

The Relationship Between Perceived Emotional Leadership and Work Engagement among Teachers at Z School in Hunan Province, China

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Abstract This study aimed to explore the internal relationship between teacher perceived emotional leadership and teachers' work engagement. A total of 235 valid responses were collected from in-service teachers at Z School in Hunan Province through a two-stage sampling method (stratified sampling followed by convenience sampling). Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0, employing descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis. The conclusions were as follows: Teachers reported moderately high levels of perceived emotional leadership and work engagement. There were no significant differences in perceived emotional leadership by gender or teaching subject; however, significant differences were found by age, years of teaching experience, school division, and whether teachers concurrently held administrative positions. There were no significant differences in work engagement by gender, age, years of teaching experience, school division, or teaching subject, whereas a significant difference was found between teachers with different administrative-duty status. Teacher perceived emotional leadership was significantly positively correlated with teachers' work engagement..

Keywords: Emotional Leadership, Work Engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

In international education research, teachers' occupational stress and issues of emotional adjustment had long been a focus, gradually becoming a crucial perspective for explaining teachers' professional status. Multiple surveys showed that a considerable proportion of teachers endured high levels of stress over the long term, but this stress did not stem from a single factor. On one hand, classroom management and teaching tasks were inherently complex; on the other hand, adjustments in school organizational structure and management practices continually increased teachers' feelings of uncertainty. As the educational system underwent continuous reform, the pressures teachers faced in terms of role expectations, work pace, and professional security tended to accumulate. In this context, whether school leaders could provide support on an emotional level to teachers—thereby buffering their occupational stress and maintaining their positive engagement—had gradually been regarded as an important issue affecting the sustainability of the teaching profession and the quality of education.

This phenomenon was especially evident in some East Asian and European countries. Influenced by declining birth rates, education systems frequently adjusted resource allocation and organizational structures, directly impacting the stability of teaching jobs. OECD data showed that the total fertility rate of member countries fell from 3.3 in the 1960s to 1.5 in 2022 (OECD, 2024). Changes in student numbers had directly driven school mergers, staff reassignments, and organizational restructuring. Such structural changes were often first reflected in teachers' work arrangements and psychological expectations. At the same time, societal expectations for education quality had not decreased; on the contrary, in an increasingly competitive context, higher demands had been placed on teachers' professional performance, subjecting teachers to dual pressures of maintaining teaching quality while coping with organizational changes. Existing studies indicated that in this process, teachers' work engagement (WE) levels had a critical impact on the quality of classroom interaction and student development, acting as a core factor directly influencing classroom efficiency and

student learning quality rather than something that short-term incentives could replace.

Regarding factors influencing teachers' work engagement, existing research had accumulated a wealth of findings. Among these factors, school leadership behavior—in particular, various types of leadership—were widely recognized as important organizational variables. Most current studies had approached the topic from classical leadership models such as transformational leadership and distributed leadership, with different countries and regions exhibiting their own practical characteristics. For example, the United Kingdom emphasized the decision-making role of leadership in school governance; Singapore leveraged distributed leadership to share management pressures; the Netherlands placed greater emphasis on collective collaboration mechanisms; and in curriculum reform research in Hong Kong, the role of school leaders in driving change had also received attention (Wei, 2022). In contrast, emotional leadership (EL), which stems from emotional intelligence theory, had seen relatively scarce systematic research in educational settings, especially research that adopted the perspective of teachers' perceptions of leaders' emotional behaviors.

In the Chinese educational context, similar organizational changes had been continuously occurring. As in many East Asian countries, China was affected by the declining birthrate trend: the rapid decrease in student populations was quickly changing how schools operate (Zhang, Shi, & Hu, 2022). Related research pointed out that declining student numbers were often accompanied by staff reassignments, changes in management structure, and even the risk of layoffs (Wan et al., 2021). For teachers, such changes meant increased uncertainty in role boundaries, and they were more likely to trigger fluctuations in professional security and psychological stability. According to organizational change theory (Kotter, 1996), employees often experienced anxiety and resistance during changes, and leaders needed to use steady communication and emotional guidance to reduce feelings of uncertainty. However, in real school environments, limited resources and accumulated pressures meant this process was not always smooth.

