Teacher–Student Conflict and Teacher Job Stress in South Korea: Public Health Implications and the Mediating Role of Controlling Classroom Managements

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of teacher–student conflict on teacher job stress in South Korea, with a focus on the mediating role of students' perceptions of controlling classroom environments. Data were drawn from 616 first-year middle school students, their parents, and teachers who participated in the 14th wave of the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey (2021). Descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed using SPSS Version 26.0, and mediation analysis was performed with PROCESS macro (Version 4.2; Model 4) employing bootstrapping procedures. The results reveal significant positive associations among teacher–student conflict, teacher job stress, and controlling classroom environments. Moreover, controlling classroom environments are positively related to teacher job stress and partially mediated the association between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress. These findings underscore the importance of addressing classroom management practices to alleviate teacher stress, foster healthier teacher–student interactions, and promote teacher well-being. The study also highlights limitations, including the reliance on cross-sectional data, and suggests directions for future research to further clarify causal relationships and explore intervention strategies.

Keywords: classroom management, controlling classroom environment, teacher job stress, teacher–student conflict, teacher well-being

1. Introduction

In Korea, teaching has long been considered a stable and respected profession. Yet over the past decade, teachers have increasingly confronted challenges that erode both their authority and their well-being. Excessive administrative work, growing parental demands, and declining professional recognition have become persistent stressors (Kim et al., 2020). The situation worsened after the 2014 enactment of the Child Welfare Act Enforcement Decree, which left teachers vulnerable to child abuse allegations for even minor disciplinary actions. This legal shift has produced significant psychological strain and, in some cases, has driven teachers to resign from the profession altogether (Jeon, 2023). Adding to the pressure, media reports have described the rise of malicious parental complaints that further undermine teachers' rights and morale (BBC News Korea, 2023).

Evidence from both national and international surveys illustrates the magnitude of the problem. The OECD TALIS 2018 survey, covering 48 countries, found that Korean teachers reported job stress levels well above the international average. More recently, a 2023 nationwide survey of 3,505 teachers revealed that one-quarter experienced severe depressive symptoms and 16% had considered suicide—rates that far exceed those in the general population (Yoon, 2023). Such statistics underscore the urgency of addressing teacher stress as a pressing educational and public health concern.

Job stress is generally defined as the negative emotional response that arises when individuals perceive threats to their self-esteem or well-being in the workplace (Kyriacou, 2001). Prior studies have linked teacher stress to a range of factors, including emotional labor, burnout, and strained professional relationships (Harmsen et al., 2018; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Ryan et al., 2017). Among these, the teacher–student relationship has been highlighted as particularly consequential. When built on trust and respect, this relationship enhances student motivation, learning outcomes, and teacher satisfaction (Roorda et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, conflictual relationships

heighten stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Spilt et al., 2011).

Adolescence adds further complexity to this dynamic. Middle school students undergo rapid developmental changes, and their interactions with multiple subject teachers often emphasize evaluation and discipline rather than personal connection. These conditions can reduce intimacy and increase the potential for conflict (Baker, 2006; Wang et al., 2013). Longitudinal research from Korea has also shown that the quality of teacher–student relationships strongly predicts both student adjustment and teacher stress (Jeong & Kim, 2019; Choi & Yeon, 2021).

To clarify the processes through which teacher–student conflict contributes to stress, scholars have pointed to mediating factors. One important factor is the controlling classroom environment—characterized by rigid rules, directive instruction, and limited autonomy support. Studies indicate that such environments not only intensify teacher–student conflict but also shape negative student perceptions of teachers and contribute to teacher emotional exhaustion (Jellesma et al., 2015; Aloe et al., 2014).

Drawing on this literature, the present study investigates whether students' perceptions of controlling classroom environments mediate the link between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress in Korea. By identifying this mechanism, the study aims to deepen understanding of the dynamics underlying teacher stress and to inform interventions that foster healthier classroom interactions and support teacher well-being.

