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The Influence of Special Education Teachers' Beliefs on Occupational Well-being--The Chain Mediation Effect of Emotional Intelligence and Work Engagement

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Abstract

In this study, 145 special education teachers from 11 special education schools were investigated using the "Assessment of Implicit Theories", "Special Education Teachers' Occupational Wellbeing Questionnaire", "The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale", and "Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)" questionnaires. Through this study, there were significant positive correlations between special education teachers' beliefs, work engagement, emotional intelligence, and occupational well-being, with the highest correlations between teachers' occupational well-being and work engagement and emotional intelligence, respectively. The mediating effect of special education teachers' emotional intelligence between special education teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being was established; the chain mediating effect of emotional intelligence and work engagement between special education teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being was established.

Keywords: *Special education teacher, Teacher beliefs, Occupational well-being*

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1. Introduction

Special education is an integral component of the national education system, playing an indispensable role in safeguarding social equity and justice and promoting the construction of a harmonious society. Special education teachers, as key implementers, bear the important mission of facilitating the holistic development of children with special needs (Zhang, 2015). With the continuous advancement of special education in China, the enrollment rate of children with special needs has been increasing, and the number of special education schools as well as the size of the teaching workforce have also grown.

Compared to teachers in general education, special education teachers face more complexity and challenges in their work (Shen, 2004). They are not only imparters of knowledge but also often assume multiple roles, such as providing daytime care, life skills training, and rehabilitation exercises. They may even offer "in-home educational services" for students who cannot attend school (Zhao, 2020). Furthermore, due to the unique nature of their students and the complexity of the teaching process, special education teachers are more prone to experiencing frustration and may encounter misunderstandings and lack of support from parents. These heavy workloads and significant stressors can

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easily lead to professional burnout, a perceived mismatch between effort and reward, reduced job engagement and professional well-being, and ultimately negatively impact the quality of education and the healthy development of children with special needs. Therefore, focusing on and enhancing the professional well-being of special education teachers has become an urgent practical issue.

In recent years, the field of teacher research has gradually shifted from focusing on external behaviors to exploring internal psychological attributes. Teacher beliefs, as a core internal cognitive framework, act like a “filter” profoundly influencing teachers’ behavioral practices and worldviews (Dong and Dong, 2021). Field research in this study found that teachers with different beliefs exhibit distinct behaviors: some teachers believe that the abilities of children with special needs are fixed, leading to low teaching motivation; while others believe in the malleability of these abilities, willing to invest more effort and deriving a sense of achievement and happiness from their work. Such differences in perspectives undoubtedly have a profound impact on teachers’ instructional behaviors, emotional states, and mental health.

Based on this, this study aims to explore the mechanism through which special education teachers’ beliefs influence their professional well-being in the Chinese context, with a specific focus on the chain mediating role of emotional intelligence and job engagement. By conducting an in-depth analysis of this “internal motivation–psychological resources–behavioral performance–well-being experience” pathway, this research seeks to provide empirical evidence and practical insights for enhancing the psychological health and professional development of special education teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Definitions

2.1.1. Teacher Beliefs

Dweck (1986) first introduced the concept of *implicit theories of ability*, referring to an individual’s assumptions about whether ability is malleable or fixed. Teachers who hold an *entity belief* (or fixed mindset) consider personal ability to be static, non-expandable, and difficult to change. In contrast, those who hold an *incremental belief* (or growth mindset) believe that personal ability is malleable and can be developed through education and teaching. Jordan and Lindsay (1997) conceptualized teacher beliefs as a continuum ranging from *pathognomonic belief* to *interventionist belief*, based on teachers’ perspectives regarding student disabilities. At one end of the continuum lies the *pathognomonic* view, where teachers perceive disabilities and disorders as inherent to the individual. They believe that the required support often lies outside the classroom—such as in hospitals or rehabilitation centers—and cannot be addressed through educational means. At the opposite end is the *interventionist* perspective, where teachers attribute students’ difficulties to the interaction between the student and their environment. They maintain that with appropriate instruction, students with disabilities can benefit from teaching in general education classrooms. This view aligns with the implicit theories of ability proposed by Dweck (1986, 2006). In this study, teacher beliefs are defined based on the frameworks established by Dweck and Jordan, specifically referring to special education teachers’ beliefs about students’ abilities. This constitutes a continuum from entity beliefs to incremental beliefs. At one end is the entity belief, which posits that student ability is fixed and unchangeable, and that disability is the primary factor limiting student development. At the other end is the incremental orientation: teachers with a growth mindset believe in the malleability of student ability and firmly hold that every student can succeed. Compared to teachers with a fixed mindset, they are less likely to make negative stereotypical judgments about students’ capabilities (Yang, 2019).

