

Research on the Mechanism of Occupational Burnout among Rural Primary School Teachers

-- Research on Grounded Theory Based on 15 Teachers of L Primary School

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Abstract: Occupational burnout is a phenomenon that occurs in the career of primary school teachers, which is very detrimental to their own development and student growth. Through a qualitative study of 15 teachers at L Elementary School, it was found that individual environments are formed by physical condition, age, university background, family situation, work experience, personality traits, and ideal pursuits. Family school cooperation, leadership style, student situation, and teaching reform shape the collective environment. Time allocation, energy allocation, and ability allocation form a sense of professional rhythm, and being trusted, recognized, valuable, and growing form a sense of professional achievement. Among them, the sense of occupational rhythm and occupational achievement directly affect the occupational burnout of rural primary school teachers, while individual and collective environments indirectly affect occupational burnout through the sense of occupational rhythm and occupational achievement. Rural primary school teachers should be guided to rationally view professional burnout, attach importance to career guidance for rural primary school teachers, and further optimize the professional environment for rural primary school teachers.

Keywords: Rural Teachers; Primary School Teachers; Occupational Burnout; Grounded Theory.

1. Introduction

Occupational burnout is a common phenomenon in the career of teachers, mainly manifested as a lack of interest and enthusiasm for educational and teaching work. [1] Teachers who experience occupational burnout also find it difficult to experience the value and significance of educating and nurturing students, viewing it as a difficult task. They either flee the teaching profession or treat their work negatively. The existence of occupational burnout is not only very harmful to the psychological health and career development of teachers themselves, but also very detrimental to the success and growth of students. Teachers in the period of occupational burnout have reduced sensitivity to students, making it difficult for them to perceive changes in students' physical and mental development, learning behavior, and the positive or negative significance of these changes. It is even more difficult to expect them to create a better atmosphere and environment to guide students' growth and success. In short, the emergence of occupational burnout means the loss of teachers' vitality and creativity, which is an obstacle to teachers' sustainable development that must be overcome and overcome.

There have been many studies on teacher burnout. From the perspective of objects, it involves teachers at all levels and types such as kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers, middle school teachers, university teachers, vocational school teachers, etc. From the perspective of the causes and improvement measures of occupational burnout, some people believe that teacher occupational burnout is due to low economic income and job benefits. Some people believe that the professional fatigue of teachers is due to the increased work pressure, long working hours, heavy responsibilities, and persistent pressure under the current education reform

situation. Some people also start from the psychological characteristics of teachers' professional development stages, believing that professional fatigue indicates the arrival of a plateau period for teachers' professional development, lacking new professional development goals and a sense of achievement and mission. Overall, there are multiple explanations for the causes of teacher burnout, and based on these different perspectives, various strategic suggestions have been proposed to help teachers overcome burnout. Overall, this provides knowledge resources for understanding and solving the problem of teacher burnout.

However, from the perspective of research methods, the vast majority of studies choose questionnaire method to collect data and conduct data analysis through quantitative software. Few people collect data through in-depth interviews, and even fewer use grounded theory to analyze data and model the mechanism of relevant influencing factors. This is precisely the innovation and value of this study.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Methods

Grounded theory is a path of qualitative research, rather than a specific theory. It was first proposed by sociologists Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser in 1967. Later, they creatively proposed a grounded theory research method based on data collection, organization, and analysis in the process of qualitative research, and achieved theoretical construction through concept extraction.[2]

This theory emphasizes the construction of theories rooted in data. Based on the systematic collection of first-hand information, the researchers in this article understand how the research subjects describe how they experience professional burnout after entering the teaching profession, how to explain the reasons for the formation of professional burnout, and try

to find as many conceptual categories as possible that reflect the essence of things, and then construct relevant theories through the connections between these conceptual categories. This research method that emphasizes discovering logic rather than verifying logic is very suitable for the rural primary school teachers who are the subject of this study. This study used the grounded theory research method to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with interviewees, and the interview tool used was a self-designed "Interview Outline on the Formation Mechanism of Occupation Burnout among Rural Primary School Teachers".

