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The Mediating Role of Work Anxiety in the Relationship Between Academic Press and Well-Being: A Conceptual Paper on Middle School Teachers in Sichuan

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Abstract: This conceptual paper investigates the mediating role of work-related anxiety in the relationship between academic pressure and well-being among middle school teachers in Sichuan. Rising educational demands have heightened academic stress for teachers, potentially impacting their mental health and overall life satisfaction. This study proposes a conceptual model in which work anxiety serves as a critical mediator linking academic demands to teacher well-being. Existing literature suggests that excessive academic demands can lead to emotional exhaustion and occupational stress, ultimately diminishing life satisfaction. The proposed model integrates constructs from occupational health psychology and educational research to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding this process. Findings underscore the importance of institutional-level interventions aimed at mitigating sources of academic pressure and addressing their psychological consequences. Practical recommendations include implementing targeted support systems to alleviate work-related anxiety and enhance teacher resilience. This study contributes to the understanding of psychosocial mechanisms underlying educator well-being in high-pressure academic environments and offers insights for policy-making and school leadership. Future research should empirically validate this conceptual model across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: work anxiety; academic press; well-being; middle school teachers; Sichuan

Published: 16 October 2025



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1. Introduction

In recent years, the educational landscape in Sichuan has experienced a shift toward higher academic standards and greater student performance expectations. As a result, teachers increasingly face considerable pressures stemming from demanding curricula, competitive examinations, and societal expectations. Limited resources and unequal distribution of educational facilities further exacerbate the challenges within the teaching environment. Teachers are required not only to deliver high-quality instruction but also to manage complex interpersonal relationships involving students, parents, and school administrators. This multidimensional stress has raised concerns about teachers' mental health and overall job satisfaction.

Work anxiety is a crucial factor for understanding how academic stress impacts teacher well-being. It refers to the emotional and cognitive discomfort triggered by work-related stressors, often manifesting as worry, tension, or apprehension concerning professional responsibilities. Middle school teachers in Sichuan may experience these anxieties due to uncertainties surrounding student evaluations, workload management, and the alignment between organizational expectations and the adequacy of institutional support

[1]. Persistent exposure to such stressors can result in emotional strain, reduced job engagement, and lower life satisfaction.

Despite indications of a connection between academic stress and well-being through work anxiety, this process has not been sufficiently examined within the context of Sichuan's educational system. To address this gap, the present study proposes a conceptual model to investigate the mediating role of work anxiety in the relationship between academic pressure and teacher well-being. The primary objective is to clarify how academic stress relates to work anxiety and how this, in turn, affects multiple dimensions of well-being, including emotional stability, job satisfaction, and personal fulfillment. By integrating insights from occupational health psychology and educational research, this study aims to deepen understanding of these psychosocial processes and provide actionable guidance for institutional interventions, such as workload management strategies, resilience-building programs, and mental health support services.

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research has practical significance. The education sector in Sichuan continues to navigate challenges from pandemic-related disruptions, including the shift to hybrid teaching and heightened attention to student mental health. These developments have intensified the pressures faced by teachers, underscoring the urgent need to implement strategies that enhance teacher well-being. By examining the mediating role of work anxiety, this study offers practical insights for educators, school administrators, and teacher training institutions, emphasizing the importance of addressing the root causes of academic pressure and fostering emotional resilience. Future research directions include empirical testing of the proposed framework across diverse educational settings and longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

2. Literature Review on Academic Press, Work Anxiety, and Well-Being

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Academic Press and Its Impact on Teachers

Academic pressure is a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological and emotional demands imposed on teachers by institutional requirements, curriculum content, and societal expectations regarding academic success. Theoretically, work-related anxiety can be understood through occupational stress models, such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework, which posits that high job demands deplete employees' emotional and cognitive resources, ultimately diminishing well-being. For middle school teachers in Sichuan, academic pressure manifests in the form of standardized testing goals, administrative accountability measures, and disparities in educational resources [2].

Academic pressure influences teachers through both cognitive and affective pathways. Cognitively, chronic exposure to high expectations triggers appraisal processes, whereby teachers perceive a mismatch between demands and available resources. This perceived discrepancy fosters rumination over work-related inefficacy, which contributes to anxiety. Affectively, sustained pressure gradually erodes emotional regulation, increasing vulnerability to stress. Teachers often internalize students' performance expectations and parental demands, compounding their emotional strain. Work anxiety serves as a mediator in this process, consistent with the principle that resource depletion due to stress initiates a downward spiral in well-being.

