
A Study on the Relationship Among Trait Emotional Intelligence, Perceived Social Support, Subjective Well-Being, and Job Burnout in Secondary School Physical Education Teachers

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Abstract: Focusing on secondary school physical education teachers in China as the specific research subjects, this paper systematically reviews the conceptual connotations, measurement tools, and empirical research status of four core constructs: trait emotional intelligence, job burnout, perceived social support, and subjective well-being. It synthesizes the mechanisms of interaction among these variables and relevant theoretical models. The research indicates that trait emotional intelligence is a core personal resource for alleviating teacher job burnout, with perceived social support and subjective well-being playing a chain mediating role between them. Secondary school physical education teachers face multiple pressures, including subject marginalization, significant safety responsibilities, and the unique context of non-classroom teaching environments. There are notable gaps in targeted and localized research in this area. This paper provides a theoretical foundation and research directions for subsequent empirical testing and interventions aimed at teacher mental health.

Keywords: Trait Emotional Intelligence; Perceived Social Support; Subjective Well-Being; Job Burnout; Secondary School Physical Education Teachers

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1. Introduction

Teaching is a helping profession characterized by high emotional engagement and high stress. Consequently, teacher job burnout and mental health have long occupied a central position in research within educational psychology and occupational health psychology. Compared to teachers of general academic subjects, secondary school physical education teachers face distinct challenges: they work in open environments, bear responsibility for student safety, are often marginalized in the curriculum, and may experience lower professional identity, putting them at greater risk for emotional exhaustion and job burnout.

Emotional intelligence, social support, and subjective well-being are key psychological variables influencing teachers' stress coping, professional adaptation, and mental health. Existing literature predominantly focuses on general primary,

secondary, and university teachers, with fewer systematic reviews specifically targeting secondary school physical education teachers. Furthermore, the chain mediation mechanisms among these variables have not been clearly integrated. Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, this paper systematically reviews the core concepts, research progress, measurement tools, and inter-variable relationships. It aims to construct a complete theoretical framework and identify research gaps, thereby laying the foundation for localized empirical research in this field.

2. Core Concept Definitions and Research Progress

2.1. Trait Emotional Intelligence

The theory of emotional intelligence originates from Thorndike's theory of social intelligence and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Mayer and Salovey categorized it into the ability model and the mixed model. Based on measurement methods, Petrides proposed the distinction between "trait emotional intelligence (TEI)" and ability emotional intelligence, which has become the mainstream consensus in academia.

Trait emotional intelligence refers to an individual's self-perception and behavioral tendencies regarding their own ability to identify, process, and utilize emotions. It falls within the personality domain, is measured using self-report questionnaires, and offers advantages such as ease of administration and suitability for large-sample studies, making it the preferred construct in educational research. It encompasses four dimensions: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, emotion regulation, and emotion utilization, constituting a vital component of teachers' professional competence.

Empirical research indicates that trait emotional intelligence positively predicts teaching efficacy and negatively predicts job burnout. In China's teacher education system, the focus has predominantly been on cultivating students' emotional intelligence, often neglecting the development of teachers' own emotional competencies. Training and support in this area are particularly lacking for physical education teachers. The Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) is a well-suited measurement tool for this field, demonstrating good localized reliability and validity, and aligns effectively with educational occupational contexts.

2.2. Job Burnout

The concept of job burnout was first introduced by Freudenberger in 1974. Maslach's three-dimensional model (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment) has become the universally accepted theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Emotional exhaustion is considered the core and initiating dimension of burnout. Depersonalization manifests as cynical and detached attitudes toward students. Reduced personal accomplishment is reflected in a diminished sense of professional worth and efficacy.

Teachers are a professional group with a high incidence of burnout. Cross-cultural research indicates that while female teachers internationally report higher levels of burnout, male teachers in China exhibit more pronounced depersonalization. Burnout levels are significantly higher among junior secondary school physical education teachers compared to their counterparts in primary and senior secondary schools, a trend associated with the challenges of managing adolescent students and the relatively lower status of the physical education discipline. For localized measurement, the revised version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) is the preferred tool, as it is well-adapted to the Chinese educational context and suitable for use with secondary school physical education teachers.