2.2. Data Collection

From November 2023 to January 2024, the author conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 teachers from a rural primary school in The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to obtain first-hand information needed for

grounded theory analysis. This primary school is located in a rural area in the suburbs of Guangzhou. It has been established for nearly 20 years and its students are mostly children of local villagers, as well as a small number of children of migrant workers. Although there are many rural primary schools in remote mountainous areas, there is still a significant gap in education quality compared to primary schools in urban areas. As of the end of 2023, there are a total of 39 teaching classes in grades 1-6 of the primary school, with a total of 1669 primary school students and 105 faculty members, including 82 full-time teachers with an average age of 41 years old. The interviewees for this interview are 15 full-time teachers, including 4 males and 11 females. The detailed information is shown in Table 1. Each interview lasts about 40-50 minutes, and based on the relevant regulations of research ethics, this study has protected the privacy of the interviewees at all stages.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey subjects

Characteristic		No.of Participants (Percentage)	Characteristic		No.of Participants(Percentage)
Age	≤30y	6(40%)	Gender	male	4(26.7%)
	31y-40y	4(26.7)		Female	11(73.3%)
	41y-50y	3(20%)	Teaching grade	Grade 1	2(13.3%)
	≥51y	2(13.3%)		Grade 2	2(13.3%)
Education	College diploma or below	3(20%)		Grade 3	2(13.3%)
	Bachelor's degree	10(66.7%)		Grade 4	2(13.4%)
	graduate degree	2(13.3%)		Grade 5	4(26.7%)
teaching experience	0-5y	4(26.7%)		Grade 6	3(20%)
	6-10y	3(20%)	class adviser	Yes	8(53.3%)
	11-15y	2(13.3%)		No	7(46.7%)
	15-20y	2(13.3%)	Lifetime employment	Yes	13(86.7%)
	≥21y	4(26.7%)		No	2(13.3%)

3. Data Analysis

This study analyzed 15 qualitative data based on the three-level coding method of grounded theory, processed them using Nvivo11.0 software, and reserved 2 data for theoretical saturation testing.

3.1. Open Coding

Open coding is the process of decomposing the raw data obtained, discovering similarities and differences through continuous comparison, and labeling the phenomena reflected in the material, gradually conceptualizing them. In open coding, researchers should try to "suspend" their personal "biases" and research "biases" as much as possible, discover and extract concepts from the data as much as possible, and operate as meticulously as possible until the coding reaches saturation. [3] This study, through sentence by sentence reading, concept naming, and coding integration of materials, ultimately extracted factors such as susceptibility to illness, fatigue, postpartum recovery, poor throat, weak resistance, leg pain, poor waist, impending retirement, middle-aged, too

young, elderly, two children, children attending school, dual employment, far away from home, children too young, children in adolescence, family care, homeroom teacher, number of class leaders, grade level, lesson plan writing, courseware, classroom response, conscientious living, cultivating people, becoming excellent, parental concepts, attitudes, parental cooperation, democracy, affinity, etc. Strictness, speaking attitude, new curriculum standards, core competencies, student attitudes, training, weekdays, weekends, winter and summer vacations, classes There are 101 initial concepts, including transitional attention, complaints, grievances, reluctance to manage, talent cultivation, moral education, and becoming better. These initial concepts are further categorized into 17 categories, namely physical condition, age, energy level, family situation, work experience, personality traits, ideal pursuit, home school cooperation, leadership style, student situation, teaching reform, time allocation, energy allocation, ability allocation, trust, recognition, value, and growth. As shown in Table 2, these 17 categories are the influencing factors of occupational burnout among primary school teachers.