2.1.2. Occupational Well-being

There is no consensus in academia regarding the definition of occupational well-being. Ryff (1989) analyzed well-being models across different branches of psychology and proposed a six-dimensional model of psychological well-being, which includes the following factors: self-acceptance, environmental mastery, autonomy, positive relations with others, personal growth, and purpose in life. In contrast, Warr (1987, 1994) focused on well-being in specific contexts (i.e., at work) and distinguished between four primary dimensions (affective well-being, aspiration, autonomy, and competence) and a secondary fifth dimension (“integrated functioning”) that encompasses the four primary dimensions and reflects the individual’s overall state. Building on the work of Ryff and Warr, Van Horn *et al.* (2004) integrated the two models and proposed that occupational well-being refers to an individual’s positive evaluation of various aspects of their work, including five dimensions: affective, motivational, behavioral, cognitive, and physical well-being. This study adopts the

definition of occupational well-being proposed by Van Horn *et al.* (2004), and subsequent measurements will involve investigating and analyzing these five dimensions.

2.1.3. Work Engagement

The concept of work engagement was first introduced in the literature by Kahn (1990), who used role theory and qualitative research to define engagement as a state of active, energetic participation in work roles, in which individuals freely express their thoughts and feelings. He argued that through such personal engagement, people can become authentic, compassionate, interesting, and creative in their work. Subsequently, Schaufeli *et al.* (2002) developed the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, enabling the widespread use of quantitative methods to measure work engagement. This study tends to adopt the concept proposed by Schaufeli, defining teachers' work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor is manifested as high energy levels and mental resilience during work; dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge; absorption is defined as being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, often accompanied by a sense that time passes quickly (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010).

2.1.4. Emotional Intelligence

The origins of emotional intelligence can be traced back to the concept of social intelligence proposed by Thorndike (1920), who defined it as "the ability to understand and act wisely in human relationships involving men, women, boys, and girls." Another early researcher who contributed to the development of emotional intelligence was Wechsler (1943). He suggested that personality traits, intelligence, and other non-intellectual factors influence intellectual functioning, with these non-intellectual factors encompassing concepts similar to emotional intelligence, which he regarded as crucial for success in life. Gardner (1993) further advanced this discourse through his theory of multiple intelligences, in which the concepts of interpersonal intelligence and intrapersonal intelligence laid the groundwork for the initial structure of emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer (1990) formally introduced the term "emotional intelligence," defining it as "a subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." This study adopts Mayer and Salovey's (1997) definition of emotional intelligence as a set of interrelated skills encompassing: (1) The ability to accurately perceive, appraise, and express emotion; (2) The ability to access and generate feelings to facilitate thought; (3) The ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; (4) And the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

