

Emotional Intelligence and Job Burnout among Secondary School Teachers: The Serial Mediating Roles of Perceived Social Support and Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract: This study investigates the relationships between emotional intelligence, job burnout, perceived social support, and subjective well-being among secondary school teachers. A sample of 504 teachers completed validated scales, including the *Job burnout Questionnaire*, *Emotional Intelligence Scale*, *Perceived Social Support Scale*, *Life Satisfaction Scale*, and *Positive and Negative Affect Scale*. A serial mediation model was constructed, and multi-group analyses were conducted to examine gender differences. Key findings include: (1) Perceived social support and subjective well-being sequentially mediate the relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and burnout; (2) Gender differences emerged: male teachers' emotional intelligence directly predicted burnout, whereas this direct effect was absent in female teachers.

1. Introduction

Job burnout refers to a psychological syndrome characterized by prolonged emotional exhaustion due to chronic workplace stress^[1]. It negatively impacts mental health and professional functioning^[2]. Teachers, as a high-risk group for burnout, face intense emotional demands and heavy workloads^[3]. Addressing teacher burnout is critical, as it directly undermines educational quality and students' long-term development.

Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) posits that personal resources mitigate the adverse effects of job demands^[4]. Emotional intelligence, as a psychological resource, protects against burnout by enabling individuals to recognize, interpret, and regulate emotions^[5-6]. Teachers with high emotional intelligence manage workplace stressors more effectively, reducing emotional exhaustion and fostering resilience^[7-8]. Studies show that teachers struggling to regulate negative emotions in classrooms report higher burnout levels, underscoring the need for school-based interventions to enhance emotional skills and institutional support^[9].

Social Support Buffering Theory (SSBT) highlights social support as a buffer against stress-related mental health risks^[10]. Emotionally intelligent teachers actively seek and perceive stronger social support, indirectly reducing burnout^[11-13]. Effective emotional regulation fosters supportive workplace relationships, particularly with superiors, which is critical for mitigating burnout^[14-15]. For example, Wang and Xu^[16] found that principal-led emotional support reduces

emotional exhaustion and enhances teachers' sense of accomplishment.

Broaden-and-Build Theory (BBT) emphasizes that positive emotions broaden cognitive resources and build psychological resilience ^[17]. Teachers with high emotional intelligence experience greater subjective well-being, which counteracts burnout ^[18–21]. These individuals report higher life satisfaction, workplace efficiency, and positive interpersonal interactions, further reinforcing well-being ^[15, 22–23].

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identifies belongingness (via social support) and well-being as outcomes of fulfilling core psychological needs ^[24]. Perceived social support satisfies teachers' need for belonging, enhancing well-being and reducing burnout. Karademas ^[25] confirmed this chain effect: social support → well-being → improved mental health.

Prior research on teacher burnout has focused on preschool and university educators, with limited attention to secondary school teachers. Secondary schoolteachers face unique stressors, including high academic pressures and complex curricula, which may differ from burnout drivers in elementary settings ^[26]. Gender differences remain debated: some studies report higher burnout among female teachers ^[27–28], while others in China suggest male teachers are more vulnerable ^[29–30].

In summary, this study examines burnout among secondary schoolteachers, focusing on emotional intelligence as a predictor and the serial mediation of perceived social support and subjective well-being. Gender-specific differences in these pathways will be analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM).

2. Participants and Research Methodology

2.1 Participants

This study utilized a convenience sampling method to survey secondary schoolteachers in Northern and Northwestern China. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, with 523 returned (87.2% response rate). After screening for validity, 19 incomplete responses were excluded, yielding 504 valid questionnaires (96.4% validity rate). Participants included 222 male and 282 female teachers.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Emotional Intelligence Scale

Emotional intelligence was measured using the Chinese version of the *Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)* ^[31], comprising 16 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale assesses four dimensions: self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, emotion regulation, and emotion utilization (4 items per dimension). Cronbach's α in this study was 0.94.

2.2.2 Primary and Secondary School Teachers' Job burnout Questionnaire

Burnout was assessed using the *Job burnout Questionnaire for Primary and Secondary School Teachers* ^[32], consisting of 22 items across three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = "never," 6 = "always"), with personal accomplishment items reverse-scored. Cronbach's α was 0.89.

2.2.3 Subjective Well-Being Composite

Subjective well-being was operationalized as a composite of three components: life satisfaction,

positive affect (PA), and negative affect (NA). It was measured using the *Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)* and the *Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)*. The composite score was calculated as: $(\text{Standardized SWLS score} + \text{Standardized PA score}) - \text{Standardized NA score}$ [33–35].

2.2.3.1 Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

The *Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)* [36], a 5-item measure rated on a 7-point Likert scale, demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$).

