Social Support, Work–Family Conflict, and Well-being Among Vocational School Teachers: Differential Effects by Gender and Career Stage

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Abstract

Vocational education contexts present occupational demands distinct from general education settings, requiring educators to integrate theoretical instruction with practical skill development, manage technical equipment and safety protocols, and facilitate industry-education partnerships. This complex environment contributes to substantial workloads, role ambiguity, and competing professional and family demands. Drawing on social support theory and occupational well-being perspectives, this study theorized that workplace social support buffers the detrimental effects of work–family conflict (WFC) on vocational teachers' well-being. Three central propositions guided the investigation: collegial, principal, and supervisory support would positively predict job and life satisfaction; WFC would negatively predict both outcomes; and social support would attenuate WFC's adverse effects. Survey data were collected from 518 vocational school teachers across northeastern Thailand. Separate hierarchical multiple regression models were estimated for each dependent variable, examining the sequential contribution of demographic variables, social support dimensions, WFC, and their interaction terms. ANOVA examined differential effects across gender and career stage. Workplace social support explained substantial variance in both outcomes, with collegial support emerging as the strongest predictor. WFC demonstrated robust negative associations with well-being indicators. Male teachers reported significantly higher WFC than female colleagues, and early-career teachers experienced elevated WFC alongside diminished well-being compared with experienced instructors. These findings identify peer networks as protective factors and work–family strain as a critical vulnerability, particularly for male and early-career vocational educators. Targeted interventions addressing gender-specific work–family pressures are essential for enhancing retention and well-being in vocational settings.

Keywords: social support, work–family conflict, teacher well-being, vocational education, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, Thailand

Introduction

Teacher well-being matters. Across the world, educators who feel unsupported, overworked, or undervalued are leaving the profession at alarming rates and the students they leave behind pay the price. Most of the research on this crisis has focused on general school teachers, quietly overlooking a group that faces some of the bad working conditions in education: vocational school teachers. These are the instructors standing in workshops and laboratories, not just teaching from textbooks but keeping machinery running safely, staying current with new technology industry standards, and personally building the bridges between their schools and local employers so their students actually get hired after graduation (Billett, 2011; Nylund et al., 2020). Low administrative support, heavy workloads, and the persistent social stigma that vocational work is somehow "less than" academic education all chip away at their sense of professional worth and their willingness to stay in the job (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). What makes this particularly concerning is how little attention it receives. While general education teachers have been studied extensively, vocational educators remain largely invisible in the well-being literature a gap this study sets out to address.

In the Thai context, this challenge is particularly acute. The Office of the Vocational Education Commission (OVEC) oversees vocational education across approximately 429 public and 484 private colleges, serving nearly one million vocational students across nine major fields of study, including industry, commerce and business administration, fine and applied arts, home economics, agriculture, fisheries, tourism and hospitality, textiles, and ICT (Equitable Education Fund [EEF], 2023). Despite this scale, studies have identified persistent problems in both public and private vocational colleges, including poor quality and inexperienced teachers, out-of-date curricula that are mostly not competency-based, and obsolete equipment (Chalamwong, 2019). The system is further strained by a critical national skills gap: the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) Development Plan under Thailand 4.0 estimated the need for 173,705 people with vocational qualifications, yet the country remained 55,642 workers or 32% short of that target (Chalamwong, 2019). This deficit places enormous pressure on frontline vocational educators to compensate for systemic shortfalls through intensified individual effort.

Behind the policy reports and workforce statistics, there are real people struggling. Thai teachers are not just overworked many are financially stretched to a breaking point, with individual debt reportedly reaching as high as three million baht, and salaries that lag well behind what teachers earn in neighboring countries like Malaysia or Singapore. It is hard to show up fully for students when you are worried about paying your own bills. And the psychological toll runs deep. Research on Thai school teachers has found that burnout, depression, anxiety, and stress are shaped not just by what happens in the classroom things like class size but also by how secure teachers feel at home financially and how supported they feel in their personal relationships (Ratanasiripong et al., 2022). In other words, the pressures of life outside school walls do not stay outside. They follow teachers in. Among university-level educators, the picture is equally concerning: a recent study found that Thai higher education teachers reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, detachment from their work, and a reduced sense of personal achievement, alongside heavy workloads and poor sleep (Pakdee et al. (2025). Perhaps most troubling is where these pressures fall hardest. Teacher shortages in Thailand hit rural schools far more severely than urban ones (Pholphirul et al., 2023) and it is in those same rural and regional areas that most vocational colleges, including the northeastern institutions at the heart of this study, are located.