Focusing specifically on primary and secondary school teachers in Hunan Province, there had been still a lack of systematic

research on the relationship between "Teacher perceived emotional leadership and work engagement." Most existing literature had remained at the stage of descriptive statistics regarding teachers' work engagement levels, with few studies conducting in-depth analyses of how leaders' emotional leadership related to teachers' engagement behaviors. Some research had shown that teachers' work engagement was influenced by multiple factors including school management systems, organizational support climate, and personal psychological traits; however, leaders' emotional behaviors were often treated implicitly as Demographic variables, lacking an independent analytical perspective and a clear theoretical model

Based on the above practical context and research gaps, this study focused on the teachers of Z School in Hunan Province. From the perspective of teachers' perceptions, the study systematically analyzed the relationship between school leaders' emotional leadership and teachers' work engagement. The research combined questionnaire surveys and interview data to compare teachers across different school levels, positions, and lengths of service, and employed statistical methods to test the research hypotheses. On this basis, the study proposed practical management insights and intervention recommendations, aiming to provide empirical evidence to inform school leadership practices and the improvement of support mechanisms for teachers.

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

To ascertain the current status of perceived emotional leadership among teachers at Z School.

To ascertain the current status of work engagement among teachers at Z School.

To analyze the differences in perceived emotional leadership among teachers at Z School based on different Demographic variables.

To analyze the differences in work engagement among teachers at Z School based on different Demographic variables.

To explore the relationship between perceived emotional leadership and work engagement among teachers at Z School.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study population comprised all in-service teachers of Z School, Hunan Province, including teachers from the primary, junior high and senior high sections. The total number of teachers at Z School was 637, which served as the demographic population. for this study.

The specific questionnaires adopted in this study were adjusted and compiled based on the Emotional Leadership Scale (Pizarro Fuentes et al., 2024) and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli et al., 2006). The overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the Emotional Leadership Scale was .931, and the Cronbach's α coefficients of each dimension were greater than .7. The overall Cronbach's α coefficient of the Work Engagement Scale was .920, and the Cronbach's α coefficients of each dimension were greater than .7. The pretest results ($N = 32$) also showed satisfactory reliability for all variables ($\alpha > .7$). The original studies confirmed good model fit through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), indicating high construct validity and good discriminant validity.

In this study, data were collected from Z School teachers via electronic questionnaires and imported into SPSS 26.0 for statistical analysis. According to the research objectives and hypotheses, descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation analysis were used to systematically process the valid data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire used in this study, titled "Teacher perceived Emotional Leadership and Work Engagement Questionnaire," consisted of three parts: teachers' personal basic information, the perceived emotional leadership scale, and the work engagement scale. The study population comprised all 637 in-service teachers at Z School in Hunan Province, including teachers from the primary, junior high, and senior high sections. In order to obtain a representative sample within feasible limits, the required sample size was determined to be 242 based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970). This survey adopted a two-stage sampling method (stratified sampling followed by convenience sampling). The questionnaires were distributed and collected through online channels. With the assistance of relevant leaders at Z School, researchers sent the survey to all in-service

teachers and explained the general content and requirements online. Participants were required to complete the questionnaire based on their true feelings and actual situations; after submission, the responses were automatically collected and stored in the system. A total of 242 questionnaires were distributed, and all were returned, resulting in a response rate of 100%. Then, using Excel software, the collected data were initially screened, and invalid or severely incomplete questionnaires were discarded according to the following criteria: (1) questionnaires with identical responses throughout (e.g., all items answered with the same option); (2) questionnaires with an excessive number of missing items; and (3) questionnaires with an unreasonably short completion time. After removing 7 invalid responses, 235 valid responses remained for data analysis, yielding an effective recovery rate of 97%, which met the standards for representativeness and reliability. Subsequently, with the help of SPSS 26.0 software, the valid data were further processed, including reliability testing, validity testing, difference testing, and correlation and regression analyses, to ensure the scientific and reliable results of the study.

3.1 Results

(1) Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Demographic Variables

Descriptive statistics were computed for the data on teachers' gender, age, years of teaching, school section, subject category, and administrative duties. The results were as follows: Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with females accounting for 51.91%, slightly higher than males at 48.09%. The age distribution was dominated by the 36 – 45 age group (40.85%), followed by 46 – 55 (31.49%) and 25 – 35 (27.66%), indicating that the sample was mainly composed of young and middle-aged teachers. Regarding teaching experience, those with 5 – 10 years of teaching experience were the most numerous (44.68%), followed by 0 – 4 years (21.70%) and 11 – 15 years (20.85%), with those over 16 years being the fewest (12.77%), which was typical for frontline educators.

