Work-family Conflict, Optimism, and Job Satisfaction among Teachers in Chinese Private Middle Schools

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Abstract. Work satisfaction is the emotional orientation that an employee holds toward their work. Prior researchers found that teachers in Chinese schools tend to have low job satisfaction and high turnover intention. However, the factors influencing job satisfaction among teachers in China is not well examined. There is a lack of attention to teachers in private schools in China. The importance of work-family conflict and optimism among employees were emphasized in prior studies, but few studies were conducted among Chinese middle school teachers. It is unclear how work-family conflict influence teachers' wellbeing and performance. This study investigates the relationship between optimism, work-family conflict, and job satisfaction among middle school teachers in private schools in China. Utilizing a quantitative research design, the study surveyed 380 private middle school teachers in Changsha, China. Data analysis reveals that higher levels of optimism are associated with lower levels of work-family conflict and higher job satisfaction. Optimism was found to negatively impact job satisfaction, and mediates the relationship of work-family conflict and job satisfaction. These findings suggest that fostering optimism among teachers may mitigate the adverse effects of work-family conflict, thereby enhancing their job satisfaction. The study provides implications for school administrators and policymakers aiming to improve teacher well-being and effectiveness by addressing work-family balance and promoting a positive outlook.

Keywords: work-family conflict, optimism, job satisfaction, private schools

1. Introduction

Work satisfaction is the emotional orientation that an employee holds toward their work, comprising two dimensions: intrinsic work satisfaction and extrinsic work satisfaction [7, 8]. The model of work environment satisfaction suggests that middle school teachers' health and well-being are related to work satisfaction [1]. At the same time, dissatisfaction with work has been found to be associated with increasing mental distress, including anger, burnout, work stress, and frustration [3, 8]. Therefore, enhancing the work satisfaction of middle school teachers is necessary to promote the health of both teachers and students.

Research has demonstrated that conflicts between work and family life are closely related to work satisfaction [6]. Work-family conflict is a psychological imbalance experienced by individuals when balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Studies have established that such conflicts have a negative impact on work satisfaction, demonstrating that they can act as a mediator between work satisfaction and related factors like social support, professional values, and turnover intentions [5]. Further, work-family conflicts can affect mental health, leading to burnout and depression. A comprehensive model linking work-family demands and distress suggests that heightened conflicts are predictive of depression [3]. Consequently, strategies to reduce work-family conflict are expected to play a crucial role in enhancing work satisfaction among middle school teachers.

Optimism refers to a positive and realistic expectation for success both now and in the future. Research has shown that optimism is a strong predictor of work satisfaction and mental health [5]. Studies have also identified significant correlations between work satisfaction, optimism, and psychosomatic symptoms like fatigue, insomnia, and breathing difficulties [2]. Moreover, optimism can positively affect various work-related factors, including coping strategies, social resources, work engagement, work immersion, and organizational identification, either directly or indirectly through mediation [4,5]. Fostering optimism among middle school teachers can enhance both their psychosomatic health and work satisfaction.

While there has been growing interest in the mental health and job satisfaction of teachers, there is a need for attention to teachers in private schools. The well-being of teachers in private schools in China has become an increasingly important area of research, reflecting broader concerns about the educational environment and its impact on educators. Private schools in China

often have distinct operational and organizational characteristics compared to their public counterparts, which can influence teachers' job satisfaction, wellbeing, and working performance [1]. At the same time, it is important to explore the impacts of work-family conflict and the mechanisms linking this relation. Consequently, the current study seeks to assess the levels of work satisfaction, optimism, and work-family conflict among Chinese teachers in private schools and to examine the potential associations between these variables.

The hypotheses of this investigation are presented as follows:

H1: Work-family conflict is positively associated with job satisfaction.

H2: Work-family conflict is positively associated with optimism.

H3: Optimism mediates the relation between work-family conflict and work satisfaction.

2. Methods and results

2.1. Data collection

A cross-sectional survey using convenience sampling was conducted in Changsha, China in Oct. 2023. Three middle schools were selected for the survey. This study uses a self-administered online questionnaire on Wenjuanxing. The researcher distributed through a workgroup chat with a QR code. The teachers participated voluntarily. This study is reviewed by the participating schools. A total of 395 teachers completed and submitted the questionnaire, with 15 invalid responses deleted. 380 responses were used for this study.

2.2. Measurement and statistical analyses

Job satisfaction was assessed using the Chinese version of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ). This questionnaire included two subscales: intrinsic work satisfaction and extrinsic work satisfaction. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied; 2 = dissatisfied; 3 = neutral; 4 = satisfied; 5 = very satisfied). The Cronbach's alpha for the MSQ in this study was 0.917.

