

# The Correlation Between Spiritual Leadership and the Well-Being of Chinese Primary and Secondary School Teachers

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## Abstract

Primary and secondary school teachers are one of the most important human resources in the field of basic education in China, and the well-being of teachers has been receiving much attention. Principals' leadership styles, and attitudes toward teachers, often have a direct impact on teachers' well-being. As a new leadership style, spiritual leadership plays a positive role in both individuals and organizations in enterprise management. However, there is less research in the literature on spiritual leadership and teachers' well-being in educational field. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to transfer the role of spiritual leadership in corporate management to the field of basic education in China and to explore the mechanisms of spiritual leadership's influence on primary and secondary school teachers' well-being. A survey of 311 Chinese primary and secondary school teachers found that the vision and hope/belief dimensions of spiritual leadership had a positive and significant effect on teacher well-being, but the other dimension of spiritual leadership, altruistic love, did not have a positive and significant effect on teacher well-being.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Leadership, Teachers' Life Well-Being, Teachers' Workplace Well-Being, Teachers' Psychological Well-Being, Primary and Secondary School Teachers

## Introduction

Well-being is a personal subjective feeling, which depends on the degree of personal satisfaction with various factors such as work and life, and is the eternal goal for people to realize their own value. Primary and secondary school teachers are one of the most important human resources in the field of basic education in China, and the well-being of teachers has been receiving much attention. However, in a survey of well-being indices of various professions in China, it was found that the teaching profession, a highly valued profession, has lower levels of well-being than other professions (Zhang, 2022). Possible reasons are heavy workload, long hours of extra overtime, disruption of work-life rhythm balance, lack of necessary teaching resources and support from school supervisors and parents, etc. (Isbell & Miller, 2023; Pong, 2022). Therefore, enhancing the well-being of Chinese primary and secondary school teachers is an urgent issue to be addressed.

The leadership style of an organization often determines the direction of its development. In school management, the principal is the "helmsman" of the school's development, and the principal's insight is essential to the school's healthy long-term development. Principals' leadership styles, and attitudes toward teachers, often have a direct impact on teachers' well-being (Guo et al., 2019). Studies have shown that transformational leadership Tian et al (2021); Zhang (2021), instructional leadership Wang et al (2020), and servant leadership Zhang (2021) all positively affect the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers. Spiritual leadership, as a new leadership style, should also have a positive effect on the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers. It was found that spiritual leadership has a positive and significant impact on employee performance Pio (2022), creative behaviors Khaddam et al (2023), mindfulness Mohammed (2022) etc. Spiritual leadership is positively influencing the well-being of corporate employees Hunsakera (2019) and nurses (Zou, et al., 2020). However, there is less research in the literature on spiritual leadership and teachers' well-being.

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to transfer the role of spiritual leadership in corporate management to the field of basic education in China and to explore the mechanisms of spiritual leadership's influence on primary and secondary school teachers' well-being. The advantages of spiritual leadership are that it establishes a common vision for the school and individuals, gives teachers hope, boosts their confidence, builds a harmonious and caring atmosphere, and enhances their motivation and vitality at work. This is of great importance to solve the problems of high work stress, burnout, and low happiness and satisfaction of primary and secondary school teachers in China nowadays.

## **Literature Review**

### **Spiritual Leadership**

Spiritual leadership originated from the study of the intersection of spirituality and leadership. In 2003, the American management scientist Fry (2003) systematically introduced the concept of spiritual leadership, and it was recognized by most scholars and is therefore used to this day. According to Fry (2003), spiritual leadership consists of values, behaviors, and attitudes that motivate individuals through intrinsic needs, while spiritual motivation is achieved by the inspiration of individuals at the organizational level and by the intrinsic characteristics of members.

