

Emotional Labor in Raudhatul Athfal (RA) Teachers' Multi-Role Work: Initial Findings

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Doi: 10.31316/g-couns.v10i02.8601

Abstract

Emotional labor among teachers in Raudhatul Athfal (RA), Islamic early childhood education in Indonesia, is a complex and underexplored phenomenon. This study aims to explore and provide preliminary findings of the emotional labor experiences of RA teachers. Using a qualitative case study design, ten female RA teachers from Bandung, Indonesia, were recruited through convenience sampling. This study utilized an open-ended online survey and Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis as data collection method and analysis, respectively. Three themes emerged. The first theme is Multirole Job Demands, with sub-themes: RA teachers' job characteristics (n=10), multirole demands (n=8), cultural display rules (n=5), and spiritual educators as emotional labor intensifier (n=4). The second theme is Emotional Labor Strategies, with sub-themes: surface acting (n=6), and deep acting (n=3). The last theme is Islamic Framework in Emotional Labor, with sub-themes: Islamic practices as emotional regulation resources and strategies (n=6), spiritual meaning-making (n=9), and workplace spirituality (n=2). The overall emotional labor experiences of the RA teachers are discussed. The findings highlight key constructs that can be explored and directly measured in future research to validate the emotional labor process among RA teachers in Indonesia. Ultimately, this research can contribute to developing support programs for RA teachers that effectively promote their well-being.

Keywords: surface acting, deep acting, early childhood teachers, spirituality, Islamic education

Abstrak

Emotional labor di kalangan guru di Raudhatul Athfal (RA), pendidikan anak usia dini Islam di Indonesia, merupakan fenomena yang kompleks. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman emotional labor guru RA. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, sepuluh guru RA perempuan dari Bandung, Indonesia, direkrut melalui convenience sampling. Studi ini menggunakan survei online terbuka dan analisis tematik reflektif Braun dan Clarke sebagai metode dan analisis pengumpulan data, secara berurutan. Tiga tema muncul. Tema pertama adalah Multirole Job Demands, dengan sub-tema: karakteristik pekerjaan guru RA (n=10), tuntutan multirole (n=8), aturan tampilan budaya (n=5), dan pendidik spiritual sebagai intensifier emotional labor (n=4). Tema kedua adalah Strategi Emotional Labor, dengan sub-tema: akting permukaan (n=6), dan akting mendalam (n=3). Tema terakhir adalah Kerangka Kerja Islam dalam Emotional Labor, dengan sub-tema: praktik Islam sebagai sumber daya dan strategi untuk regulasi emosional (n=6), pembuatan makna spiritual (n=9), dan spiritualitas di tempat kerja (n=2). Pengalaman emotional labor keseluruhan dari guru RA dibahas. Temuan ini menyoroti konstruksi kunci yang dapat dieksplorasi dan diukur secara langsung dalam penelitian di masa depan untuk memvalidasi proses emotional labor di antara guru RA di Indonesia. Pada akhirnya, penelitian tersebut dapat berkontribusi pada pengembangan program dukungan bagi guru RA yang secara efektif meningkatkan kesejahteraan mereka.

Keywords: akting permukaan, akting mendalam, guru anak usia dini, spirituality, pendidikan Islam

Article info

Received September 2025, Revised November 2025, Accepted January 2026, Published February 2026

Published by: Guidance and Counseling Study Program
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta



INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) represents a critical developmental period. The foundational cognitive, emotional, and spiritual capacities were established. Consequently, early childhood teachers carry substantial responsibilities that extend beyond traditional pedagogical roles. The complexity of these roles necessitates sustained emotional regulation, a phenomenon conceptualized as emotional labor (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983).

Emotional labor, as defined by Hochschild (1983), refers to the management of feelings to create publicly observable facial and bodily displays in accordance with organizational expectations. This concept originated from ethnographic studies of flight attendants and has since gained significant theoretical traction in educational research. Emotional labor requires workers to induce or suppress feelings to maintain appropriate emotional presentations (Hochschild, 1983). In ECE specifically, teachers engage in continuous emotional work that encompasses supporting student learning, managing classroom dynamics, and maintaining professional relationships with colleagues, parents, and administrators (Yin et al., 2019).

Currently, scholars distinguish emotional labor into the strategies of surface acting and deep acting (Grandey, 2000, 2003). Surface acting involves "faking" appropriate emotions. This modifies emotional expressions without changing internal emotional experiences (Grandey, 2000; Zhao et al., 2025). While functionally effective in the short term, surface acting has been consistently associated with long-term negative outcomes, including burn out, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced job satisfaction (Kariou et al., 2021; Ntim et al., 2023). Conversely, deep acting involves genuine efforts to align internal emotional states with organizational display rules. This happens through cognitive and somatic techniques such as reappraisal, visualization, and memory recall (Grandey, 2000). Deep acting displays a more authentic form of emotional regulation. This strategy can enhance personal accomplishment and job satisfaction. It can reduce the negative psychological costs which typically associated with emotional labor (Yin et al., 2019). Recent meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that emotional labor significantly predicts teacher burnout, with surface acting consistently associated with negative outcomes and deep acting showing more complex, context-dependent relationships with well-being indicators (Yin et al., 2019).

Recent educational research has demonstrated that teachers engage in substantial emotional labor. The inherently relational nature of their work is the main reason (Jaikla & Piyakun, 2024; Purper et al., 2023). In ECE, this relational work is particularly intense, given that teachers face substantial emotional labor demands related to the developmental needs of young children and the emotional demands of caregiving relationships. ECE teachers see emotional labor not only as a tool to meet their professional expectations, but also as a means to strengthen their relationship with their students (Levine Brown et al., 2023).

Early childhood teachers navigate multiple role expectations (Brown et al., 2025). As educators, ECE teachers provide developmentally appropriate curricula (Qasmi et al., 2022). As caregivers, they address children's physical and emotional needs and manage classroom behavior to maintain order. Additionally, they serve as intermediaries who connect families with educational systems (Pennington et al., 2024). Each role demands adherence to different administrative rules and appropriate emotional expressions (Purper et al., 2023). These divergent expectations create role conflict that intensifies emotional labor demands.



