



# The mediating role of workplace social support on the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and teacher burnout



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- An integrated model of teacher burnout was developed based on this study's results.
- Emotional intelligence is negatively associated with teacher burnout.
- Emotional intelligence is positively associated with workplace social support.
- Workplace social support partially mediated emotional intelligence and teacher burnout.
- The mediating relationship among variables is consistent across gender and age.

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the mediating effect of workplace social support on the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and teacher burnout among 307 Chinese middle school teachers. Structural equation modelling revealed a satisfactory fit between the data and our theoretical model. Workplace social support partially mediated the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and teacher burnout. Neither gender nor age moderated the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and teacher burnout. Emotional intelligence and workplace social support can protect teachers from teacher burnout. Thus, providing effective emotional intelligence training and creating supportive workplace conditions requires increased attention from education administrators.

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## 1. Introduction

Teacher burnout is defined as symptoms of emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) and has received extensive and continuous attention worldwide (Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012; Shin, Noh, Jang, Park, & Lee, 2013). In mainland China, a nationwide web-based investigation revealed that almost 80% of middle school teachers reported experiencing burnout during their daily

work (SINA, 2005). Thus, a critical problem requiring an immediate solution is how to reduce teacher burnout. Identifying the factors that determine teacher burnout has significant implications not only for teachers' effectiveness, motivation and job satisfaction (Jalongo & Heider, 2006; Thakur, 2012), but also for students' academic achievement and personal development (Dorman, 2003; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

Many factors might be associated with teacher burnout. According to the Job Demand-Resources Model, burnout is related to both high job demands (e.g. workload) and low job resources (e.g. social support) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Teachers often experience high demands in the teaching environment, including heavy workload and time pressures, role conflict and ambiguity, complicated school relationships and pressure and criticism from parents and society (Okeke & Dlamini, 2013). Consequently, the availability of various types of job resources becomes crucial to buffering job demands. While, from the stress–burnout relationship perspective,

*Abbreviations:* SEM, structural equation modelling; CFI, comparative fit index; GFI, goodness of fit index;  $p(\Delta\chi^2)$ ,  $p$ -value of the  $\chi^2$  difference; RMSEA, root mean squared error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual; CI, confidence interval; EI, emotional intelligence; ROE, regulation of emotion; SEA, self-emotion appraisals; UOE, use of emotion; OEA, others' emotion appraisals.

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Görgens-Ekermans and Brand (2012) argued that burnout can be understood as an extreme case of chronic and prolonged stress that is likely to emerge when work is unchallenging, unrewarding and does not include positive feedback and recognition (Maslach et al., 2001). Thus, factors that can counteract teaching stress might also be effective in reducing teacher burnout (Lo, 2014). Previous studies have suggested that personal resources and social resources in the work environment could encourage and reinforce teachers' coping efforts in stressful work-related conditions (Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, & Wang, 2009). Therefore, we conceived of personal resources (i.e. trait emotional intelligence [EI]) and social resources (i.e. perceived workplace social support) as burnout protectors, and explored a possible protective mechanism for teacher burnout.

Evidence suggests that teachers' personal resources such as personality characteristics (Kokkinos, 2007), self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007) and EI (Chan, 2006) are related to burnout. From a theoretical perspective, personal resources have been recognized as crucial protective factors for individuals' general psychological well-being (Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). Thus, personal resources would also be necessary in an occupational context. Consistently, numerous studies indicate that teachers with increased personal resources have increased burnout resilience (Gu & Day, 2007) and decreased burnout risk (Howard & Johnson, 2004) when faced with the same stressors than those who do not.

In addition to personal resources, school-based environmental resources such as supportive supervisors and colleagues (Kokkinos, 2007; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014) and positive student feedback (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012) play central roles in reducing teacher burnout and promoting teaching performance. Theoretically, environmental resources in the workplace are effective initiators of employees' work engagement and, consequently, of enhanced performance (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009a). Consistently, empirical studies suggest that teachers that perceive sufficient environmental resources (e.g. collaborative and participatory school climate) have increased job satisfaction and retention (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). In contrast, teachers with scarce environmental resources (e.g. unsupportive workplace conditions) tend to have low job satisfaction and high turnover intention (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012).