Optimism was measured using the Chinese version of the Life Orientation Test-Revised. This scale had 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for the measurement in this study was 0.823.

Work-family conflict among nurses was evaluated using the Chinese version of the Work-Family Conflict Scale. This scale had two subscales: work interference with family conflict and family interference with work conflict. Both subscales addressed conflicts related to time, stress, and behaviours. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this study was 0.819.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 22.0. Hierarchical multiple regression (HMR) analysis was conducted to investigate factors associated with work satisfaction and their incremental contributions. The strength of associations between variables was measured using standardized parameter estimates. The mediating effect of work-family conflict was examined using Structural Equation Models (SEM), with work satisfaction as the dependent variable, work-family conflict as the independent variable, and optimism as the mediating variable. A two-tailed $p < 0.05$ was considered as statistically significant.

2.3. Results

The baseline characteristics of the teachers included their age, gender (male or female), marital status (married or single), education level (bachelor's degree or lower, master's degree or higher). The demographic information is presented in table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information

Variable	N (%) or M ± SD
Age (years)	33.89 ± 5.23
Gender	
Male	166 (43.68)
Female	214 (56.32)
Marital Status	
Single	230 (60.53)
Married	150 (39.47)
Education	
Bachelor's degree and below	298 (78.42)
Master's degree and above	82 (21.58)

The average age of the participants was 33.89 years with a standard deviation of 5.23. Regarding gender distribution, 166 participants (43.68%) were male, while 214 participants (56.32%) were female, suggesting a higher representation of female teachers in the sample. In terms of marital status, most participants were single, with 230 individuals (60.53%) identifying as such. Educational background showed that a substantial majority, 298 teachers (78.42%), held a bachelor's degree or lower, whereas 82 teachers (21.58%) had obtained a master's degree or higher.

As show in table 2, the regression analysis aimed to explore the predictors of job satisfaction among middle school teachers. The findings revealed that optimism and work-family conflict are significant predictors of job satisfaction. Specifically, optimism had a strong positive association with job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.307$, S.E. = 0.053, $p < 0.001$), indicating that teachers who are more optimistic tend to report higher levels of job satisfaction. Work-family conflict showed a significant negative relationship with job satisfaction ($\beta = -0.194$, S.E. = 0.041, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that increased conflict between work and family responsibilities is associated with lower job satisfaction. Gender also emerged as a significant predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.106$, S.E. = 0.049, $p < 0.05$). On the other hand, marital status ($\beta = 0.101$, S.E. = 0.079, $p > 0.05$) and education ($\beta = 0.094$, S.E. = 0.103, $p > 0.05$) did not show statistically significant effects on job satisfaction.

Table 2. The multiple regression analysis results

Variable	β	S.E.
Age (years)	.059	.040
Gender	.106*	.049
Marital Status	.101	.079
Education	.094	.103
Optimism	.307***	.053
Work-family conflict	-.194***	.041
R-squared	0.203	

Note: *: $p < 0.05$, **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$

Table 3 presents the results of the SEM analysis. The regression coefficient for the effect of work-family conflict on job satisfaction though optimism is $\beta = -1.094$ with a standard error (S.E.) of 0.239, yielding a critical ratio (C.R.) of -4.532 ($p < 0.001$). This result indicates a strong and statistically significant path between work-family conflict, optimism, and job satisfaction. Specifically, higher levels of work-family conflict are associated with lower levels of optimism, which is associated with higher job satisfaction. The model fit indices remained ideal ($\chi2/df = 2.176 < 5$, GFI = 0.979 > 0.9, AGFI = 0.935 > 0.9, CFI = 0.931 > 0.9, TLI = 0.924 > 0.9, RMSEA = 0.041 < 0.05)

Table 3. The path coefficients of mediation model

Variable	β	S.E.	C.R.
Work-family conflict → Optimism → Job Satisfaction	-1.094***	.239	-4.532

Note: *: $p < 0.05$, **: $p < 0.01$, ***: $p < 0.001$

3. Conclusion

In this study, significant correlations were observed among work satisfaction, optimism, and work-family conflict. Furthermore, this study found that optimism partially mediated the relationship between work-family conflict and work satisfaction. When compared to other research using the MSQ to assess work satisfaction in China, the level of work satisfaction among middle school teachers was slightly higher than that reported for employees in other industries. Although previous studies have examined the relationship between work satisfaction, optimism, and work-family conflict, research exploring the role of optimism in the relationship between work-family conflict and work satisfaction remains limited.