2.2. Prior Research and Hypothesis Development

2.2.1. Teachers' Beliefs and Occupational Well-being

Regarding the relationship between teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being, Zeng *et al.* (2016) demonstrated a similarly positive correlation between incremental beliefs and well-being, noting that different beliefs lead individuals to perceive situations differently: "incremental beliefs foster resilience, whereas entity beliefs do not." Vermeulen *et al.* (2012) found through surveys that teachers' evaluation of whether students possess developmental potential primarily depends on students' problematic behaviors. Teachers tend to exhibit positive attitudes toward students without disruptive behaviors but display negative attitudes toward those with disruptive behaviors that interfere with teaching. Anat Shoshani (2021) evaluated an intervention program designed to enhance mathematics teachers' incremental beliefs, aiming to foster their sense of teaching efficacy as well as students' mathematical motivation and achievement. The study revealed that teachers' incremental beliefs were positively correlated with their occupational well-being. Previous research has also indicated that a growth mindset among teachers can enhance their sense of efficacy, occupational well-being, and professional growth. Based on these findings, this study proposes Hypothesis H1: Special education teachers' beliefs can significantly and positively predict their occupational well-being.

2.2.2. The Mediating Role of Emotional Intelligence in Teacher Beliefs and Occupational Well-being

The relationship between beliefs and emotions is well-supported in the literature. Studies by Burnette *et al.* (2013) and Carver *et al.* (1990) suggest that individuals with incremental beliefs are more likely to experience positive emotions, such as joy and excitement, as they are less affected by failures and more likely to recognize their progress toward goals. On the other hand, research by King (2012, 2016) and Dela Rosa (2019) found that learners who endorse entity beliefs are more prone to experience negative emotions, including anger, anxiety, shame, and hopelessness. Nalipay (2019) also

demonstrated in their study that teachers' incremental beliefs predict teaching satisfaction through the mediating role of teacher emotions. Regarding the relationship between emotional intelligence and occupational well-being, although progress has been made in research on teacher emotions, few studies have directly linked teacher emotions to teacher well-being (Frenzel, 2016; Taxer and Frenzel, 2015). Puertas Molero *et al.* (2019) stated that teachers' emotional intelligence is a critical characteristic in educational environments, enabling them to enhance their well-being, which in turn improves teaching methods. They argued that teachers' emotional intelligence enhances their ability to regulate emotions, strengthens decision-making in teaching contexts, and ultimately improves learners' academic performance. Additionally, Ngui and Lay (2020) found that, as a construct within positive psychology, teachers' emotional intelligence significantly predicts their resilience. Based on these findings, this study proposes Hypothesis H2: Special education teachers' beliefs can influence their occupational well-being through the mediating role of emotional intelligence.

2.2.3. *The Mediating Role of Work Engagement in Teacher Beliefs and Occupational Well-being*

Research on how teachers' beliefs influence their work engagement in educational settings remains limited. Aronson *et al.* (2002) demonstrated that shifting students from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset positively impacted their academic engagement. Students with a growth mindset interpreted academic challenges as opportunities to enhance their abilities and improve learning skills, thereby fostering resilience and academic engagement. Theoretically, Blackwell *et al.* (2007) argued that an incremental theory of intelligence leads to positive effort, beliefs, and learning goals, which in turn enhance engagement. Zeng *et al.* (2019), in a study conducted within the Chinese context, revealed that teachers' growth mindset, well-being, and resilience strongly predicted work engagement. They found that well-being and perseverance mediated the correlation between work engagement and incremental beliefs. Regarding the relationship between work engagement and occupational well-being, studies by Shimazu and Schaufeli (2009) and Shimazu (2012) indicated a positive correlation between well-being and work engagement, suggesting a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Research by Schaufeli (2012) and Shuck and Reio (2014) demonstrated that work engagement contributes to well-being, while Upadaya and Salmela-Aro (2013) proposed that well-being can also promote work engagement. Studies by Kim (2013) and Lei (2018) consistently identified work engagement as a critical factor for success in both professional and academic environments, also highlighting its association with various significant teacher outcomes. Based on these findings, this study proposes Hypothesis H3: Special education teachers' beliefs can influence their occupational well-being through the mediating role of work engagement.

