers' internal psychological resources, observable relational behaviors, classroom emotional conditions, and children's progressive internalization of regulation skills.

Summary of Results

The synthesis of nine empirical studies therefore demonstrates five principal conclusions. First, emotion coaching and co-regulation constitute the most direct mechanisms through which teachers facilitate children's independent regulation of emotions. Second, teacher emotional modeling and emotion-related language support children's emotion knowledge and social-emotional understanding. Third, warm, sensitive, predictable teacher–child interactions provide relational security that is especially important for children with weaker regulatory abilities. Fourth, teachers' own psychological well-being and emotion regulation shape their capacity to provide responsive emotional support. Finally, professional coaching can improve emotion-focused teaching, confirming that these competencies can be systematically developed through early childhood teacher education and continuing professional development.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that early childhood teachers occupy a central position in supporting children's mental health and emotion regulation through interconnected processes of emotion coaching, co-regulation, emotional socialization, relational support, teacher psychological well-being, and professionally developed emotional competence. Rather than functioning as isolated instructional strategies, these dimensions appear to form a developmental system in which teachers' internal emotional resources influence interaction quality, which subsequently shapes children's opportunities to understand, express, and regulate emotions. This interpretation is consistent with evidence positioning early childhood educators' social-emotional competence as an important predictor of teacher well-being, teacher–child relationships, classroom management, and SEL implementation (Xu et al., 2024).

A particularly important finding was the prominent role of emotion coaching and co-regulation. Silkenbeumer et al. (2018) demonstrated that preschool teachers adjusted co-regulatory assistance according to children's age and existing regulatory competence, with metacognitive prompts encouraging greater spontaneous self-regulation. More recent observations involving 48 teachers and 213 children similarly showed that emotion labeling, validation, and metacognitive co-regulation were associated with children's independent regulation of negative affect (Silkenbeumer et al., 2024). These findings support a developmental-internalization perspective: emotion regulation first occurs within adult–child interaction before increasingly becoming an autonomous child capacity. Consequently, effective PAUD teachers should not merely suppress crying, anger, fear, or frustration but help children interpret emotional states and identify developmentally appropriate regulatory responses. Mänty et al. (2022) likewise argue that educators require conscious and consistent co-regulation practices grounded in shared professional understanding.

The second major finding concerns teachers as emotion-socialization agents and relational figures. Arace et al. (2021) found that educators' emotion-coaching styles were associated with attachment security

and children's social competence, while teachers' emotional self-efficacy and family communication strengthened supportive practices. This is compatible with findings showing that teacher–child closeness and autonomy support contribute to self-regulation and developmental adjustment (Cadima et al., 2019), while closeness may be especially beneficial to children possessing weaker emotion knowledge (Marks et al., 2023). Conversely, conflictual or emotionally insecure relationships are associated with poorer social outcomes and greater difficulties for children displaying internalizing symptoms (Paes et al., 2023; Skalická et al., 2019). Continuity of close teacher relationships across educational transitions is also associated with stronger social-emotional functioning and self-regulation (Vitiello et al., 2022).

Importantly, the review also demonstrates that supportive interaction cannot be understood independently from harmful interaction. Phillips et al. (2022) showed that greater exposure to punitive and disapproving teacher behaviors predicted smaller gains in children's self-regulation, even after broader classroom-quality indicators were considered. Thus, promoting mental health in PAUD requires more than adding emotional-learning activities; it also requires reducing humiliating, threatening, excessively controlling, or punitive responses. Indonesian evidence concerning positive discipline similarly emphasizes teacher strategies that guide behavior without relying primarily on punishment (Sumiati & Patilima, 2023), while Indonesian research has also highlighted educators' responsibility in preventing psychologically harmful interactions with children.

