

# Unraveling Job Stress, Burnout, and Psychological Capital among Chinese EFL Teachers in Higher Institutions

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Received: February 7, 2024

Accepted: May 6, 2024

Online Published: September 5, 2024

doi:10.5539/ies.v17n5p29

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v17n5p29>

## Abstract

This study delves into the status quo, variations based on demographic information, and the relationship between job stress, burnout, and Psychological Capital (PsyCap) among Chinese English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in higher institutions. The investigation utilized a questionnaire for data collection and analysis. 297 EFL teachers from various institutions in China were recruited between July and October 2023. The data underscores that Chinese EFL instructors in higher institutions experience moderately high levels of stress, burnout, and PsyCap. However, when compared to stress and burnout levels, PsyCap emerges as relatively lower. The statistical results revealed that male teachers report significantly higher stress levels than their female counterparts; no difference was identified in job burnout indicators; among four indicators in PsyCap, male teachers exhibit significantly higher self-efficacy compared to female teachers. Private school teachers face elevated levels of stress and increased burnout compared to their public school counterparts, alongside possessing lower levels of PsyCap than those in public schools. Positive correlations exist between job stress and burnout, and negative correlations with PsyCap. PsyCap partially mediates the stress-burnout relationship, with indicators like hope and resilience playing a mediating role. This research may offer some guidance for educators, institutions, policymakers, and researchers to enhance the well-being of Chinese EFL teachers in various educational settings.

**Keywords:** Chinese EFL teachers, job stress, job burnout, psychological capital (PsyCap)

## 1. Introduction

Because of the high standards for output and difficulty of the task, stress among educators and researchers in higher education has been on the rise (Graça et al., 2021), leading to a focus on teachers' well-being (Kwon et al., 2020). Teachers' well-being has garnered significant attention from society in recent years, which has also led to public discussions on the stress that comes with being a teacher (Chen et al., 2023). Teachers who are under continuous work stress not only develop subhealthy psychology such as worry, tension, and depression, but also severely exhaust individual resources, which can lead to job burnout (Zhao et al., 2022). Over the last thirty years, teacher burnout has increased dramatically on a global scale (Garcia-Arroyo et al., 2019; Mahmoudi et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2022). Currently, some Chinese instructors face enormous pressure in the work environment (Tang, 2020; Wang, 2021; Wang & Wang, 2020; Zhang & Jiang, 2020). Consequently, job burnout among teachers in China is on the rise due to high demands and workload (Zang et al., 2022; Zhu, 2020).

Teaching EFL is fraught with many difficulties, which might raise the risk of teacher burnout and attrition among EFL educators (Acheson et al., 2016; Wang, 2021). It is noteworthy that the turnover rate for foreign language teachers is higher than that of other subject areas (Acheson et al., 2016; Swanson, 2012; Tang, 2020), which validates further empirical research on burnout in EFL situations (Khani & Mirzaee, 2015; Wang, 2021). Thus, the research of burnout in this setting (China) is essential since it has one of the largest populations of English learners globally, with a million EFL teachers, and Chinese EFL teachers frequently encounter unique challenges and experiences.

Previous academics suggested a variety of ideas and models to better understand and explain the relationship between job features, employee well-being, and workplace outcomes. The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, developed by Bakker et al. (2003) and Demerouti et al. (2001) posits that working environments can be

split into two main categories: job demands and job resources, which are in distinct ways related to specific workplace performance. The Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) and the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker et al., 2014; Demerouti et al., 2001) demonstrate that adequate and appropriate resources have a vital role in mitigating the harmful impact of job stress on burnout (Mullins et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2019). Individual internal resources are just as crucial in preventing teachers' job burnout as external ones like social support. The current study concentrated on psychological capital (PsyCap)--an essential internal resource. PsyCap, a relatively recent concept developed from positive organizational behavior, is thought to be a positive psychological state with four main components: self-efficacy, optimism, resiliency, and hope. This state leads to positive organizational behaviors (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). PsyCap is thought to be a kind of capital that transcends more conventional forms of capital like human and social capital (Luthans et al., 2015).

Regarding the connection between PsyCap and burnout at work, Luthans and Youssef (2004) argued that PsyCap is a significant factor in lowering job burnout. Cheung et al. (2011) has discovered that among Chinese instructors, PsyCap modulated the connection between emotional labor, job burnout, and job satisfaction. In another study of Chinese university teachers, Zhang et al. (2019) reported that PsyCap was negatively related to teachers' burnout via the mediating role of coping styles, this finding was echoed by several researchers in different contexts such as Asheghi et al. (2020), Liu et al. (2021) and Zhu et al. (2021). The JD-R hypothesis explains why PsyCap has this protective effect. The JD-R paradigm states that job resources serve as bulwarks against job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), thereby influencing both individual and organizational outcomes. According to a different recent study, PsyCap is regarded as an internal resource that serves as a significant strategy for lowering job burnout (Pu et al., 2017).