2.2.4. *Emotional Intelligence and Work Engagement as a chain mediating pathway*

On emotional intelligence and work engagement, Puertas Molero *et al.* (2019) suggested that due to the close relationship between emotional intelligence and several mental health components, emotional intelligence has the potential to predict work engagement. Herman (2013) proposed in their study that emotional intelligence includes awareness and regulatory components, which are crucial for maintaining positive emotional states. Lamberti (2010) found that work engagement and emotional intelligence are among the six key drivers of organizational energy. Several studies have explored the relationship between learners' emotional intelligence and academic engagement. Martín *et al.* (2021) identified significant correlations between the three components of learning engagement (vigor, dedication, and absorption) and emotional intelligence among secondary school students. They argued that learners' emotional intelligence fosters an optimistic attitude toward learning and educational environments, noting that learners who can appropriately regulate their emotions are motivated to actively participate in academic activities. Zhoc *et al.* (2020) also investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and various types of engagement among university students, demonstrating that emotional intelligence is significantly correlated with learners' social, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Regarding teachers' work engagement, Mérida-López *et al.* (2017) examined the impact of emotional intelligence and stress on teachers' work engagement. They suggested that developing emotional intelligence can reduce stress caused by ambiguous information in teaching environments, thereby enhancing teachers' work engagement. Yang (2022) confirming a positive correlation between teachers' emotional intelligence and work engagement. Based on these findings, this study proposes Hypothesis H_4 : Special education teachers' beliefs can influence their occupational well-being through the chain mediating path of emotional intelligence and work engagement.

3. Method

3.1. *Participants and procedures*

A network questionnaire was used to survey teachers from a total of 11 special education schools in Chongqing and Sichuan Province, and 162 questionnaires were collected. Among them, since there are 20-30 full-time teachers in the

schools surveyed, all participants were required to obtain written informed consent, and this study adhered to the principle of voluntary participation, so some teachers did not complete the questionnaire. In addition, when screening invalid questionnaires, the author eliminated questionnaires with regular answers and those with answering times of less than 180 seconds to ensure the validity of the questionnaires. After screening, this study obtained a total of 145 valid questionnaires and eliminated 17 invalid questionnaires, with an effective questionnaire rate of 89.51%. Among them, 23 were male (15.9%) and 122 were female (84.1%); 73 teachers were 25 years old and below (50.4%), 47 teachers were 26-30 years old (32.4%), and 25 teachers were 31 years old and above (17.2%); 117 had a special education professional background (80.7%), and 28 had a non-special education professional background (19.3%); 113 were tenured staff (19.3%), and 32 were non-tenured staff (22.1%).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Teachers' Beliefs

The Implicit Theories of Intelligence Scale developed by Dweck and Henderson (1988) was selected and adapted to form the *Teacher Beliefs Scale*, consisting of 6 items. A 6-point Likert scale was used for scoring. Higher scores indicate that teachers are more inclined towards a developmental belief orientation, i.e., they believe that the abilities of special needs children can be developed. Although the questionnaire is designed to measure participants' implicit theories of intelligence, the theoretical basis behind it is very close to the concept of teacher beliefs in this study, and the items are concise. Therefore, this study made certain adaptations based on this scale. The original item "You have a certain amount of intelligence, but you can't really change it" was adapted to "The ability level of special needs children is fixed and cannot be easily changed"; the original item "Your intelligence is an ability that is unlikely to change" was adapted to "I believe that the ability of special needs children is an ability that is unlikely to change"; and the original item "You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence" was adapted to "Special needs children can learn new knowledge, but they cannot really improve their abilities". The Cronbach's α coefficient of the adapted scale was 0.894.

3.2.2. Occupational Well-being

The Teacher Occupational Well-being Questionnaire for Special Education compiled by the Chinese scholar Wang (2017) was used, totaling 25 items, using a 1-5 scale, with higher scores indicating higher occupational well-being. The questionnaire includes five dimensions: emotional well-being, professional well-being, interpersonal harmony, physical and mental well-being, and environmental satisfaction. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficients for the five dimensions were 0.885 (emotional well-being), 0.9 (professional well-being), 0.808 (interpersonal harmony), 0.864 (physical and mental well-being), and 0.526 (environmental satisfaction), and the Cronbach's α coefficient for the occupational well-being questionnaire was 0.900.