The spiritual leadership model consists of three major dimensions: vision, hope/faith, and altruistic love (Fry et al., 2005). Vision is the blueprint for the future of the organization and the direction in which the organization will strive for the future. Spiritual leaders have both the ability to create a vision and outline a grand blueprint for the organization, as well as to generate a strong commitment to the vision and work tirelessly to achieve it (Fry et al., 2011). Using this vision, leaders motivate their employees so that they are willing to work with them to achieve the organizational vision (Fry et al., 2011). Hope is the expectation that one's wishes will be fulfilled and is a psychological activity. Faith is the belief that one can achieve something, and is the firm confidence one has in something (Fry, 2003). Spiritual leadership helps employees develop a strong belief and hope for the formation of an organizational vision, so that they can work together to achieve their personal and organizational goals. Altruistic love is caring for others from the heart, without expecting anything in return.

Altruistic love means affirming oneself and appreciating others, thus feeling the harmony of the work environment and gaining a strong sense of satisfaction. According to Fry et al (2011), altruistic love makes employees believe that organizational leaders have the right moral orientation and helps employees reconcile their relationships with others and are willing to share their resources and contribute to the development of the organization.

Based on this, this study adopts Fry's conception of spiritual leadership as the sum of values, attitudes, and behaviors desired by spiritual leaders through intrinsic motivation of their members to experience their own meaning and a spiritual presence that the organization identifies with.

### **Teachers' Well-being**

As the research on well-being has gradually intensified, the definition and connotation of well-being have been expanded, and more and more researchers have studied well-being from an integrated perspective. Zheng et al (2015), based on an integrated perspective, proposed that employee well-being is both the perception and satisfaction of employees at work and life, as well as the psychological experience and satisfaction state of emotions at work and non-work levels. He argued that employee well-being mainly includes three dimensions: life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being. According to the concept of employee well-being proposed by Zheng et al (2015), combined with educational contexts, we consider teacher well-being as teachers achieving satisfaction in their lives, realizing their professional aspirations at work, and acquiring a psychological experience of sustained happiness.

By reviewing the literature, the researchers found that the antecedent variables affecting teachers' well-being came from three levels: individual, group, and organizational (Lv, 2021). Early research focused mostly on the effects of individual-level variables on teacher well-being, such as personality, motivation, cognitive ability, and emotional status. More recent studies have focused on the group and organizational levels, with an increasingly enriched selection of variables that facilitate in-depth analysis of the factors influencing teachers' well-being at a higher level. Group-level influences include team structure, team member characteristics, and leadership style. The structure and culture of the organization, on the other hand, are the main factors at the organizational level (Lv, 2021).

### **Spiritual Leadership and Teachers' Well-being**

Previous scholars have found leadership style to be one of the important factors in their research on the antecedents influencing teachers' well-being (Guo et al., 2019). Studies by Tian et al (2021); Zhang (2021) confirmed that transformational leadership is significantly and positively related to teachers' well-being, and instructional leadership Wang et al (2021) and servant leadership Zhang (2021) also found the same conclusion. However, the literature is less on spiritual leadership and teacher well-being. But we assume that spiritual leadership also significantly and positively affects teacher well-being as well as other leadership styles.

Fry (2003) argues that spiritual leadership can be a motivating force for themselves and their subordinates, enabling all members of the organization to develop a strong sense of their own identity and a sense of mission. School spiritual Leadership aligns teachers' personal development with organizational destiny by portraying an organizational vision in which

teachers want their work to be more meaningful and their sense of mission and well-being to be enhanced (Schulte & Vainio, 2010). Hope/belief can strengthen teachers' confidence that the organizational vision can be achieved, enhance the ability to withstand work stress and challenges, reduce anxiety and frustration, and can improve teachers' overall well-being in terms of life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being (Charalampous et al., 2019). Leaders convey altruistic love to teachers as a sign of respect, recognition, and inclusion that boosts positive emotions, suppresses negative emotions, closes the relationship between teachers and leaders and others, and improves well-being in life, workplace, and psychological well-being (Guerci et al., 2022).