In the Sichuan context, post-pandemic educational reforms have amplified academic pressures. Hybrid teaching formats, heightened attention to student mental health, and elevated parental expectations have intensified workloads. Teachers frequently report feeling "sandwiched" between institutional demands and student needs, a tension that exacerbates anxiety. This anxiety not only impairs instructional performance but also contributes to broader life dissatisfaction. Moreover, there is a bidirectional relationship between pressure and anxiety: heightened anxiety undermines coping resources, reducing teachers' ability to manage subsequent pressures, thereby creating a reinforcing negative cycle.

Theoretical integration also identifies moderating factors. Self-efficacy, for instance, can influence the effect of pressure by shaping teachers' confidence in managing demands. When perceived pressure exceeds confidence, anxiety predominates. Institutional support similarly moderates outcomes; schools with robust mentoring and support programs often exhibit lower levels of teacher anxiety despite equivalent external pressures, suggesting that structural interventions can disrupt the pressure-anxiety-well-being trajectory.

It is important to note that not all academic pressure is detrimental. According to the principle of Yerkes-Dodson, moderate pressure can enhance motivation and performance. In high-stakes environments like Sichuan, however, pressure frequently exceeds optimal levels, becoming counterproductive. The key distinction lies in perceived control: controllable pressure can stimulate growth, whereas uncontrollable pressure—such as unrealistically high performance targets—primes teachers for anxiety. This underscores the importance of interventions targeting both systemic sources of pressure, such as policy reforms, and individual appraisal mechanisms, such as cognitive-behavioral strategies.

Cultural factors also warrant consideration. Sichuan's collectivist culture may amplify perceptions of pressure through social accountability, whereas more individualistic contexts may emphasize private achievement-related stress. Cross-cultural research could further illuminate how institutional and cultural norms moderate the pressure-anxiety relationship. Overall, this theoretical synthesis supports the role of work anxiety as a central mediator linking external academic pressures to internal teacher well-being, providing a framework for designing more effective support systems in evolving educational contexts.

2.2. Exploring the Relationship Between Work Anxiety and Teacher Well-Being

The relationship between work anxiety and teacher well-being is a critical area of research, particularly in high-stress educational settings such as Sichuan middle schools. Work anxiety, characterized by persistent concern over professional performance, skills, and meeting institutional expectations, can significantly affect teachers' mental health. This section examines how work anxiety manifests among teachers, its underlying causes, and its adverse effects on personal well-being [3].

Work anxiety in teachers typically arises from the perception that multiple job demands are simultaneously unmanageable. These demands extend beyond instructional responsibilities—such as lesson planning, grading, and test preparation—to include interpersonal challenges, including managing student behavior and meeting parental expectations. In regions like Sichuan, where educational inequality and a competitive academic environment are prominent, teachers frequently experience cognitive burnout. Chronic negative emotions can deplete psychological resources such as attention and memory, exacerbating anxiety and reducing capacity to cope with routine stress. This depletion initiates a downward spiral, further diminishing well-being and resilience to stressors.

The impact of work anxiety extends beyond professional functioning, affecting personal well-being and life satisfaction. Symptoms such as insomnia, irritability, and emotional fatigue are common among teachers experiencing chronic stress. These effects often follow teachers home, impairing social relationships and self-image and producing gradual loss of happiness. For example, teachers with high work anxiety may socially withdraw or engage in self-neglect, which perpetuates distress and reduces overall quality of life. Work anxiety thus acts as a mediator influencing multiple aspects of well-being.

From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, work anxiety is activated and maintained through non-productive self-perceptions, including self-doubt about teaching abilities or fear of professional incompetence. These self-judgments are reinforced by administrative evaluations and societal pressures, creating a sense of constant observation. Over time, teachers may internalize such pressures and develop maladaptive thought patterns, such as catastrophizing ("If my students fail, I will lose my job") or overgeneralization ("One

bad lesson means I am a terrible teacher"). These cognitive distortions amplify anxiety and reduce quality of life by exaggerating perceived threats and misrepresenting reality.