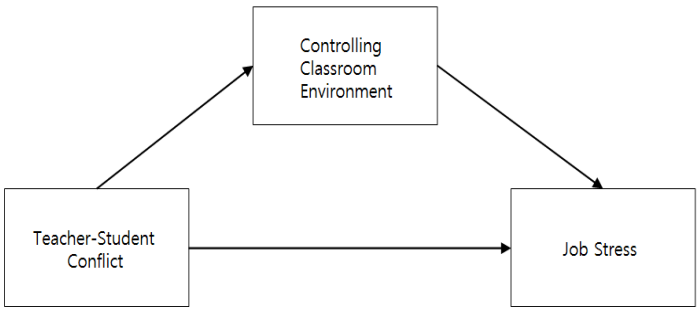

Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

(Note: The actual diagram should be inserted at this point to represent the proposed research model.)

1.1 Hypotheses

Research Problem 1: What is the relationship between teacher–student conflict, classroom control, and teacher job stress in Korea?

Research Problem 2: Does the controlling classroom environment mediate the relationship between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress in Korea?

2. Method

2.1 Sampling Method

This study analyzed data from the 14th wave (2021) of the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey, conducted by the Korea Child Care Policy Institute. The original sample included 2,562 households with newborns recruited from 30 medical centers (excluding Jeju Island) between April and July 2008 (Kim et al., 2022). After accounting for attrition due to deaths, migration, loss of contact, and withdrawal requests, 1,589 households remained from the initial 2,150 participants in Waves 1–3. The final dataset comprised 616 households with children entering their first year of middle school in 2021. Each household provided data from one student, one parent, and one teacher, resulting in a total of 1,848 participants. This exceeded the minimum sample size of 77, calculated using G*Power 3.1 for mediation analysis, ensuring robust generalizability and reduced sampling error. The inclusion of 616 students, parents, and teachers enabled multigroup analyses with sufficient sample sizes for reliable findings across independent groups.

2.2 Surveyor'S Chain Procedure

The study explored the relationship between children's development and their environment, involving students, parents, caregivers, and teachers. The survey, adapted for adolescents, received IRB approval (KICCE: 220996-210414-HR-006), and interviewer training was completed before implementation (July–December 2021).

Parents first completed mailed questionnaires, followed by tablet-assisted personal interviews (TAPIs) with parents and children in separate rooms. Teacher surveys were conducted online with parental consent. In December 2021, non-face-to-face surveys were introduced due to COVID-19, with 72 caregivers (5.3%) and 8 children (0.6%) participating remotely.

2.3 Participants

The sample consisted of 313 male students (50.8%), and the average ages of the fathers and mothers were 46 and 44 years, respectively. Mothers were slightly more likely to have a college degree or higher at 442 (46.8%), and the average monthly household income was KRW 6.62 million won / USD 4,744.50 dollar. Female teachers outnumbered male teachers by more than three to one, with 471 (76.5%) female teachers. The average age of teachers was 39 years. 245 (39.8%) teachers had a graduate degree or higher, and 112 (18.2%) had more than 20 years of experience.

Table 1. Illustrates the General Characteristics of the Study Participants(*N*=616)

Subject	Variables	Classify	Frequency	Rate(%)
Students	Gender	Male	313	50.8
		Female	303	49.2
		Sum	616	100.0
Parents	Father's Age	Missing data	4	.6
		Total	612	99.4
		Average Age	*46 years*	
	Education	High school or less	181	29.4
		College graduate	361	58.6
		Graduate degree or above	72	11.7
		Missing data	2	.3
		Total	616	100.0
	Occupational Status	Employed	365	59.3
		Part-time	15	2.4
		Daily laborer	11	1.8
		Employer with employees	49	8.0
		Self-employed without employees	45	7.3
		Missing data	44	7.1
		Total	572	92.9
	Mother's Age	Total	614	99.7
		Missing data	2	.3
		Average Age	*44 years*	
	Education	High school or less	174	28.0
		College graduate	414	42.3
		Graduate degree or above	28	4.5
		Missing data	2	.3
		Total	614	95.5

Table 1. Illustrates the General Characteristics of the Study Participants(*N*=616)(Continued)