Therefore, the research hypothesis was formulated

H1: Vision is related positively with teachers' life well-being.

H2: Vision is related positively with teachers' workplace well-being.

H3: Vision is related positively with teachers' psychological well-being.

H4: Hope/Faith is related positively with teachers' life well-being.

H5: Hope/Faith is related positively with teachers' workplace well-being.

H6: Hope/Faith is related positively with teachers' psychological well-being.

H7: Altruistic love is related positively with teachers' life well-being.

H8: Altruistic love is related positively with teachers' workplace well-being.

H9: Altruistic love is related positively with teachers' psychological well-being.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model of this study. The independent variables are the three dimensions of spiritual leadership, and the dependent variables are teachers' life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being, as a way to explore the impact of spiritual leadership on teachers' well-being.

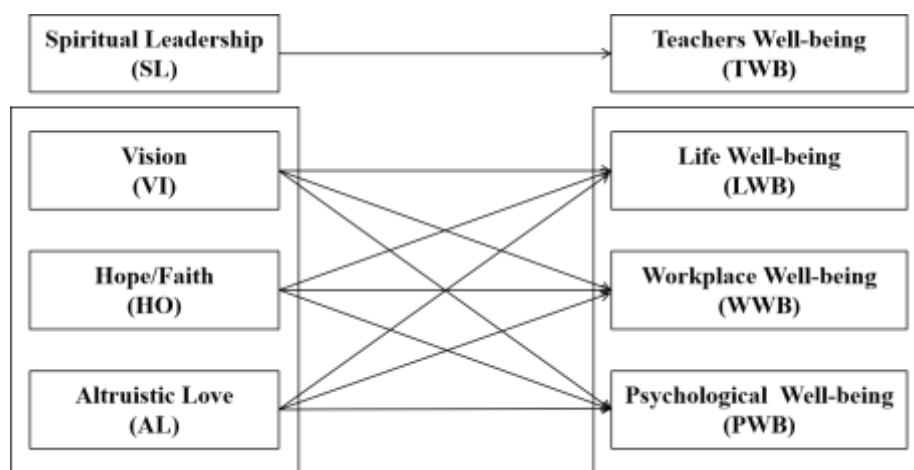


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

In this study, research data were collected through a quantitative self-report approach, and partial least squares equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze the data and test the research hypotheses. The study used a questionnaire method with an online electronic questionnaire to expand the range of respondents and research data sources. The

questionnaire consisted of three main parts, the first part was to let the respondents know the purpose of this survey and the description of confidentiality measures; the second part had information on the demographic variables of the respondents; and the third part had the measurement items of the study variables.

### **Participants**

The questionnaire completed by the 311 teachers (63 males; 248 females) was valid. The age ranges of the participants were 4.2% under 25 years old, 34.1% 25-35 years old, 41.2% 36-45 years old, 19% 46-55 years old, and 1.6% over 55 years old. The professional titles of the participants were junior title (39.2%), intermediate title (52.1%), associate title (8.0%) and senior title (0.6%). The education level of the participants was mainly Bachelor's degree (88.4%), with Junior College Education (5.5%) and Master's degree or above (6.1%). The participants were mainly in primary school (90.4%) and the rest were in middle school (8.4%) and high school (1.3%).

### **Instruments**

#### **Spiritual Leadership**

This study used the Spiritual Leadership Scale developed by Fry et al (2005) as a measure of spiritual leadership in schools with an educational contextual transformation. The scale has favorable reliability and is widely cited by scholars. The scale has three subscales: vision, hope/belief, and altruistic love, with 17 items. The vision subscale has five items, such as "My school has a vision statement that brings out the best in me", with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.929. The hope/belief subscale has 5 items, such as "I persevere and exert extra effort to help my school succeed", which has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.894. The number of items on the altruistic love subscale was 7, such as "My school really cares about its teachers.", while Cronbach's alpha value is 0.911. The Likert 5-point scale was used, with a score of 5 for "completely agree" and 1 for "completely disagree".