Institutional support plays a vital role in mitigating work anxiety. Teachers in environments where well-being is prioritized-through access to mentoring, mental health services, and manageable workloads-report lower anxiety levels. Conversely, workplaces lacking such support experience higher burnout and turnover. Post-pandemic educational reforms in Sichuan, such as rapid shifts to hybrid teaching, have placed additional pressures on teachers without sufficient guidance, further exacerbating anxiety. These observations highlight the need for structural interventions, including organizational measures and professional development initiatives and professional development opportunities, to address root causes of work-related anxiety.

Individual differences also moderate the impact of work anxiety. Teachers with higher resilience or stronger social support experience less severe anxiety when exposed to comparable stressors. Resilience enables educators to reframe challenges, maintain a sense of control, and buffer against the detrimental effects of stress. Conversely, individuals with preexisting mental health vulnerabilities or insufficient coping mechanisms are more susceptible to negative outcomes. These differences suggest that targeted interventions-such as cognitive-behavioral training or mindfulness programs-can help teachers develop resilience and reduce anxiety.

The long-term consequences of unmanaged work anxiety are significant, affecting both teachers and the broader educational system. Chronically anxious teachers often demonstrate reduced job engagement, lower teaching efficacy, and diminished enthusiasm for working with students, potentially leading to poorer classroom environments and student outcomes. High levels of anxiety are also associated with increased absenteeism and early retirement, exacerbating teacher shortages and destabilizing schools. In contexts like Sichuan, where recruiting and retaining qualified teachers is already challenging, addressing work anxiety is essential for sustaining educational quality and equity.

Cultural factors may shape how work anxiety and well-being are expressed in Sichuan. Collectivist values emphasizing social harmony and shared success may influence teachers' experiences of academic pressure, with concerns focused more on letting colleagues or the community down than on personal performance. Awareness of these cultural subtleties can guide the design of locally appropriate interventions. Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to track changes in work anxiety over time and to assess the effectiveness of interventions [4].

In conclusion, work anxiety is a central factor linking academic pressure to teacher well-being, with implications for both educators and students. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that combines institutional support, resilience-building strategies, and culturally responsive policies. Reducing work anxiety can foster healthier teaching environments, enhance teacher well-being, and improve educational outcomes.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

3.1. Proposed Mediating Role of Work Anxiety in Academic Press-Well-Being Link

According to the proposed theoretical framework, work anxiety serves as a key mediator between academic pressure and the well-being of middle school teachers in Sichuan. In this mediation model, sustained academic stressors generate psychological strain, which in turn depletes teachers' emotional and cognitive resources, ultimately diminishing well-being. The model integrates concepts from occupational health psychology and stress theories to illustrate how external demands translate into internalized fear, undermining both job satisfaction and personal well-being.

Central to this mediation model is the transactional process of stress appraisal. When teachers perceive that academic demands-such as high-stakes testing, heavy curricula, and accountability requirements-exceed their coping resources, a cognitive dissonance emerges due to the mismatch between professional responsibilities and available personal

resources. This discrepancy fosters work anxiety, characterized by continuous preoccupation with job performance, concern over negative evaluation, and emotional exhaustion. Work anxiety thus functions as a critical pathway through which organizational stressors are internalized as psychological strain, affecting overall well-being. The mediating role is particularly pronounced in Sichuan's high-stakes educational environment, where pressure-to-performance ratios are elevated.

The model distinguishes three pathways through which work anxiety mediates the relationship between academic pressure and well-being. First, the *emotional channel* involves depletion of affective resources, whereby chronic anxiety reduces teachers' capacity to experience positive emotions both during work and off-duty. Second, the *cognitive channel* affects decision-making and problem-solving capacities; anxious teachers tend to focus on perceived threats, diverting attention from instructional strategies and classroom management. Third, the *behavioral channel* manifests in compensatory behaviors, such as over-preparing lessons or avoiding certain interactions with students, which may further undermine work-life balance. Together, these pathways explain why teachers experiencing high work anxiety may report low life satisfaction despite objectively meeting academic demands.

Contextual factors within the Sichuan education system further shape this mediation. The province's emphasis on standardized testing amplifies pressure, and teachers in underfunded schools face additional rural-urban disparities in resources. Post-pandemic hybrid teaching has introduced new anxiety triggers, including technology-related stress and blurred boundaries between work and home environments. These contextual variables suggest that work anxiety interacts with environmental pressures and institutional supports, rather than acting as an independent or deterministic factor [5].