Table 2. Open coding Results

Conceptual category	Initial concept	Conceptual category	Initial concept
Physical condition	Easy to get sick, easily feel tired, postpartum recovery, poor throat, weak resistance, leg pain, poor waist, eye interference, and insufficient energy	Teaching reform	new curriculum standards, core competencies, student perspectives, training, digital resources, student centeredness, new technologies
Age size	Fast retirement, middle-aged, too young, backbone teachers	Time allocation	Workdays, weekends, winter and summer vacations, classes, after-school work, fixed work, temporary work
Family situation	There are elderly people, two children, children attending school, dual employees, far away from home, children too young, children in puberty, family care, family support, household chores, and a decent economy	Energy allocation	Busy, distracted, and neglecting one thing over another
hands-on background	Teaching experience, class adviser, number of class leaders, grade level taught, lesson plan writing, courseware, classroom response, crisis events	Ability allocation	Unable to control, difficult, learn from scratch, explore on one's own, and sharpen one's skills in the face of challenges
Personality traits	Optimistic, pessimistic, extroverted, introverted, reflective, pursuing perfection, carefree	Trusted	Doubting teachers' words, excessive attention, complaints, grievances, and not daring to intervene
Ideal pursuit	Conscience, cultivation of people, becoming excellent, promotion of professional titles	Recognized	Treatment, status, stability
family-school cooperation	Parental education level, parental beliefs, parental attitudes, parental cooperation, parental attention, parental involvement	Realizing value	Cultivate talents, moral education, become better, hope
Leadership style	Democracy, affinity, strictness, speech attitude, speech content, development planning, fairness, performance evaluation	Making progress	Promotion, advancement, and awards
Student situation	Existing foundation, family background, learning attitude, learning ability, academic performance, conduct, and speech	/	/

3.2. Axial Coding

Table 3. Axial coding Results

Main category	subcategory	category connotation
Individual environment	Physical condition	The individual physical health status of primary school teachers often makes it difficult for them to handle related tasks if their health is poor;
	age difference	Teachers of different ages play different social roles and have varying levels of dedication to their work, attitudes towards accepting new things, and social positions within school teams;
	Family situation	The number and care needs of elderly and children in the family, as well as the family's economic conditions and support for individual careers, can all affect teachers' sense of professional burnout;
	Working Experience	The accumulation of work experience will affect the efficiency of teachers in handling problems;
	Personality traits	Different personalities may have varying perspectives on the same event, resulting in different outcomes;
	Ideal pursuit	Teachers who have lofty ideals and aspirations for the teaching profession also have higher requirements for themselves and higher expectations for the results of their work. When encountering setbacks, the psychological gap will also be greater;
Collective environment	family-school cooperation	Parents' cognition, emotions, attitudes, behavior patterns towards schools and teachers, as well as their emphasis on their children's education, all have an impact on teachers' sense of professional achievement;
	leadership style	Different types of leaders have different ways of managing school teachers;
	Student situation	Students' knowledge foundation, learning attitude, learning ability, learning motivation, etc.
	teaching reform	Curriculum reform, teaching method improvement, the use of new digital technology platforms, and the utilization of digital resources, as well as whether teachers adapt quickly and whether the support provided by schools is effective, will all affect teachers' sense of professional achievement and career rhythm;
Professional rhythm sense	time allocation	When various factors in both collective and individual environments are intertwined, whether individual teachers can allocate their time directly affects their professional experience;
	effort coordination	When various factors in both collective and individual environments are intertwined, the individual teacher's ability to handle these affairs effectively directly affects their professional experience;
	Capacity allocation	When various factors in both collective and individual environments are intertwined, the ability of individual teachers to be competent and responsible directly affects their professional experience;
Career Achievement	Trusted	Whether a teacher is trusted by superiors, parents, and students in the field of teacher education directly affects their sense of professional achievement;
	Recognized	In the current society, the social status, treatment, and level of importance of teachers directly affect their sense of professional achievement;
	Realizing value	The words and deeds of teachers in the field of education and teaching have an impact on the development of society and the growth of students. This is the mission and responsibility of teachers. How well this role is played is an important reminder of teachers' self-worth and directly affects their sense of professional achievement;
	Making progress	Whether teachers have been promoted in their professional development, professional titles, and awards in various professional competitions are all manifestations of their growth. Whether their growth is smooth or not will directly affect their sense of professional achievement;

Axial coding is a process of further deepening the numerous categories formed by open coding, in order to obtain categories with stronger generalization or higher abstraction levels. Its main task is to discover and construct various connections between categories, including causal relationships, temporal relationships, temporal relationships, situational relationships, similarity relationships, etc. [4] thus organically linking the subcategories obtained in open coding. Summarize and enhance the 17 subcategories, and extract four main categories: individual environment, collective environment, sense of professional rhythm, and sense of professional achievement, as shown in Table 3.