#### **Teachers' Well-being**

This study used the Employee Well-Being Scale developed by Zheng et al (2015) as a measure of teacher well-being with educational contextual transformation. The scale has 3 dimensions: life well-being, workplace well-being and psychological well-being, with 18 items. The life well-being dimension has six items, such as "I feel satisfied with my life", with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.913. The workplace well-being dimension has six items, such as "I can always find ways to enrich my work", which has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.916. The psychological well-being dimension has six items, such as "People think I am willing to give and to share my time with others", while Cronbach's alpha value is 0.904. A 7-point Likert scale was used, with a score of 7 for "strongly agree" and 1 for "strongly disagree".

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, the data were analyzed using PLS-SEM, and SPSS 26 and SmartPLS 4.0 were used as statistical analysis tools. PLS-SEM has the advantages of small samples, non-normal distribution, and analysis of complex models, and is suitable for analyzing causal relationships between variables.

## Results

### Measurement Model

Following the steps of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), this study divides the model validation into two sections: measurement model and structural model.

Before starting to evaluate the measurement model, we tested the Common Method Bias (CMB) of the model. In the questionnaire design, we set the rating range for spiritual leadership to 5 and for teacher well-being to 7 to procedurally avoid CMB. The CMB was also assessed statistically using the full covariance test proposed by (Kock, 2015). Table 1 shows the VIF values of all the constructs, which were less than 3, in accordance with the criteria proposed by (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, the CMB was not an issue in this study.

Table 1

*Full covariance test*

VI	HO	AL	LWB	WWB	PWB
1.124	1.982	1.210	2.104	2.875	2.875

The researchers evaluated the measurement model through SmartPLS 4.0 and executed the PLS-SEM algorithm procedure to obtain data related to reliability and validity, which are shown in Tables 2 and 3. The metric loading reliability was assessed by the value of outer loading. According to Hair et al. (2017), the threshold value of loading is 0.5, and any value above 0.5 is acceptable. As shown in Table 2, all indicator loadings met the criteria, except for AL1, which was removed due to low loading. Structural reliability was assessed by Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR). The results showed that the values of both CA and CR were greater than 0.7, which is in line with the acceptance level suggested by (Kline, 2010; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The researchers examined the convergent validity by means of average variance extraction (AVE). The AVE values for all constructs in Table 2 were greater than 0.5, which is consistent with the acceptance range recommended by (Hair et al., 2017).

Moreover, discriminant validity was assessed in this study using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) method. Henseler et al (2015) suggested that the value of HTMT should be less than 0.9. Table 3 shows that the HTMT ranged from 0.468 to 0.863, which were below the threshold value. Therefore, appropriate discriminant validity was obtained in this study.

Table 2

*Construct reliability and convergent validity assessment.*

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Loading (&gt;0.5)</b>	<b>CA (&gt;0.7)</b>	<b>CR (&gt;0.7)</b>	<b>AVE (&gt;0.5)</b>
Vision (VI)		0.929	0.946	0.780
VI1	0.833			
VI2	0.900			
VI3	0.891			
VI4	0.910			
VI5	0.879			
Hope/Belief (HO)		0.894	0.922	0.705
HO1	0.815			
HO2	0.897			
HO3	0.763			
HO4	0.836			
HO5	0.878			
Altruistic Love (AL)		0.911	0.932	0.699
AL1	Deleted			
AL2	0.858			
AL3	0.852			
AL4	0.915			
AL5	0.649			
AL6	0.891			
AL7	0.824			
Life Well-being (LWB)		0.913	0.933	0.701
LWB1	0.835			
LWB2	0.837			
LWB3	0.880			
LWB4	0.873			
LWB5	0.877			
LWB6	0.709			
Workplace Well-being (WWB)		0.916	0.935	0.704
WWB1	0.830			
WWB2	0.860			