2.2.3.2 Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

The *Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)* [37] includes 20 items (10 positive and 10 negative emotions). Participants rated their alignment with each emotion using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "very slightly" to 5 = "extremely"). Scores for positive and negative affect were calculated separately. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$.

2.2.4 Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS)

The *Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS)*, originally developed by Zimet et al. [39] and adapted by Jiang [38], consists of 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. It assesses three dimensions: family support, friend support, and significant-other support. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$).

2.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0. Serial mediation effects were tested with the PROCESS Macro 3.4, and multi-group analyses by gender were conducted in AMOS 24.0.

3. Results

3.1 Common Method Bias Test

Harman's single-factor test was applied to assess common method bias. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of all items from the four variables (emotional intelligence, burnout, perceived social support, and subjective well-being) extracted 12 factors with eigenvalues >1 . The largest factor accounted for 27.54% of variance ($<40\%$), indicating no significant common method bias.

3.2 Chain Mediation Model Analysis of Job burnout and Related Factors

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among emotional intelligence, perceived social support, subjective well-being, and job burnout in secondary school teachers. Results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation Analysis between Variables

	Job burnout	Emotional Intelligence	Subjective Well - being	Perceived Social Support
Job burnout	-			
Emotional Intelligence	-0.368***	-		
Subjective Well - being	-0.622***	0.474***	-	
Perceived Social Support	-0.524***	0.394***	0.631***	-

(Note: ** represents $p < 0.01$, *** represents $p < 0.001$)

The serial mediation model was tested using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 6) ^[40], with emotional intelligence as the independent variable, job burnout as the dependent variable, perceived social support and subjective well-being as sequential mediators, and gender as a covariate. Bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples (95% CI) revealed a significant total effect of emotional intelligence on burnout ($\beta = -0.371, p < .001$). Emotional intelligence directly predicted burnout ($\beta = -0.079, p = .026$) and exerted indirect effects through three pathways: (1) by enhancing perceived social support ($\beta = 0.396, p < .001$), which in turn reduced burnout ($\beta = -0.185, p < .001$); (2) by fostering subjective well-being ($\beta = 0.267, p < .001$), which subsequently lowered burnout ($\beta = -0.459, p < .001$); and (3) sequentially through perceived social support ($\beta = 0.526, p < .001$) leading to improved subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.459, p < .001$). All indirect pathways were statistically significant, as indicated by 95% CIs excluding zero. Specifically, the indirect effects via perceived social support alone (95% CI [-0.141, -0.043]), subjective well-being alone (95% CI [-0.207, -0.095]), and the serial pathway (95% CI [-0.155, -0.079]) collectively accounted for 78.5% of the total effect. Full results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of the Chain Mediation Model

Regression Equation		Global Fit Indices			Significance of Regression Coefficients	
Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	<i>R</i>	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
Job burnout	gender	0.416	0.173	52.487***	-0.195	-4.798***
	Emotional Intelligence				-0.371	-9.120***
Perceived Social Support	gender	0.418	0.175	53.096***	0.139	3.435***
	Emotional Intelligence				0.396	9.764***
Subjective Well-Being	gender	0.677	0.459	141.280***	0.002	0.065
	Emotional Intelligence				0.267	7.440***
	Perceived Social Support				0.526	14.516***
Job burnout	gender	0.661	0.437	96.792***	-0.135	-3.958***
	Emotional Intelligence				-0.079	-20.050*
	Perceived Social Support				-0.185	-4.199***
	Subjective Well-Being				-0.459	-10.042***

(Note. *** represents $p < 0.001$; all variables in the model were standardized)

As shown in Table 2, emotional intelligence directly predicted burnout and exerted indirect effects through two pathways: (1) via perceived social support alone, (2) via subjective well-being alone, and (3) sequentially through perceived social support followed by subjective well-being (serial mediation). All pathways were statistically significant. The standardized path coefficients are

illustrated in the serial mediation model (Figure 1).

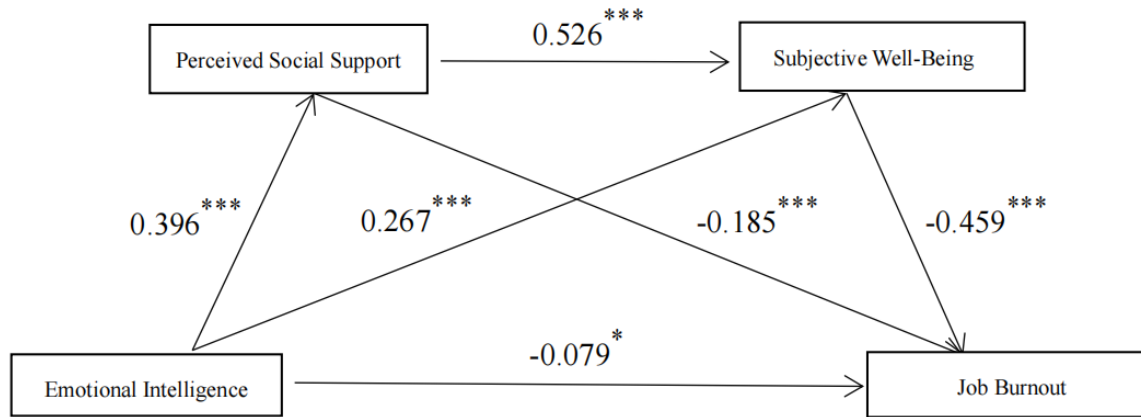


Figure 1. Chain Mediation Model (N=504)