Little empirical study has been done to date to examine PsyCap's potential function in the relationship between job stress and job burnout in Chinese EFL settings, despite the fact that it has been found to buffer job burnout. Some research suggests that private sector employees may face more stress due to high customer-service orientation (Yeh et al., 2018). Yet, there's a gap in examining job stress and burnout among Chinese EFL teachers in private and public schools. Therefore, in order to go beyond the findings of earlier research, the present study investigated the status quo and relationships between job stress, job burnout, and PsyCap among Chinese EFL teachers in higher institutions. The study's findings will help to avoid and lessen job burnout among Chinese EFL teachers. They may also offer valuable insights to managers and organizations looking to improve psychological capital among their staff members and lessen the detrimental impacts of burnout.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Job Stress

Job stress was initially proposed by American psychologist Cannon (1939) and has since been extensively studied by scholars. In the teaching career, this notion has been characterized as "the experience of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, and depression, resulting from some aspects of their work as a teacher" (Saleem & Muhammad, 2020).

There are many factors leading to work stress, such as gender (Long & Gessaroli, 1989), organizational factors (Chen, 2019), and social factors (Gera et al., 2021). For instance, the harmony of interpersonal relationships affects teachers' levels of work stress (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). Among the main factors, the heavy teaching workload in universities has become a pressing concern due to the scarcity of teaching resources amid rapid expansion (Farmer, 2020). This study examines the following organizational factors: workload, role ambiguity, role conflict, job insecurity, and interpersonal conflict (Asih et al., 2018).

### 2.2 Job Burnout

Maslach & Jackson's (1981) defined that burnout is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, or depersonalization, as well as a state of low professional efficacy, and is a product of prolonged work stress and a common worldwide health problem. According to Maslach, there are three primary signs of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Teacher burnout can also result from a lack of organizational support, which reduces intrinsic motivation for growth (Zhang, 2021). Mahmoudi et al. argued that strengthening social capital is an effective solution to reduce burnout among physical education teachers (2018). Furthermore, some scholars believe that increasing teachers' professional resilience (Jia, 2021) is important means of alleviating teacher burnout. Moreover, Yang et al. proposed improving teachers' professional well-being as an important measure to address burnout. Furthermore, teachers' psychological capital has an impact on burnout levels (Wang & Zhang, 2019).

### 2.3 Psychological Capital

Drawn from positive psychology and Positive Organizational Behavior (Cameron & Caza, 2004), psychological capital (PsyCap) is defined as “an individual’s positive psychological state of development and is characterized by four main components: (1) having confidence (efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success” (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). Research has shown that higher levels of PsyCap are associated with various positive outcomes, including higher job satisfaction, better job performance, increased organizational commitment, lower levels of stress and burnout, and greater well-being. Organizations can foster positive organizational behavior by developing employees’ PsyCap through training, support, and creating a positive work environment (Cheung et al., 2011; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017; Pu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019).

Previous studies have investigated the antecedents, consequences or roles of job stress, job burnout and PsyCap from various perspectives, many of them provided insights into how demographic factors, such as age, gender, and education level, can influence job stress. However, there are research gaps further exploration in understanding the relationship between PsyCap and demographics, such as gender and working environment. In addition, research on EFL teachers’ stress is relatively rare compared to research focusing on EFL learners’ stress (Jiang, 2019). What’s more, previous research found there was no significant difference overall between public and private sector employees in terms of total stress (Bano & Jha, 2012). Some research suggests that private sector employees are expected to provide more stress than their public sector counterparts due to the high customer-service orientation of the work (Yeh et al., 2018). Comparing college English teachers in private and public schools regarding job stress and burnout is yet to be investigated. Examining the differences and potential implications between private and public school teachers in this specific profession can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of stress and burnout in different contexts.

Luthans et al. (2008), Yin et al. (2018), and Yin (2023) highlighted the need for research on the relationship between gender and psychological capital, exploring whether gender differences exist in the development and utilization of PsyCap resources in this area which was echoed by Bafei et al. (2023). This research will consider these gaps as opportunities to investigate how demographic factors may influence the outcomes of job stress, job burnout and PsyCap, and their connections.

### 2.4 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the status quo and relationship of job stress, burnout, and PsyCap of Chinese EFL Teachers in higher institutions. Specifically, this study will answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the status quo of the stress, burnout and PsyCap levels among Chinese EFL teachers in higher institutions?
- 2) Is there a significant difference in the level of stress, burnout and PsyCap levels when they are grouped according to profile?
- 3) Will PsyCap significantly mediate the connection between job stress and burnout among Chinese EFL teachers in higher institutions?

### 2.5 Scope and Delimitation of the Study

Figure 1 highlights the research paradigm with constructs of three variables of the study. The research analyzed respondents’ workplace stress levels, focusing on workload, time pressure, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, and job insecurity. It also assessed individuals’ levels of burnout by looking at emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal achievement. In addition, the study examined the respondents’ PsyCap, including their levels of hope, efficacy (self-efficacy), resilience, and optimism. Additionally, the study delved into whether there were notable variations in the evaluation of stress, burnout, and PsyCap when participants were segmented into distinct groups based on their profiles. It also scrutinized potential correlations, aiming to deepen comprehension of the interrelationships among these variables.