The vulnerability of the student population further intensifies the inherent emotional complexity. Young children need consistent emotional support from adults. This support includes availability, responsiveness, and emotional regulation. Teachers must be aware that their own emotions affect their students. This may create pressure for teachers to remain positive, particularly when they face personal emotional challenges.

Islamic early childhood education adds unique dimensions to these multiple role demands. Teachers in Islamic schools play not only an academic role but also a spiritual one. Spiritual educators provide moral guidance, character formation, and spiritual mentorship (Muzaki et al., 2025). This additional role has not been adequately examined in the emotional labor literature, which has primarily focused on secular educational contexts.

In Indonesia, Raudhatul Athfal (RA) institutions are the primary type of Islamic early childhood education. As stated in Keputusan Menteri Agama Republik Indonesia Nomor 450 Tahun 2024 (the Decree of the Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia Number 450 of 2024), "RA serves as an early childhood education institution operating within the formal educational framework, providing educational programs that incorporate Islamic religious principles for children aged 4 to 6 years." In 2023, there are more than 31,000 RAs nationwide, educating approximately 1,300,000 children (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). RA schools integrate secular early childhood curricula with Islamic religious education. Teachers actively serve as spiritual educators by modeling Islamic values, conducting religious observances, and guiding children's spiritual development alongside their traditional educational responsibilities.

RA teachers have a more specialized and in-depth role as spiritual educators compared with general kindergarten teachers. This is the reason of RA being under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. RA integrates specific Islamic religious education in all aspects of learning (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2024). Meanwhile, kindergarten teachers generally implement religious values and ethics in accordance with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's guidelines, which are inclusive of all religions.

The Indonesian curricular framework further emphasizes the centrality of spiritual education in Islamic early childhood settings. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia established Profil Pelajar Pancasila (the Pancasila student profile) as a key framework to foster character development and enhance student competencies. The first dimension of this Pancasila student profile (P5) emphasizes faith and a fear of God Almighty (Badan Standar Kurikulum dan Asesmen Pendidikan, 2022). To enhance this approach for Islamic education, the Ministry of Religion has integrated additional competencies, resulting in Profil Pelajar Pancasila dan Profil Pelajar Rahmatan lil Alamin (the Pancasila Student Profile and the Rahmatan lil Alamin Student Profile; P5RA) (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2024). A fundamental principle of the P5RA approach is religiosity. This encourages all school activities to be conducted with devotion to Allah SWT (Direktorat KSKK Madrasah Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam, 2022). P5RA emphasizes the role of RA teachers as spiritual educators.

Despite growing recognition of emotional labor's significance in education, critical gaps remain in the current literature. Firstly, most emotional labor research in education has focused on secular educational contexts. There is limited attention to religious educational settings. The significant limitation is mostly because of the substantial global presence of religious education, and it is more likely that spiritual educator roles create unique emotional labor demands. Secondly, past studies have not



fully explored the specific challenges that teachers in religious educational settings face when juggling multiple roles at the same time. There are still few studies on how teachers manage the emotional demands of their various roles, such as educator, caregiver, and spiritual educator.

To address the gaps, this qualitative study aims to explore and provide initial findings in answering the main research question: How do RA teachers experience emotional labor while simultaneously serving as educators, caregivers, and spiritual educators? Specifically, we examine the emotional challenges RA teachers face due to their many roles. This study also examines the strategies these teachers employ that are grounded in Islamic values, as well as how cultural and religious contexts influence emotional labor experiences in ways that extend beyond traditional surface and deep acting categorizations.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative approach with a case study design. The choice of a case study design is motivated by the aim to thoroughly investigate a phenomenon in its natural setting (Yin, 2018). Emotional labor in RA teachers is a complex phenomenon and is still underexplored. A case study is appropriate for providing initial findings in this complex phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The case study design method aligned with this study's objective.

This study involved RA teachers in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, who were recruited through convenience sampling. Bandung Regency has the highest number of RA institutions in West Java (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Jawa Barat, 2024). The use of convenience sampling aligns with the purpose of this study, which is to provide preliminary findings. Additional research is necessary before these findings can be generalized.

In addition to being an RA teacher, participants in this study were required to have at least one year of teaching experience, be directly involved in students' spiritual development activities, and be willing to participate. Exclusion criteria include substitute teachers, assistant teachers, administrative staff, and teachers on extended leave.

Ten female RA teachers participated in this study. Demographic information of this study's participants was presented in Table 1. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 51 years ($M = 32.5$, $SD = 9.90$), and teaching experience ranged from 1 to 17 years ($M = 7.70$, $SD = 5.21$). Most of the participants hold bachelor's degrees (80%). The class sizes ranged from 9-22 students ($M = 13.8$). Schools were distributed across urban ($n=2$), rural/village ($n=6$), and mountainous ($n=1$) settings, with one location unspecified.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age (y.o)	Teaching experience (years)	Education	Class Size	Assistant
P1	51	12	Bachelor (ECE)	9	No
P2	40	10	Bachelor (ECE)	10	No
P3	29	11	Bachelor (ECE)	16	Yes
P4	44	8	Bachelor (ECE)	10	No
P5	30	8	Bachelor (ECE)	12	No
P6	37	17	Bachelor (ECE)	22	Yes
P7	21	2	High school (SMA)	13	Yes



P8	24	1	Bachelor (ECE)	20	No
P9	22	1	High school (SMA)	11	Yes
P10	29	7	Bachelor (IECE)	15	No

Notes. ECE = Early Childhood Education; IECE = Islamic Early Childhood Education or PIAUD; SMA = Sekolah Menengah Atas; Assistant = the availability of a teacher's assistant.

Participant invitations were distributed through the university's alumni network. In the invitation, we provide information regarding this study's objectives, procedures, and participant eligibility criteria. Potential participants had to provide digital informed consent before completing an online survey via Google Forms. The consent explained that participation in this study is voluntary. Participants could withdraw from this study at any time without facing any consequences. In addition, we ensured that their confidentiality will be protected. The survey included demographic and open-ended questions that explored the emotional labor experiences of RA teachers. As part of the consent, participants agreed to share personal contact information. This is important for follow-up clarification if needed.

