

The Burnout Phenomenon of Teachers under Various Conflicts

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Abstract: Teachers' burnout is common and harmful, especially high school teachers who work at county. From the perspective of education management, the paper provides descriptions and explanations of teachers and school administrators' behaviors and concepts of value. It found out that conflicts between them probably lead to teachers' burnout. It include the conflict between overloaded work pressure under strict school management and teachers' call for flexibility, the conflict between redundant roles of teachers and lack of specific organizational objectives, the conflict between unfair evaluation and teachers' call for fairness. The paper is aimed at finding out why these conflicts lead to teachers' burnout.

Key words: management theories; high school teachers; school administrators; conflicts

Burnout is a group of negative symptoms that an individual experiences at work. Suffering burnout, teachers, with job passion gone, show passive, negative or even numb attitudes and emotions to people around them or the people they serve. Besides, their own sense of self fulfillment is lowered. Burnout not only has negative effect on teachers' own physical and mental health but also triggers conflicts between themselves and their colleagues, school administrators, lower instruction quality, and affects the development of students' mental health, worse still, it will greatly affect the whole society negatively. Based on surveys on four middle schools at a county in Guangdong Province, this paper focuses on the burnout phenomenon of high school teachers at county.

In high school, education administrative personnel are more likely to make higher demand on teachers so as to survive in the fierce high school education competition, especially the competition of college entrance examinations, with other rivals, and with city schools in particular. Under such pressure, high school teachers work very hard, they look forward to being respected and cared for. They are not frequently involved in school administrative life, nor could administrators detach completely from teachers. The interaction between teachers and administrators affect teachers' emotion, especially at a county where education laws are not effectively executed usually. Besides, high school teachers are confronted with other pressure resulting from education management, which adds their emotion burden. Set on this background, the paper is aimed at finding what conflicts trigger high school teachers' burnout and how conflicts arrive.

1. Educational Management and Teachers' Burnout

1.1 An educational management theories

In the past, literature concerning teachers' burnout usually adopted the perspective of psychology or sociology, focusing on teachers themselves. Some experts pointed out that teachers' character, age, educational

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level, subjects that they instruct and the whole society are all important factors leading to teachers' burnout. Although some scholars touched the relationship between education especially school management and teachers' burnout, they often tended to describe and lacked practical research. Instead, I use the perspective of education management to analyze this phenomenon.

There exist contradictory schools of management theories as far as teacher management is concerned, viewed from different perspectives, their opinions controvert each other. Their conflict is relevant to the discussion of this paper.

1.2 Webber's management theory

Administration by bureaucrats is the most efficient form of organization. Their disciplined behavior, governed by rules and controlled by hierarchical superiors, ensures a rational and consistent pursuit of organization objectives. The rationality and reliability are enhanced by the emphasis placed on establishing a detached, impersonal relationship among staff and between staff and the public, so ensuring that impact of the individuality of any given position occupant is minimal.

It is focuses on five aspects: (1) mechanic rationality. It emphasizes the effectiveness and adaptability of means, ignoring whether objective is reasonable, just or not. (2) It emphasizes hierarchy and enhances regulations. Its sole objective is to chase efficiency and economic benefit. Efficiency is the standard to evaluate all the jobs. (3) It emphasizes the external orderliness of educational behaviors and the external educational performances. (4) It regards teachers as a passive object, a machine running for completing instruction and other tasks. Therefore, it stresses authority, procedures and standardization. (5) It emphasizes the power of administration, law and economy, ignoring that of enlightenment.

1.3 Abrahamson's management theory

However, some scholars disagreed with Webber; they claimed that the aspect of educational irrationality should not be ignored. According to Abrahamson, teachers "seem unreasonably resistant toward administrative control." He said:

Professional people work as senior and junior, rather than as boss and subordinate. Of course somebody has to be in charge of the project or activity and be responsible for it. But the professional thinks of it as a group project, with each member of the team having independent responsibility clearly vested in him. Thus the superior should be a coordinator or a teacher, rather than a superior.