Table 1 Frequency and Percentage Results of Teachers' Demographic Variables Information

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	113	48.09
	Female	122	51.91
Age	25-35	65	27.66
	36-45	96	40.85
	46-55	74	31.49
Years of Teaching	0-4 years	51	21.70
	5-10 years	105	44.68
	11-15 years	49	20.85
	16 years or above	30	12.77
School Division	Primary school	86	36.60
	Junior school	66	28.09
	Senior school	83	35.32
Subject Category	Humanities	101	42.98
	Science	69	29.36
	Arts/Sports	65	27.66
Concurrent Administrative Duty	Yes	30	12.77
	No	205	87.23

In terms of school section, primary, junior, and high school teachers accounted for 36.60%, 28.09%, and 35.32% respectively, covering all levels fairly evenly; high school teachers were slightly more represented due to the school's emphasis on high school. Since the school was a humanities-focused institution, in the sample humanities teachers were the largest group (42.98%), followed by science (29.36%) and arts/physical education (27.66%). Only 12.77% of respondents held administrative positions, while 87.23% were full-time teaching staff.

(2) Analysis of Differences and Correlation

Gender differences: The overall gender difference in teacher perceived emotional leadership did not reach a significant level ($t=-0.075$, $p=0.940>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Empathy ($t=-0.174$, $p=0.862>0.05$), Adaptability ($t=-0.227$, $p=0.821>0.05$), Self-Awareness ($t=0.340$,

$p=0.734>0.05$), and Positive Attitude ($t=-0.151$, $p=0.880>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, indicating that there are no significant gender differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teacher perceived emotional leadership.

Age differences: The overall difference in teacher perceived emotional leadership across age reached a significant level ($F=9.366$, $p<0.001$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Empathy ($F=3.091$, $p=0.047<0.05$), Adaptability ($F=8.687$, $p<0.001$), Self-Awareness ($F=5.000$, $p=0.007<0.05$), and Positive Attitude ($F=4.735$, $p=0.010<0.05$) are all less than 0.05, indicating that there are significant age differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teacher perceived emotional leadership. LSD test results revealed that: both the 36-45 age group and 46-55 age group scored significantly higher than the 25-35 age group on Emotional Leadership, Adaptability, Self-Awareness, and Positive Attitude; for Empathy, only the 46-55 age group showed significantly higher scores compared to the 25-35 age group; no significant differences were found between the 36-45 and 46-55 age groups across all dimensions.

Teaching experience differences: The overall difference in teacher perceived emotional leadership across years of teaching experience reached a significant level ($F=5.142$, $p<0.001$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Adaptability ($F=4.156$, $p<0.001$), Self-Awareness ($F=4.133$, $p<0.001$), and Positive Attitude ($F=3.542$, $p=0.015<0.05$) are all less than 0.05, while the Empathy dimension showed no significant difference, indicating that there are significant teaching experience differences in the overall level and some dimensions of teacher perceived emotional leadership. LSD test results revealed that: the 16+ years group scored significantly higher than the 0-4 years group across Emotional Leadership, Adaptability, Self-Awareness, and Positive Attitude, and also significantly outperformed the 5-10 years and 11-15 years groups on Emotional Leadership, Self-Awareness, and Adaptability; the 5-10 years group showed significantly higher levels of Emotional Leadership and Self-Awareness compared to the 0-4 years group; no significant differences were found among groups for the Empathy dimension.

School division differences: The overall difference in teacher perceived emotional leadership across school divisions reached a significant level ($F=7.593$, $p<0.001$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Empathy ($F=3.615$, $p=0.028<0.05$), Adaptability ($F=6.415$, $p<0.001$), and Positive Attitude

($F=5.555$, $p<0.001$) are all less than 0.05, while the Self-Awareness dimension showed no significant difference ($F=1.431$, $p=0.241>0.05$), indicating that there are significant school division differences in the overall level and some dimensions of teacher perceived emotional leadership. LSD test results revealed that: primary school teachers scored significantly higher than senior high school teachers on Overall Emotional Leadership, Empathy, and Positive Attitude; for Adaptability, primary school teachers significantly outperformed both junior high and senior high school teachers; no significant differences were found between primary and junior high schools, nor between junior and senior high schools across most dimensions (except for Adaptability); no significant differences were observed across any school division for the Self-Awareness dimension.

Subject category differences: The overall difference in teacher perceived emotional leadership across subject categories did not reach a significant level ($F=1.401$, $p=0.248>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Empathy ($F=2.576$, $p=0.078>0.05$), Adaptability ($F=0.434$, $p=0.649>0.05$), and Self-Awareness ($F=0.633$, $p=0.532>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, while only the Positive Attitude dimension reached a significant difference ($F=3.726$, $p=0.026<0.05$). Post-hoc LSD test indicated that teachers in the Arts/Sports category reported significantly higher levels of positive attitude compared to those in the Science category.