Here is the uncomfortable truth: Thailand has big ambitions for vocational education, but the people being asked to deliver on those ambitions are not always being looked after. The Thai vocational system has long tried to do two things at once give students solid academic foundations while also equipping them with real, hands-on industry skills (EEF, 2023). That dual mission puts enormous responsibility on teachers, who must be both credible classroom educators and up-to-date industry practitioners. And yet, despite how central teachers are to making this work, vocational education has repeatedly been deprioritized in both policy funding and public conversation. Since 2014, OVEC has rolled out wave after wave of reform pushing schools toward dual vocational training, raising English proficiency standards, integrating digital learning platforms, and more (EEF, 2023). Each of these changes, however well-intentioned, lands as yet another demand on teachers who are already stretched thin. Nobody asked them if they had the bandwidth. The honest gap in Thailand's reform agenda is this: there has been plenty of attention on what teachers should teach and how, but very little on whether teachers themselves are actually okay whether they are supported, sustainable, and planning to stay in the profession (Ratanasiripong et al., 2022; Wongsricha & Kulapichitr, 2021). That is precisely the gap this study is designed to speak to.

A central question driving this study is what protects teachers when occupational demands become excessive. Social support theory offers a well-established answer. First articulated by Cobb (1976) and extended across decades of occupational health research, the theory proposes that interpersonal resources in the workplace—from collegial relationships to supervisory guidance to principal leadership—buffer individuals against the psychological costs of chronic stress. In educational settings, this buffering effect has been documented consistently, with peer support and administrative support both emerging as significant predictors of teacher well-being and retention (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Viswesvaran et al., 1999).

What remains less understood is whether these dynamics hold in vocational education, where the occupational demands are structurally distinct. Thai vocational teachers carry formal teaching loads of 21–40 hours per week (OVEC, 2021), alongside the less visible demands of equipment maintenance, industry liaison, and technical assessment—all of which encroach significantly on personal and family time. When professional demands persistently compete with family responsibilities, work–family conflict (WFC) becomes not an occasional stressor but an embedded feature of the role. Drawing on social support theory and occupational well-being perspectives, this study examines how different sources of workplace support interact with WFC to shape vocational teachers' job satisfaction and life satisfaction in northeastern Thailand, with particular attention to whether these effects differ by gender and career stage.

This study looked at how four sources of workplace support from colleagues, principals, supervisors, and mentors work alongside work–family conflict to shape how satisfied vocational school teachers in northeastern Thailand feel about their jobs and their lives, and whether that picture looks different depending on gender or career stage. What the findings reveal is surprising in places and uncomfortable in others. For anyone responsible for teacher welfare, school policy, or the future of vocational education in Thailand, the patterns uncovered here are difficult to ignore.

Literature Review

Vocational Education as a Distinct Occupational Context

Vocational and technical education occupies a distinctive niche within national educational systems, preparing students for direct entry into skilled trades, technical professions, and semi-professional occupations. Unlike general secondary teachers, vocational educators are expected to maintain dual competencies as both pedagogical practitioners and domain experts in fields characterized by ongoing technological change (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2010). This dual mandate generates occupational demands that are qualitatively distinct from those experienced by general educators, including the management of technical laboratories and workshops, compliance with workplace health and safety regulations, supervision of student practical assessments, and the cultivation of ongoing relationships with industry partners.

Research on vocational teachers in Southeast Asian contexts has documented elevated rates of occupational burnout, role conflict, and turnover intention relative to their counterparts in general education (Chairat & Therawiwat, 2019; Wongsricha & Kulapichitr, 2021). The Thai vocational education system, administered by the Office of the Vocational Education Commission, encompasses over 400 institutions serving approximately 800,000 students, with teacher retention identified as a persistent systemic challenge (OVEC, 2021). Understanding the psychological and social determinants of vocational teacher well-being is therefore a matter of considerable policy urgency.