3.2.3. Work Engagement

The Chinese version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, adapted from Schaufeli's *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* by domestic scholars Zhang and Gan (2005), is used, consisting of a total of 15 items, using a 1-5 rating scale. This scale includes three dimensions: "vigor," "dedication," and "focus," containing 6, 4, and 5 items respectively after initial testing and screening. In this study, the Cronbach's α coefficients for the three dimensions are 0.874 (vigor), 0.769 (dedication), and 0.768 (focus), and the Cronbach's α coefficient for the work engagement questionnaire is 0.924.

3.2.4. Emotional Intelligence

This scale was developed by Hong Kong scholars Wong and Law (2002). It contains 16 items and uses a 7-point Likert scale. The scale can be divided into four dimensions: self-emotion appraisal, other's emotion appraisal, emotion utilization, and emotion regulation. In this study, the internal consistency coefficients for the four dimensions were 0.889 (self-emotion appraisal), 0.896 (other's emotion appraisal), 0.853 (emotion utilization), and 0.938 (emotion regulation), and the Cronbach's α coefficient for the emotional intelligence scale was 0.918.

3.3. Analytic Strategies

The data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. The software was used for descriptive statistical analysis and independent samples t-tests to examine the differences in special education teachers' beliefs, work engagement, emotional intelligence,

and occupational well-being with respect to demographic variables. Regression analysis and mediation effect tests were employed to investigate the regression relationships and mediation effects among the variables. Harman's single-factor variance test was used (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The results showed that there were 13 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the variance explained by the first factor was 29.219%, which is well below the critical threshold of 40%. Therefore, common method bias is not a severe issue in this study.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

After analyzing the samples, special education teachers of different genders showed significant differences in vigor ($t=2.402$, $p<0.05$), dedication ($t=2.944$, $p<0.01$), and work engagement ($t=2.316$, $p<0.05$). Significant differences exist in vigor ($t=3.096$, $p<0.05$) and work engagement ($t=3.269$, $p<0.05$) across different age groups. Whether or not one has a special education background shows significant differences in vigor ($t=-2.596$, $p<0.05$), dedication ($t=-3.527$, $p<0.01$), dedication ($t=-3.113$, $p<0.01$), work engagement ($t=-3.361$, $p<0.01$), and environmental satisfaction ($t=-2.246$, $p<0.05$). Whether or not special education teachers have tenure shows a significant difference in environmental satisfaction ($t=-2.025$, $p<0.05$). Teacher beliefs, work engagement, emotional intelligence, and occupational well-being are significantly and positively correlated with each other (Table 1). Special education teacher beliefs and occupational well-being are significantly and positively correlated; special education teacher beliefs and emotional intelligence are significantly and positively correlated; special education teacher beliefs and work engagement are significantly and positively correlated; special education teacher emotional intelligence and work engagement are significantly and positively correlated; special education teacher emotional intelligence and occupational well-being are significantly and positively correlated; special education teacher work engagement and occupational well-being are significantly and positively correlated; among them, the correlation between teacher occupational well-being and work engagement is the highest.

4.2. Mediation Analysis

As indicated by correlation analysis, there are significant correlations between special education teachers' beliefs, emotional intelligence, work engagement, and occupational well-being, which meets the statistical requirements for further analysis of the mediating effects of emotional intelligence and work engagement (Wen and Ye, 2014). After controlling for gender, major, and employment status, with teacher beliefs as the independent variable (X), occupational well-being as the dependent variable (Y), and emotional intelligence (M1) and work engagement (M2) as mediating variables, a chain mediation effect analysis was conducted using Model 6 in the PROCESS3.3 program developed by Hayes (2015). Bootstrap resampling was performed 5000 times, and the specific test results are shown in Table 2.

