

The Mediating Role of Work Anxiety in the Relationship Between Teacher Professionalism and Well-Being: A Conceptual Paper on Middle School Teachers in Sichuan Province, China

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Abstract – Teacher professionalism is a critical factor influencing educators' experiences, affecting both their well-being and levels of work-related anxiety. While professionalism is often associated with positive outcomes, its impact on teacher well-being remains complex, particularly when work anxiety is present. This study aims to examine the relationship between teacher professionalism and well-being, with work anxiety as a mediating factor, among middle school teachers in Sichuan Province, China. This study will employ a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, using a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across different school types, locations, and teaching experiences. Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire incorporating validated scales for teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and well-being. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted to prove the reliability of the instruments. Data analysis will involve Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationships among teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and well-being. Additionally, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be employed to test the hypothesized mediation model, providing a comprehensive understanding of both direct and indirect effects. The findings are expected to offer empirical insights into how professionalism influences well-being, particularly in the presence of work anxiety. This study has significant implications for educational policymakers, administrators, and teacher training programs. By identifying the role of professionalism and work anxiety in shaping teacher well-being, the study aims to inform strategies that promote professional development while ensuring psychological resilience among educators.

Keywords – Teacher professionalism, teacher well-being, work anxiety, mediation, middle school teachers, structural equation modeling

I. INTRODUCTION

The professional environment of teachers plays a crucial role in shaping education quality and influencing teachers' professional well-being. In China, particularly in Sichuan Province, middle school teachers shoulder heavy teaching responsibilities while navigating multiple societal expectations. Beyond delivering subject knowledge, they are also expected to provide emotional support, moral guidance, and value cultivation to students (Dong, 2020). In recent years, educational reforms and increasing public demands for higher education quality have led to substantial changes in the working conditions of middle

school teachers, introducing new challenges and pressures (Guo, 2023).

Middle school teachers in Sichuan Province face an increasingly demanding workload. In addition to their teaching duties, they are often required to engage in extensive test preparation counseling and training on test-taking strategies, which are both time-intensive and mentally exhausting (Contemporary Educator, 2023). The pressure intensifies in the context of high-stakes examinations such as the Gaokao and Zhongkao, where teachers' performance is frequently evaluated based on student enrollment rates. This direct linkage between student success and teachers' professional evaluations exacerbates work-related anxiety and psychological stress.

Professional well-being is a key determinant of teachers' job satisfaction and mental health (Van Horn et al., 2004). Research suggests that professional well-being not only affects teachers' career development but also has a direct impact on teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Carine Viac & Fraser, 2020). Higher levels of professional well-being are often associated with increased job commitment and teaching motivation, whereas work-related anxiety can diminish instructional effectiveness and hinder long-term career sustainability (H. Wang & Song, 2024). Given these considerations, examining the factors influencing teachers' professional well-being, particularly the mediating role of work anxiety, is essential for enhancing teachers' working conditions and improving overall educational outcomes.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The professional well-being of middle school teachers in Sichuan Province is increasingly under strain due to heightened professional expectations and growing workplace pressures. While teacher professionalism is widely recognized as a critical determinant of teacher effectiveness and student success (Jansem, 2020), its psychological implications for teachers remain underexplored. Research suggests that teachers' actions are shaped by their motivations, capacities, and working conditions (Nwoko et al., 2023; Orina et al., 2021, 2022; Prado & Opeña, 2024; Toropova et al., 2021). However, despite the acknowledged significance of teacher professionalism, limited research has examined how professional demands influence teachers' well-being, leaving a critical gap in the literature.

Existing studies have predominantly focused on student anxiety and academic performance, with relatively little attention given to work-related anxiety among teachers

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(Kobul & Saraçoğlu, 2020). Recent findings suggest that work anxiety may play a mediating role in shaping the relationship between professional expectations and occupational well-being. For instance, J. Wang et al. (2022) demonstrated that teacher efficacy and anxiety mediate the relationship between achievement goals and work engagement. Similarly, Mohsin et al. (2022) found that work anxiety mediates the relationship between workplace ostracism and incivility, while Fiorilli et al. (2020) identified anxiety as a key mechanism linking emotional intelligence to school burnout. Despite these insights, research remains scarce on whether work anxiety mediates the relationship between teacher professionalism and professional well-being, particularly among middle school teachers in Sichuan Province.