Social Support Theory and Occupational Well-being

The theoretical foundation of the present study draws on the stress-buffering model of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which proposes that social support attenuates the adverse effects of stressors on well-being outcomes by providing individuals with informational, emotional, and tangible resources needed to cope with challenging circumstances. In workplace contexts, this model predicts that individuals with high levels of social support will be relatively protected against the well-being consequences of occupational stressors such as WFC (Viswesvaran et al., 1999).

Empirical research has consistently identified multiple distinct sources of workplace social support that may operate independently and interactively on well-being outcomes. Collegial support—the provision of emotional encouragement, professional assistance, and social validation by workplace peers—has been identified as a particularly potent resource for educators, given the social and collaborative nature of teaching work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Principal and supervisory support, while structurally distinct, represent vertical support flows within organizational hierarchies and may influence teacher well-being through mechanisms including resource provision, performance feedback, and the modeling of organizational values (Leithwood et al., 2019). Mentored support, particularly during early career stages, has been theorized to facilitate socialization and competence development (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), though its effects on established well-being indicators remain less consistently documented.

Work–Family Conflict

Work–family conflict is defined as a form of interrole conflict in which the demands of work and family roles are mutually incompatible, such that participation in one role is made more

difficult by participation in the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). WFC has been consistently associated with reduced job satisfaction, lower life satisfaction, greater burnout, and elevated turnover intention across diverse occupational contexts (Byron, 2005; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Within education, teaching has been identified as an occupation with particularly high WFC risk, given the tendency for work demands to encroach on personal and family time through activities such as lesson preparation, marking, and administrative duties conducted outside formal working hours.

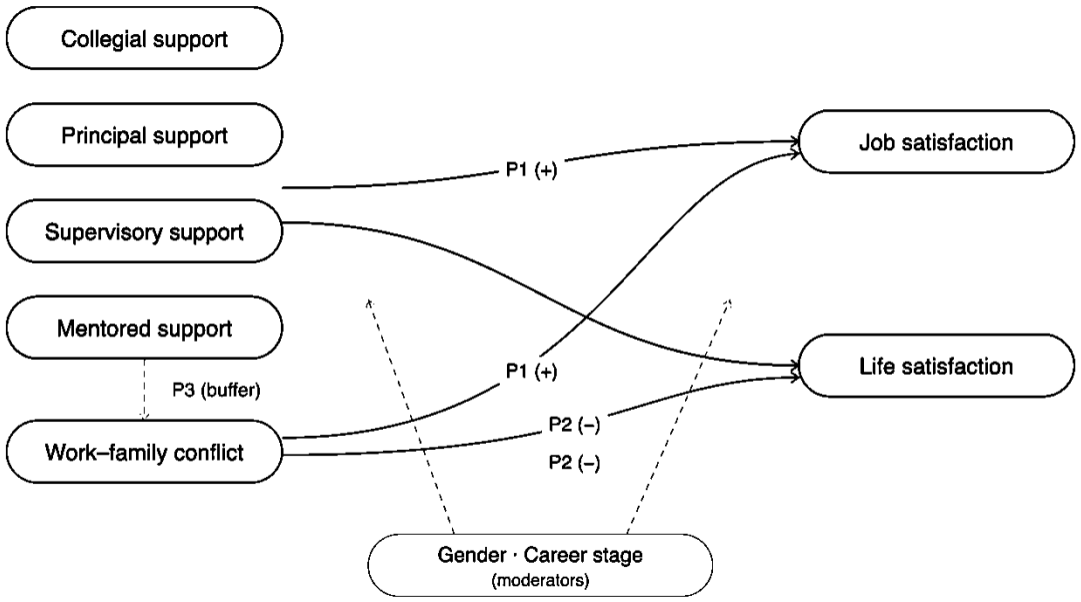
Gender differences in WFC have been a subject of ongoing theoretical debate. Traditional role theory predicts higher WFC among women due to disproportionate family responsibility assumptions; however, emerging evidence suggests that men in professional roles characterized by high time demands may experience comparable or greater WFC, particularly when societal norms construct breadwinner expectations as incompatible with active family engagement (Nohe et al., 2015). Career stage has also been theorized as a moderator of WFC, with early-career professionals disproportionately burdened by simultaneous demands of professional socialization and family formation (Hall, 2002).