From this framework, two testable hypotheses emerge. H1 predicts that work anxiety partially mediates the relationship between academic pressure and teacher well-being, accounting for a substantial portion of the total effect. H2 proposes that the strength of this mediation is moderated by individual and organizational factors; teachers with lower psychological resilience or limited access to institutional support are expected to experience stronger mediation effects. These hypotheses underscore that work anxiety operates as a mediator only under certain individual or environmental conditions.

Theoretically, framing work anxiety as a mediating mechanism highlights the processes by which academic pressure affects well-being, going beyond linear direct-effect models. It also allows for feedback loops, wherein diminished well-being may exacerbate anxiety, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of stress.

Practically, interventions targeting work anxiety—such as cognitive-behavioral training or workload adjustments—may be more effective in disrupting the pressure-well-being link than approaches focusing solely on academic pressure or well-being. For policy-makers in Sichuan, this entails a dual approach: alleviating sources of academic pressure (e.g., revising curricula or evaluation criteria) while simultaneously strengthening buffers against anxiety (e.g., mental health programs or peer support networks). By addressing the mediating pathway, interventions move from symptom management toward disrupting the mechanism through which stress affects teachers' lives.

Methodologically, testing this mediation model requires longitudinal or experience-sampling designs to capture dynamic interdependencies between pressure, anxiety, and well-being. Cross-sectional studies may oversimplify mediation effects by neglecting temporal order and bidirectional relationships. Multilevel analyses are also recommended to disentangle individual mediation effects from contextual school-level variables, particularly given the heterogeneity of Sichuan's educational settings.

Limitations of the proposed model include its conceptual nature and the exclusive focus on anxiety as a mediator, potentially overlooking other mechanisms such as burnout or self-efficacy. Nevertheless, by systematically positioning work anxiety as a mediator, the framework provides a foundation for exploring how academic pressures influence

well-being through specific psychological mechanisms, offering a deeper understanding of teacher well-being beyond simple correlations.

3.2. Contextual Factors in Sichuan Middle Schools: A Conceptual Analysis

The unique context of the Sichuan educational system shapes the interplay between academic stress, work anxiety, and teacher well-being. Situated in southwestern China, middle schools in Sichuan operate within a highly competitive system characterized by sharp rural-urban disparities in resource distribution and varying institutional structures. These contextual factors create distinct pressure profiles for teachers across different school settings, influencing how academic demands translate into mental distress and ultimately affect professional satisfaction.

A primary factor is the province's emphasis on high-stakes testing as a measure of educational quality. This testing culture fosters a results-oriented environment in which teachers are under constant pressure to demonstrate student success through measurable outcomes. Consequences of this system include increased workloads—such as extended teaching hours, mandatory repetition sessions, and continuous assessment—as well as heightened risk of burnout due to elevated expectations. Parental expectations in urban areas, such as Chengdu, intensify these pressures, creating a cycle of chronic stress that is difficult to break.

Geographical disparities further influence teachers' stress experiences. Rural teachers must meet the same standardized evaluation standards as their urban counterparts but often work under resource constraints, including larger class sizes and outdated teaching materials. This inequity heightens stress, as rural teachers are expected to perform at the same level without adequate support. Urban teachers, particularly in elite schools, face different pressures, such as competition for teaching awards and maintaining school rankings. These variations demonstrate that work anxiety emerges differently depending on a school's position within the broader education hierarchy.

Post-pandemic educational changes have introduced additional stressors. Hybrid teaching, initially intended as a temporary solution, has become a persistent feature, requiring teachers to master digital platforms while managing traditional classroom responsibilities. These technological demands disproportionately affect older teachers and those in underfunded schools. Furthermore, the blurring of work and home boundaries during online teaching has eroded opportunities for recovery, leaving many teachers feeling constantly "on duty." These pandemic-related stressors compound existing academic pressures and contribute to heightened anxiety.

Societal changes in Sichuan further complicate the landscape. Rapid urbanization and the influx of migrant communities have diversified student demographics, challenging teachers' pedagogical adaptability. Concurrently, provincial education reforms aimed at reducing student workload have paradoxically increased teacher responsibilities through added reporting requirements and curriculum adjustments. Such policy shifts create role ambiguity as teachers balance innovative instructional demands with traditional performance metrics.