WWB3	0.851			
WWB4	0.819			
WWB5	0.840			
WWB6	0.836			
Psychological Well-being (PWB)		0.904	0.926	0.676
PWB1	0.775			
PWB2	0.815			
PWB3	0.857			
PWB4	0.860			
PWB5	0.863			
PWB6	0.760			

Table 3

*Discriminant validity assessment (HTMT).*

Construct	VI	HO	AL	LWB	WWB	PWB
VI						
HO	0.863					
AL	0.828	0.809				
LWB	0.604	0.555	0.468			
WWB	0.712	0.703	0.576	0.759		
PWB	0.603	0.750	0.478	0.710	0.808	

**Structural Model**

In this study, SmartPLS 4.0 was used to run the Bootstrapping procedure to evaluate the structural model, with the significance level set to 0.05 and the test type set to one-tailed. It was found that VI had a positive and significant effect on LWB ( $\beta = 0.450$ ,  $t = 4.856$ ,  $p$  value=0.000), WWB ( $\beta = 0.445$ ,  $t = 5.382$ ,  $p$  value=0.000), and PWB ( $\beta = 0.160$ ,  $t = 2.101$ ,  $p$  value=0.018). Similarly, HO had a positive and significant effect on LWB ( $\beta = 0.183$ ,  $t = 1.829$ ,  $p$  value = 0.034), WWB ( $\beta = 0.319$ ,  $t = 3.631$ ,  $p$  value = 0.000), and PWB ( $\beta = 0.692$ ,  $t = 10.761$ ,  $p$  value = 0.000). However, AL did not have a positive significant effect on LWB ( $\beta = -0.049$ ,  $t = 0.593$ ,  $p$  value=0.277), WWB ( $\beta = -0.047$ ,  $t = 0.081$ ,  $p$  value=0.282), and PWB ( $\beta = -0.196$ ,  $t = 2.704$ ,  $p$  value=0.003). The findings also showed that VI, HO and AL together explained 31.6% of the variance in LWB, 46.7% in WWB and 46.8% in PWB. According to the value of effect size  $f^2$ , VI has a small effect on LWB and WWB, HO has a small effect on WWB, AL has a small effect on PWB, and HO has a medium effect on PWB. The results from Table 4 and Figure 2 show that the hypotheses for H1 to H6 are valid and the hypotheses for H7, H8 and H9 are not valid.



Table 4  
 Structural Model Assessment

Hypothesis	Relationship	Beta	Se	T values	P values	LL	UL	R <sup>2</sup>	f <sup>2</sup>	VIF
H1	VI -> LWB	0.450	0.093	4.856	0.000	0.291	0.596	0.316	0.090	3.343
H2	VI -> WWB	0.445	0.083	5.382	0.000	0.304	0.576	0.467	0.112	3.343
H3	VI -> PWB	0.160	0.076	2.101	0.018	0.031	0.280	0.468	0.015	3.343
H4	HO -> LWB	0.183	0.100	1.829	0.034	0.022	0.351		0.017	2.980
H5	HO -> WWB	0.319	0.088	3.631	0.000	0.176	0.470		0.065	2.980
H6	HO -> PWB	0.692	0.064	10.761	0.000	0.585	0.797		0.304	2.980
H7	AL -> LWB	-0.049	0.082	0.593	0.277	-0.179	0.091		0.001	2.681
H8	AL -> WWB	-0.047	0.081	0.577	0.282	-0.178	0.087		0.002	2.681
H9	AL -> PWB	-0.196	0.072	2.704	0.003	-0.312	-0.075		0.027	2.681