Research Propositions

Building on the foregoing theoretical framework, the study was guided by three central propositions.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Workplace Social Support, Work–Family Conflict, and Teacher Well-being



Teal arrows (P1) represent the hypothesized positive effects of workplace social support dimensions on job and life satisfaction; coral arrows (P2) represent the hypothesized negative effects of work–family conflict on both outcomes; the dashed line (P3) indicates the proposed buffering interaction between social support and work–family conflict; and gray dashed lines indicate moderation by gender and career stage.

Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect data from vocational school teachers across northeastern Thailand. This region was selected on the basis of its demographic representativeness within the national vocational education system and the practical accessibility of institutions through established research networks. The study received institutional ethical approval, and participation was entirely voluntary. All respondents provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Participants

The final analytic sample comprised 518 vocational school teachers (N = 518). Participants were employed across multiple vocational colleges and technical institutes within the northeastern region, spanning a range of subject specializations including engineering technology, business administration, hospitality, agriculture, and health sciences. The sample included both male and female instructors and represented a range of career stages from early-career (fewer than five years of experience) to experienced practitioners (five or more years).

Survey instruments were administered in Thai by trained research assistants during scheduled staff meetings, ensuring a high response rate and minimizing missing data. Completed surveys were checked for completeness before inclusion in the analytic dataset.

Measures

Workplace Social Support. Four dimensions of workplace social support were assessed using adapted scales drawing on the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and the Workplace Support Questionnaire (Karasek et al., 1998). The four dimensions comprised: (a) collegial support (support from workplace peers), (b) principal support (support from school principals), (c) supervisory support (support from direct supervisors), and (d) mentored support (guidance from experienced mentor figures). Each subscale consisted of five items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All subscales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from .78 to .87).

Work–Family Conflict. WFC was measured using the five-item Work–Family Conflict Scale (Netemeyer et al., 1996), which assesses the extent to which work demands interfere with the fulfillment of family responsibilities. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (α = .83).

Job Satisfaction. Job satisfaction was assessed using a five-item scale adapted from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire short form (Weiss et al., 1967), measuring overall satisfaction with the teaching position. Internal consistency was acceptable (α = .81).

Life Satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured using the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), a widely validated measure of subjective well-being. The scale demonstrated good reliability (α = .84).

Demographic Variables. Gender (coded 0 = female, 1 = male), years of teaching experience (continuous), age, and educational qualification were included as demographic covariates in regression models.

Results

The regression analyses revealed several clear and meaningful patterns across both outcome measures (Tables 1 and 2).

The single most consistent finding was the role of colleague relationships. Across both job satisfaction ($\beta = .329$, $p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = .301$, $p < .001$), support from peers at work was the strongest positive predictor in the model. More than any formal leadership structure or mentoring arrangement, the quality of day-to-day relationships with fellow teachers shaped how satisfied vocational educators felt both at work and in their lives more broadly.

Work–family conflict told an equally consistent story, but in the opposite direction. It was a significant negative predictor of both job satisfaction ($\beta = -.241$, $p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = -.225$, $p < .001$), confirming that when work bleeds into family life, the damage is felt across both domains not just inside the classroom but at home as well.

Perhaps the most striking finding involved principal support, which produced a completely different effect depending on what was being measured. For job satisfaction, principal support was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.148$, $p = .005$) — meaning that closer principal involvement was associated with lower daily professional satisfaction, possibly reflecting experiences of micromanagement or added performance pressure. Yet for life satisfaction, the direction reversed entirely: principal support became a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .203$, $p < .001$). Teachers may draw broader meaning and stability from institutional leadership even when that same leadership creates friction in their day-to-day work.