The regression analysis results show that the total effect of special education teachers' beliefs on their occupational well-being is significant ($\beta=0.261$, $P<0.001$). Secondly, after including teachers' beliefs, work engagement, and emotional intelligence in the regression equation, special education teachers' beliefs not only directly and significantly positively predict their occupational well-being ($\beta=0.157$, $P<0.01$), but also significantly and positively predict their emotional intelligence ($\beta=0.208$, $P<0.01$). However, the predictive effect on work engagement is not significant ($\beta=0.09$, $P>0.05$); emotional intelligence directly and positively predicts special education teachers' work engagement ($\beta=0.379$, $P<0.001$); emotional intelligence and work engagement have significant positive predictive effects on special education teachers' occupational well-being ($\beta=0.136$, $P<0.01$; $\beta=0.448$, $P<0.001$).

The results of the mediation effect analysis (see Table 3) show that the total mediation effect value is 0.104 (accounting for 39.87% of the total effect). The Bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the mediation effect of emotional intelligence does not include 0, and the Bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the mediation effect of work engagement includes 0, indicating that emotional intelligence plays a significant mediating role between teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being, while the mediation effect of work engagement between teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being is not established. Specifically, the mediating effects of emotional intelligence and work engagement consist of indirect effects generated by the following two paths: the indirect effect 1 formed through the path of teacher belief \rightarrow emotional intelligence \rightarrow occupational well-being (effect value 0.028); the indirect effect 2 formed through the path of teacher belief \rightarrow emotional intelligence \rightarrow work engagement \rightarrow occupational well-being (effect value 0.035). The percentages of the above two indirect effects in the total effect are 10.84% and 13.56%, respectively. Selecting the indirect effect comparison option in Model 6 to compare whether there are significant differences in the indirect effects of different paths pairwise, the data show that the Bootstrap 95% confidence intervals for the differences between the above three indirect effects all include 0. Therefore, there are no significant differences between any two of them.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis Among Special Education Teachers' Beliefs, Work Engagement, Emotional Intelligence, and Occupational Well-Being

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. TB	1														
2. Vigor	0.178*	1													
3. Dedication	0.291**	0.755**	1												
4. Focus	0.133	0.819**	0.667**	1											
5. WE	0.216**	0.946**	0.876**	0.912**	1										
6. Self-Emotion	0.272**	0.122	0.165*	0.01	0.107	1									
7. Other's Emotion	0.179*	0.293**	0.212*	0.280**	0.289**	.471**	1								
8. Emotion Utilization	0.198*	0.534**	0.465**	0.430**	0.523**	.399**	.474**	1							
9. Emotion Regulation	0.152	0.550**	0.450**	0.461**	0.536**	.364**	.408**	.586**	1						
10. EI	0.257**	0.506**	0.434**	0.400**	0.491**	.708**	.749**	.807**	.799**	1					
11. Emotional	0.383**	0.564**	0.647**	0.509**	0.625**	.255**	.332**	.442**	.403**	.471**	1				
12. Professional	0.438**	0.523**	0.627**	0.452**	.581**	.226**	.317**	.501**	.368**	.464**	.771**	1			
13. Inter-personal	0.337**	0.583**	0.616**	0.420**	.589**	.283**	.338**	.475**	.467**	.516**	.581**	.680**	1		
14. Physical-mental	0.420**	0.344**	0.276**	0.144	.280**	.213*	0.13	0.133	.185*	.216**	.357**	.327**	.409**	1	
15. Environmental	-0.046	0.323**	0.378**	0.267**	.351**	0.012	0.132	.294**	.214**	.219**	.251**	.334**	.360**	-0.06	1
16. OW	0.435**	0.647**	0.699**	0.492**	.669**	.278**	.344**	.502**	.450**	.519**	.824**	.852**	.832**	.600**	.496**

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. ES= employment status, TB= teachers' beliefs, EI= emotional intelligence, WE= work engagement, OW= occupational well-being.