A third critical interpretation concerns teacher mental health as a prerequisite for child emotional support. Jeon et al. (2019) found that teacher stress and emotional exhaustion were associated with children's anger–aggression, anxiety–withdrawal, and social competence. This relationship is theoretically plausible because chronically stressed educators have fewer psychological resources available for patience, sensitive interpretation, and intentional co-regulation. Evidence from Ghana further indicates that surface emotional labor can increase emotional exhaustion and reduce personal accomplishment among preschool teachers (Donkor et al., 2023). Similarly, emotional exhaustion has been associated with conflictual teacher–child relationships, while job autonomy and rewards may buffer this association (Chukwuedo et al., 2020). Systematic reviews consequently argue that educator well-being should be addressed through both individual psychological support and workplace-level interventions rather than expecting teachers to manage structural stressors independently (Berger et al., 2022; Beames et al., 2023). Indonesian evidence concerning PAUD teacher resilience similarly underlines emotion regulation, impulse control, and adaptive coping as important professional resources.

The results further indicate that teachers' emotional competence is modifiable through professional development. Curby et al. (2024) reported meaningful improvements in observed emotion-focused teaching following coaching, reinforcing the proposition that emotional modeling, responsive reactions, and explicit emotion instruction can be systematically developed. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that in-service professional development improves teacher–child interaction quality, particularly when training combines coursework, individualized support, reflection, and coaching (Egert et al., 2020). Professional development may additionally buffer the negative impact of teacher stress on classroom interaction quality (Sandilos et al., 2018), while integrated training targeting self-regulation and executive functioning has demonstrated positive effects on child-level outcomes (Spruijt et al., 2024). Broader reviews similarly show that longer professional-development programs with coaching tend to produce more consistent child outcomes (Brunsek et al., 2020).

These findings have direct implications for social-emotional learning (SEL). Blewitt et al. (2020) found that curriculum-based SEL programs can strengthen responsive teacher–child interactions and classroom management, although evidence concerning teacher well-being remains less conclusive. At the child level, a meta-analysis of 79 studies involving 18,292 participants showed significant improvements in social competence, emotional competence, behavioral self-regulation, and emotional-behavioral problems following universal early-childhood SEL interventions (Blewitt et al., 2018). A systematic review of 85 preschool self-regulation interventions likewise indicates that successful programs frequently incorporate cognitive challenge, mediated play, mindfulness, physical activity, adequate intervention dosage, and implementation fidelity (Pandey et al., 2023).

Overall, the present synthesis supports an integrated pathway: teacher psychological well-being and emotional competence → emotionally responsive practices → secure and supportive teacher–child relationships → stronger child emotion regulation and mental-health adjustment. However, Xu et al. (2024)

caution that educator social-emotional competence does not automatically translate into all child emotional or behavioral outcomes, highlighting the importance of mediating mechanisms, contextual conditions, and implementation quality. Therefore, PAUD mental-health promotion should be conceptualized as an ecological and relational system, not merely as a child-focused curriculum. Teacher education, institutional well-being policies, positive-discipline practices, family collaboration, reflective supervision, and evidence-based SEL should operate simultaneously. Within the Indonesian context, strengthening teachers' understanding of executive functioning, emotional development, positive discipline, and educator well-being is especially relevant for translating this evidence into culturally responsive PAUD practice (Seno et al., 2021; Sumiati & Patilima, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review demonstrates that early childhood teachers play a central role in supporting young children's mental health and emotion regulation through interconnected emotional, relational, and pedagogical processes. The synthesis of nine empirical studies identified five dominant dimensions: emotion coaching and co-regulation, emotional modeling and socialization, emotionally supportive teacher–child relationships, teacher psychological well-being and self-regulation, and professional competence in emotion-focused teaching. Empirically, supportive teacher practices were associated with stronger emotion knowledge, social competence, attachment security, preschool adjustment, and increasingly independent emotion regulation. In contrast, teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, punitive responses, and disapproving classroom practices were associated with poorer social-emotional functioning and smaller gains in children's self-regulation.

The review further indicates that teacher emotional competence is not solely an individual disposition but can be strengthened through structured professional development and coaching. The findings support an integrated conceptual pathway in which teacher psychological well-being and emotional competence influence emotionally responsive teaching practices, which shape teacher–child relationships and classroom emotional climate and ultimately contribute to children's mental health and autonomous emotion regulation. Therefore, early childhood mental-health promotion should include not only child-focused activities but also teacher well-being programs, emotion-coaching competence, positive discipline, reflective practice, family collaboration, and sustained professional development.

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