Multiple measures ensured participant confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to replace the real names in all research documents and reports. Identifying details, such as schools, locations, or other contextual information that could compromise anonymity, were excluded. All procedures adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

As for data analysis, this study employed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. We explore emotional labor experiences of Raudhatul Athfal (RA) teachers. There is a six-phase approach as follows. Firstly, familiarization with data through repeated reading and initial note-taking. Secondly, we formulate the initial codes by using inductive and deductive approaches. Thirdly, we construct themes by identifying frequent patterns. Fourthly, collaboratively review and refine themes. Fifthly, using theoretical grounding to define and name themes. Lastly, we integrate the findings with existing literature to do the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

This study utilized investigator triangulation as a data validation procedure (Carter et al., 2014). Two researchers independently examined and coded the qualitative data of this study. When disagreements occur between the researchers' analyses, a third researcher reviews the conflicting interpretations and makes a final determination to reach consensus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Three interconnected themes emerge from the reflexive thematic analysis as follows. First, multirole emotional labor demands. Second, conventional emotional labor strategies. And third, the Islamic framework as a resource for emotional regulation.

Table 2.
Thematic Matrix

Main theme	Subtheme	Representative Quote	Frequency (n/10)	Interpretation
Theme 1: Multirole Job Demands	RA teachers' job characteristics	" <i>Dengan berperan di kelas menuntut energi emosional besar pada guru.</i> "	10/10	Teaching as a profession entails high-frequency and



	<p><i>Memberikan perhatian penuh pada anak-anak, sehingga terkadang waktu dan energi yang kita miliki untuk diri sendiri menjadi berkurang.”</i> (by playing a role in the classroom demands great emotional energy from the teacher. Give full attention to children, so that sometimes the time and energy we have for ourselves becomes reduced) (participant 7)</p>		<p>duration interaction with students and their parents, requiring high emotional effort from the teachers.</p>
Multirole demands	<p><i>“Peran yang dijalani semuanya dari pendidik, pembimbing, mediator, fasilitator, creator”</i> (The roles are all educators, supervisors, mediators, facilitators, creators) (participant 5)</p>	8/10	<p>The RA teachers simultaneously play more than one role, e.g., educator, caregiver, mediator, and spiritual educator. Teachers need to constantly manage their emotions when carrying out these various roles.</p>
Cultural Display Rules	<p><i>“Saya selalu menyembunyikan perasaan pribadi saya, saya harus tetap profesional dan ceria di hadapan siswa”</i> (I always hide my personal feelings, I have to stay professional and cheerful in front of students) (participant 7)</p>	5/10	<p>Some of the RA teachers implicitly indicated that there are cultural norms they perceived as defining specific expectations regarding teachers' emotional</p>



				expressions (display rules). While some of these teachers believe that they need to limit their emotional expressions, others either did not mention anything regarding restrictions or did not feel that there were any restrictions at all.
Spiritual Educators as Emotional Labor Intensifier		“ <i>Saya menjadi bingung posisi saya pada saat itu. Menjadi takut akan peran sebagai pendidik dan pengasuh sekaligus pembimbing spiritual</i> ” (i became confused about my position at that moment. Becoming afraid of the role of educator and caregiver as well as spiritual guide) (participant 3)	4/10	The spiritual educator role adds distinctive demands. While most of the RA teachers stated that being a spiritual educator is their responsibility and found this role fulfilling, others experienced it as a burden.
Theme 2: Emotional Labor Strategies	Surface Acting	“ <i>Saya tidak memperlihatkan perasaan yang saya rasakan atau ekspresi tersebut dihadapan anak-anak. Saya tetap perlu menjadi tenang dihadapan anak-anak.</i> ” (I don't show my feelings or expressions in front of the children. I still need to be calm in front of the children) (participant 7)	6/10	The RA teachers frequently employed surface acting by suppressing or masking their emotions to maintain professional composure.



	Deep Acting	<p>“<i>Mengafirmasi diri sendiri, mencoba menetralsir dulu perasaan emosi negatif tersebut sebelum ke kelas/ memberikan materi.</i>” (Affirm yourself, try to neutralize these negative emotions first before going to class/giving material.) (participant 3)</p>	3/10	Some RA teachers employ cognitive reappraisal. This strategy demonstrates emotional alignment rather than only suppression.
Theme 3: Islamic Framework in Emotional Labor	Islamic Practices as Emotional Regulation Resources and Strategies	<p><i>Tawakkul: "Kami hanya bisa berusaha...diserahkan kepada Allah SWT, sehingga saya tidak ada rasa kecewa"</i> (We can only try... Left to Allah SWT, so I have no regrets) (participant 1)</p> <p><i>Sabr: "Bersikap sabar, bertanggung jawab menyayangi anak"</i> (Be Patient, Responsible for Caring for Children) (participant 6)</p> <p><i>Istighfar and du'a: "Tenang, beristighfar dan mohon pertolongan hanya kepada Allah"</i> (Calm down, say istighfar and ask for help only from Allah) (participant 2)</p>	6/10	Islamic spiritual teachings, e.g., tawakkul, sabr, istighfar, and du'a, provide distinct emotional regulation resources and strategies for the RA teachers.
	Spiritual Meaning- Making	<p>“<i>Menjadikan peran guru sebagai ibadah. Mendidik bukan hanya pekerjaan, melainkan sebagian dari amal jariyah</i>” (Make the role of teachers as worship. Educating is not only a job, but a part of</p>	9/10	The teachers interpreted emotional challenges through Islamic frameworks. They viewed difficulties as a divine test,



	continuous charity) (participant 7)		strengthening faith, seeking Allah's guidance, or framing teaching as spiritual worship.
Workplace spirituality	<i>"Disekolah selalu ada kajian rutin dihari jum'at jdi dimana guru akan membaca qur'an dan artinya dan memaknai isi yang dibacanya."</i> (in school, there is always a routine study on friday where the teacher will read the qur'an and its meaning and interpret the content he reads.) (participant 5)	2/10	The Islamic framework can also be a resource that is the basis for joint spiritual activities in the RA environment. This practice is closely related to the concept of workplace spirituality.

Theme 1: Multirole Job Demands

This theme explores the complex job demands of the RA teachers. As explained before, they have multiple professional roles in their daily practice. When asked about their primary roles, participants (n = 4) identified the educator role as the most prominent. The spiritual educators (n = 3) as the second. And the caregiver/nurturing roles (n = 2) were identified as the third. One participant described their experience as having the roles (as educator, mediator, facilitator, motivator) with all being "equally dominant" (Participant 10). Another participant characterized the roles as "all interconnected and situational" (Participant 6), highlighting the fluid transitions required throughout daily practice.