Administrative duties differences: The overall difference in teacher perceived emotional leadership between those concurrently holding administrative duties and those who did not reached a significant level ($t=3.595$, $p<0.001$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Adaptability ($t=2.411$, $p=0.020<0.05$) and Self-Awareness ($t=3.111$, $p<0.001$) are both less than 0.05, while Empathy ($t=1.770$, $p=0.084>0.05$) and Positive Attitude ($t=1.646$, $p=0.101>0.05$) showed no significant differences, indicating that teachers with concurrent administrative duties scored significantly higher than those without in overall emotional leadership and some dimensions.

Gender differences: The overall gender difference in teachers' work engagement did not reach a significant level ($t=-0.067$, $p=0.947>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Vigor ($t=0.295$, $p=0.768>0.05$), Dedication ($t=-0.209$, $p=0.835>0.05$), and Absorption ($t=-0.234$, $p=0.816>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, indicating that there are no

significant gender differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teachers' work engagement.

Age differences: The overall difference in teachers' work engagement across age groups did not reach a significant level ($F=0.885$, $p=0.414>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Vigor ($F=0.302$, $p=0.740>0.05$), Dedication ($F=1.891$, $p=0.153>0.05$), and Absorption ($F=1.446$, $p=0.238>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, indicating that there are no significant age differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teachers' work engagement.

Teaching experience differences: The overall difference in teachers' work engagement across years of teaching experience did not reach a significant level ($F=1.449$, $p=0.229>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Vigor ($F=1.691$, $p=0.170>0.05$), Dedication ($F=0.917$, $p=0.433>0.05$), and Absorption ($F=1.179$, $p=0.319>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, indicating that there are no significant teaching experience differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teachers' work engagement.

School division differences: The overall difference in teachers' work engagement across school divisions did not reach a significant level ($F=2.190$, $p=0.114>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Vigor ($F=2.082$, $p=0.127>0.05$), Dedication ($F=1.523$, $p=0.220>0.05$), and Absorption ($F=1.864$, $p=0.157>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, indicating that there are no significant school division differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teachers' work engagement.

Subject category differences: The overall difference in teachers' work engagement across subject categories did not reach a significant level ($F=1.245$, $p=0.290>0.05$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Vigor ($F=1.004$, $p=0.368>0.05$), Dedication ($F=1.015$, $p=0.364>0.05$), and Absorption ($F=0.559$, $p=0.572>0.05$) are all greater than 0.05, indicating that there are no significant subject category differences in all dimensions and the overall level of teachers' work engagement.

Administrative duties differences: The overall difference in teachers' work engagement between those concurrently holding administrative duties and those who did not reached a significant level ($t=-3.305$, $p<0.01$). From the dimension analysis, the significance levels of Dedication ($t=-2.516$, $p<0.05$) and Absorption ($t=-3.305$, $p<0.01$) are both less than 0.05, while the Vigor dimension showed no significant difference ($t=-1.047$,

$p=0.302>0.05$), indicating that teachers with concurrent administrative duties scored significantly lower than those without in overall work engagement and some dimensions.

(3) Correlation between emotional leadership and work engagement

Table 2 Correlation between emotional leadership and work engagement

	EL	EM	AD	SA	PA	WE	V	D	A
E	1								
L									
E	.72								
M	3**	1							
A	.68	.26							
D	4**	7**	1						
S	.72	.35	.37						
A	9**	0**	9**	1					
P	.75	.44	.34	.38					
A	2**	0**	9**	5**	1				
W	.51	.43	.32	.41	.32				
E	9**	0**	2**	9**	4**	1			
V	.46	.36	.31	.40	.24	.78			
	0**	0**	3**	8**	6**	6**	1		
D	.40	.31	.28	.30	.25	.77	.39		
	5**	7**	9**	3**	9**	1**	8**	1	
A	.36	.34	.16	.28	.26	.81	.47	.43	
	5**	2**	3*	3**	2**	1**	4**	2**	1

* $p<.05$ ** $p<.01$

Note: Emotional Leadership (EL) Empathy (EM), Adaptability (AD), Self-Awareness (SA), and Positive Attitude (PA). Work Engagement (WE) Vigor (V), Dedication (D), and Absorption (A).