Cultural factors also influence how teachers experience stress. Confucian values emphasizing scholarly dedication, combined with local norms of hard work, create a cultural expectation that anxiety is an inevitable consequence of professional commitment. This normalization of distress can discourage help-seeking until anxiety becomes severe. Hierarchical leadership structures common in local schools may further limit teachers' autonomy in managing workloads, reducing opportunities for institutional support.

This conceptual analysis identifies three key mechanisms through which contextual factors amplify the mediating role of work anxiety. First, the *evaluation paradox* arises when accountability measures intended to ensure quality instead generate excessive surveillance stress. Second, *resource asymmetry* reflects unequal access to support systems, producing varying coping capacities among teachers. Third, *cultural dissonance* occurs when

institutional expectations conflict with professional identity or pedagogical norms, creating tension between student-centered teaching and examination-focused pressures. These mechanisms help explain why similar levels of academic pressure can result in different levels of anxiety across Sichuan schools.

Provincial responses to these challenges remain inconsistent. While some urban schools have implemented wellness programs and peer support networks, many rural schools lack the budget for such initiatives, resulting in unequal opportunities to buffer work anxiety. Cognitive-behavioral approaches, which teach teachers practical strategies to reframe rather than avoid stress, appear promising, but their effectiveness depends on alignment with local conditions.

This situative analysis highlights the need for nuanced, context-sensitive interventions that consider Sichuan's educational heterogeneity. Generic strategies may overlook specific challenges faced by teachers in different regions or school types. Effective interventions must address the interaction of systemic pressures, institutional resources, and cultural expectations, targeting not only the symptoms of distress but also the ecological factors that generate it. By incorporating these considerations, the conceptual framework provides a foundation for developing targeted strategies to reduce work anxiety and support teacher well-being.

4. Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

This study highlights the significant mediating role of work anxiety in the relationship between academic stress and well-being among middle school teachers in Sichuan. The proposed theoretical model elucidates how increasing educational demands contribute to emotional exhaustion and professional stress, which in turn diminish teachers' life satisfaction. Three situational mechanisms—evaluation paradox, resource asymmetry, and cultural dissonance—explain the variability of this dynamic across different school contexts. These findings underscore the importance of institutional-level interventions that address not only academic pressure but also the psychological consequences that follow.

The study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it integrates insights from occupational health psychology and educational research to examine the psychosocial pathways influencing teacher well-being. Second, it demonstrates how regional characteristics—such as Sichuan's competitive educational culture and unequal resource allocation—shape individual stress responses. Third, it identifies work anxiety as a modifiable factor that can disrupt the downward spiral from pressure to diminished well-being. Collectively, these contributions enhance understanding of educator mental health in high-stakes contexts and challenge the normalization of distress as an unavoidable professional cost.

Practical implications are particularly relevant for school administrators and policy makers. Interventions should focus on capacity-building initiatives, such as culturally relevant peer mentoring programs and anxiety management workshops. In urban schools, efforts might aim to shift success metrics away from standardized test scores alone, while in rural or underfunded schools, investments in facility improvements and workload redistribution may be more effective. Teacher evaluation systems could also be reformed to account for contextual differences, mitigating inequitable performance pressures. Post-pandemic educational demands, including digital literacy and hybrid teaching management, further necessitate guidance on boundary-setting and coping strategies.

Future research should empirically test this conceptual model through longitudinal designs across diverse school contexts in Sichuan. Cross-level analyses could examine variations in mediation processes among teachers of STEM versus humanities subjects, novices versus experienced educators, and schools undergoing rapid policy changes versus more stable institutions. Qualitative investigations of effective bottom-up coping strate-

gies-particularly those emerging from pandemic-induced adaptations-would inform context-sensitive interventions. Comparative studies with other provinces could evaluate the generalizability of the framework.

Methodologically, future work should address causal inference through experimental or time-lagged designs. Self-report measures could be complemented with physiological indicators of anxiety, such as cortisol levels, to mitigate response biases. Additionally, research should explore protective factors beyond psychological resilience, including collegial support and leadership styles, which may buffer the mediating effects of work anxiety.

Finally, this study emphasizes the need to reframe educational perceptions of teacher well-being. Sustainable improvements require interventions targeting structural and cultural sources of academic pressure, alongside individual coping strategies. As Sichuan's education system evolves toward 2030, embedding mental health considerations in policy development will be crucial for creating environments in which both teachers and students can thrive. This framework offers a foundation for evidence-based practices that respect teachers' psychological needs while sustaining pedagogical excellence.

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