Teachers' job demands are the expectations that arise from their frequent, prolonged, and diverse interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. This also includes the emotional display rules that dictate how teachers should express their emotions in these interactions (Yin et al., 2019).

RA Teachers' Job Characteristics: This sub-theme depicts the nature of interaction expectation between the teachers, particularly with their students, parents, in terms of frequency and duration.

Participant 2 provided detailed insight into the high frequency and duration of daily interaction expectations between the RA teachers and their students:

"Setiap pagi kami datang pukul. 07.15 siap siap untuk menyambut siswa dan membaca iqro di kelas setelah itu melakukan jurnal pagi dan fisik motorik lalu berdoa sebelum belajar dan muroja'ah hafal, makan snack pagi terus lanjut membaca iqro dan jurnal sampai pukul 10.00 masuk ke kegiatan inti atau sentra setelah selesai anak pembiasaan cuci tangan dan wudhu bersiap siap untuk m siang dan sholat Dzuhur setelah makan dan sholat doa pulang" (Every morning



we arrive at 7:15 ready to welcome students and read Iqro in class, after that we do morning journals and gross motor activities, then pray before learning and Quran memorization review, morning snack, then continue reading Iqro and journaling until 10:00, entering core activities or centers, after finishing children's hand washing and ablution habits, preparing for lunch and Dzuhur prayer, after eating and praying, farewell prayer).

Teachers without an assistant teacher may face more challenges. Participant 1 described:

"Dari awal pembelajaran sampai kepulangan anak semuanya butuh tuntutan karena saya tidak ada guru pendamping" (From the beginning of learning until the children go home, everything needs demands because I do not have an assistant teacher).

Moreover, this statement demonstrates that in addition to students, the RA teachers also need to interact regularly with the students' parents:

"Melengkapi administrasi pembelajaran, memberikan pemahaman terhadap orang tua yg masih khawatir dengan berbagai macam aktivitas anak dikelas" (Completing the learning administration, providing understanding to parents who are still worried about various kinds of children's activities in the classroom.).

Multirole demands: This sub-theme reflects the heightened emotional burden experienced by RA teachers due to the multirole nature of their profession.

Participants described complex emotional labor demands arising from simultaneous role performance as educator, spiritual educator, caregiver, mediator, and facilitator. The demanding nature of juggling multiple roles was illustrated across the participants. Participant 5 described this complexity: *"Peran yang dijalani semuanya mulai dari pendidik, pembimbing, mediator, fasilitator, kreator"* (the roles played are all from educators, supervisors, mediators, facilitators, creators). This simultaneous role performance created what participants described as overwhelming daily demands.

The intersection of multiple roles may also create emotional conflicts that required constant regulatory management. Participant 4 described a particularly challenging scenario:

"Pernah seperti sedang mengajar menjelaskan agar anak mandiri tiba tiba ada anak yang nangis meluk dengan erat susah untuk lepas disaat seperti itu terkadang merasa bingung harus bagaimana disisi lain saya berusaha berperan sebagai ibu meluk anak tersebut supaya tenang tapi disisi lainnya anak anak yang lain pada bengong ngeliatin bagaimana dengan anak yang lainnya sementara anak yang nangis butuh waktu lama sampai dia tenang" (It happened while I was teaching, explaining so that children would be independent, suddenly there was a child who cried and hugged tightly, hard to let go, at times like that I sometimes felt confused about what to do, on one side I tried to play the role of a mother hugging the child to calm them down, but on the other side the other children were staring. How do I do with the other children while the crying child needed a long time to calm down?).



The situation described illustrates how the demands of a teacher's different roles can create conflicting emotional display rules. The teacher must simultaneously maintain instructional authority while also providing maternal comfort, leading to an internal emotional conflict about which role to prioritize.

Participant 3 mentioned encountering notable role conflict when handling parent disputes:

"Ketika suatu hari ada orang tua yang menginginkan dan menekan agar kita menuruti keinginan orang tua tersebut. Namun di sisi lain saya tidak bisa mengorbankan anak yang masih perlu di bantu untuk mengubah perilakunya. Di sini saya harus berperan pendidik dan pengasuh bagi anak-anaknya. Pembimbing spiritual untuk kedua orang tuanya. Tidak hanya saling meminta tolong langkah mana yang harus diambil. Kedua orang tua ini pun masih kekeh dengan pendapatnya. Disinilah saya merasa tekanan yang begitu besar selama saja mengajar" (When one day there were parents who wanted and pressed us to follow the parents' wishes. However, on the other hand, I couldn't sacrifice a child who still needed help to change their behavior. But here I had to play the role of educator and caregiver for their children. Spiritual guide for both parents. Not only asking each other for help on what steps to take. Both parents were still stubborn with their opinions. This is where I felt such great pressure during my teaching).

Cultural Display Rules: The Indonesian Islamic cultural context established distinctive norms for emotional expression, particularly affecting the RA teachers who serve as community moral exemplars. These expectations created what past research identifies as display rules, which are organizational norms determining the appropriateness of expressing specific emotions in a professional setting (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989).

Some of the teachers acknowledged the existence of these display rules. Participant 7 clearly articulated these cultural constraints:

"Dalam budaya lokal, seorang guru dianggap sebagai figur teladan, sehingga ketika guru mengekspresikan rasa marah berlebihan akan dianggap tidak pantas" (In local culture, a teacher is considered a role model, so when teachers express excessive anger, it will be considered inappropriate).

This statement aligns with the results of a recent review, which indicates that some teachers view display rules through the lens of their role-based identity (Stark & Bettini, 2021). Indonesian teachers can identify themselves as moral authorities whose emotional expressions are subject to community scrutiny and evaluation.

The impact of these cultural constraints varied across different environmental contexts. These results align with a recent review indicating that teachers associate display rules with specific physical settings, such as inside the school versus outside. When participant 8 was asked about her behavior at school and home, she highlighted notable differences in how she expresses her emotions at the two settings.:

"Sangat berbeda karena di sekolah saya sangat berhati-hati dalam menyampaikan emosi" (Very different because at school I am very careful in expressing emotions).