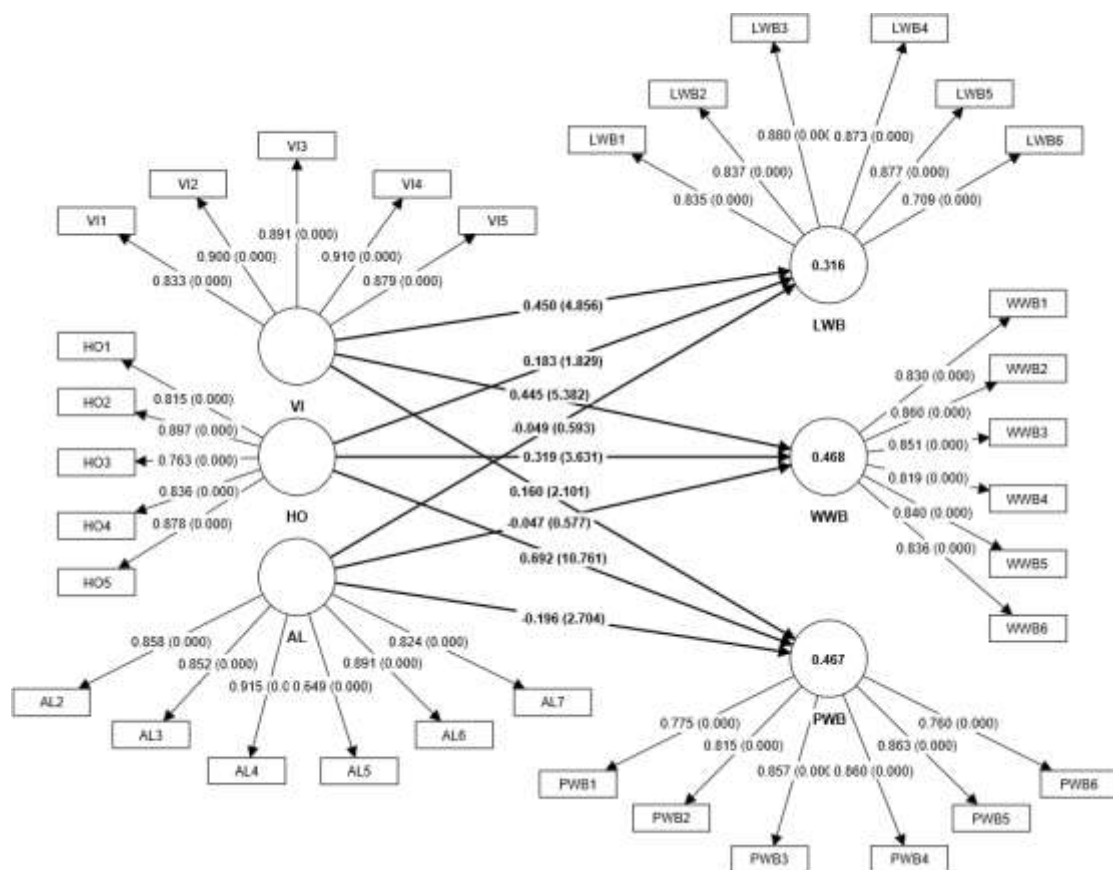


Figure 2. Hypothesis testing.

The researchers also evaluated the model predictive ability by executing the PLSpredict procedure. As can be seen in Table 5, the values of PLS-SEM\_RMSE are all smaller than the values of LM\_RMSE, which, according to Fair et al. (2019), indicates that the model has high predictive power.

Table 5

*PLSpredict.*

Indicators	Q <sup>2</sup> predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	LM_RMSE	PLS-LM
LWB1	0.201	1.032	1.074	-0.042
LWB2	0.243	1.073	1.114	-0.041
LWB3	0.234	1.176	1.222	-0.046
LWB4	0.211	1.102	1.144	-0.042
LWB5	0.176	1.172	1.215	-0.043
LWB6	0.181	1.611	1.632	-0.021
PWB1	0.238	0.942	0.985	-0.043
PWB2	0.294	0.894	0.917	-0.023
PWB3	0.302	0.906	0.935	-0.029
PWB4	0.362	0.816	0.816	0.000
PWB5	0.378	0.853	0.867	-0.014
PWB6	0.271	1.007	1.033	-0.026
WWB1	0.277	1.201	1.246	-0.045
WWB2	0.354	1.100	1.124	-0.024
WWB3	0.318	1.106	1.143	-0.037
WWB4	0.328	1.081	1.099	-0.018
WWB5	0.310	1.046	1.066	-0.020
WWB6	0.326	1.076	1.085	-0.009