Prior research has shown that teacher burnout is closely related to both personal and environmental resources (Johnson et al., 2012; Yang, Ge, Hu, Chi, & Wang, 2009). However, two problems have yet to be fully addressed. First, although previous studies have independently used environmental and personal resources to explain teacher burnout (Johnson et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), to our knowledge no study has integrated both constructs into the same predictive model. According to the employee-working environment fit framework, burnout can be affected by complex dynamics between the worker and his/her working environment, rather than a single personal or environmental attribute (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2011). Although some studies have focused on interactions between personal and environmental influences on occupational outcomes (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009b), the complexity and dynamics of these protective factors have been neglected when studying teacher burnout in a school context (Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Soini, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Second, although many studies have focused on gender and age differences in teacher burnout (Lau, Yuen, & Chan, 2005), few have evaluated the moderating effects of gender and age on the relationship between EI and teacher burnout. Therefore, it is unknown if female and male teachers or younger and older teachers would equally benefit from EI and workplace social support as protective factors for burnout.

To fill these gaps, the current study has two main goals. Firstly, we aim to incorporate personal and environmental resources into

an integrated model to test for a possible burnout mechanism among teachers in mainland China (Fig. 1). Secondly, we aim to examine the moderating effects of age and gender within this integrated model. In the following sections, we will summarize the literature on EI-related concepts, workplace social support and teacher burnout. Based on this literature review, we will detail the hypotheses that formed the theoretical model for our research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Trait EI and teacher burnout

EI reflects the extent to which a person attends to, processes and intra- and inter-personally acts upon emotional information. There are two types of EI that can be operationally defined: ability EI and trait EI (Kafetsios & Zampetakis, 2008). Specifically, ability EI (or cognitive-emotional ability) refers to one's actual emotional ability from a cognitive perspective (e.g. the ability to recognise, process and utilise emotion-loaded information). Measuring ability EI requires the use of maximum-performance tests with correct and incorrect responses, such as the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008). In contrast, trait EI (or emotional self-efficacy) refers to a constellation of behavioural dispositions and self-perceptions concerning one's ability to process emotional information from a personality perspective (e.g. when a person tends to be sympathetic, impulsive or assertive). Measures of trait EI, such as the 33-item Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS-33) (Schutte et al., 1998), do not have correct or incorrect responses. Instead, these self-report questionnaires reflect individuals' tendencies during emotional processing. Previous studies found that trait EI was more strongly associated with mental health than ability EI (Brown, 2006) and was an important predictor of teacher burnout (Platsidou, 2010). Therefore, in the current study, we only focused on trait EI among teachers.

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that trait EI is associated with individual differences in teacher burnout (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). Theoretically, trait EI could render teachers less vulnerable to burnout because those with enhanced EI might more effectively use emotional information to make sense of their reactions to stressors and to guide adaptive actions (Greenberg, 2002). Empirical research has also reported connections between trait EI and teacher burnout (Chan, 2006). For instance, Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, and Salovey (2010) found that teachers with higher emotion regulation efficacy reported lower burnout. In addition, evidence from professional training programmes suggests that EI training can be an effective technique for improving individual stress resilience, which may be particularly helpful in combating teacher burnout (Brackett & Katulak, 2006). Based on these findings, we hypothesised the following:

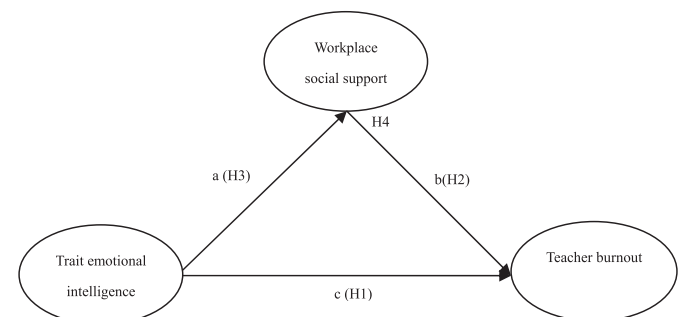


Fig. 1. The theoretical model for the relationship between trait emotional intelligence, workplace social support and teacher burnout.

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