Subject	Variables	Classify	Frequency	Rate(%)
	Occupational Status	Employed	259	42.0
		Part-time	32	5.2
		Daily laborer	6	1.0
		Employer with employees	32	5.2
		Self-employed without employees	59	9.6
		Unpaid family worker	12	1.9
		Missing data	216	35.1
		Total	616	64.9
	Gender	Male	145	23.5
		Female	471	76.5
	Age	20s-30s	107	17.4
		30s-50s	406	65.9
		50s or older	103	16.7
		Average Age	*39 years*	
Teachers		College graduate	371	60.2
	Education	Master's degree or above	245	39.8
	Experience	1-5 years	186	30.2
		6-20 years	318	51.6
		21-30 years	76	12.4
		Over 30 years	36	5.8
Households	Average Monthly Household Income(KRW)	Missing data	37	6.4
			579	93.6
		Average	6,620,000 KRW / 4,744.50 USD	

2.4 Measures

2.4.1 Independent Variable: Teacher-Student Conflict

This study assessed the teacher–student relationship as perceived by homeroom teachers using eight conflict-related items from the Teacher–Child Relationship Scale, adapted from Pianta (2001) by the Korean Children's Panel Study team. Of the original 15 items, seven focused on intimacy were excluded. Respondents rated their relationship with the student on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree(1) to strongly agree(5), with items such as "I often clash with (student)" (Kim, 2019). Higher scores indicated greater conflict. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α) for the teacher-reported conflict scale was α = .777.

2.4.2 Dependent Variable: Job Stress

Job stress was assessed using three items from the 14th wave (2021) of the Korean Children Panel data. Participants rated their stress related to parental relationships, student life guidance, and classroom instruction on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater stress (Kim, 2019). The internal consistency reliability for this measure was α = .740.

2.4.3 Mediating Variable: Controlling Classroom Environment

Controlling classroom environment was assessed using data from the 14th wave (2021) of the Korean Children Panel. Ten items were adapted from Kim et al. (2012), emphasizing strict rules and a directive atmosphere while excluding peer and teacher support items. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a more controlling environment. The internal consistency reliability for this measure was α = .681.

2.5 Data Analysis(Statistical analysis)

To examine the mediating role of the classroom environment in the relationship between teacher–student conflict and job stress among South Korean teachers, data from 616 participants were analyzed after excluding incomplete responses from a total of 2,150. Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 and the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 4.2; Hayes, 2018).

The PROCESS macro, developed by Hayes, utilized bootstrapping to assess the significance of indirect effects, offering advantages over the Sobel test, which assumes normality (Hayes, 2018). Initially, the reliability of the measurement tools was assessed using Cronbach's α, followed by descriptive statistics to characterize the participants and data distribution. Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to evaluate relationships among variables. To confirm the mediating effect of the classroom environment, SPSS PROCESS macro Model 4 was employed, involved three steps: first, the significance of the independent variable (teacher–student conflict) on the dependent variable (job stress) was assessed; second, the mediator's effect was evaluated; and third, mediation was checked for mediation by determining whether the confidence interval of the indirect effect (BootLLCI to BootULCI) excluded 0.

3. Results

3.1 The Correlation Between Measured Variables

Table 2. Correlation Among Measured Variables and Means and Standard Deviations (*N*=616)

variable	1	2	3
1	1		
2	.220**	1	
3	.094*	.099*	1
M(SD)	1.395(.515)	2.972(.883)	2.436(.718)

*p<.05, **p<.01

1. Teacher–student conflict
2. Teacher job stress
3. Controlling classroom environment

As a preliminary step to understanding the relationships among teacher–student conflict, teacher job stress, and the controlling classroom environment in South Korea, a correlation analysis was conducted to assess linear relationships among the variables. The results, presentes in Table 2, revealed significant correlations among the measured variables. Specifically, a positive correlation was found between teacher-perceived teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress (r= .220, p< .01), indicating a static relationship. Additionally, a positive correlation was observed between teacher-perceived teacher–student conflict and students' perceived controlling classroom environment (r= .094, p< .05). Lastly, a positive correlation was identified between teacher job stress and the controlling classroom environment (r= .099, p< .05). The correlation coefficients, ranging from .094 to .220, suggested no multicollinearity issues, as none exceed the .85 threshold for stability (Min & Kim, 2020).