Table 3. Mediation Analysis of Perceived Social Support and Subjective Well-Being Using Bootstrap Method

			95%CI	
Path	Effect Size	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Emotional Intelligence → Job burnout	-0.095	0.047	-0.187	-0.004
Emotional Intelligence → Perceived Social Support → Job burnout	-0.088	0.025	-0.141	-0.043
Emotional Intelligence → Subjective Well-Being → Job burnout	-0.148	0.028	-0.207	-0.095
Emotional Intelligence → Perceived Social Support → Subjective Well-Being → Job burnout	-0.115	0.019	-0.155	-0.079
Total Effect	-0.447	0.049	-0.543	-0.350

As shown in Table 3, the mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects of perceived social support and subjective well-being in the relationship between emotional intelligence and job burnout, with a total indirect effect of -0.447 (95% CI not including zero). The mediation operated through three pathways: first, emotional intelligence reduced burnout via perceived social support alone (effect = -0.088, 19.7% of the total effect; 95% CI [-0.141, -0.043]); second, through subjective well-being alone (effect = -0.148, 33.1% of the total effect; 95% CI [-0.207, -0.095]); and third, sequentially through perceived social support followed by subjective well-being (effect = -0.115, 25.7% of the total effect; 95% CI [-0.155, -0.079]). Additionally, emotional intelligence retained a significant direct effect on burnout (95% CI [-0.187, -0.004]), confirming partial mediation.

3.3 Multi-Group Analysis by Teacher Gender

To test whether the serial mediation model (perceived social support → subjective well-being) was invariant across genders, multi-group analyses were conducted separately for male and female teachers. As shown in Table 4, the constrained structural weights model (equal path coefficients) yielded non-significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2 = 8.937$, $\Delta df = 6.000$, $p > 0.05$), and the constrained structural covariance model (equal error variances) also showed non-significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2 = 10.681$, $\Delta df = 10.000$, $p > 0.05$). Changes in model fit indices (NFI, IFI, CFI, RMSEA, GFI) were all below the threshold of 0.05, confirming that the serial mediation model exhibited cross-gender invariance [41].

Table 4. Measurement Invariance Test

Model	$\Delta CMIN$	ΔDF	P	ΔNFI	ΔIFI	ΔCFI	$\Delta RMSEA$	ΔGFI
Structural weights	8.937	6.000	0.18	-0.013	-0.004	-0.004	0.031	-0.009
Structural residuals	10.681	10.000	0.38	-0.016	-0.001	-0.001	0.012	-0.011

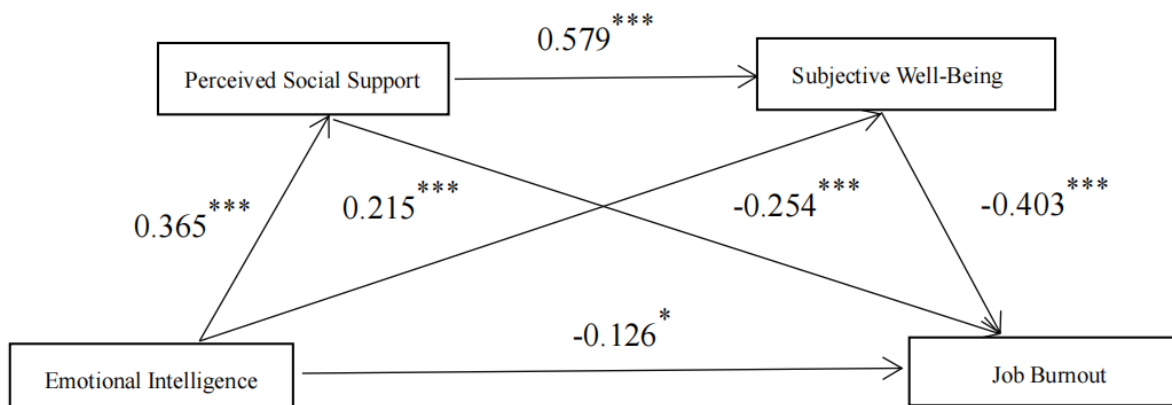


Figure 2. Chain Mediation Model for Male Teachers (N = 222)