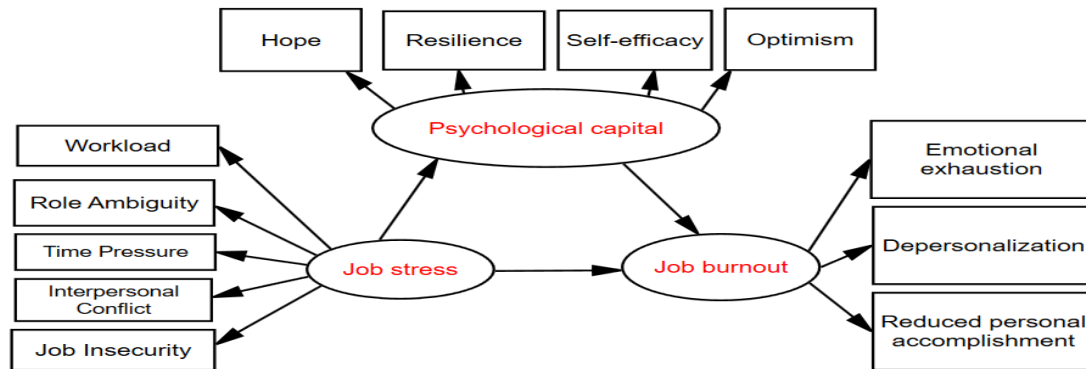


Figure 1. Research paradigm

### 3. Method

This study utilized a survey methodology to explore the current landscape and profile-based discrepancies in stress, burnout, and PsyCap levels among EFL instructors in the context of Chinese colleges. Additionally, it employed correlation analysis to examine the relationships between these variables while comparing various groups of instructors.

#### 3.1 Population and Sampling Technique

The participants for this study were randomly recruited from different higher institutions (public and private) located in different cities in China.

#### 3.2 Instruments

This study utilized a comprehensive questionnaire consisting of a demographic information in part 1 and three Likert (4 points: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree) scales in part 2: the EFL Teacher Job Stress Scale, the EFL Teacher Job Burnout Scale, and the Psychological Capital Scale. The questionnaire was distributed to Chinese EFL teachers through an online survey tool (<https://www.wjx.cn/>).

##### 1) EFL Teacher Job Stress Scale

The EFL Teacher Job Stress Scale was adapted from College Working Stress Scale (CWSS: (Li, 2005)) which offers a comprehensive evaluation of employees' well-being in a variety of areas. The EFL Teacher Job Stress Scale adapted in this study is a 50-item, 5-factor instrument that measures the extent to which Chinese EFL teachers experience occupational stress. Work factors such as role ambiguity, role conflict, job insecurity, and interpersonal conflict were measured with 10 items respectively. All items have a high level of internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha=0.92$ ). Prior study shows adequate internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha=0.81$  to  $0.91$ ) and construct validity support for this scale in China (He & Liu, 2012; Ni et al., 2016; Wang & Jing, 2019).

##### 2) EFL Teacher Job Burnout Scale

EFL Teacher burnout was assessed using 30 items adapted from a Likert scale developed by Aboagye et al. (2018) in China. It consists of three sub-scales: (1) emotional exhaustion; (2) depersonalization; and (3) reduced personal accomplishments. Reliability and validity of the scale have been established in previous studies (Aboagye et al., 2018; Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011).

##### 3) Psychological Capital Scale

This research used a self-made questionnaire to measure Psychological Capital among Chinese EFL instructors. The questionnaire included four indicators: hope, efficacy (self-efficacy), resilience, and optimism. Each part includes 10 construct-related statements, and respondents will score their agreement on a 4-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was validated and pilot-tested (Cronbach's alpha values= $0.825$ ) before being administered to the target sample of Chinese EFL instructors.

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

The research employed a multi-faceted statistical approach to comprehensively analyze the relationships among work stress, burnout, and PsyCap among Chinese EFL teachers. Descriptive statistics were calculated to elucidate the distribution of each variable using SPSS 25. Group comparisons employed ANOVA to assess variations across

gender and school type subgroups. The stepwise regression proposed by Wen and Ye (2014) was used to analyze the mediating effect of PsyCap on stress and job burnout and was verified using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) through SPSSAU.

#### 4. Results

In total, 297 valid questionnaires were collected through online channel. Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of participants. Among the respondents, 34.30% are male teachers, and 65.70% are female teachers. The respondents were also associated with different school types, with 24.20% working in private institutions and 75.80% in public schools.

Table 1. Profile of the respondents

Category	Levels	Count	Column N %
Gender	Male	102	34.30%
	Female	195	65.70%
School Type	Private	72	24.20%
	Public	225	75.80%

##### 4.1 Assessment of the Respondents' Job Stress, Burnout and PsyCap

Table 2 provides a descriptive analysis of stress, burnout, and PsyCap among Chinese EFL teachers. The stress experienced by Chinese EFL teachers varies across different dimensions, with interpersonal conflict emerging as the most significant stressor, boasting the highest mean ( $M=3.48$ ,  $SD=0.33$ ). Workload follows closely behind, with a slightly lower mean ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ). Conversely, role ambiguity and time pressure exhibit lower stress levels, with means of 3.29 ( $SD=0.43$ ) and 3.30 ( $SD=0.44$ ) respectively. Insecurity falls within the mid-range, with a mean of 3.35 ( $SD=0.38$ ). Overall, the average stress level among Chinese EFL teachers is 3.36 ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=0.31$ ), reflecting a moderately high level of stress among Chinese EFL instructors.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of stress, burnout and PsyCap of Chinese EFL teachers