3.2 The Mediating Effect of Classroom Controlling Environment on the Relationship between Teacher–Student Conflict and Teacher Job Stress

This study employed Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) to investigate whether the classroom controlling environment perceived by Korean students mediates the relationship between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress. To assess the statistical significance of the mediating effect, 5,000 bootstrapping iterations were performed, and the 95% confidence interval was checked for the inclusion of 0. All effects were reported using unstandardized coefficients (B), as they were considered to more accurately represent the data compared to standardized coefficients (β; Hayes, 2018).

The results of the mediating effect of the perceived classroom controlling environment on the relationship between teachers' perceived teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress in Korea are summarize in Table 3 and Figure 2.

The analysis revealed that all path effects were statistically significant. Specifically, teacher–student conflict in Korea had a significant positive effect on the controlling environment (B= .131, p< .05), and the controlling classroom

environment significantly influenced teacher job stress (B= .098, p< .05), thereby mediating the relationship between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress. The total effect of teacher–student conflict on teacher job stress was B= .378, p< .001. However, with the introduction of the mediator, the direct effect decreased to B= .365, p< .001, indicating that the controlling classroom environment served as a mediator in this relationship.

Table 3. Mediating Effect of Controlling Classroom Environment on the Relationship between Teacher–Student Conflict and Job Stress (*N*=616)

Path			*B*	*se*	*t*	*95% Cl*		*R*	R^2	*F*
						*LLCI**	*ULCI***			
(independent) Teacher–student conflict	→	(Mediator) Controlling classroom environment	.131	.056	2.340*	.021	.241	.094	.009	5.478*
(independent Teacher–student conflict	→	(dependent) Job stress	.365	.068	5.398***	.232	.498	.234	.055	17.781***
(Mediator) Controlling classroom environment	→	(dependent) Job stress	.098	.049	2.015*	.003	.193			

**p*<.05. ****p*<.001.
*LLCI= lower limit of the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap indirect effect .
**ULCI= upper limit of the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap indirect effect .

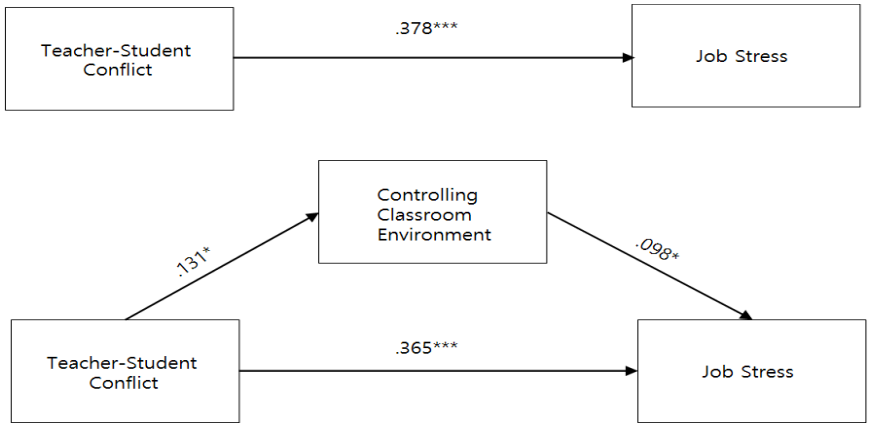

Figure 2. Effect Size for Each Path

This study demonstrates a significant indirect effect of teacher–student conflict on teacher job stress via the controlling classroom environment. The total effect of the path from teacher–student conflict to teacher job stress through the controlling classroom environment exceeded the direct effect, indicating a mediating role. Bootstrapping analysis further validated the indirect effects, confirming that the confidence interval did not include 0, as shown in Table 4. These findings confirm that the controlling classroom environment partially mediates the relationship between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress in Korea.

Table 4. Total Effects, Direct Effects, and Indirect Effects of Teacher–Student Conflict, Job Stress, and Controlling Classroom Environment Relations (*N*=616)

	B	*se*	*t*	*95% Cl*	
				LLCI[*]	*ULCI*[**]
Total effect	.378	.068	5.599[***]	.245	.511
Direct effect	.365	.068	5.398[***]	.232	.498
Indirect effect	.013	.008	-	.000	.032

[***]p<.001
[*]LLCI= lower limit of the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap indirect effect.
[**]ULCI= upper limit of the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap indirect effect.