However, not all participants experienced restrictive display rules. Participant 4 noted:

"Tradisi di sekolah membentuk tidak membatasi saya dalam mengekspresikan emosi" (The tradition at school does not limit me in expressing emotions).

Taken together, past studies indicate that these emotional display rules can be influenced by the strength of the RA teacher's identification with their role and their physical location (Stark & Bettini, 2021).

Spiritual Educators as Emotional Labor Intensifier: In contrast to what was previously assumed, only three out of 10 RA teachers in this study saw the role of spiritual educators as an emotional labor intensifier.

The role of spiritual educators was predicted to emerge as a distinct dimension of the emotional labor of RA teachers. Recent studies supported that the spiritual educator role creates a distinct emotional demand compared to secular educational settings (Irpan & Sain, 2024; Syafii & Azhari, 2025).

Participant 1 described,

"terbebani dengan keinginan orangtua" (burdened by parents' desires).

Parents were expected their child acquired advanced Quranic reading skills. And this is inappropriate at this level of age. This situation created emotional dissonance requiring teachers to manage disappointment while maintaining supportive relationships with both children and parents.

In times of facing intense emotional events, participant 3 stated:

"saya menjadi bingung posisi saya pada saat itu. Menjadi takut akan peran sebagai pendidik dan pengasuh sekaligus pembimbing spiritual." (I became confused about my position at that moment. Becoming afraid of the role of educator and caregiver as well as spiritual guide).

The mention of the spiritual guide role indicates the teacher's recognition of the various demands associated with that role.

However, some participant reported conversely. Participant 2 said,

"Tidak, karena peran sebagai guru spiritual itu akan selalu menjadi pengingat bagi diri saya sendiri" (No, because the role as spiritual educator will always be a self-reminder).

Other participant (participant 6) said

"Tidak. Karna sudah menjadi ke-khas-an dari RA itu sendiri. Dan muatan-muatan pembelajaran pun mengacu pada dasar keagamaan." (No. Because it has become a characteristic of RA itself. And the learning content also refers to religious foundations).

Theme 2: Emotional Labor Strategies

This theme captures the emotional labor strategies that RA teachers use to handle the many demands of their jobs. The analysis shows how these teachers switch between the two emotional labor strategies, i.e., surface and deep acting. They often use these strategies simultaneously or in quick succession, depending on the situation. These findings portray the complexity of emotional labor in education, especially in the context of Islamic early childhood education.



Surface Acting Manifestations: Surface acting is a common emotional labor strategy among the RA teachers. It involves expressing emotions outwardly differently from how one feels inside.

When asked to describe how she managed her emotional expressions in the classroom, Participant 7 said the following:

"Saya tidak memperlihatkan perasaan yang saya rasakan atau ekspresi tersebut dihadapan anak-anak. Saya tetap perlu menjadi tenang dihadapan anak-anak" (I don't show the feelings I experience or those expressions in front of the children. I still need to remain calm in front of the children). This is an example of emotional suppression, which indicates surface acting.

Participant 8 gave another example of surface acting:

"Akan mengesampingkan emosi tersebut seperti tidak terjadi apa2 dan akan menjadi seperti biasa lagi, dan pastinya hanya di pendam saja" (I will set aside those emotions as if nothing happened and will become normal again, and certainly just keep it inside).

Participant 8 further stated:

"Tidak ada karena orang lain tidak pernah tau kalau saya tertekan karena saya selalu diam dan di pendam sendiri saja" (There is none because other people never know I'm stressed because I always stay silent and keep it to myself).

These findings align with what previous research has described as emotional dissonance. Emotional dissonance occurs when teachers' true feelings conflict with the emotional responses they are required to display in their professional roles (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). This situation is prevalent in the teaching profession, where educators often mask their frustration, stress, or personal challenges to uphold a professional appearance (Nath & Pandey, 2025). Overall, teachers need to be careful about using surface acting on an ongoing basis, as previous research has found that it is associated with increased burnout and emotional exhaustion (Ntim et al., 2023; Purper et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2019).

Deep Acting Manifestations: Deep acting is different from surface acting because it focuses on what's happening inside. In deep acting, people genuinely try to match their true feelings with what is needed for their job. They use techniques that change both their thoughts and behaviors. Deep acting strategy demonstrated individuals' capacity for true emotional transformation rather than mere emotional suppression.

Participant 5 described cognitive reappraisal as a form of deep acting strategy:

"Selalu mengafirmasi diri dengan kalimat-kalimat positif dan berusaha untuk masuk ke area sekolah/gerbang sekolah tidak membawa emosi negatif" (Always affirming myself with positive statements and trying to enter the school area/school gate without bringing negative emotions).

This cognitive approach represents a genuine attempt to align internal emotional states with professional requirements, a characteristic of deep acting (Grandey, 2003).

Importantly, the data revealed that teachers can employ both surface and deep acting strategies simultaneously or in rapid succession. This finding challenges the idea that these two approaches are completely separate.



Participant 7 illustrated this complexity during a particularly challenging classroom incident:

"Pernah suatu hari dimana ada satu anak inisial K dia hanya berdiam diri saja dengan wajah yang pucat, ketika saya tanya dia malah menangis keras dan badannya demam. Pada waktu yang sama anak yang lain ada yang berebut mainan sehingga suasana menjadi gaduh. Sebagai pendidik : saya harus bersikap tenang dengan menjaga suasana pembelajaran agar anak-anak yang lain tetap mendapatkan pembelajaran secara kondusif. Sebagai pengasuh : saya harus menenangkan dan merawat anak K, memeriksa suhu badannya, memberi minum dan obat, kemudian memposisikannya dengan rasa aman. Sebagai pembimbing spiritual : saya memberikan ketenangan lewat kata-kata lembut supaya anak lain tidak ketakutan" (One day there was a child with initials K who just stayed quiet with a pale face, when I asked him, he cried loudly and his body had a fever. At the same time, other children were fighting over toys so the atmosphere became noisy. As an educator: I had to remain calm while maintaining the learning atmosphere so that other children still received learning in a conducive manner. As a caregiver: I had to calm and care for child K, check his body temperature, give him drinks and medicine, then position him safely. As a spiritual guide: I provided peace through gentle words so that other children wouldn't be afraid).