They claim that their autonomy should be respected; otherwise they will resist school management. Pondering over the conflict, I find that one school is fixed on organization, while the other on teachers. These two theories indicate that when inappropriate management is carried out, the conflicts between administrators and teachers are inevitable. As teachers are subordinates in school, the inevitability will negatively affect their emotions and lead to their burnout, Burnout is more apparent among high school teachers at counties as mentioned above.

2. Methodology, Methods and Data Source

2.1 Methodology

Using qualitative research and field work methods, the paper studied four middle schools at county A in Guangdong Province. Two schools have a junior education department as well, while the other two have only senior middle school students. The framework for collecting data for this research is based on the management

theories mentioned above. The data are drawn from teachers and administrators' own experience and the writer's own participation, for he has worked with many of the teachers surveyed for several years and therefore he is very familiar with the situations there. The purpose is to offer explanation and description of teachers and administrators' behaviors and their concept of value. In this way the paper makes sure that data are authentic, real-life, not faked; they are representative of samples, individuals or collective and they are valuable. and findings and conclusions are not only coherent but also reliable.

2.2 Methods and data source

First, documentary analysis: The research has gathered many documents concerning high school management, such as formal school management documents, daily professional management regulations and the speech scripts of school leaders.

Second, narrative analysis: The research has gathered much email writing, letters or chatting record on QQ from high school teachers. And their narration has been sort out in a scientific manner and some representative ones are illustrated later.

Third, interview: School leaders, other administrative personnel, students and other people as well as those teachers who wrote email were interviewed.

Four, self participation: The writer worked at the county for 7 years with many teachers surveyed. He had a close contact with those school administrators, teachers, and students; therefore, he is very familiar with the details of the school running and the phenomenon of high school teachers' burnout.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Work pressure under strict management VS teachers' call for flexibility

Like many other teachers, high school teachers should not only carry out their regular tasks such as preparing for lessons, studying textbooks and methods of instruction, but also spare much time to mark homework and guide student's extracurricular activities. At the same time, they are also supposed to take part in many kinds of school-led supervision, special program study, and various trainings as well as routine further study. But they can't avoid these routine tasks, for schools ordered that their instruction record book must be handed in once every week and only those whose book is clean and full of writing can be praised. Someone who dare refuse to hand in or do it late will usually be criticized or fined. It has happened in four schools I surveyed. And in almost every school, it makes clear that those who are absent from regular meeting for no good reason will be fined at the end of each semester.

Worse still, three of four schools under survey made a very strict timetable for teachers. Despite different diction, their contents seemed almost the same as follows:

Teachers of Chinese and English must arrive at school to guide students to read textbook aloud at 6:40 am and 6:40pm very Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday respectively. Teachers of Chinese, Math and English must be on evening duty twice a week. Other teachers must be on duty at 2:30pm twice a week and on evening duty once a week. Every week, one group of teachers has to make up lessons for students and the next week another group of teachers do the same. Two groups will carry out two such rounds a month. Once teachers violate the rules, fines will be made and vary from 5 Yuan to 20 Yuan per time according to situations. And, if serious accidents concerning students' safety occur, the teacher on duty that time will bear major responsibility. If high school teachers' attendance record and duty performance turn out to be unsatisfactory, they are likely to lose chance to teach senior 3 students ...

Many high school teachers feel oppressed and exhausted under such demanding time requirement, among

them, teachers of so called “major subjects” (Chinese, English and Math) feel more tired. As Ms. A said:

To avoid being criticized for being late for evening duty, I have to rush to market to buy food for supper immediately after school (5:10 pm) and shoot back home preparing my cooking, at the same time, I must take care of my baby. Having swallowed supper, I have to drive my motorbike in a hurry to school which is not near. I feel life is like a battle. Sometimes I feel I almost break down.