Dimension	Indicators	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Rank	Verbal Interpretation
Stress	Workload	297	2.35	4	3.37	0.38	2	Involved
	Role ambiguity	297	1.9	4	3.29	0.43	5	Involved
	Time pressure	297	2.2	3.91	3.30	0.44	4	Involved
	Interpersonal conflict	297	2.6	4	3.48	0.33	1	Involved
	Insecurity	297	2	4	3.35	0.38	3	Involved
	Average Stress	297	2.5	3.88	3.36	0.31		Involved
Burnout	Exhaustion	297	2.3	3.9	3.29	0.33	3	Involved
	Depersonalization	297	2.2	3.92	3.35	0.36	1	Involved
	Reduced Personal Accomplishment	297	2.1	4	3.31	0.42	2	Involved
	Average Burnout	297	2.5	3.87	3.32	0.31		Involved
PsyCap	Hope	297	2.3	4	3.07	0.42	3	Involved
	Self-efficacy	297	2.36	4	3.19	0.38	2	Involved
	Resilience	297	2	4	3.25	0.37	1	Involved
	Optimism	297	2.2	4	3.06	0.37	4	Involved
	Average PsyCap	297	2.43	3.88	3.14	0.32		Involved

*Note.* The scale ranges are delineated as follows: a score falling between 3.51 and 4.00 is categorized as “Highly Involved,” scores within the range of 2.51 to 3.50 are termed “Involved,” those between 1.51 and 2.50 are considered “Somewhat Involved,” and scores ranging from 1.00 to 1.50 are interpreted as “Not Involved.”

Shifting focus to the burnout dimension, depersonalization standing out as the most prominent ( $M=3.35$ ,  $SD=0.36$ ). Reduced personal accomplishment follows closely behind with a mean of 3.31 ( $SD=0.42$ ), indicating notable feelings of diminished achievement. Exhaustion, exhibits a slightly lower mean of 3.29 ( $SD=0.33$ ). Overall, the average burnout level among these teachers is 3.32 ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=0.31$ ), suggesting a moderately high

level of burnout across the board.

Regarding PsyCap, resilience emerges as the most prominent aspect, characterized by the highest mean ( $M=3.25$ ,  $SD=0.37$ ). Self-efficacy closely follows with a mean of 3.19 ( $SD=0.38$ ), indicating a moderately strong belief in one's abilities to perform tasks effectively. Hope demonstrates a slightly lower mean of 3.07 ( $SD=0.42$ ), while optimism ranks lowest with a mean of 3.06 ( $SD=0.37$ ). The average PsyCap level among these teachers is 3.14 ( $M=3.14$ ,  $SD=0.32$ ), reflecting a moderately positive PsyCap.

In summary, the data illuminates the moderately higher level of stress, burnout, and PsyCap among Chinese EFL teachers. Compared to stress and burnout, PsyCap as a personal psychological resource appears to be relatively lower.

#### 4.2 Demographic Variations of Stress, Burnout and PsyCap

To investigate gender and school type-related differences in the assessment of stress, burnout, and PsyCap levels, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted using SPSS. This statistical analysis was performed separately for the two variables, allowing for a comprehensive examination of potential variations.

##### 4.2.1 Gender Related Difference in the Assessment of the Stress, Burnout and PsyCap Level

In Table 3, gender-based variations in stress, burnout, and PsyCap assessment are presented. When comparing stress levels between genders, statistically significant differences are observed across various indicators. Specifically, male participants report significantly higher stress levels than females in workload ( $F=26.498$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), role ambiguity ( $F=4.21$ ,  $p=0.041$ ), time pressure ( $F=4.916$ ,  $p=0.027$ ), interpersonal conflict ( $F=12.378$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), and the average stress level ( $F=11.417$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). However, there is no significant difference in stress levels related to insecurity ( $F=0.781$ ,  $p=0.378$ ). Overall, male participants tend to experience higher stress levels compared to female participants.

Table 3. Gender-based variations in stress, burnout, and PsyCap assessment

Dimension	Indicators	Gender (M, SD)		F	p	Compare
		Male(n=102)	Female(n=195)			
Stress	Workload	3.52(0.30)	3.29(0.39)	26.498	0.000**	1>2
	Role ambiguity	3.36(0.43)	3.25(0.42)	4.21	0.041*	1>2
	Time pressure	3.38(0.41)	3.26(0.44)	4.916	0.027*	1>2
	Interpersonal conflict	3.58(0.25)	3.44(0.35)	12.378	0.001**	1>2
	Insecurity	3.37(0.32)	3.33(0.42)	0.781	0.378	
	Average Stress	3.44(0.27)	3.31(0.32)	11.417	0.001**	1>2
Burnout	Exhaustion	3.29(0.36)	3.28(0.31)	0.016	0.898	
	Depersonalization	3.39(0.38)	3.34(0.36)	1.149	0.285	
	Reduced Personal Accomplishment	3.31(0.49)	3.31(0.37)	0.008	0.929	
	Average Burnout	3.33(0.36)	3.31(0.28)	0.178	0.673	
PsyCap	Hope	3.06(0.27)	3.08(0.48)	0.091	0.763	
	Self-efficacy	3.31(0.31)	3.13(0.39)	16.914	0.000**	1>2
	Resilience	3.28(0.30)	3.23(0.40)	1.195	0.275	
	Optimism	3.06(0.36)	3.06(0.38)	0.004	0.948	
	Average PsyCap	3.18(0.26)	3.12(0.34)	2.046	0.154	

Note. \*  $p<0.05$ , \*\*  $p<0.01$ ; "1" = "Male", "2" = "Female".

