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The Association between Teacher Engagement and Work–Life Balance among College English Teachers in Jilin Province, China

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Abstract

This study examined the association between teacher engagement and work–life balance (WLB) among college English teachers in Jilin Province, China, with particular attention to whether engagement accounts for additional variance in WLB beyond demographic characteristics. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Data were collected from college English teachers working in public and private higher-education institutions in Jilin Province, and 240 valid questionnaires were retained after data-quality screening. Teacher engagement was measured using the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), while WLB was assessed using the four-item Work–Life Balance scale developed by Brough et al. Data were analysed in SPSS through descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, and hierarchical multiple regression, with gender, teaching experience, academic title, weekly teaching hours, and institution type entered as control variables. The results showed that teacher engagement was positively and significantly associated with WLB. Hierarchical regression further indicated that engagement explained additional variance in WLB after demographic factors were controlled, suggesting that more engaged teachers tended to report more favourable perceptions of work–life balance. Although the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference, the findings highlight teacher engagement as an important psychological resource related to teachers' work–life experiences. By focusing on a regional higher-education EFL teaching context and modelling engagement as an explanatory resource beyond demographic characteristics, this study extends evidence on the engagement–WLB relationship among Chinese college English teachers and provides implications for engagement-supportive institutional practices.

Keywords: *teacher engagement; work–life balance; college English teachers; Chinese higher education*

1. Introduction

College English teachers in China work in increasingly intensified higher-education environments that can strain their work–nonwork boundaries and threaten work–life balance (WLB). Beyond classroom instruction, many teachers simultaneously manage student support, administrative service, and research- and evaluation-related tasks, which collectively increase time pressure and reduce opportunities for recovery and non-work engagement. Recent evidence from Chinese university teaching contexts also

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suggests that workload structures and accountability arrangements can shift in ways that further complicate teachers' allocation of effort and time (Sun et al., 2023). In this context, sustaining WLB is not only a personal concern but a professional sustainability issue with implications for well-being and retention.

Teacher engagement offers a theoretically meaningful pathway for explaining variation in WLB under demanding conditions. Engagement is commonly defined as a positive, fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). For teachers, these qualities manifest as sustained energy for instructional work, strong identification with teaching goals, and deep concentration during teaching activities. As a motivational resource, engagement may support adaptive self-regulation, help teachers cope more effectively with ongoing demands, and preserve psychological capacity for non-work roles.

Work–life balance (WLB) in this study refers to teachers' overall appraisal of whether work responsibilities remain compatible with non-work life (Brough et al., 2014). Despite growing research on teacher well-being, empirical evidence on the engagement–WLB association among college English teachers in regional Chinese contexts remains limited. Research on university English teachers in China indicates that curriculum reform and evolving professional expectations can generate substantial emotional and identity-related challenges (Yip et al., 2022). However, fewer quantitative studies have examined whether engagement is associated with teachers' overall WLB while accounting for demographic characteristics that often co-vary with workload structure and career stage. Addressing this gap can clarify whether engagement contributes incremental explanatory value beyond structural constraints.

Accordingly, this study examines whether teacher engagement is positively associated with WLB among college English teachers in Jilin Province, China, after controlling for key demographic characteristics. By testing the incremental contribution of engagement beyond structural and career-related factors, the study evaluates the expectation that teachers who report higher levels of engagement—reflected in greater vigour, dedication, and absorption—will also report a more favourable global appraisal of work–life balance.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesises key conceptual and empirical work on teacher engagement and work–life balance. It establishes the rationale for expecting a positive engagement–WLB relationship.

Teacher Engagement

Teacher engagement is commonly conceptualised as a persistent, positive work-related motivational state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption. This conceptualisation highlights sustained energetic investment, strong identification with work goals, and deep immersion in work tasks, distinguishing engagement from transient affective reactions (Schaufeli et al., 2002). In educational contexts, engagement has been shown to be a meaningful construct among practising teachers across cultural settings, supporting its relevance for research on teacher functioning and sustainability (Klassen et al., 2012). Consistent with this established framework, the present study treats engagement as a multidimensional state typically operationalised through the UWES tradition (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

2.1 Work–Life Balance

Work–life balance (WLB) is best understood as a global evaluative judgement of the compatibility between work responsibilities and non-work life. Contemporary work–family scholarship increasingly conceptualises balance as an overarching appraisal of role fit and resource allocation across domains, rather than equating it solely with the absence of conflict (Hirschi et al., 2019; Landolfi et al., 2020). This global perspective is particularly relevant for higher-education teachers whose role demands and time pressures may constrain recovery and non-work participation. Accordingly, WLB is treated here as an overall perception of balance that has been commonly assessed using concise validated measures designed to capture this broad appraisal (Brough et al., 2014).