Moreover, while numerous studies have examined the direct impact of teacher professionalism on various educational outcomes, the potential indirect effects mediated by work anxiety have yet to be systematically explored (Hascher et al., 2021). The absence of work anxiety as a mediating factor limits our understanding of how professional expectations contribute to occupational stress and well-being. Addressing this gap is essential for developing targeted interventions that mitigate stress and promote a supportive professional environment for teachers.

This study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the mediating role of work anxiety in the relationship between teacher professionalism and professional well-being among middle school teachers in Sichuan Province. By identifying the underlying mechanisms through which professionalism affects teacher well-being, this research will offer valuable insights for educational policymakers and school administrators in designing more effective support structures that balance professional expectations with psychological well-being.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Professionalism and Teachers' Professional Well-being

Teacher professionalism plays a crucial role in shaping teaching effectiveness and influencing overall well-being. Research consistently demonstrates that professionalism enhances job satisfaction and fosters a sense of accomplishment, contributing to higher professional well-being (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2020). The professional competence of teachers significantly affects their well-being, particularly in areas such as work engagement, innovation, and career fulfillment (Tanang & Abu, 2019). Mardikaningsih et al. (2022) also found that teacher motivation and professionalism directly impact performance and professional satisfaction.

Furthermore, teachers who demonstrate high professionalism often report greater work satisfaction, increased motivation, and a stronger commitment to their profession (Dinnen et al., 2024). However, despite these positive associations, excessive professional expectations and pressures may lead to heightened stress and decreased well-being. The balance between professionalism and

psychological well-being remains a crucial area for further exploration, particularly in the context of rapidly evolving educational landscapes and increasing job demands.

Teacher Professionalism and Work Anxiety

Teacher professionalism, encompassing pedagogical expertise, ethical standards, and professional commitment, is generally perceived as a positive attribute. However, research suggests that increased professional expectations can also contribute to work-related anxiety, particularly in high-stakes educational environments. Studies indicate that strict performance evaluations, administrative pressures, and societal expectations heighten teachers' stress levels, leading to work anxiety (Zhang et al., 2023).

Professional demands, such as excessive workload, long working hours, and accountability pressures, can induce anxiety as teachers strive to meet institutional benchmarks while managing complex classroom dynamics (Luo et al., 2021). Additionally, high professional responsibility often correlates with fear of failure and job insecurity, further intensifying anxiety levels (Wang & Peng, 2022). Despite these findings, limited research has explored the direct relationship between teacher professionalism and work anxiety, particularly among middle school teachers. Investigating this link is essential for understanding how professionalism-induced stress affects teachers' psychological well-being and overall job satisfaction.

Work Anxiety and Teachers' Professional Well-being

Work anxiety has emerged as a significant factor affecting teachers' well-being. Teaching is inherently a high-stress profession that demands sustained engagement, emotion regulation, and psychological resilience (Hargreaves, 2020; Roeser et al., 2021). Anxiety, as a common emotional response to work-related stress, can negatively impact job satisfaction, performance, and overall well-being (Frenzel et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Prolonged exposure to stressors such as excessive workload, student behaviour management, and administrative expectations can lead to burnout, diminished motivation, and even attrition (Battams et al., 2022).

Recent studies suggest that work anxiety mediates the relationship between professional demands and occupational well-being. For example, Wang et al. (2022) found that teacher efficacy and anxiety mediate the relationship between achievement goals and work engagement. Similarly, Mohsin et al. (2022) demonstrated that work anxiety influences workplace relationships, including ostracism and incivility, which further deteriorate teachers' well-being. Fiorilli et al. (2021) also identified anxiety as a key mechanism linking emotional intelligence to school burnout.

Despite these insights, limited research has directly explored how work anxiety mediates the relationship between teacher professionalism and professional well-being, particularly in the context of middle school teachers in Sichuan Province. Addressing this gap is essential for designing interventions that promote psychological resilience while maintaining high professional standards.