In burnout dimension, no significant difference is found between male and female teachers in terms of exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment between male, consequently, there is no significant difference in the overall burnout level between male and female EFL teachers.

Regarding PsyCap, statistical analysis reveals significant differences between genders in self-efficacy ( $F=16.914$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). However, there are no significant differences in hope ( $F=0.091$ ,  $p=0.763$ ), resilience ( $F=1.195$ ,  $p=0.275$ ), optimism ( $F=0.004$ ,  $p=0.948$ ), and the average PsyCap level ( $F=2.046$ ,  $p=0.154$ ). Overall, while self-efficacy is notably higher among male participants, other dimensions of PsyCap do not significantly differ between genders.

In summary, male and female Chinese EFL teachers exhibit variations in stress-related dimensions, particularly

workload, role ambiguity, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict. However, burnout and PsyCap dimensions show fewer significant gender differences.

#### 4.2.2 School Related Difference in the Assessment of the Stress, Burnout and PsyCap Level

In Table 4, variations in stress, burnout, and PsyCap assessment across different school types are presented. Statistical analysis indicates significant differences between school types in workload ( $F=17.103$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), interpersonal conflict ( $F=5.092$ ,  $p=0.025$ ), and the average stress level ( $F=6.828$ ,  $p=0.009$ ), with private schools reporting higher stress levels in these dimensions. However, there are no significant differences in role ambiguity ( $F=2.556$ ,  $p=0.111$ ), time pressure ( $F=1.888$ ,  $p=0.171$ ), and insecurity ( $F=1.647$ ,  $p=0.2$ ). Overall, private schools tend to exhibit higher stress levels compared to public schools, particularly in workload, interpersonal conflict, and the average stress level.

Table 4. School type-based variations in stress, burnout, and PsyCap

Dimension	Indicators	School Type (M, SD)		F	p	compare
		Private(n=72)	Public(n=225)			
Stress	Workload	3.52 (0.30)	3.32 (0.38)	17.103	0.000**	1>2
	Role ambiguity	3.36 (0.43)	3.27 (0.43)	2.556	0.111	
	Time pressure	3.36 (0.38)	3.28 (0.45)	1.888	0.171	
	Interpersonal conflict	3.56 (0.26)	3.46 (0.34)	5.092	0.025*	1>2
	Insecurity	3.40 (0.33)	3.33 (0.40)	1.647	0.2	
	Average Stress	3.44 (0.28)	3.33 (0.31)	6.828	0.009**	1>2
Burnout	Exhaustion	3.38 (0.24)	3.26 (0.34)	7.419	0.007**	1>2
	Depersonalization	3.50 (0.32)	3.31 (0.37)	16.996	0.000**	1>2
	Reduced Personal Accomplishment	3.44 (0.44)	3.27 (0.40)	9.125	0.003**	1>2
	Average Burnout	3.44 (0.28)	3.28 (0.31)	15.356	0.000**	1>2
PsyCap	Hope	2.90 (0.35)	3.13 (0.43)	17.095	0.000**	1<2
	Self-efficacy	3.14 (0.43)	3.20 (0.36)	1.479	0.225	
	Resilience	3.13 (0.42)	3.29 (0.34)	10.526	0.001**	1<2
	Optimism	3.04 (0.38)	3.06 (0.37)	0.154	0.695	
	Average PsyCap	3.05 (0.33)	3.17 (0.31)	7.714	0.006**	1<2

Note. \*  $p<0.05$ , \*\*  $p<0.01$ ; “1” = “private school”, “2” = “public school”.

Similarly, significant differences were revealed between school types in exhaustion ( $F=7.419$ ,  $p=0.007$ ), depersonalization ( $F=16.996$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), reduced personal accomplishment ( $F=9.125$ ,  $p=0.003$ \*\*), and the average burnout level ( $F=15.356$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), with private schools reporting higher burnout levels in these dimensions.

Coming to PsyCap, statistical analysis indicates significant differences between school types in hope ( $F=17.095$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), resilience ( $F=10.526$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), and the average PsyCap level ( $F=7.714$ ,  $p=0.006$ ), with public schools reporting higher levels in these dimensions. However, there are no significant differences in self-efficacy ( $F=1.479$ ,  $p=0.225$ ) and optimism ( $F=0.154$ ,  $p=0.695$ ) between school types. Overall, public schools tend to exhibit higher levels of hope, resilience, and average PsyCap compared to private schools.

#### 4.3 Mediating Role of PsyCap Between Stress and Burnout

Table 5 provides a summary of the mediation test results for the relationship between stress, PsyCap and burnout. The total effect, direct effect, and mediation details are presented. The total effect of stress on burnout is 0.496, and the direct effect is 0.351, indicating a partial mediation effect through PsyCap ( $z = 4.93$ ,  $p = 0.0$ ).