2.2 Teacher Engagement as a Predictor of Work–Life Balance

Teacher engagement is commonly framed as a positive motivational state that is associated with more favourable functioning and well-being. In job demands–resources theory, engagement reflects sustained energy and dedication that tend to co-occur with positive work experiences, suggesting that more engaged teachers may report a more favourable overall appraisal of work–life balance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Related perspectives on self-regulation further indicate that engagement may be linked to more adaptive management of effort and resources across competing role demands, which is consistent with maintaining balance between work and non-work life (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Empirical evidence likewise points to a generally positive engagement–work–life relationship across organisational settings (Wood et al., 2020). However, limited quantitative evidence has examined whether teacher engagement accounts for additional variance in work–life balance among college English teachers in regional Chinese higher-education contexts after demographic characteristics are controlled. This gap is important because demographic and workload-related characteristics may shape teachers' perceived balance, making it necessary to clarify whether engagement remains meaningfully associated with WLB beyond such background factors.

3. Methods

This section outlines the study procedures used to test the proposed association. It summarises the design, measures, and analytic strategy, including the handling of demographic controls.

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine whether teacher engagement is positively associated with work–life balance (WLB) among college English teachers in Jilin Province, China. Teacher engagement was specified as the focal predictor and WLB as the outcome variable, while five demographic characteristics (gender, teaching experience, academic title, weekly teaching hours, and institution type) were treated as control variables to account for potential differences associated with career stage and workload-related contexts.

3.2 Participants, Setting, and Sampling

Participants were college English teachers working in public and private higher-education institutions in Jilin Province, China. A total of 260 questionnaires were distributed, and 248 were returned. Data-quality screening was conducted prior to analysis.

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Specifically, cases were excluded if they contained more than 10% missing responses across the scale items (i.e., more than one missing value across the 13 items) or showed clearly patterned responding, defined as selecting the same response option for all items in a scale (e.g., identical responses across all UWES-9 items or across all WLB items). After screening, 240 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis. Participation was voluntary and limited to teachers currently teaching college English courses at the time of data collection.

3.3 Measures

Teacher engagement and WLB were measured using established self-report instruments, with all items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Composite scores were computed as mean values to facilitate interpretation and comparability across scales.

Teacher Engagement (UWES-9). Teacher engagement was assessed using the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Domínguez-Salas et al., 2022), comprising three dimensions—vigour, dedication, and absorption—with three items each. An overall engagement score was computed as the mean of the nine items, with higher scores indicating higher engagement; dimension scores were calculated as the mean of the corresponding three items when needed for descriptive purposes.

Work–Life Balance (Brough et al., 2014). Work–life balance was measured using the four-item Work–Life Balance scale developed by Brough et al. (2014). One item (Item 2) was reverse-scored prior to computing the composite score. A total WLB score was calculated as the mean of the four items, with higher scores reflecting a more favourable perceived balance.

Demographic variables (controls). Respondents reported gender, teaching experience (1–10 years, 11–20 years, >20 years), academic title (teaching assistant, lecturer, associate professor, professor), weekly teaching hours (<10, 11–20, >20), and institution type (public vs. private).

3.4 Procedure and Ethics

Data were collected via Wenjuanxing (an online survey platform widely used in China). The survey link was distributed to eligible college English teachers in Jilin Province through professional WeChat groups. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. An electronic informed-consent statement was presented on the first page, and respondents could exit at any time before submission. To enhance data quality, the survey was configured to limit multiple submissions (one submission per device/IP) and responses were screened to remove cases with excessive missing data or patterned responding, following pre-specified criteria.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were exported from Wenjuanxing and analysed in SPSS (Version 27). Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlations, and hierarchical multiple regression were performed, with VIF/tolerance and the Durbin–Watson statistic used to evaluate key model assumptions ($p < .05$, two-tailed).