4. Discussion

4.1 Academic Significance

The present research shows that the controlling classroom environment plays a partial mediating role in the link between teacher–student conflict and teacher job stress in South Korea. In particular, conflictual teacher–student interactions appeared to increase the likelihood of teachers adopting more controlling classroom practices, which in turn elevated their stress levels. Although the direct effect of conflict on stress remained significant, the decrease in its magnitude after including the mediator provides compelling evidence for the mediating influence of classroom climate. In this regard, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that teacher–student conflict should not be understood merely as an interpersonal issue but rather as a structural condition reinforced by classroom practices (Park & Kim, 2004; Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015; Kang & Hong, 2022). In line with prior findings, negative teacher–student relationships have consistently been linked with teachers' emotional exhaustion and a decline in professional commitment (Aldrup et al., 2018; Hagenauer, Hascher, & Volet, 2015; Kim et al., 2020). By identifying classroom climate as a central mechanism that transmits interpersonal conflict into occupational stress, this study broadens theoretical understanding of teacher well-being.

4.2 Practical and Policy Implications

The results point to an urgent need for more balanced classroom management strategies. Overly controlling approaches reduce students' sense of agency, weaken mutual trust, and ultimately aggravate stress for both students and teachers (Yun et al., 2022). Previous research has also shown that student misbehavior and disengagement are key drivers of teacher burnout (Gu & Kim, 2014), and surveys indicate that a majority of teachers report student relationships as a major factor shaping their psychological well-being (Lee & Kim, 2020). These findings highlight the importance of cultivating supportive, open, and collaborative classroom environments. Practical interventions may include teacher training programs focused on communication and conflict resolution, the provision of psycho-emotional support services, and access to professional counseling (Yoo & Park, 2015; Yu, 2020). At the policy level, reforms aimed at reinforcing teacher authority, creating transparent procedures for managing complaints, and expanding institutional supports are likewise essential to strengthen teacher resilience and sustain effective teaching practices.

Although the study is situated within the South Korean context, its implications extend beyond national boundaries. Teacher–student conflict and related stress are global concerns with far-reaching consequences for both teacher health and student outcomes. Demonstrating the mediating function of classroom climate underscores the importance of structural factors that cut across cultural contexts. Internationally, the evidence suggests that enhancing teacher well-being requires not only developing individual coping resources but also transforming classrooms into spaces marked by collaboration, respect, and balanced authority. Ensuring shared agency and reciprocal respect between teachers and students is therefore fundamental to protecting the professional health of educators and safeguarding students' learning rights. In summary, teacher–student conflict continues to represent a critical stressor, and its negative effects are amplified in highly controlling environments. Alleviating teacher stress demands an integrated strategy that simultaneously addresses interpersonal conflict and reshapes the broader classroom climate. These conclusions provide a basis for evidence-informed interventions, policy innovations, and comparative research aimed at creating healthier and more sustainable educational systems worldwide.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how a controlling classroom environment mediates the association between teacher–student conflict and teachers' job stress within the South Korean context. The findings indicate that conflictual interactions with students tend to lead teachers toward more controlling classroom practices, which in turn heighten their stress levels. The partial mediation effect of classroom climate highlights that teacher–student conflict is not simply an interpersonal tension but a structural phenomenon shaped by the broader classroom context and management style.

These insights underscore the need to cultivate classroom environments grounded in mutual respect, collaboration, and emotional support. Professional initiatives that strengthen teachers' communication and conflict-resolution skills, provide psycho-emotional counseling, and enhance institutional support systems can play a vital role in sustaining teacher resilience and overall instructional quality.

Future research should broaden this line of inquiry through cross-cultural and longitudinal approaches to better capture how classroom climate shapes teachers' well-being over time. Such efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of teacher stress and inform evidence-based interventions and policies aimed at fostering healthier, more sustainable educational communities worldwide.

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Authors contributions

Professor Eun-Joo Hong, the corresponding author, prepared the initial draft and conducted the overall review and editing of the manuscript. Professor Hyo-Eun Kim, the first author, was responsible for the study design and manuscript revision. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.