This participant demonstrates how teachers rapidly shift between surface acting (maintaining a calm demeanor for classroom management), genuine emotional expression (maternal care for the sick child), and deep acting (spiritual comfort for other children) within a single challenging episode.

Theme 3: Islamic Framework in Emotional Labor

This theme explores how the Islamic framework offers resources for emotional regulation. These resources can be utilized as emotional regulation strategies through various Islamic practices and the process of spiritual meaning-making (a form of deep acting strategy). Additionally, at the organizational level, the Islamic framework can serve as a foundation for workplace spirituality.

These findings contribute to understanding how the Islamic framework may create unique pathways for managing professional emotional demands that may differ significantly from secular approaches.

Islamic Practices as Emotional Regulation Resources and Strategies: The most significant finding regarding cultural context was how Islamic spiritual concepts provided powerful resources for emotional regulation. Recent research confirms that Islamic spiritual practices offer unique pathways for authentic emotional regulation (e.g., Razilhija et al., 2025).

Participant 1 stated:

"Dalam ajaran Islam bahwa kita hanya bisa berusaha dan untuk hasil diserahkan kepada Allah SWT, sehingga saya tidak ada rasa kecewa bila hasilnya tidak sesuai dengan harapan karena saya yakin semua tergantung pada ketentuan Allah SWT" (In Islamic teachings, we can only try our best and leave the results to Allah SWT, so I don't feel disappointed if the results don't meet expectations because I believe everything depends on Allah's decree).



The statement reflects the Islamic concept of *tawakkul* (trust in Allah's will). Participant 1 further elaborated on this transformative process:

"Iya mempengaruhi, bahwa saya berusaha berserah diri kepada Allah dengan segala ketentuannya sehingga saya belajar untuk ikhlas menerimanya" (Yes, it influences, that I try to surrender to Allah with all His decrees so that I learn to sincerely accept them).

Participant 6 also expressed the same belief:

"Bahwa menjadi apapun pasti ada ujiannya dan solusinya. Bersama kesulitan pasti ada kemudahan" (That becoming anything definitely has its tests and solutions. With difficulty, there is definitely ease).

The Islamic virtue of *sabr* (patience) provided another crucial resource for emotional regulation. Participant 6 emphasized the importance of patience in her daily life as a teacher:

"Bersikap sabar, bertanggung jawab menyayangi anak didik, lemah lembut tidak kasar dan keras hati" (Being patient, responsible loving students, gentle not harsh and hard-hearted).

Sabr can function simultaneously as an emotional labor strategy and a spiritual practice that can transform the subjective experience of emotional challenges. Unlike passive resignation, *sabr* represents active emotional endurance combined with continued constructive action despite difficulties, such as yearning to seek knowledge, resolute to find solutions, and non-complaining (El Hafiz et al., 2015). The concept of *sabr* is deeply rooted in Quranic teachings, where it is presented as a divine test that strengthens faith and facilitates forgiveness of sins when successfully navigated.

Participant 8 stated that she also practices *sabr*:

"Hanya bisa sabar saja" (Can only be patient), while Participant 9 provided a more detailed explanation: *"dengan norma sosial dan tradisi islam saya dapat belajar sabar, ikhlas, tenang untuk dapat mengelola emosi"* (with social norms and Islamic traditions I can learn patience, sincerity, calmness to be able to manage emotions).

The practice of *istighfar* (seeking Allah's forgiveness) can also be an alternative to an Islamic coping mechanism. Participant 2 described her approach to managing emotional challenges:

"Tenang, beristighfar dan mohon pertolongan hanya kepada Allah agar diberikan jalan keluar yang terbaik" (Calm down, seek forgiveness and ask for help only from Allah so that the best way out is given).

Spiritual Meaning-Making: Islamic spiritual frameworks provided participants with resources for meaning-making. For example, when asked what she did when facing challenges while serving as an RA teacher, participant 1 said that:

"Saya tidak merasa dalam keadaan sulit, karena saya yakin dalam ajaran Islam bahwa semua permasalahan pasti ada jalan keluarnya, dengan yakin bahwa Allah pasti memberikan ujian atau cobaan pada hambanya sesuai dengan kemampuannya" (I don't feel in a difficult situation, because I believe in Islamic



teachings that all problems definitely have a way out, with the belief that Allah definitely gives tests or trials to His servants according to their abilities).

Another example is shown by Participant 5, who stated:

"mungkin sedang diuji dan allah inginkan saya lebih kuat" (maybe I'm being tested and Allah wants me to be stronger). In line with this statement,

Participant 7 even sees work as a teacher as a form of worship:

"Menjadikan peran guru sebagai ibadah. Menyadari bahwa dengan mendidik bukan hanya pekerjaan, melainkan sebagian dari amal jariyah" (Making the teacher role as an act of worship. Realizing that educating is not just a job, but part of continuous charity).

These practices demonstrate how the RA teachers are transforming emotional labor burden as a form of spiritual devotion. This shift may bring deeper motivation and a sense of purpose. As a result, it has the potential to help maintain their well-being and job commitment over the long run.

Workplace Spirituality: This sub-theme describes how RA teachers can collaborate with their coworkers through structured spiritual practices. These practices help create meaning, purpose, and mutual support in their work environments. Only two teachers reported participating in these activities, but their uniqueness makes them worth exploring further.

Participant 5's description of one of the routine activities at her school, where *"guru akan membaca Qur'an dan artinya dan memaknai isi yang dibacanya"* (the teacher would read the Qur'an and its meaning and interpret the content he reads).

Every Friday provides an interesting picture of how spirituality is integrated into the work environment. Through this activity, the school provides a space for teachers not only to reinforce shared values but also to examine their professional challenges from a spiritual perspective. This collective process of interpreting the Qur'an is likely to help teachers realign their personal spiritual motivations with their professional responsibilities. This practice aligns with the concept of workplace spirituality, which is "the recognition of an inner life that nourishes and is nourished by meaningful work that takes place in the context of community" (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000).

Participant 6 provided an additional example of other practical applications of Islamic spiritual practices in her school:

"Muhasabah diri, musyawarah bersama rekan juang, memohonkan kesalahan anak-anak dalam doa" (Self-reflection or *muhasabah*, consultation with colleagues, praying for the children's mistakes in du'a).