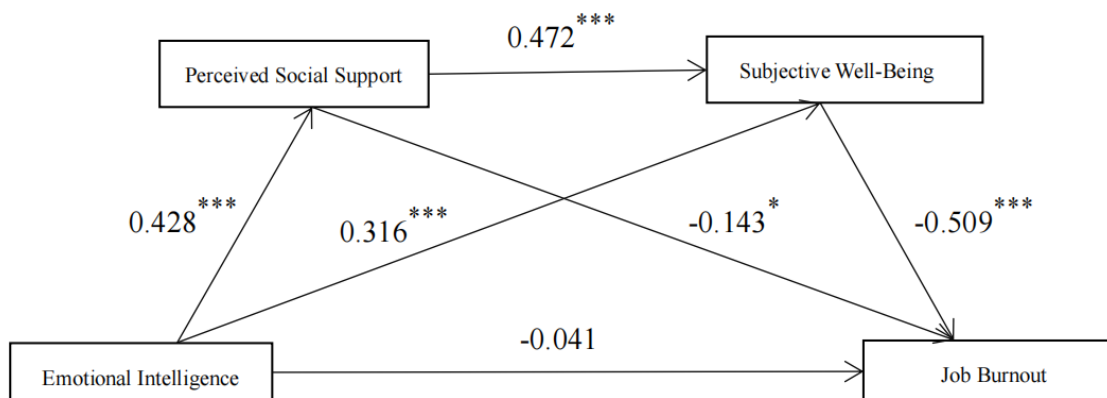


Figure 3. Chain Mediation Model for Female Teachers (N = 282)

Table 5. Comparison of Path Coefficients in the Chain Mediation Model by Gender

	Male Teachers				Female Teachers			
	β	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>C.R.</i>	<i>P</i>	β	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>C.R.</i>	<i>P</i>
Emotional Intelligence → Perceived Social Support	0.365	0.065	5.829	***	0.428	0.053	7.928	***
Perceived Social Support → Subjective Well-Being	0.579	0.008	11.027	***	0.472	0.007	9.64	***
Emotional Intelligence → Subjective Well-Being	0.215	0.008	4.099	***	0.316	0.007	6.455	***
Emotional Intelligence → Job burnout	-0.126	0.068	-2.261	*	-0.041	0.063	-0.75	0.453
Subjective Well-Being → Job burnout	-0.403	0.542	-5.831	***	-0.509	0.486	-8.147	***
Perceived Social Support → Job burnout	-0.254	0.084	-3.787	***	-0.143	0.067	-2.417	*

As shown in Table 5, the results demonstrate that perceived social support and subjective well-being act as serial mediators in the relationship between emotional intelligence and job burnout. Notably, male teachers' emotional intelligence directly predicted their job burnout ($\beta = -0.126, p < 0.05$), whereas no significant direct effect was observed for female teachers ($\beta = -0.041, p > 0.05$).

4. Discussion

Consistent with prior studies [42, 43], this research confirms that emotional intelligence in secondary school teachers significantly predicts reduced job burnout, with perceived social support and subjective well-being acting as sequential mediators. Specifically, emotional intelligence directly lowers burnout while also alleviating it indirectly through a chain pathway: first enhancing perceived social support, which then fosters subjective well-being, ultimately reducing burnout.

Multi-group analysis confirmed the cross-gender invariance of the serial mediation model, aligning with findings from Xie et al. [44] in elementary school teachers. However, gender-specific analysis revealed distinct pathways: male teachers' emotional intelligence exerted a significant direct effect on burnout, whereas female teachers' emotional intelligence influenced burnout exclusively through mediation. Specifically, female teachers' emotional intelligence reduced burnout by sequentially enhancing perceived social support and subjective well-being, with the indirect effect being significantly stronger than in male teachers.

These gender differences may stem from societal roles and emotion regulation strategies. First, men often prioritize career achievement, directing emotional resources toward workplace challenges, which allows emotional intelligence to directly buffer job-related stress [45]. In contrast, women manage multiple roles (e.g., work-family balance), distributing emotional energy across life domains and relying on social support systems to integrate these resources [46]. Second, men tend to suppress emotions [47,48], increasing vulnerability to emotional exhaustion under stress, while women employ expressive strategies (e.g., communication, leisure activities) to activate social support networks, thereby mitigating stress [47].

These findings highlight the need for gender-specific interventions: male teachers may benefit from targeted emotional intelligence training to enhance stress resilience, while female teachers require strengthened social support systems and strategies to amplify well-being. However, the study's reliance on self-reported measures and cross-sectional data limits causal inferences and temporal analysis. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and objective

assessments (e.g., behavioral observations) to clarify the dynamic relationships between emotional intelligence and burnout.

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