### Discussion and Conclusions

In a survey of 311 Chinese primary and secondary school teachers, this study found that the vision and hope/belief dimensions of spiritual leadership had a positive and significant effect on teachers' well-being, and thus hypotheses H1 to H6 of the study were supported. However, another dimension of spiritual leadership, altruistic love, did not have a positive and significant effect on teachers' well-being, and hypotheses H7, H8, and H9 were not supported.

Vision aims to construct a positive value that facilitates managers to lead and promote the development of the organization (Fry, 2003). The study showed that vision has a positive and significant effect on teachers' life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being, which is consistent with Schulte & Vainio's (2010) study, and research hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 hold valid. Spiritual leaders outline the future of the school for teachers through a clear picture of the school's vision, so that teachers can experience the value and meaning of their work and life, and gain psychological satisfaction.

The findings also revealed that hope/beliefs play a positive and significant role in teachers' life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being, a result that supports

research hypotheses H4, H5, and H6, in line with (Charalampous et al., 2019). Spiritual leaders have a strong belief in the achievement of their vision, and this strong belief can infect teachers, making them have the confidence, motivation and power to accomplish their vision. This can motivate teachers to go to work actively, try to overcome difficulties, gain competence and obtain life well-being, workplace well-being and psychological well-being.

Unfortunately, however, altruistic love does not positively and significantly contribute to teachers' life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being, and research hypotheses H7, H8, and H9 are not supported. This is different from the results of the previous study by (Guerci et al., 2022). One possible reason for the lack of significance in the relationship between altruistic love and teachers' well-being could be the presence of other factors that influence teachers' well-being more strongly. It is possible by adding variables, such as workload (ace et al (2021), job satisfaction Ortan et al (2021), or organizational culture Katsantonis (2020), play a more significant role in determining teachers' well-being. Further research may explore into these factors could provide insights into why the relationship was not significant. Researchers may further explore the influence of other factors that may mediate or moderate the relationship between leaders' altruistic love and teachers' well-being.

### **Theoretical Implications**

At present, there has been sufficient research on the spiritual leadership style of corporate managers and employee well-being in corporate management in China and abroad, but the application of spiritual leadership style in Chinese education, especially in basic education, is less and not deeper. This study takes Chinese primary and secondary school teachers as a focus point to reveal the influence of spiritual leadership style on the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers, expanding the research field and scope of spiritual leadership with certain theoretical contributions. By exploring the influence of spiritual leadership on the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers, it also enriches the antecedents of teacher well-being research and provides a theoretical guarantee for improving the research path of teacher well-being.

### **Practical Implications**

Primary and secondary school teachers are the front-line workers in China's basic education, and their well-being not only directly affects their own work efficiency and teaching quality, but also has an impact on students' psychological state, learning achievement, and interest in learning. This study examines the influence of principals' spiritual leadership style on the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers, not only to provide school principals with a reference path to change their management style and carry out instructional management reform, but also to provide teachers with methods and strategies to improve their well-being, so that they can better engage in education and teaching and improve the quality of education in schools.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

First, all data in this study were answered by the teachers themselves, and teachers may have filled in the responses out of social approvability. Therefore, paired surveys and staged surveys could be considered in the future to further enhance the reliability of the study

results. In addition, this study only chose the effect of spiritual leadership on the well-being of primary and secondary school teachers as an entry point, and other variables can be studied in the future on teachers' well-being, which can better explore the formation mechanism of teachers' well-being.

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