Discussion

To explore the overall emotional labor experiences of the RA teachers, we use the emotional labor model proposed by Grandey (2000) (see Figure 1).



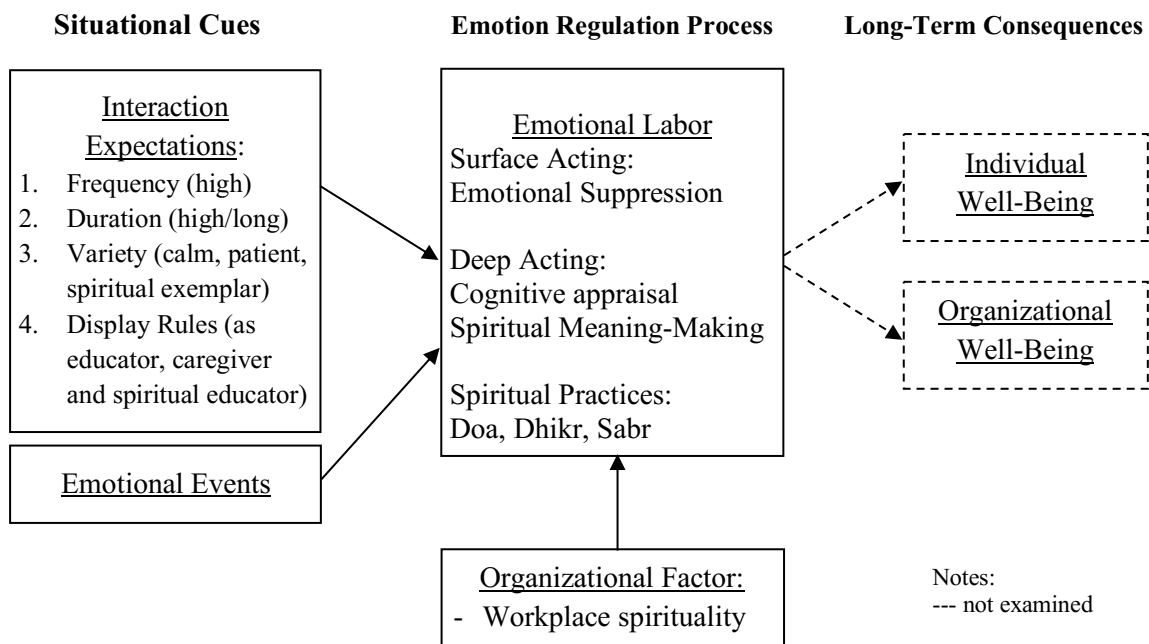


Figure 1. The RA teachers' emotional labor experiences

The RA teachers in this study experienced a range of emotional events and expectations that influenced the extent of emotional effort they invested in fulfilling their roles each day. Interaction expectations, as outlined in Grandey's emotional labor model (Grandey, 2000), are also referred to as job demands (Yin et al., 2019) and are relevant to the first theme of this study's findings, namely, Multirole Job Demands. In their work, RA teachers have frequent and long interactions with students (Jaikla & Piyakun, 2024). In addition, the RA teachers also need to interact with the students' parents. In fulfilling their responsibilities, the RA teachers recognised the need to regulate their emotional expressions in alignment with the professional demands of being educators, including remaining calm, patient, and serving as spiritual exemplars. The intense emotional experiences faced by the RA teachers (such as dealing with crying children, managing those who resist following instructions, and addressing conflicts among children) and the high interaction expectations or job demands of RA teachers necessitate significant efforts in emotional management.

In managing emotions, Grandey (2000) identified two primary strategies that individuals can employ: surface acting and deep acting. These emotional labor strategies are particularly relevant to the second theme of this study's findings, namely Emotional Labor Strategies. The RA teachers may engage in surface acting, typically characterized by emotional suppression or masking (Grandey, 2000). For example, when a child is crying during a lesson, a teacher may maintain a smile even if they are feeling confused internally. The RA teachers can also employ deep acting, which involves cognitive reappraisal (Grandey, 2000). For instance, when she feels anxious about a task, she tries to replace those emotions with more positive ones.

What is unique in this study's findings is the presence of a third theme: the Islamic Framework as an emotional regulation resource. The Islamic Framework can act as an emotional regulation resource. These resources enable RA teachers to use spiritual meaning-making as a form of deep acting to manage their emotions. In addition, we



identified that RA teachers can use other strategies from Islamic practices, such as tawakkul, sabr, istighfar (as a form of dhikr), and du'a. The Islamic framework may also affect the emotional labour process of RA teachers as an organisational factor, i.e., workplace spirituality (e.g., Rana et al., 2022). This particular organisational factor may help the RA teachers to engage in more adaptive emotional labour strategies (Rana et al., 2022; Zou et al., 2022). Further research is still needed to confirm and test the role of these constructs related to this Islamic framework in the emotional labor process of RA teachers.

It is important to clarify that when we mention RA teachers, we specifically mean the RA teachers involved in this study. We do not attempt to generalize our findings to all RA teachers in Indonesia due to the limitations of our methodology. Table 3 presents the demographic characteristics of participants, along with the emotional labor strategies and examples of intense emotional events they have experienced. We sorted the data by participants' teaching experience, from shortest to longest.

Table 3.

Pattern of demographic characteristics and emotional labor strategies

Participant	Age (y.o)	Teaching experience (years)	Education	Class Size	Assistant	ELS	Example of intense emotional events
P9	22	1	High school (SMA)	11	Yes	Surface acting, spiritual meaning making, sabr	Managing difficult students
P8	24	1	Bachelor (ECE)	20	No	Surface acting, sabr	Managing difficult students
P7	21	2	High school (SMA)	13	Yes	Surface acting, deep acting, spiritual meaning making	Students' disputes, students feeling unwell at school
P10	29	7	Bachelor (IECE)	15	No	Surface acting, spiritual meaning making, sabr	Students getting into an accident in class (e.g., falling from his/her chair)
P4	44	8	Bachelor (ECE)	10	No	Surface acting, spiritual meaning making, sabr	Managing difficult students, including students with separation anxiety



P5	30	8	Bachelor (ECE)	12	No	Deep acting, spiritual meaning making	Managing multirole demands, including administrative tasks
P2	40	10	Bachelor (ECE)	10	No	Spiritual meaning making, istighfar	Work-family conflict
P3	29	11	Bachelor (ECE)	16	Yes	Deep acting, spiritual meaning making	High parental expectation, parent-to-parent conflict
P1	51	12	Bachelor (ECE)	9	No	Surface acting, deep acting, spiritual meaning making, tawakkul	High parental expectation
P6	37	17	Bachelor (ECE)	22	Yes	Spiritual meaning making, sabr, tawakkul, muhasabah	Parent-to-parent conflict

Notes. ELS = Emotional Labor Strategies; ECE = Early Childhood Education; IECE = Islamic Early Childhood Education or PIAUD; SMA = Sekolah Menengah Atas; Assistant = the availability of a teacher's assistant.