3.3. Selective Coding

Selective coding involves developing core categories, systematically linking them with other categories, establishing relationships, developing storylines, and depicting overall behavioral phenomena. By repeatedly browsing, comparing, and analyzing raw materials, open coding, axial coding, and analysis memos. This study found that 'occupational burnout' can be used as the core category, and the main category relationship structure can be used as the 'storyline' to construct a model diagram of 'the formation mechanism of occupational burnout among rural teachers', as shown in Figure 1.

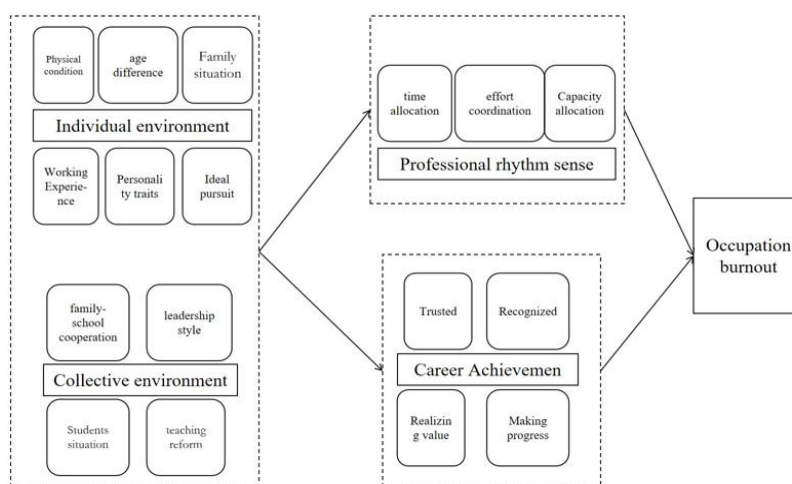


Figure 1. Formation mechanism of occupational burnout among rural primary school teachers

4. Research Findings and Explanations

4.1. The Sense of Professional Rhythm and Achievement Directly Affect the Sense of Professional Burnout among Rural Primary School Teachers

4.1.1. The Sense of Professional Rhythm Directly Affects the Sense of Professional Burnout among Rural Primary School Teachers

Every profession has its own characteristics, and the fundamental difference between the teaching profession and other professions lies in teaching and educating people. From the perspective of professional targets, teachers face living people, not lifeless organisms, but growing teenagers; From the perspective of professional content and tasks, the job of a teacher is not only to teach, but also to educate people; From the perspective of work style, teachers mainly use their own knowledge, wisdom, and personal charm to influence students through education, teaching, and the process of coexisting with students. 'If we only attend a few classes and finish work immediately, it would be easy, but how is that possible? Being a teacher is a conscientious job with only a lower limit and no upper limit.' (T03) Being a teacher in different stages of life has different specific job responsibilities and methods. Primary school teachers will spend more energy on managing student discipline and cultivating good habits; The time allocation, energy allocation, and ability allocation of primary school teachers form their

sense of professional rhythm. When time, energy, and ability are all capable of handling the current job, one will feel at ease and will not have too much pressure or urgency. On the contrary, there will be negative feelings such as "unable to keep up, unable to bear it, slow adaptation, and unbearable", and one's own pace of action cannot be consistent with the work schedule, making people feel tired and want to lie down or give up. Of course, this feeling of not being able to keep up with the pace is not necessarily caused by personal reasons, but may also be due to too many non-teaching affairs in the school, far exceeding the normal workload. 'If it's just teaching students, I think it's okay to have multiple classes. But you also require us teachers to watch the daycare and brunch from morning till night, which makes me feel very tired.' (T06)

4.1.2. The Sense of Professional Achievement Directly Affects the Sense of Professional Burnout among Rural Primary School Teachers