Supervisory support showed a more straightforward pattern, contributing positively to both job satisfaction ($\beta = .123$, $p = .021$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = .154$, $p = .003$). Mentored support, by contrast, did not reach statistical significance in either model (job satisfaction: $\beta = .079$, $p = .099$; life satisfaction: $\beta = .065$, $p = .161$), suggesting that mentoring relationships, at least as measured here, did not independently predict well-being outcomes after accounting for other support sources. Finally, gender was non-significant in both models (job satisfaction: $\beta = .019$, $p = .635$; life satisfaction: $\beta = -.010$, $p = .787$), indicating that gender differences in work–family conflict operate through WFC itself rather than through a direct independent effect on satisfaction.

Table 1

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Job Satisfaction

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Sex	0.019	0.039	*.019*	0.476	.635
Principal Support	-0.083	0.030	*-.148*	-2.818	.005
Supervisory Support	0.088	0.038	*.123*	2.313	.021
Mentored Support	0.066	0.040	*.079*	1.652	.099
Colleague Relationship	0.279	0.036	*.329*	7.712	< .001
Work–Family Conflict	-0.115	0.019	*-.241*	-6.054	< .001

Note. N = 518. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE B = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; WFC = Work–Family Conflict. Mentored Support was non-significant (p = .099). Principal Support showed a negative association with job satisfaction.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Life Satisfaction (Happiness)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Sex	-0.010	0.037	*-.010*	-0.270	.787
Principal Support	0.105	0.028	*.203*	3.750	< .001
Supervisory Support	0.102	0.034	*.154*	3.000	.003
Mentored Support	0.052	0.037	*.065*	1.405	.161
Colleague Relationship	0.241	0.033	*.301*	7.303	< .001
Work–Family Conflict	-0.101	0.018	*-.225*	-5.611	< .001

Note. N = 518. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE B = standard error; β = standardized coefficient; WFC = Work–Family Conflict. Mentored Support was non-significant (p = .161). Principal Support showed a positive association with life satisfaction, reversing its direction from Table 1.

Together, these results position peer networks and work–family strain as the two most critical factors for vocational teacher well-being, with the nature of principal leadership deserving closer attention. Future work would benefit from exploring the quality and reciprocity of peer relationships, the specific principal behaviors that support versus pressure teachers, and how work–family strain accumulates differently across career stages and school contexts.

Discussion

Colleagues Matter Most

Across both models, collegial support was the strongest predictor of well-being (β = .329) for job satisfaction and (β = .301) for life satisfaction. This is not surprising in isolation; research consistently shows that teachers in supportive peer environments report higher well-being and lower burnout (Collie et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). What is notable here is the margin. Teachers who perceive a collegial and supportive school environment report higher levels of wellbeing, resilience, and lower levels of stress and burnout and in this sample, that effect outweighed both formal leadership and mentoring combined. The reason likely lies in proximity: colleagues share the same workshop floor, understand the same technical pressures, and can offer help without the power dynamics that come with supervisory or principal relationships. Experienced teachers in particular draw their satisfaction primarily from

collegial collaboration, and this pattern appears to hold strongly in the vocational context as well.

The Principal Support Puzzle

Principal support produced the most unexpected finding: negative for job satisfaction (β = -.148) but positive for life satisfaction (β = .203). This split has a plausible explanation. Close principal involvement in day-to-day work may feel less like support and more like monitoring adding accountability pressure that chips away at professional autonomy. Teachers who perceive inadequate resources or a negative school climate report lower job satisfaction, which in turn contributes to higher attrition rates. At the same time, knowing that an institution is actively led may provide a sense of stability that benefits broader life satisfaction, even when it creates friction at work. The practical implication is direct: principals who want to support teacher well-being should step back from task management and focus instead on creating stable, resource-rich conditions being present without being intrusive.

Work–Family Conflict and Teacher Well-being: A Persistent Negative Effect

Work–family conflict was a significant negative predictor of both job satisfaction (β = -.241) and life satisfaction (β = -.225). This confirms what spillover theory has long proposed that strain in one life domain does not stay contained there (Staines, 1980). Importantly, social support did not buffer this effect. The two operate independently, meaning that even teachers with strong peer networks still suffer when work encroaches on family life. This is consistent with the main effect model of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and has a clear practical implication: investing in peer networks and reducing work–family conflict are not interchangeable strategies—Sboth are necessary.