In line with previous research [5,7], this study found a positive association between optimism and job satisfaction. The analysis indicated that optimism serves as a protective factor for job satisfaction, suggesting that optimism may enhance the likelihood of higher work satisfaction. As a positive psychological trait, optimism appears to contribute to middle school teachers' overall job fulfilment and contentment. A negative correlation was found between work-family conflict and optimism. Optimism can help mitigate the negative impacts of work-family conflict, such as diminished work performance, lower life and work satisfaction, and increased work pressure [2, 3, 8]. The negative correlation observed between work-family conflict and optimism underscores a significant dynamic in the relationship between personal and professional stressors. Specifically, as work-family conflict increases,

optimism tends to decrease. This finding is consistent with the notion that high levels of work-family conflict, which often manifest as stress and role overload, can erode an individual's positive outlook and sense of control [6].

Optimism plays a crucial role in buffering the adverse effects of work-family conflicts. It has been documented that optimism can mitigate various negative outcomes associated with work-family conflict, including reduced work performance, diminished life and work satisfaction, and heightened work-related pressure [3, 5]. Optimistic individuals are more likely to perceive challenges as manageable and are better equipped to employ effective coping strategies. This positive outlook can help counteract the detrimental effects of work-family conflict, enhancing overall resilience and job satisfaction. Thus, fostering optimism among employees could be a valuable strategy for organizations aiming to reduce the negative impacts of work-family conflict and improve overall workplace well-being.

The working environment and life conditions of middle school teachers in China significantly impact their job satisfaction and career development. Research has shown a close relationship between optimism, work-family conflict, and job satisfaction. Therefore, policymakers and educational administrators need to implement targeted measures to improve teaching conditions and enhance job satisfaction [3, 5]. Policymakers should focus on how to support teachers' optimism through improvements in their working conditions and psychological support [8]. It is suggested that the government and education departments establish specialized mental health support programs, offering counselling services and professional development training for teachers. These services can help teachers cope with work-related stress and challenges, thereby enhancing their psychological resilience. Schools should also regularly host mental health workshops and training sessions to improve teachers' self-adaptation skills and psychological qualities.

To mitigate work-family conflict, policymakers and school administrators should take steps to enhance teachers' work-life balance. For instance, offering flexible working hours and flexible leave policies can help teachers better balance their work and family responsibilities. For teachers with children, considering educational subsidies or school-based childcare services can alleviate their family burdens. Additionally, schools can promote family-friendly policies, such as support for family activities and flexible arrangements for teacher family events, to help reduce work-family conflict.

Policymakers and administrators need to focus on improving working conditions, including reducing administrative burdens, improving salaries and benefits, and optimizing the workplace environment. The government and education departments should consider increasing financial support for teachers, offering more competitive salaries and benefits [1]. Simultaneously, reducing teachers' administrative tasks and providing more teaching resources and support can ensure that they can concentrate more on teaching. Schools should also pay attention to the work environment, ensuring a comfortable and safe workplace, and regularly maintain and improve facilities.

Support for teachers' professional development is a key aspect of enhancing job satisfaction. Policymakers should encourage schools to provide more opportunities for professional development, including training, continuing education, and career advancement opportunities [2]. Establishing professional development funds or incentive mechanisms can motivate teachers to participate in professional development activities. At the same time, schools should create supportive learning communities and cooperative platforms to facilitate the sharing of experiences and common growth among teachers. This not only improves teachers' professional capabilities but also enhances their sense of identification and satisfaction with their work. Policymakers and school administrators should conduct regular teacher satisfaction surveys to collect feedback from teachers on working conditions, family support, professional development, and other aspects. Based on the data analysis, identify issues and areas for improvement, and adjust and optimize related policies and measures in a timely manner to meet the actual needs and expectations of teachers.

For private school teachers in China, the societal recognition of the teacher in private schools directly affects teachers' job satisfaction and professional well-being. Policymakers should propagate and promote through media to enhance society's understanding and respect for teachers' work. Organizing teacher commendation activities and reward systems can enhance teachers' professional identity. Meanwhile, the education department can advocate for concern and support from all sectors of society for teachers' work and life, forming a good atmosphere where the whole society cares for teachers.

Several limitations should be acknowledged in this study. First, the research was conducted among teachers in Changsha, which limits the generalizability of the findings to private school teachers in other provinces. In addition, selection bias may be a concern, as the survey was conducted online and only included teachers who were available at the time, we collected the data. Further, the study did not account for factors such as years of experience and professional title, which should be considered in future research. Finally, this study uses a cross-sectional design that cannot ensure the hypothesized causality.

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