They feel even suffocated when they just finish weekday instruction and then have to make up lessons on weekends, and even worse, on Monday, they have to get up early to attend the raising national flag ceremony. As one teacher put it “my energy is running out. I just walk between school and home, numb, don’t know what I am doing”. This phenomenon is more common in senior department than in junior one at comprehensive middle schools, the research found.

Among all high school teachers, senior 3 teachers feel most acute about exhaustion. Each of them is given specific number of students to tutor in spare time and their tutoring process must be recorded in a notebook and handed in. At the same time, school administrators hand out many model tests to teachers to select, to practice, to examine students, to carefully analyze students’ performance. Even worse, some administrators watch teachers’ behaviors closely. Thus, teachers’ time is mercilessly deprived of and worn out, as Ms. B put it:

What the hell did he (the administrator in charge of grade senior 3) think he is? Is this grade his own? Order us to do this or that all the time! Almost every day he carried a notebook passing by office rooms. If he caught some being late or absent, he would grin! Then at the meeting, he would coldly call names of those unlucky ones and detailed how much they had been fined. Who knows where the fines go! I swear I work very hard, but how can I bet that I won’t be late or something else happens? ...

From this case, we clearly find that teachers’ interest is not correspond with that of administrators, but usually it is teachers who have to swallow down their pride and submit, otherwise, as one principal told at a public meeting that “That is how our school runs, if you are capable enough, you can go. I don’t care.” Many teachers just hide their anger inside.

When conflict went extremely, some teachers did quit their job at all cost, as Ms Li did. She used to be a top English teacher at the county but she couldn’t bear the school management, saying “this is the hell you live in, you are just a slave. Alive or dead, they don’t care! Marks are their life! I would rather give up many things and quit! I quit, aren’t they satisfied?” and she did and works in a high school in a big city now.

Another situation also affect teachers’ burnout, as Ms. C said:

The difficulty level of college entrance examination is increasing year by year, higher and higher demanding of teachers, especially modern multi-media instruction design and operation ... to some teachers, they have to continually improve their professional and computer skills, this nevertheless adds up some teachers’ pressure, especially those who know little about computer.

To learn to adapt to the new reform, such high school teachers are forced to spare more time to learn new technology, which adds their anxiety, for the school has made it public that some unqualified teachers will be eliminated. More and more university graduates are competing for this profession. Some older teachers have to worry about their future and their mood is unstable. Unlike teachers in a city who have more opportunities to use multi-media instruction technology, high school teachers at county have to start to learn from the base, besides, the school at county usually have inadequate multi-media rooms for teachers to share and therefore their improvement is slow and in return increases their anxiety.

Thirdly, although now the issue of teacher specialization has been on the agenda, it’s still at the transitional

stage where some aspects have been formalized, for example, the system of employment; many aspects are still not fully professional. And at many small counties where some educational laws are still not really executed, teaching management still copies the traditional ones, and teachers there have difficulty fighting for their own rights.

However, many teachers call desperately for professional flexibility, claiming that some unnecessary tasks should be reduced as many as possible or even eliminated. They also insist that their school should create more recreation to brighten their tiring life and wish school should not only focus on college entrance examinations but also develop a further perspective. Unfortunately, their call usually goes ignored, so they continue to be confronted with heavy and repetitive tasks. As a result, many teachers sink into extreme mental and physical exhaustion.

3.2 Conflict of teachers' various roles VS lack of specific organizational objectives

Role means "A person's behavior mode that stands for their social status and identity, and includes others' expectation of them" Role conflict means that when some people play the same role, they are confronted with different expectations from others. Or it means that when an individual plays various roles, different roles clash against each other. The former is called "inner-role conflict" while the latter "inter-role conflict".

In China, teacher's serving as a model has long been in people's mind. Confucius said "Students will follow their teacher without being ordered if their teacher is a proper model himself, otherwise much order will be of no avail " Many people have assumed that teachers are so perfect that they ought to serve as the best moral example for youngsters. The stereotype imposes too many missions and duties on teachers. Living under frequent public supervision, teachers have to oppress normal expression of their personal emotions in case their fault will be under severe criticism. Once committing any mistake, teachers usually go through strong and lasting self-censure.