Based on Table 3, we identified several patterns, i.e., teaching experience-emotional labor strategy, teaching experience-emotional events, and class size-assistant teacher-emotional labor strategy.

In the current sample, teachers with different lengths of teaching experience showed differences in the use of emotional labor strategies. Less experienced teachers (1-2 years of experience), i.e., Participants 9, 8, and 7, tend to use surface acting combined with spiritual practice. Most experienced teachers with 12-17 years of experience (i.e., Participant 1 and 6) demonstrated more sophisticated use of emotional labor strategies, including *tawakkul*, *muhasabah*, spiritual-meaning making, and deep acting. This pattern suggests that teaching experience may be related to the type of emotional labor strategy used; less experienced teachers are more likely to use surface acting than more experienced teachers (Tsang et al., 2022).

The diversity in the length of teaching experience also shows a different pattern in the types of emotional events considered emotionally challenging. Less experienced teachers (Participant 9, 8, and 7) found emotional events related to classroom management and student behavior regulation as emotionally challenging. More



experienced teachers (Participant 10, and 4) reported critical incidents, such as student accidents in class, students with separation anxiety, as emotionally challenging. For the experienced teachers (Participants 2, 3, 1, and 6), interpersonal challenges with adults (e.g., high parental expectations, parent-to-parent conflict, work-family conflict) are emotionally challenging.

Class size may also be related to the type of emotional labor strategy used by the teachers. Teachers managing larger classes (18-22 students; Participant 8 and 6) without assistants reported behavioral suppression-focused strategies (surface acting, *sabr*), while those in smaller classes (9-15 students) with comparable experience demonstrated more diverse strategies. Participant 8, managing the largest class (20 students) without an assistant, reported only surface acting and *sabr*, while Participant 10, managing a mid-sized class (15 students, no assistant), employed additional spiritual meaning-making. Similarly, Participant 6, despite managing the largest class overall (22 students), employed the most comprehensive strategy. This condition may relate to participant 6's teaching experience (as mentioned before) and also the presence of an assistant teacher. These results may suggest that the teachers in large classes without assistance appear constrained to surface acting, potentially creating vulnerability to emotional exhaustion, whereas assistant availability enables these same teachers to use more adaptive emotional labor strategies.

The pattern of correlation between demographic characteristics and emotional labor experience of the RA teachers is intriguing and warrants further investigation through follow-up studies. This study has several limitations. As a case study, this study used a small, culturally homogeneous sample. The results provide initial findings that serve as a foundation for further studies rather than for generalization. Regarding data collection, this study relied solely on self-report measures. This method may introduce potential measurement bias, such as social desirability bias and recall bias. This study also did not utilize any software for data analysis. Lastly, this study has not directly measured the constructs involved in the emotional labor process experienced by RA teachers, including teachers' job demands, emotional labor strategies, spirituality, and co-worker support.

To address the above limitation, future research is recommended to expand the sample to include diverse and culturally varied Islamic education settings. It should use multiple data collection methods to minimize biases. Future research is also suggested to use advanced data analysis methods and software for more robust analysis. Quantitative approaches are needed to directly measure the constructs involved in RA teachers' emotional labor, including job demands, emotional labor strategies, spirituality, and co-worker support. Additionally, future studies should explore how specific Islamic practices function as emotional regulation resources and investigate long-term changes in emotional labor strategies, thereby providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of emotional labor in this context.

Due to methodological limitations of this study, further studies are needed to confirm the findings. As initial findings, this study highlights the role of RA teachers' spirituality on their emotional labor experience. The findings suggest that spirituality is an individual factor that may help RA teachers manage their emotions. The findings also suggest that Islamic practices can be potentially deemed as a distinct category of emotional labor strategy. This can have implications for efforts to improve the emotional well-being of RA teachers. These efforts may integrate Islamic teachings or practice education, such as *sabr*, *dhikr*, and spiritual meaning-making, into their programs.



Moreover, one of the challenges that the RA teachers face is unrealistic parental expectations. Schools can implement parent education programs that help align parents' expectations with what is developmentally appropriate for their children. This strategy can help to create a more supportive environment for both teachers and families in Islamic early childhood education settings. This supportive environment can play a role as an organizational factor that affects the emotional labor experience of RA teachers.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study explored the emotional labor experiences of ten Raudhatul Athfal (RA) teachers in Bandung, Indonesia. The findings extend Grandey's (2000) emotional labor model by demonstrating that the Islamic framework introduces a spiritual-cultural dimension previously absent from secular educational contexts, wherein Islamic practices (such as *tawakkul*, *sabr*, *istighfar*, and *du'a*) and spiritual meaning-making may function as emotional labor strategies. To operationalize these theoretical insights, we recommend that RA institutions develop comprehensive teacher training programs. These programs should integrate Islamic teachings and practices, for example, *tawakkul*, *sabr*, *du'a*, and *dhikr* (the remembrance of Allah). RA institutions can also implement school policies that strengthen workplace spirituality, such as regular Qur'an studies and *muhasabah*.

The findings of this study are preliminary and require further research due to several methodological limitations. These include a small sample size, a homogeneous sample, and reliance on self-report measures. This study also did not directly assess all the constructs involved in the emotional labor process. We recommend future research to include: 1) quantitative studies using validated instruments to directly measure job demands, emotional labor strategies, workplace spirituality, and teachers' well-being in larger, geographically diverse RA samples; 2) longitudinal studies tracking the use of emotional labor strategy across teachers' careers and the long-term impacts of spirituality-based strategies on teachers' well-being; and 3) comparative research between RA teachers and general kindergarten teachers within identical geographic regions.

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