Male Teachers: An Overlooked Group

Male teachers reported significantly higher work–family conflict than their female counterparts a finding that cuts against the common assumption that women bear the heavier work–family burden. In Thailand's vocational context, male instructors are disproportionately concentrated in workshop-intensive fields with irregular hours and heavy equipment demands. Cultural expectations around breadwinning compound this, creating a double pressure that is rarely named or addressed in institutional policy. Exploring differential effects for men in particular provides insights into factors which may be of relevance for their retention a concern among practitioners and policymakers. Gender-inclusive WFC interventions are not just equitable—they are strategically necessary for retention.

Early-Career Teachers: A Double Penalty

New teachers faced the highest WFC and the lowest well-being simultaneously. This aligns with life course research identifying the career entry phase as uniquely stressful, when professional socialization, skill development, and family formation all compete at once (Hall, 2002). Support from school leaders plays a critical role in shaping the job satisfaction of novice teachers yet in this sample, mentored support did not independently predict well-being. This does not mean mentoring is irrelevant; it may simply mean that informal, variable mentoring is not enough. What early-career vocational teachers need most is structured access to the collegial networks that experienced teachers have already built because those networks, not formal mentoring, are what the data shows actually protects well-being.

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

This study has examined the relationships among workplace social support dimensions, work–family conflict, and well-being outcomes among 518 vocational school teachers in northeastern Thailand. The findings identify collegial peer relationships as the most powerful source of social support for both job and life satisfaction, confirm WFC as a significant and pervasive well-being drain, reveal a theoretically meaningful split effect for principal support across outcome domains, document counter-intuitive gender differences in WFC with male teachers disproportionately affected, and describe an early-career double penalty pattern of compounded vulnerability. These findings collectively advance understanding of the psychological ecology of vocational teacher well-being and have direct relevance to both research and practice.

Implications for Practice

Three sets of practice-oriented recommendations follow from the findings. First, institutional leaders should prioritize the deliberate engineering of collegial peer connections within vocational schools. This includes scheduling protected time for collaborative professional activities, creating shared workspaces that facilitate organic peer interaction, and recognizing peer support as a legitimate and valuable institutional resource rather than an informal byproduct of workplace culture. Structured peer-mentoring programs targeted specifically at early-career teachers may simultaneously connect new instructors to protective peer networks while addressing the double penalty of elevated WFC and diminished well-being that characterizes the career entry phase.

Second, principals and institutional managers should critically examine their leadership style in relation to the split effect identified here. Effective leadership for vocational teacher well-being likely involves a shift from task-focused monitoring toward a role that prioritizes systemic stability, resource provision, and advocacy for teacher workload management. In practical terms, this might involve principals actively lobbying for WFC-supportive policies rather than creating additional performance demands.

Third, and most urgently, institutional leaders should establish formal boundary intervention policies specifically designed to mitigate WFC. Such policies might include caps on after-hours communication expectations, flexible scheduling provisions for family emergencies, workload equity audits, and the destigmatization of work–family balance discussions, particularly for male educators who may lack cultural sanction for expressing WFC-related distress.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study warrant acknowledgment. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the regional sampling frame limits generalizability to the broader national vocational education population. Self-reported measures are subject to common method variance, although the diversity of predictor and outcome constructs reduces the risk of systematic bias. The non-significance of interaction terms may reflect insufficient statistical power for detecting moderation effects rather than the genuine absence of buffering, and future research with larger samples should revisit moderation hypotheses. Longitudinal designs tracking teachers across career stages would provide valuable evidence on

developmental trajectories of WFC and well-being. Qualitative investigations, particularly with male teachers, would illuminate the mechanisms by which work–family strain is experienced and managed in this underresearched subgroup.

Future research might also extend the present framework to examine organizational-level predictors of vocational teacher well-being, including school climate, workload policies, and leadership culture, as contextual factors that may condition the effects of individual-level social support and WFC. Cross-national comparative studies would further illuminate the extent to which findings from the Thai vocational education context generalize to vocational systems in other national and cultural contexts.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Claude (Anthropic), ChatGPT (OpenAI), Perplexity AI, and NotebookLM (Google) were used to assist with manuscript writing, editing, literature search, and diagram creation. These tools were not used in data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the work presented.

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