Table 6 provides a detailed overview of the mediation test results for the relationship between four key indicators—stress, hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism—and the outcome variable burnout. Each pathway’s total effects, mediation components, and direct effects are systematically presented, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between these variables. In the case of stress => hope => burnout, the total effect is significant at 0.496, and the mediation path reveals partial effects ( $z=5.03$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Contrastingly, the stress => self-efficacy => burnout pathway yields non-significant results ( $z = -1.349$ ,  $p = 0.177$ ), suggesting no significant mediation effect. Moving on to stress => resilience => burnout, the total effect stands at 0.496. The mediation path exhibits partial effects ( $z = 2.896$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Lastly, the Stress => optimism => burnout pathway test results ( $z = 1.157$ ,  $p = 0.247$ ) indicate no significant mediation effect. These findings collectively contribute to a nuanced

understanding of the mediating roles of hope and resilience in the stress-burnout relationship, while highlighting the absence of significant mediation in the case of self-efficacy and optimism

Table 5. Summary of mediation test results of PsyCap

Item	c			a*b					c'	Decision
	Total effect	a	b	Mediation	(Boot SE)	(z)	(p)	(95% BootCI)		
Stress=>PsyCap=> Burnout	0.496**	-0.374**	-0.390**	0.146	0.03	4.933	0	0.092 ~ 0.208	0.351**	Partial Mediation

Note. \* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01;

“a” represents the regression coefficient of X on M;

“b” represents the regression coefficient of M on Y;

“a\*b” represents the product of a and b, which is the mediation effect;

“c” represents the regression coefficient of X on Y (when there is a mediator variable M in the model), indicating the direct effect.

Table 6. Summary of mediation test results of four indicators in PsyCap

Items	c			a*b					c'	Decision
	Total effect	a	b	Mediation	(Boot SE)	(z)	(p)	Direct Effect		
Stress=>Hope=>Burnout	0.496**	-0.587**	-0.238**	0.14	0.028	5.03	0	0.277**	Partial mediation	
Stress=>Self-efficacy=>Burnout	0.496**	-0.118	0.099	-0.012	0.009	-1.349	0.177	0.277**	No sig. Mediation	
Stress=>Resilience=> Burnout	0.496**	-0.314**	-0.193**	0.061	0.021	2.896	0.004	0.277**	Partial mediation	
Stress=>Optimism=>Burnout	0.496**	-0.476**	-0.064	0.031	0.026	1.157	0.247	0.277**	No sig. Mediation	

Note. \* p<0.05 \*\* p<0.01; bootstrap type: percentile bootstrap.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was constructed with stress as the predictive variable, PsyCap as the mediating variable, and job burnout as the dependent variable. The model fit indices are assessed through various indicators in Table 7. The  $\chi^2$  test yields a p-value of 0.21, indicating a non-significant difference between observed and expected covariance matrices. The  $\chi^2/df$  ratio is 1.875, below the threshold of 3, suggesting an acceptable fit. Other crucial indices, including GFI (0.92), RMSEA (0.03), and CFI (0.97), surpass the recommended values, reflecting a good model fit. Furthermore, NFI and NNFI both exceed the 0.9 threshold. The RMSEA’s 90% CI is within an acceptable range (0.014 to 0.05), and the default model’s non-significant  $\chi^2(66)$  emphasizes the superiority of the specified model in comparison. Overall, these fit indices suggest a satisfactory fit of the proposed model.

Table 7. Fit indices among competing models

Indicators	$\chi^2$	df	p	$\chi^2/df$	GFI	RMSEA	RMR	CFI	NFI	NNFI
Judgment Criteria	-	-	>0.05	<3	>0.9	<0.10	<0.05	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Value	452.637	51	0.21	1.875	0.92	0.03	0.001	0.97	0.92	0.93

Note. Default Model:  $\chi^2(66)=2036.442, p=1.000$ .

Table 8 provides a summary of model regression coefficients for four indicators. The non-standardized regression coefficients depict the strength and direction of the relationships between the predictor (X) and outcome (Y) variables. Notable findings include stress significantly predicting burnout (coefficient: 0.309, p<0.05, with a standardized coefficient of 0.358). Stress also negatively predicts PsyCap (coefficient: -0.453, p<0.05), with a



standardized coefficient of -0.4. PsyCap, in turn, negatively predicts burnout (coefficient: -0.362,  $p < 0.05$ ), with a standardized coefficient of -0.474. Overall, these regression coefficients unveil the intricate relationships within the model, providing insights into the impact of stress, burnout, and PsyCap on each other.

Table 8. Summary of model regression coefficients of four indicators

X	→	Y	Non-standardized regression coefficient	SE	z (CR value)	p	standardized regression coefficient
stress	→	burnout	0.309	0.059	5.233	0	0.358
stress	→	PsyCap	-0.453	0.08	-5.693	0	-0.4
PsyCap	→	burnout	-0.362	0.056	-6.42	0	-0.474
stress	→	Insecurity	1.204	0.089	13.595	0	0.847
stress	→	Interpersonal conflict	1.016	0.075	13.508	0	0.84
stress	→	Time pressure	1.086	0.099	10.942	0	0.674
stress	→	Role ambiguity	1.014	0.097	10.43	0	0.642
stress	→	Workload	1	-	-	-	0.721
burnout	→	Reduced personal accomplishment	1.332	0.12	11.131	0	0.749
burnout	→	Depersonalization	1.257	0.108	11.611	0	0.806
burnout	→	Exhaustion	1	-	-	-	0.715
PsyCap	→	Optimism	0.951	0.077	12.364	0	0.785
PsyCap	→	Resilience	0.996	0.077	12.905	0	0.83
PsyCap	→	Self-efficacy	0.86	0.077	11.099	0	0.698
PsyCap	→	Hope	1	-	-	-	0.725

Note. ‘→’ indicates the regression influence relationship or measurement relationship; The hyphen ‘-’ indicates that the item is the reference item.