2.3. Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support refers to an individual's subjective perception and evaluation of support resources from family, friends, colleagues, and supervisors. It is distinct from objective social support, and its subjective experience has a more significant impact on mental health. As a crucial psychosocial resource, it can buffer stress, reduce burnout, and enhance well-being.

Research indicates that females generally report higher levels of perceived social support. In collectivist cultures,

family support is the primary source, while workplace support is particularly critical for teachers. Secondary school physical education teachers, who often have fewer colleagues and work independently, may be more sensitive to their perception of social support, yet research specifically focusing on this group remains insufficient. Measurement employs the two-dimensional Chinese adapted version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), which categorizes support into family support and non-family support, demonstrating excellent cultural appropriateness.

2.4. Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their quality of life based on self-defined standards. It encompasses three dimensions: positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction, serving as a core indicator for measuring teachers' mental health and quality of life.

The overall subjective well-being of teachers in China is at a moderate level, significantly influenced by factors such as age, teaching experience, income, professional title, and region: senior teachers report higher levels than young teachers, and urban teachers report higher levels than their rural counterparts. Physical education teachers tend to have relatively lower levels of subjective well-being due to high occupational stress and low professional identity. Measurement employs a combined approach using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), covering both cognitive and affective dimensions, demonstrating stable cross-cultural validity.

3. Inter-variable Relationships and Mechanisms

3.1. Trait Emotional Intelligence and Job Burnout

A significant negative correlation exists between the two, with high trait emotional intelligence negatively predicting job burnout. The mechanism operates as follows: as a personal resource, trait emotional intelligence helps teachers identify emotional cues, regulate negative emotions, and optimize coping strategies, thereby reducing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization—consistent with the JD-R theory. Within the Chinese context, emotion regulation and emotion appraisal are key dimensions for alleviating burnout, and the emotional management ability of physical education teachers directly influences their professional adaptation.

3.2. The Mediating Role of Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support mediates the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and job burnout: teachers with high trait emotional intelligence are more likely to establish good interpersonal relationships and perceive higher levels of support; adequate perceived social support fulfills the need for belonging, buffers work stress, and thereby reduces burnout. For physical education teachers, support from colleagues and supervisors can compensate for the lack of resources caused by subject marginalization, serving as a critical protective factor.

3.3. The Mediating Role of Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being mediates the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and job burnout: trait emotional intelligence enhances positive affect and life satisfaction, strengthens psychological resilience, and consequently alleviates burnout. Subjective well-being serves as a crucial psychological bridge connecting personal resources and occupational health.

3.4. The Chain Mediation Model

Integrating theory and empirical research, a chain mediation pathway is established: trait emotional intelligence → perceived social support → subjective well-being → job burnout.

Specifically, trait emotional intelligence enhances the perception of social support; Perceived social support, in turn, promotes subjective well-being; Subjective well-being directly alleviates job burnout.

This model comprehensively explains the pathways through which personal resources, social resources, and positive psychological states influence burnout, thereby providing a theoretical framework for intervention.

4. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Population Gap: Existing research predominantly focuses on general teachers, with insufficient targeted and localized studies on secondary school physical education teachers, overlooking their unique occupational stressors.

Mechanism Gap: The chain mediation model has not been empirically tested within the physical education teacher population, and there is a lack of longitudinal tracking and intervention experiments.

Practice Gap: Interventions aimed at cultivating emotional intelligence, establishing social support systems, and enhancing subjective well-being for physical education teachers are largely absent.

Future research should empirically test the chain mediation model and develop localized intervention programs to provide support for improving the occupational health of physical education teachers.

5. Conclusion

Trait emotional intelligence, perceived social support, and subjective well-being are core variables influencing job burnout among secondary school physical education teachers. As a personal resource, trait emotional intelligence significantly alleviates job burnout through the chain mediating effects of perceived social support and subjective well-being. The unique professional characteristics of physical education teachers make them more susceptible to emotional stress and resource scarcity, underscoring the urgent need for targeted theoretical research and practical interventions.

This review systematically synthesizes the core constructs, measurement tools, and inter-variable relationships, identifies research gaps, and provides a theoretical foundation and research directions for future studies on the occupational health of secondary school physical education teachers.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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