Sense of achievement is the psychological feeling that a person experiences after achieving their goals or desires through their own efforts. It is not limited to achieving big goals, and even small goals can bring a sense of achievement. This feeling stems from the balance between desire and reality. A sense of achievement is a basic need for everyone in modern society, and it plays an important role in teachers' adherence to their teaching intentions. When there is often a sense of achievement in the field of education and teaching, professional burnout is difficult to occur. 'I feel used to it now. Over the long term, I have found that this job can actually

bring me a great sense of achievement. Through my own work, I can change a person, such as their mindset and attitude towards life. I think it is quite meaningful. Compared to when I first started working, my current work status has actually improved. (T10) Conversely, it can lead to feelings of fatigue. When taking over a new class, students may need more attention and guidance because they may not be easy to manage and teach. They try their best to do it themselves, spend a lot of time on it, but still do not receive any results, and they will be discouraged, wondering if I did not do well. (T13)

4.2. The Environment Indirectly Affects the Occupational Burnout of Rural Primary School Teachers Through the Interweaving of Occupational Rhythm and Occupational Achievement

4.2.1. The Impact of Individual Environmental Factors on Occupational Burnout Occurs through Two Pathways

Individual environment includes the physical condition, age, family situation, work experience, personality traits, and ideal pursuits of individual teachers. These factors not only affect the sense of professional rhythm but also the sense of professional achievement, which in turn affects the sense of professional burnout. When teachers have health problems or rely on the care of elderly and children in their families, and the workload is relatively high, they feel that time and energy cannot keep up with the pace of work. However, a sense of mission and responsibility drives teachers to persist, and their hearts often struggle. If this state persists for a long time, professional burnout will occur. *'I am almost 50 years old, and my energy cannot keep up in all aspects. I also have many physical problems, such as dizziness, headache, numbness in my hands and feet. But as a homeroom teacher and a teacher of Chinese, I need you everywhere. When I can't handle it, I really want to retire early. (T14) I have two children, the eldest just started kindergarten and the youngest is only one year old. Every night when I go back, I have to deal with the two of them, and I don't even have time to check my phone. Not to mention preparing for competitions, I have to squeeze time in school to prepare for classes. At noon, I check on childcare and other things, and hardly have any rest, so I have to work around the clock. (T8)* Teachers often face unexpected events in the process of education and teaching, requiring educational wit and work experience to cope. If not handled properly, it can lead to feelings of frustration, and if this happens frequently, it can also cause professional burnout.

4.2.2. The Indirect Impact of Collective Environment on Occupational Burnout is More Pronounced

The collective environment includes home school cooperation, leadership style, student situation, and teaching reform, all of which have an impact on the sense of career rhythm and achievement. Education is not solely the responsibility of teachers, but rather a collaborative endeavor involving multiple parties. The most direct partners include parents, students, school leaders, and colleagues, with the first three groups having a more significant and direct impact on teacher burnout. *'There was a student before who didn't submit his homework from Monday to Thursday. I asked that student to submit his homework every day, but he didn't submit it until Friday. So I called his parents, hoping they could supervise him to complete his homework. Then that*

parent went to the principal to complain about me, and I felt quite aggrieved. (T11) The principal will have an impact on you. In the past, the principal adopted a relatively relaxed policy, and he wouldn't manage us too tightly. In fact, we also worked hard on our own. Now that we have changed leaders, we have to manage everything and take care of everything. I feel that this atmosphere is so oppressive. His leadership style and some of the management systems he has established will make me feel professional fatigue. He often comes up with decisions that you find unbelievable, and time is urgent and tasks are heavy. (T9) The students in the village have a poor foundation, are not obedient, and do not work hard. Like us who need to read aloud every day in English learning, they don't do oral practice at all when they come home. Some knowledge has been taught many times, but there is no response or complete absorption, and I feel like doing this job doesn't make much sense. (T5) In addition, various reforms in the field of teaching will always receive support from some people and resistance from others. Reform means that the old system will change. In this process, those who cannot adapt or are unwilling to accept due to external or personal conditions are prone to occupational burnout. The new curriculum standards now require teachers to make students the main body of the classroom and let them learn on their own. However, the children here lack organizational and expressive abilities, and cannot quickly meet the requirements of the new curriculum standards. But the leaders constantly demand that we teach according to the new curriculum standards, so we can only adapt slowly, but it will be a bit difficult, especially for some old teachers who are resistant to these reforms. (T4)