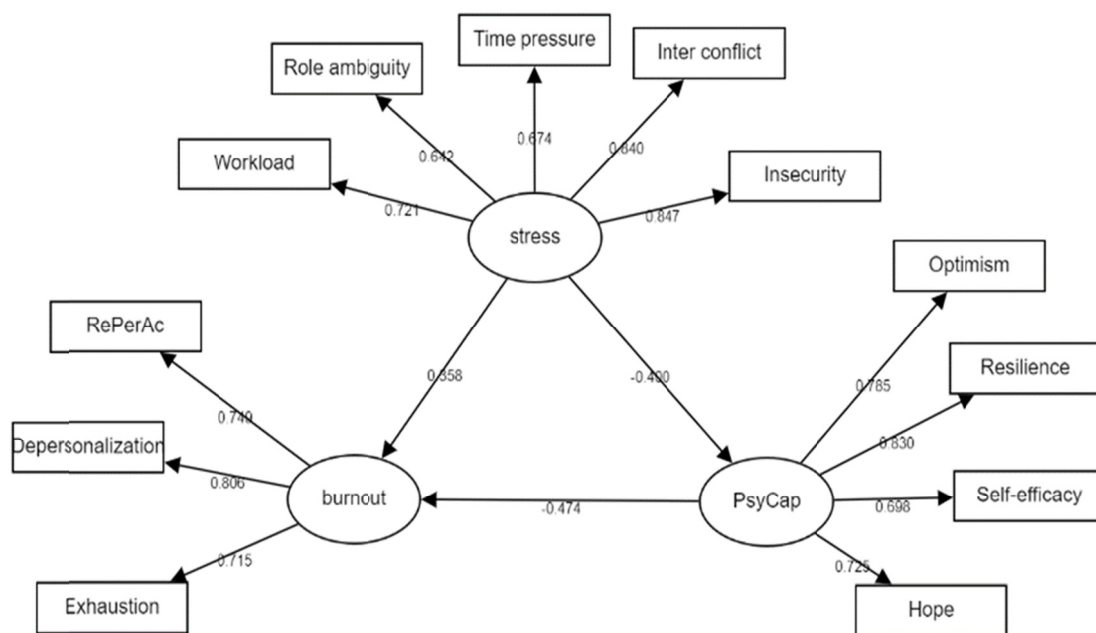


Figure 2. Structural equation model of the PsyCap’s mediating effect on the relationship between stress and burnout (Note. RePerAC refers to “reduced personal accomplishment”)

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Status Quo of the Respondents' Job Stress, Burnout and PsyCap

When evaluating the average levels of stress, burnout, and PsyCap, stress emerges with the highest mean ( $M=3.36$ ,  $SD=0.31$ ), indicating a consistent but moderately elevated level of stress among participants. Burnout follows closely with an  $M$  of 3.32 ( $SD=0.31$ ), suggesting a comparable level of engagement in burnout factors. In contrast, PsyCap exhibits a comparatively lower mean ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD=0.32$ ). The high level of stress and burnout among EFL teachers align with previous studies. As was argued, Chinese teachers experience significant pressure in the working environment, and owing to high expectations, working standards and workload, job burnout is becoming increasingly common in Chinese society (Zang, et al., 2022; Zhu, 2020). The findings align with previous studies in terms of job burnout levels, such as emotional exhaustion (Chen & Lin, 2008; Xu & Jia, 2022) and low levels of personal accomplishment (Wang, 2022; Zhao et al., 2020). The mean value for the four dimensions of PsyCap fall within the moderately high range (but lower than stress and burnout), indicating that the majority of EFL professors at Chinese universities remain optimistic about their work. This is slightly different from Yong et al. (2016) who investigated the level of psychological capital in Chinese university EFL lecturers, and found a very high level of PsyCap among Chinese university EFL teachers in Zhejiang province.

### 5.2 Difference in the Level of Stress, Burnout and PsyCap Levels When They Are Grouped According to Profile

#### 5.2.1 Gender-Based Variations in Stress, Burnout, and PsyCap

Male teachers report significantly higher stress levels than their female counterparts in workload, role ambiguity, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict. The findings aligns with some studies which have shown significant differences in stress levels between male and female teachers, with female teachers generally experiencing lower levels of stress (Long & Gessaroli, 1989). It also diverges from the study by Xhelilaj et al. (2021) examining the relationship between teacher burnout, occupational stress, in that study, teachers aged 30, females demonstrated a higher workload than males of the same age category.

Teacher burnout may be significantly influenced by a person's gender. However, several studies have explored the gender differences in job burnout among EFL teachers in China, yielding mixed findings. Xu (2010) reported that female EFL teachers exhibit significantly higher levels of reduced personal accomplishments compared to their male counterparts. In contrast, Tang (2020) discovered that female EFL teachers experience significantly lower reduced personal accomplishments than males. Li (2016) observed that female EFL teachers demonstrate more severe emotional exhaustion than males. However, in this study, there are no significant gender-based differences in burnout levels among Chinese male and female EFL teachers.