Relevant Theory

While research on teacher professionalism and well-being has gained traction, the role of work anxiety as a mediator remains underexplored. According to Affective Events Theory (AET), workplace events—including professional expectations and teaching-related challenges—trigger emotional responses, which subsequently influence job attitudes and behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 2020). AET suggests that work anxiety can serve as a mediating factor that connects external work pressures to teachers' well-being (Domagalski & Steelman, 2021; Gabriel et al., 2023).

Research on AET in educational contexts has shown that teachers' emotional experiences significantly shape their work motivation and well-being. Events such as student interactions, peer collaboration, and performance evaluations can induce stress and anxiety, which in turn influence job satisfaction and professional commitment (Chen et al., 2023; Lai et al., 2024). AET thus provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding how teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and professional well-being interact in the workplace.

The literature reviewed highlights the critical relationships between teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and professional well-being. While prior research has demonstrated that professionalism enhances well-being, the potential negative effects mediated by work anxiety remain understudied. Given the increasing pressures on middle school teachers in Sichuan Province, it is imperative to investigate how professionalism-induced work anxiety affects their overall well-being.

Conceptual Framework

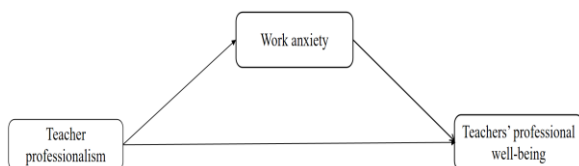


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which emphasizes the interaction between personal, environmental, and behavioural factors in shaping human functioning. Within the context of this research, teacher professionalism is expected to influence teacher well-being, while work anxiety may act as a mediating factor that alters the strength and direction of this relationship.

Teacher professionalism serves as the independent variable (IV) in this study. It encompasses various dimensions, including professional knowledge, commitment, collaboration, and ethical standards (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2006). A strong sense of professionalism is associated with enhanced job satisfaction, motivation, and overall well-being. However, the professional expectations and responsibilities placed on teachers can also contribute to stress and anxiety.

Work anxiety is considered the mediating variable (MV) in this framework. It represents the psychological

distress that teachers may experience due to excessive workloads, high performance expectations, and pressures from administrative and societal demands (Frenzel et al., 2016). The presence of work anxiety could potentially weaken the positive impact of teacher professionalism on well-being, leading to increased emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction.

Teacher well-being is the dependent variable (DV) in this study. It refers to teachers' subjective well-being in their professional environment, encompassing aspects such as emotional resilience, job satisfaction, and work-life balance (Ramirez-Garcia et al., 2019). While higher professionalism is expected to contribute to improved well-being, the extent of this effect may be influenced by the level of work anxiety experienced by teachers.

This framework posits that teacher professionalism positively influences teacher well-being; however, this relationship may be partially mediated by work anxiety. To test this hypothesis, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be employed, allowing for an in-depth examination of both direct and indirect relationships among the study variables. Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights into how schools and policymakers can better support teachers by fostering professionalism while minimizing work-related anxiety.

IV. METHOD

Research Design

This study utilizes a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to objectively examine the relationships among teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and professional well-being. A quantitative approach enables hypothesis testing and the generalization of findings to a broader teacher population through statistical analysis. The cross-sectional design captures the current state of these relationships at a specific point in time without manipulating variables, aligning with the study's goal to explore existing patterns and mediating effects. This approach ensures efficiency, broad data coverage, and validity in answering the research questions.

Population and Sample

The study targeted middle school teachers in Sichuan Province, China. According to the (relevant education bureau, 2022), the estimated population size of middle school teachers in the province is approximately 335,200 teachers. A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to ensure diversity in terms of school location (urban and rural), school type, and teaching experience. The sample size in this study is 384, which is calculated by the model of Krejcie and Morgan (1970). By calculation, when $P=0.5$, $X^2=3.841$, $e=0.05$, $N=7026000$, $n=383.661513$.