Correlation between emotional leadership and work engagement: Teacher perceived emotional leadership was significantly and positively correlated with work engagement at the overall level ($r=0.519$, $p<0.01$). From the emotional leadership dimension analysis, Empathy ($r=0.430$, $p<0.01$), Self-Awareness ($r=0.419$, $p<0.01$), Adaptability ($r=0.322$, $p<0.01$), and Positive Attitude ($r=0.324$, $p<0.01$) were all significantly and positively correlated with work engagement. From the work engagement dimension analysis, emotional leadership was significantly and positively correlated with Vigor ($r=0.460$, $p<0.01$), Dedication ($r=0.405$, $p<0.01$), and Absorption ($r=0.365$, $p<0.01$), indicating that higher levels of perceived emotional leadership were associated with higher levels of teachers' work engagement.

3.2 Discussion

(1) Teacher perceived emotional leadership at Z School was generally at a high level. Among the dimensions, Positive Attitude scored the highest, while Empathy was relatively lower. These results indicated that school administrators had a solid foundation in emotional recognition, regulation, and the transmission of positive emotions, but there might still be room for improvement in leaders' abilities to "understand teachers' situations, respond empathetically, and sensitively recognize teachers' emotional needs." In school management, common pressures on targets, pace of tasks, and hierarchical communication tend to make emotional management focus more on "maintaining a positive atmosphere and stable output," emphasizing the larger collective and insufficiently addressing individual emotional differences.

Teachers' work engagement at Z School was also at a relatively high level. By dimension, Vigor was the highest, Dedication next, and Absorption relatively lower. These results indicated that teachers generally had a sense of energy and meaningfulness but were somewhat weak in sustained immersion and deep concentration. The relatively lower Absorption might mean that teachers were frequently interrupted during work, with extra non-teaching tasks encroaching on planning and reflection time; additionally, those with administrative duties might incur high role-switching costs, weakening the experience of "long periods of immersion in teaching activities."

(2) Discussion of Differences by Demographic Variables

The difference analysis showed that teacher perceived emotional leadership differed significantly across some demographic variables, while teachers' work engagement was generally stable, with significant differences appearing only for "holding an administrative position."

For emotional leadership: Neither gender nor subject category showed significant differences in overall emotional leadership or any dimension, suggesting that emotional management practices at the school level were quite standardized and situational across the organization. In contrast, age, years of teaching, school section, and administrative duties all showed significant differences. Age and teaching experience were positively correlated; elementary school teachers had the highest perception and high school teachers the lowest; teachers with administrative roles had significantly higher perceived emotional leadership than those without.

For work engagement: Gender, age, years of teaching, school section, and subject category were all not significant, suggesting that work engagement was primarily influenced by shared organizational systems, job demands, and resource supply. However, teachers with administrative roles had significantly lower work engagement than those without, with even larger differences in Dedication and Absorption. Holding an administrative role entails additional coordination, reporting, meetings, and emergency tasks, creating conflicts between job demands and personal roles (the dual role of teacher/administrator), which reduces time and psychological resources for teaching and professional reflection, ultimately weakening the sustained experience of "Absorption" and "Dedication."

(3) Teacher perceived emotional leadership was significantly and positively correlated with work engagement. Emotional leadership was significantly and positively correlated with Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption; each dimension of emotional leadership was also significantly and positively correlated with overall work engagement and its dimensions. These findings suggested that leaders' emotional capabilities might influence teachers through multiple emotion-related interaction mechanisms that jointly shape teachers' energy, sense of meaning, and immersion at work, rather than through a single pathway.

4. CONCLUSION

(1) Perceived Emotional Leadership and work engagement among teachers at Z School in Hunan Province are at an overall relatively high level. Among the dimensions of Perceived Emotional Leadership, Positive Attitude and Adaptability are relatively higher, followed by Self-Awareness, while Empathy is relatively lower; among the dimensions of work engagement, Vigor is the highest, followed by Dedication, while Absorption is relatively lower.

(2) Regarding differences across demographic variables: Perceived Emotional Leadership shows no significant differences across gender and subject category, whereas significant differences exist across age, years of teaching experience, school section, and holding an administrative position; work engagement shows no significant differences across gender, age, years of teaching, school section, or subject category, whereas significant differences exist only for holding an

administrative position, with teachers holding administrative positions having significantly lower work engagement than those without.

(3) Teacher perceived Emotional Leadership is significantly positively correlated with work engagement ($r=0.519$, $p<0.01$), and all dimensions of Emotional Leadership are significantly positively correlated with work engagement, with Empathy showing the highest correlation.

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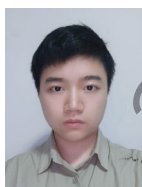
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