In the PsyCap dimension, there is no significant gender difference in hope, optimism, or overall PsyCap level among male and female teachers. However, male teachers exhibit significantly higher self-efficacy compared to their female counterparts. The findings were partly different from those previous studies (Han & Li, 2019; Li et al., 2015), in which the level of psychological capital of female teachers is significantly lower than that of male teachers in various colleges in China.

#### 5.2.2 School Types-Based Variations in Stress, Burnout, and PsyCap

Teachers in private schools show higher levels of workload, interpersonal conflict, and average stress. The findings align with studies such as Mercer (2023) and Richards et al. (2018). Concerning burnout, teachers in private schools report significantly higher levels of exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment compared to their public school counterparts. This finding enhanced the argument that teacher well-being is influenced by a diverse range of organizational factors (including school type and working conditions) (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018; Yun, 2016). Regarding PsyCap, teachers in private schools exhibit significantly lower hope and resilience compared to their public school counterparts, indicating potential challenges in maintaining a positive outlook and coping with adversity in the private school environment. However, consistent self-efficacy and optimism across schools suggest uniform perceptions in these components. This is different from previous studies which found that private sector employees demonstrated higher optimism scores than public sector employees, and public sector employees demonstrated higher self-efficacy scores than private sector employees (Dirzyte & Patapas, 2022; Ji et al., 2022).

### 5.3 Mediating Role of PsyCap Between Stress and Burnout

The positive correlations between job stress and burnout indicates that prolonged exposure to high job stress without sufficient resources can lead to burnout (Bakker & Costa, 2018), which was supported by previous research studies (Bottiani et al., 2019; Košir et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2022). The negative correlation between burnout and PsyCap is consistent with previous studies which found PsyCap to negatively predict depersonalization

(Peng et al., 2019; Pu et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019a).

The mediation model combines stress and PsyCap as predictors for burnout, providing insights into their direct and indirect effects. Significant mediating roles of hope and resilience in the stress-burnout relationship were observed. Their interconnectedness can be interpreted from perspectives of Job-Demands Resources theory and Conservation of Resources theory. Regarding the negative connection between stress and PsyCap, can be interpreted based on the two theories, as was argued that job stress can significantly impact teachers' PsyCap (Zhang et al., 2019b). High levels of stress may deplete psychological resources, making it more challenging for educators to maintain hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). The impact of psychological capital on teacher burnout aligns with previous studies (Asheghi et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021). According to PsyCap theory, people who score highly on self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience feel they have more control over their work environment, can better handle job demands, and are more satisfied with their jobs (Bakker et al., 2014; Estiri et al., 2016).

Educational institutions can implement interventions and support mechanisms to enhance teachers' PsyCap and mitigate the impacts of job stress and burnout. This may include providing professional development in stress management, offering mentorship programs, and creating a supportive work environment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

## 6. Conclusion

Chinese college EFL teachers were identified as experiencing moderately high overall levels of stress and burnout. In contrast, PsyCap exhibited a comparatively lower level. Male teachers experience significantly higher stress, particularly related to workload, role ambiguity, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict, compared to their female counterparts. The exploration of school type-based variations underscores the impact of organizational context on teacher well-being. Teachers in private schools face significantly higher workload-related stress, stress from interpersonal conflict, and elevated burnout levels compared to their public school counterparts. Additionally, private school teachers report lower hope and resilience, contributing to lower overall PsyCap levels. Intricate relationships among job stress, burnout, and PsyCap were identified in Chinese EFL teachers. The analysis reveals robust correlations, indicating a positive association between job stress and burnout, coupled with negative correlations between both stress and burnout with PsyCap. The mediation analysis unveils the mediating role of PsyCap, particularly through pathways involving hope and resilience. While these dimensions contribute significantly to mitigating the impact of stress on burnout, self-efficacy and optimism do not show significant mediation effects.

These findings offer actionable insights for educational stakeholders seeking to improve teacher well-being. Targeted interventions that focus on enhancing PsyCap, particularly through fostering hope and resilience, can prove effective in mitigating the detrimental effects of job stress and burnout. Recognizing the nuanced impact of stress on different dimensions of burnout emphasizes the need for diverse and tailored support strategies. Overall, this study lays the foundation for evidence-based interventions that prioritize teacher mental health and resilience in educational settings.

This study has limitations that need acknowledgment. Due to space constraints, this study did not investigate the intricate connections within each major dimension, such as how time pressure contributes to job burnout. Additionally, while the study examined gender and school types as factors influencing stress, burnout, and PsyCap, it did not explore the interactive effects between gender and school types. Future studies are recommended to delve into these areas.

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### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the teachers involved in this research for providing valuable data and insights. I am also thankful to my colleagues for their assistance and support throughout this study. Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Dapat, for his invaluable guidance, support, and encouragement, which have been instrumental in shaping this work.

### **Authors contributions**

Dr. Sun was responsible for designing the research, developing the methodology, formulating the research questions, and collecting the data. Dr. Sun also performed the statistical analysis and visualized the results. As the corresponding author, Dr. Dapat provided resources, assisted in interpreting the results, and contributed to editing and revising the manuscript. Both Dr. Sun and Dr. Dapat made significant contributions to the discussion and provided critical insights throughout the study.

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript. There are no special agreements concerning authorship, and both authors contributed equally to this research.

### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### **Informed consent**

Obtained.

### **Ethics approval**

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

### **Provenance and peer review**

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

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