Instrumentation

The study will utilize a structured questionnaire consisting of three validated scales to measure the key study variables. For the dependent variable, Teacher Well-

Being Scale will be used. The scale assesses teachers' subjective well-being in relation to their work environment. The operational definition of professional well-being follows Ramirez-Garcia et al. (2019), and the measurement items were adapted from their research questionnaire. For the independent variable, teacher professionalism will be measured with Teacher Professionalism Scale. Teacher professionalism encompasses teachers' professional knowledge, commitment, collaboration, and ethical standards. This study employs a validated scale, which demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$) in prior studies (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2006). As for the mediating variable, work anxiety is measured using a subscale from the Teacher Emotions Scale (TES) developed by Frenzel et al. (2016). This scale evaluates teachers' anxiety levels related to professional responsibilities, workload, and external pressures.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability of the questionnaire before full-scale implementation. In line with the central limit theorem, a pilot study with at least 30 participants was deemed necessary (Memon et al., 2020). A preliminary survey involving 80 participants was conducted, yielding the following internal consistency results:

TABLE I: RELIABILITY OF THE SCALES (N=80)

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	NO. of items
Teachers' Professional Well-being	.938	.620	11
Teacher Professionalism	.932	.681	8
Work Anxiety	.899	.698	5

Cronbach's Alpha (α) is over 0.8 in all dimensions. This indicates that the internal consistency of each dimension of the questionnaire is high, and the reliability of the scale reaches the testing standard (Henson, 2001).

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, ethical approval will be secured from the relevant academic committee at participating schools. Potential respondents will be informed about the research objectives, and informed consent will be obtained. To ensure data security, all responses will be stored in encrypted formats, and only the research team had access to the dataset. Confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly maintained, in accordance with ethical research standards. This methodological framework ensures a rigorous, transparent, and systematic approach to investigating the research questions.

Data will be collected through a structured questionnaire distributed via an online platform. To obtain a representative sample, eight middle schools will be randomly selected from the population of middle schools in Sichuan Province. The questionnaire link will then be randomly disseminated to all in-service teachers within the selected schools. This sampling strategy is designed to enhance the generalizability of the findings. According to

Table I, a minimum of 384 valid responses is required to ensure sufficient statistical power for subsequent analyses. Therefore, this study aims to collect at least 400 valid responses to account for possible non-responses or incomplete data.

Data Analysis

The collected data will be analysed using SPSS and AMOS statistical software, following a structured approach to address the research objectives. To examine the relationship among teacher professionalism, work anxiety and teacher well-being, Pearson correlation analysis will be conducted. This analysis will determine the strength and direction of associations between teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and well-being. Understanding these relationships is crucial, as it provides initial insights into whether higher levels of teacher professionalism are linked to greater well-being and whether work anxiety plays a role in shaping this relationship.

To investigate the mediating effect of work anxiety between teacher professionalism and teacher well-being, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) will be employed. SEM is chosen due to its ability to simultaneously assess direct and indirect effects among latent variables, providing a comprehensive understanding of the proposed mediation model (Kline, 2023). Model fit will be evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including Chi-square statistics, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), ensuring that the theoretical model aligns with the observed data. Additionally, a bootstrapping method with 5,000 resamples will be applied to test the significance of the mediation effect. This approach enhances the reliability of the findings by generating confidence intervals for indirect effects, allowing for robust statistical inference.

By employing these analytical techniques, this study aims to provide a clear and statistically sound understanding of how teacher professionalism influences well-being, with work anxiety as a potential mediating factor. The findings from these analyses will contribute to a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of the interplay between teacher professionalism, work anxiety, and teacher well-being in the context of middle school educators in Sichuan Province.

V. CONCLUSION

This proposed study aims to examine the relationship between teacher professionalism and well-being among middle school teachers in Sichuan Province, with work anxiety as a mediating factor. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data will be analysed through Pearson correlation analysis and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to assess direct and indirect relationships. The findings are expected to contribute to both theory and practice by clarifying how professionalism influences well-being and highlighting the role of anxiety. While the study is limited to a single region and employs a cross-sectional approach, future research could explore longitudinal effects and additional mediating factors. The

insights gained will inform educational policies aimed at fostering professionalism while mitigating work-related anxiety to enhance teacher well-being.

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