However, many surveyed teachers unanimously think differently that they will do their best but don't expect others to ask too much from them, especially at the sensitive stage of high school which is one step close to university education.

Unfortunately, school administrators highly value this role and in many occasions they speak highly of those models who still come up to the platform despite their severe health problem or those do a marvelous job in teaching at the cost of their families. Encouraged so, many teachers try to be a perfect model in the society by beating out their every energy, and their physical health will be seriously harmed and leads to mental wearing out.

At the same time, besides being an instructor, teachers serve as a subordinator, a student discipline supervisor, a coordinator between students and parents and so on. Under the current circumstance, high school teachers have to spare much time to handle their students' discipline problems. This becomes more obvious when expansion of high school education is undertaking across China and accordingly various levels of students are packed into high school classroom. Mr. A said:

Tired, I am very tired, almost everything has something to do with you, including students' study, living and, oh, you also have to be a babysitter, I am not joking, you see, I have to walk outside the classroom to watch who is sleeping or chatting or reading non-textbooks in class twice a week, and also have to supervise who is not sleeping, talking in their dorm after 23:00 pm ...when they violate the school rules, I have to "educate" themtoo many things, you can't imagine? But every teacher in our school does so ...

It happens in all four schools. Young women teachers feel more painful because high school students seem unlikely to be obedient to them. But all the teachers said that these additional tasks almost flatten them down and they vex their anger upon students who rebel in return, and then teachers feel they almost lose control of

themselves and negative emotions will last for several days and even one or two weeks.

Also, under hierarchy management, teachers, as a subordinator, usually have to carry out what their leaders ask them to do, unconditionally.

A computer teacher told me that he regretted being a teacher, for, whenever mid-term and final examinations are coming, he would be torn open. The administrators would ask them to type students' subjects marks at any time, but he can't say no, or he (the principal) would tell him "go or stay to work, I can hire another one, a better one.

This happens more among those teachers who teach so called "minor subjects" (the ones that are not a single compulsory subject in the college entrance examination). They feel their dignity is put under others' feet and they often work passively.

The list of teachers' role can lengthen again. Many teachers surveyed reported that they sometimes are afraid to deal with students' parents. Miss A said:

What she does (the students' parent) know? That day, she came to my classroom, crying that her boy's physics mark had dropped very much. I told her that he (the student) often read novels in class. What did she respond? Oh, my God! She said he used to be a "nice" boy never reading other books in class. It must have been my fault, she said ... then we argued.

In my survey, many teachers report that skepticism from parents put them under embarrassment. In comparison with junior middle school students' parents, the senior ones' parents are more sensitive about their children' academic performance, and their expectation is usually higher for they want to see the fruit of their education investment on their children.

Many administrators I interviewed admitted that they themselves didn't know what teachers should do and what they don't have to do for there is no specific and clear rules about the range of teachers' work. One top leader in the local education bureau complained that they had no choice but to put so many tasks on teachers for they have no adequate money to hire other staff. The conflicts lead to teachers' deep depression and wear them out.

3.3 Unfair evaluation VS teachers' call for fairness

As mentioned above, the students' performance in some important exams such as final exam organized by the superior city education bureau or college entrance exams is closely related to the interests of various parts. Leaders of local education bureau can attract more investment and secure their personal status and prestige, and school administrators can obtain their social status, prestige, wealth and power, while teachers expect to get more professional opportunities, higher social status, prestige, wealth and other benefit.

The conflict arrives when unfair evaluation system is carried out and it will severely beat their morale. In order to achieve a large scale of success, four schools stipulate almost the same:

The bond delivered to teachers at the end of each term will be determined mainly by, first, the overall performance of the whole grade. If the grade fails to reach the index ordered by school, all the teachers will receive less money than other grades that performed better. Then, if all teachers in one class can over fulfill or finish the index ordered by the grade to the class, they can receive the same amount of money, but if some teachers can produce some outstanding students who can be ranked top 100, 50, 10, or the best in the whole city or in the whole province, they will earn extra money according to the level of excellence ...