4. Results

This section reports the findings in the order of the analyses conducted. Results are presented with reference to Tables 1–5 to address the study hypothesis.

4.1 Sample characteristics

The valid sample (N = 240) was predominantly female (70.0%) and worked mainly in public universities (75.0%); over half reported 11–20 weekly teaching hours (55.0%).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (demographics)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	72	30.0
	Female	168	70.0
Teaching experience	1–10 years	120	50.0
	11–20 years	78	32.5
	>20 years	42	17.5
Academic title	Teaching assistant	30	12.5
	Lecturer	120	50.0
	Associate professor	66	27.5
	Professor	24	10.0
Weekly teaching hours	<10 hours	54	22.5
	11–20 hours	132	55.0
	>20 hours	54	22.5
Institution type	Public university	180	75.0
	Private university	60	25.0

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

The full demographic distribution across gender, teaching experience, academic title, weekly teaching hours, and institution type is reported in Table 1.

4.2 Descriptive statistics and reliability (Table 2)

As reported in Table 2, both constructs showed adequate dispersion across respondents, with WLB_mean exhibiting greater variability than TE_mean (SD = 1.052 vs. 0.856), while internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha \geq .75$). Full descriptive statistics are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability (Cronbach's alpha)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Alpha
Teacher Engagement (TE_mean)	2.96	0.856	1.0	4.889	0.829
Work-Life Balance (WLB_mean)	2.806	1.052	1.0	5.0	0.753

4.3 Correlations (Table 3)

Bivariate associations indicated a positive engagement–WLB relationship consistent with the study expectation.

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Table 3

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation between key variables (N = 240)

Variable	M	SD	1	2
1. Teacher engagement	2.960	0.856	—	
2. Work-life balance	2.806	1.052	0.309***	—

Note. Pearson correlations are reported. *** p < .001 (two-tailed).

Table 3 shows that teacher engagement was positively correlated with WLB (r = 0.309, p < .001), providing initial support for the proposed positive association.

4.4 Hierarchical regression predicting WLB

Hierarchical regression results showed that engagement explained incremental variance in WLB beyond demographic controls, supporting the hypothesised relationship.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression predicting work–life balance

Panel A. Regression coefficient (Model 2)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Teacher engagement	0.376	0.075	0.306	5.023	< .001

Panel B. Model fit and change statistics

Model	R^2	Adj. R^2	F (df1, df2)	p	ΔR^2	ΔF	Δp
Model 1 (Controls)	.075	.039	2.067 (9, 230)	.033			
Model 2 (+ Engagement)	.167	.130	4.580 (10, 229)	< .001	.092	25.233	< .001

Note. Controls (gender, teaching experience, academic title, weekly teaching hours, and institution type) were entered in Step 1 and dummy-coded (reference categories: male, 1–10 years, teaching assistant, <10 weekly teaching hours, and public institution). For brevity, Panel A reports only the focal predictor (teacher engagement).

In Model 1, the control variables explained 7.5% of the variance in WLB (R^2 = .075), F(9, 230) = 2.067, p = .033. Adding teacher engagement in Model 2 significantly improved model fit (ΔR^2 = .092), $\Delta F(1, 229) = 25.233$, p < .001.

Model diagnostics suggested no serious multicollinearity and acceptable residual independence.

Table 5. Collinearity diagnostics (Model 2 predictors; Durbin–Watson=1.901)

Predictor	Tolerance	VIF
Gender	0.958	1.044
TeachExp_11_20	0.838	1.194
TeachExp_gt20	0.871	1.148
Title_Lecturer	0.392	2.553
Title_AssocProf	0.42	2.382
Title_Professor	0.597	1.674
Hours_11_20	0.598	1.673
Hours_gt20	0.637	1.57
InstType_Private	0.953	1.05
TE_mean	0.98	1.02

Note: VIF/Tolerance for the intercept (constant) is not interpreted; only predictors are reported.