5. Suggestions

5.1. Guide Rural Primary School Teachers to Rationally View Occupational Burnout

No matter what profession, some people will experience job burnout, and it is difficult to completely eliminate this phenomenon. Teachers should actively face professional burnout. Teachers should pay attention to cultivating a healthy mentality and a sound personality, always maintain a positive and upward attitude, arrange work and life reasonably, balance work and life as much as possible, strive for positive social support, and reduce the generation of negative emotions. Teachers should improve their career planning, enhance their self-management abilities, and adhere to lifelong learning; Pay attention to self-renewal, enhance professional competence and teaching ability, adapt to environmental changes, actively reflect on teaching, and thereby reduce the occurrence of occupational burnout; Establishing the correct role of a teacher, constantly enhancing one's self-confidence, and also learning psychological regulation. Actively participate in activities that are beneficial to physical and mental health, cultivate personal interests and hobbies during holidays, and actively participate in physical exercise. Physical exercise can improve people's emotions and increase their ability to cope with stress. [5] Peaceful coexistence with colleagues, learning from experienced teachers, emphasizing communication and exchange between teachers and students, reducing conflicts between teachers and students, promoting positive interaction with parents, and establishing a good home school relationship.

5.2. Emphasize Career Guidance for Rural Primary School Teachers

Generally speaking, the professional growth of primary school teachers goes through four stages: newly hired teachers, qualified teachers, excellent teachers, and well-known teachers. But only a very small number of people can complete these four stages completely, and many people stay in the second or third stage. The stagnation in professional development, the continuous investment requirements for teachers' time, experience, and abilities in education and teaching work, as well as the impact of uncertain factors such as individual physical condition, age stage, and family support, can cause conflicts in teachers' hearts. If guidance can be provided through school organizations during the early stages of teacher recruitment, and the career development path of teachers can be planned well, it will effectively reduce the professional burnout of rural primary school teachers.

5.3. Further Optimize the Professional Environment for Rural Primary School Teachers

Schools should strive to transform traditional management models and establish a teacher centered management philosophy. While creating a harmonious and friendly educational environment, they should also establish a teacher centered management system, optimize the allocation of educational resources, fully tap into the subjective initiative and creativity of primary school teachers in the education and teaching process, give teachers more autonomy, and enhance their professional happiness, satisfaction, and sense of achievement. For rural primary schools, in order to retain excellent teachers or future excellent teachers, it is necessary to cultivate teachers and enable them to help students become adults while realizing their own life values. Most teachers choose the position of primary school teacher with educational ideals in mind, rather than seeking a temporary solution for survival. Relying solely on economic benefits and humanistic care to retain people is a superficial relationship. The education of children cannot rely solely on teachers. Parents should share the responsibility of cultivating their children as much as possible and maintain reasonable expectations for teachers. Schools and families should unite to play a collaborative role in education and jointly promote the healthy growth of children. Schools should continuously promote the improvement of management systems to enhance teachers' discourse power, create a harmonious working environment for teachers, and alleviate the fatigue caused by school management systems [6]. The principal should be good at uniting the faculty and staff. In such an atmosphere, the principal and teachers establish a good emotional relationship, develop a sense of familiarity with the principal, and achieve consensus in understanding and spiritual recognition, making the teachers wholeheartedly accept the

principal.

It should be pointed out that the occurrence of occupational burnout among rural primary school teachers is not always influenced by all the above factors. The same factor also has different effects on different teachers. Because of the differences, different respondents will experience unique psychological changes when facing occupational burnout. In addition, there are still some shortcomings in this study. One is that the research object is primary schools in suburban towns of major cities in the Pearl River Delta, and establishing a model of the mechanism of occupational burnout based on this may not be suitable for the situation of primary schools in remote mountainous areas; Secondly, occupational burnout is a psychological activity that varies with changes in individual or collective environments. Currently, the respondents are mainly undergraduate students, and for graduate students, the influencing factors of their occupational burnout may differ from the conclusions of this study. Further research will be conducted in the future.

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