This is a typical case of hierarchy and economy-oriented management. Administrators fix their eyes on the efficiency of teachers' instruction. They believe that stipulated by profit, all teachers will be easily under control.

The problem is that education performance is unlike the way a factory runs, for it depends on many undependable personal conditions that are out of teachers' control. And unfair or standard evaluation can discourage teachers' confidence:

Mr. B was quite low in spirits after he received the bond at the end of the term, he was even angry and felt unfair. Although his students performed well in the final math exam in his class, they did a poor job in other subjects. Besides, the whole grade failed to fulfill their supposed index. He told me that he would rather his students had done a shabby job so that he can balance his mood for other teachers who performed much worse could get almost the same amount of money. He felt deceit and hopeless and he was wondering whether he would work as hard as before next term ...

This clearly shows that sole focus on the overall performance but ignoring individual one would lead to teachers' delusion.

At the same time, when administrators pay too much attention to marks, they ignore the gradual growth of teachers' professional skills and harm some teachers' pride, as Mr. C said "Why do you have to work hard? Useless! If your students encounter bad luck, all your efforts are a waste of time! Who care about the daily performance of yours students?" This is why so many teachers are passionless about their instruction. Short-sighed goals replace far-sighed potential.

When it keenly affects teachers' economy interest, especially when the amount of money they can receive is large, some unfairly-treated teachers will fall into rage. Ms. D was one of them.

After knowing that she received 5000 Yuan less than other English teacher in the bond delivery of college entrance exams performance, she went furious immediately. Full of anger, she rushed into the principal's office, screaming "What on earth did she earn so much more than I? My overall performance was much better than hers. I made more extra contribution to my class than she! She only sent one student to Peking University. But did we educate only the best one? 5000 Yuan less! Are you nuts? ..."

When I summarize teachers' interviews, email-writing and my own experience, I found many teachers agreed that the exchange of marking students' papers between different grades is a cause, because teachers don't care so much about another grade and deadline is usually limited. When some outstanding students fall into the hand of some irresponsible teachers who finish marking students' papers in a hurry, their marks would meet bad luck. And secondly, many other elements affect teachers' performance, for example, if a teacher can't secure the chance to teach key classes, they automatically lose a chance to produce a top student from the very beginning. And outstanding performance in some exam, especially in the college entrance exams, is often a lucky thing. For example, Yangcheng Evening News, a nationally-known paper in Guangdong Province, once reported that some best students in the whole province in the college entrance exams could not be ranked top ten or even top 50 in their school before the college entrance exam.

However, in order to survive the competition from rivals in the same county or those in the developed city school administrators say they are forced to do so for if outstanding students appear in another school, that school can attract more quality students and begin another advantageous circle.

The question is whether the school is a market oriented by profit or a place where teachers can be well evaluated and tapped out their best potential?

4. Conclusions

Some traditional education management theory stresses the importance of rationality, hierarchy, and

efficiency, however, certain other theory points out people should not ignore the irrational aspect of school management, otherwise teachers will turn resistant against management.

Unfortunately, many high schools still adhere to the traditional management theory of rationality, especially high schools at counties where high schools have to struggle against city for survival in severe education competition and education laws are not well executed. Education administrators at counties focus on regulations and efficiency, ignoring teachers' individuality, emotional needs, dignity and call for concern and respect. Conflicts between high school teachers and educational administrators are inevitable, including the conflicts between overloaded work pressure under strict school management and teachers' call for flexibility, the conflict between the redundant roles of teachers and school's lack of specific organizational objectives, and the conflict between unfair educational evaluation and teachers' call for fairness. To be well informed of why these conflicts lead to high school teachers' burnout is very important for people to adopt effective methods to solve it.

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