Table 5 indicates VIF values were low to moderate (max = 2.553) and the Durbin–Watson statistic was 1.901.

5. Discussion

5.1 Principal findings

The present study supports the proposition that teacher engagement is positively associated with work–life balance (WLB) among college English teachers in Jilin Province. In line with prior evidence that engagement tends to covary with work–life outcomes, the findings indicate that engagement remains a meaningful correlate of teachers' global WLB appraisal even when key demographic characteristics are statistically controlled (Wood et al., 2020).

5.2 Interpretation in context

A plausible interpretation is that engagement reflects an energising, resourceful motivational state that helps teachers sustain self-regulation and protect recovery opportunities, thereby supporting better perceived balance. From a job demands–resources (JD–R) perspective, engagement is part of a motivational process through which resources and positive work experiences translate into adaptive functioning and well-being-relevant outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and self-regulation accounts further suggest that engaged employees may be better positioned to manage effort, maintain recovery, and avoid resource depletion over time (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

This interpretation is especially relevant in contemporary Chinese higher education, where intensified workload arrangements and reform-related demands can erode time and psychological space for non-work roles. Research on Chinese university teaching indicates that workload structures and quality-management practices may shift in ways that increase time pressure and complicate teachers' allocation of effort (Sun et al., 2023), while research on university English teachers during curriculum reform highlights emotional and identity-related challenges that can further strain teachers' capacity to maintain equilibrium across life domains (Yip et al., 2022).

5.3 Practical implications

Strengthening teachers' work–life balance is likely to be more feasible when universities treat engagement as an organisationally shapeable state rather than solely an individual attribute. Consistent with job demands–resources theory, institutions can support engagement by expanding actionable resources—such as

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supportive leadership, clearer role expectations, appropriate autonomy, and transparent evaluation practices—while minimising hindrance-type demands that absorb time and energy without clear pedagogical value (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). These organisational levers align with the present finding that engagement is positively linked with WLB, suggesting that engagement-oriented management may be a useful consideration for supporting teachers' overall work–life experience.

In operational terms, engagement-supportive policies should prioritise reducing avoidable administrative workload and reinforcing support and empowerment conditions that enable sustainable teaching. Evidence from Chinese teacher samples indicates that perceived organisational support and psychological empowerment are meaningfully related to engagement and workplace well-being (Yu et al., 2024). Meanwhile, higher-education scholarship has highlighted growing concern about administrative burden in universities and the way compliance- and paperwork-related requirements can encroach on academic time and capacity—conditions that can plausibly undermine sustainable boundary management (Woelert, 2023). In Chinese higher-education contexts, workload intensification and accountability-oriented quality management have likewise been reported as salient features shaping university teachers' work, underscoring the value of streamlining low-value administrative processes and improving scheduling flexibility where possible (Sun et al., 2023).

5.4 Limitations and future research

Several limitations constrain interpretation and point to directions for future work. The cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures may elevate common-method bias, and the regional sampling frame limits generalisability across China's diverse higher-education contexts; moreover, the current model does not explicitly test intervening mechanisms (e.g., recovery or job resources) that theory suggests may link engagement to WLB (Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

Future research should strengthen causal inference and specify mechanisms by integrating broader JD–R variables and employing longitudinal or intensive repeated-measures designs. For example, longitudinal or diary studies could test whether engagement predicts subsequent changes in WLB through recovery processes, while expanded models could incorporate job demands/resources to examine indirect pathways (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In addition, given evidence that WLB is closely tied to emotional exhaustion and well-being among Chinese college teachers, future work could model engagement alongside burnout-related indicators to clarify how motivational and strain processes jointly shape WLB (Wei & Ye, 2022).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, drawing on a cross-sectional survey of college English teachers in Jilin Province, this study provides evidence that teacher engagement—conceptualised as vigour, dedication, and absorption—is positively associated with teachers' global work–life balance after accounting for key demographic characteristics. By extending engagement research to a regional Chinese higher-education language-teaching context and applying a hierarchical-regression approach, the findings suggest that fostering engagement may be a useful organisational consideration for supporting teachers' work–life experiences, particularly in settings characterised by intensified teaching demands and expanding role expectations.

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