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Variable Relationships in the Chain Mediation Model

	OW			EI			WE			OW		
	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t	β	SE	t
Gender	0.060	0.105	0.566	-0.036	0.160	-0.223	-0.242	0.117	-2.072*	0.179	0.079	2.258*
Major	0.228	0.098	2.326*	0.113	0.149	0.762	0.362	0.109	3.325**	0.031	0.076	0.413
ES	0.053	0.093	0.569	0.114	0.140	0.811	0.043	0.103	0.415	-0.001	0.069	-0.018
TB	0.261	0.044	5.879***	0.208	0.067	3.093**	0.090	0.051	1.774	0.157	0.034	4.566***
EI							0.379	0.062	6.138***	0.136	0.047	2.923**
WE										0.448	0.057	7.901***
R ²	0.223	0.076	0.338	0.580								
F	10.017***	2.871*	14.222***	31.731***								

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001. ES= employment status, TB= teachers' beliefs, EI= emotional intelligence, WE = work engagement, OW= occupational well-being.

Table 3: Test of Chain Mediation Effect					
	Effect Value	BootSE	95%CI		Effect Proportion
			BootLLCI	BootULCI	
Total Effect	0.261	0.044	0.173	0.349	100.00%
Direct Effect	0.157	0.034	0.089	0.225	60.13%
Total Indirect Effect	0.104	0.033	0.044	0.173	39.87%
Ind1: TB→EI→OW	0.028	0.013	0.006	0.058	10.84%
Ind2: TB→WE→OW	0.040	0.024	-0.003	0.090	
Ind3: TB→EI→WE→OW	0.035	0.016	0.009	0.071	13.56%
C1: Ind1-Ind2	-0.024	0.053	-0.133	0.074	
C2: Ind1-Ind3	-0.014	0.029	-0.083	0.036	
C3: Ind2-Ind3	0.010	0.057	-0.104	0.121	

Note: TB= teachers' beliefs, EI= emotional intelligence, WE= work engagement, OW= occupational well-being.

5. Discussion

Data analysis reveals that, firstly, the mediating effect of work engagement between special education teachers' beliefs and their professional well-being is not established, thus hypothesis H1 is not supported. The main reason is that special education teachers' beliefs cannot significantly predict their work engagement, leading to the failure of the mediating effect. This indicates that special education teachers' beliefs about students cannot influence their professional well-being through work engagement. This may be because the antecedent variables of work engagement are mainly focused on meaning, security, and sense of achievement, while the special education teachers' beliefs in this study are mainly an evaluation of students' abilities. Although this evaluation may affect teachers' teaching behavior, this influence may primarily be on the teaching strategies adopted, and may not affect their enthusiasm, engagement, and other aspects of their work (Hu and Wang, 2014). The research by Zeng *et al.* (2019) mainly focuses on teachers' own beliefs, and this evaluation of their own abilities is more likely to affect their vigor, focus, and dedication at work. In addition, it may also be because special education teachers' work engagement is affected by many factors, and their burnout is not solely caused by students, but rather by a lack of a sense of achievement and satisfaction in their work, and a failure to find their value and meaning in their work, which leads to a series of burnout issues. Therefore, special education teachers' beliefs about students may have an impact on work engagement, but cannot directly influence work engagement.

Second, the mediating effect of emotional intelligence between special education teachers' beliefs and their occupational well-being is established, and hypothesis H₂ holds. This indicates that special education teachers' beliefs about students can influence their occupational well-being through emotional intelligence. That is, the more developmental special education teachers' beliefs are, the more likely they are to experience positive emotions and express and regulate emotions in a reasonable way, making them less susceptible to failure and negative emotions, thus leading to higher emotional intelligence and, consequently, an increase in the sense of well-being experienced in their profession. In the field of positive psychology, according to Fredrickson's (2005) broaden-and-build theory, people with high emotional intelligence are more likely to experience positive emotions. Positive emotions broaden attention to the surroundings and establish more open and flexible information resources, making it easier to discover the positive meaning behind events and generate positive evaluations, thereby increasing a person's well-being; while negative emotions narrow attention and weaken a person's ability to cultivate resources, thereby reducing a person's well-being. When special education teachers have a high level of teacher beliefs, they are able to understand, actively participate in, and regulate negative emotions related to teaching practices (such as daily teacher-student interactions, student behavior, and outcomes) or teacher roles (interactions with students, parents, and relationships with colleagues), and their occupational well-being will be greatly improved.

Third, the chain mediation effect of emotional intelligence and work engagement between special education teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being is established, and hypothesis H_3 holds. This indicates that special education teachers' beliefs not only directly impact their occupational well-being, but also indirectly influence it by affecting teachers' emotional intelligence, which in turn affects their work engagement, ultimately impacting their occupational well-being. Special education teachers' beliefs, as an internal source of positive psychology, can be activated as an upward spiral, because positive beliefs predict an increase in positive emotions, leading to a continuous rise in work engagement and well-being. According to information obtained from interviews, teachers who hold a developmental tendency in their beliefs about students tend to exhibit a more open and inclusive mindset in their work, and are better at perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions. This, to some extent, can effectively help teachers alleviate stress or unexpected situations in teaching, gain positive experiences, and thereby increase their enthusiasm for participating in work. As work engagement continuously increases, the perceived occupational well-being also becomes higher, thus forming an internal mechanism for enhancing teachers' occupational well-being.

Based on this, to enhance the occupational well-being of special education teachers, it is first necessary to cultivate teachers' developmental beliefs and enhance their spiritual qualities. At the level of the social environment, build a "barrier-free" social environment, that is, change the stereotype of special groups through media publicity, public opinion guidance, etc.; from the level of the living environment, provide various social supports to enable special education teachers to experience the reality and possibility of the development of special students; from the level of the school environment, through various levels and types of teacher training, teachers realize that students' abilities can be improved through effective teaching strategies and teaching methods. Secondly, create a good working environment and enhance teachers' work engagement. By creating a good organizational atmosphere, provide special education teachers with a warm and harmonious interpersonal environment; adopt effective incentive mechanisms to provide special education teachers with a positive and upward working competitive environment; provide rich learning platforms to provide special education teachers with the self-improvement environment needed for development. Finally, pay attention to teachers' mental health and explore potential emotional regulation abilities. In the pre-service stage, attention should be paid to the cultivation and development of emotional intelligence of normal students; in the process of teacher training, we should actively pay attention to the mental health development of special education teachers, pay attention to the cultivation of emotional intelligence in teacher training, and at the same time pay attention to the combination of various training contents to jointly promote the improvement of emotional intelligence of special education teachers; after the training, special education teachers themselves should have a certain ability of introspection and emotional regulation, and be able to seek appropriate ways to release and relieve pressure.

This study has some limitations. First, the research sample is limited to a specific province, and future studies could expand the geographic scope of the sample to enhance the universality and representativeness of the research results. Second, this study employed a cross-sectional design, which makes it difficult to infer causal or temporal relationships between variables based on the research results. It is recommended that future research consider other methods, such as experimental or longitudinal designs, to confirm and add more evidence to the findings of the current study. Finally, all data are based on teachers' self-assessments, which may lead to common data bias issues. In future research, this bias can be avoided by using multiple assessment methods.

6. Conclusion

The results revealed no significant differences in special education teachers' beliefs across demographic variables; there were no significant differences in occupational well-being based on gender or age, but significant differences existed based on professional background and employment status; emotional intelligence showed significant differences based on educational level, but no significant differences across other variables; work engagement showed significant differences based on gender, age, and professional background, with no differences only in "employment status". There were significant positive correlations between special education teachers' beliefs, work engagement, emotional intelligence, and occupational well-being, with the highest correlations between teachers' occupational well-being and work engagement and emotional intelligence, respectively. The mediating effect of special education teachers' emotional intelligence between special education teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being was established; the chain mediating effect of emotional intelligence and work engagement between special education teachers' beliefs and occupational well-being was established.

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