

The Causes of Teacher Burnout in Secondary Education in Underdeveloped Regions

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Abstract:

Against the backdrop of promoting equitable and high-quality education, enhancing the quality of education in underdeveloped regions hinges on strengthening the teacher workforce. However, educators in these areas commonly face severe professional burnout, which not only undermines their physical and mental well-being and career development but also negatively impacts student academic performance and overall educational quality in underdeveloped regions. Therefore, investigating the causes and solutions to this issue is of significant importance. This study focuses on teacher burnout in underdeveloped regions, employing a combined methodology of systematic literature review and in-depth interviews. First, a systematic literature review comprehensively examines the causes of burnout. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with representative secondary school teachers in underdeveloped regions to collect primary data, thereby validating and deepening theoretical research findings. The findings reveal that the causes of professional burnout among secondary education teachers in underdeveloped regions are complex and multifaceted. Building on this foundation, this paper proposes multi-level, systematic improvement strategies. These strategies aim to alleviate professional burnout, stabilize the teaching workforce, and enhance educational quality, thereby providing a reference framework for both theoretical research and practical application.

Keywords: Teacher burnout; underdeveloped regions; secondary education

1. Introduction

Secondary education in underdeveloped regions

shoulders the important responsibility of laying the foundation for local youth to enter higher education and future career development. The quality of sec-

ondary education is directly related to intergenerational mobility and social equity. From the perspective of research background, teacher burnout is a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal achievement caused by long-term work pressure [1]. In underdeveloped regions, due to their remote geographical locations, scarce resources, and relatively backward socio-economic conditions, the working environment and sources of stress faced by teachers are more complex and prominent. The phenomenon of teacher burnout is particularly common and serious; that is, the uneven distribution of resources leads to multiple work challenges for teachers, which in turn causes emotional exhaustion and a decline in professional identity [2]. This ultimately leads to a high teacher turnover rate and a decline in teaching effectiveness, which has a negative impact on the development of education.

This study selects a secondary school in the underdeveloped western region of China as a typical case to explore the following core issues: the actual situation of teacher burnout in the region, as well as the key internal and external factors that trigger it. At the same time, it analyzes the mutual influence mechanisms among these factors and proposes multi-level, systematic improvement measures to provide a theoretical basis for effectively addressing teacher burnout in underdeveloped regions.

The significance of this study lies in: at the theoretical level, by combining systematic literature review with qualitative interviews, it can construct a more fitting explanatory model of teacher burnout in China's underdeveloped regions, enriching localized educational human resource management theory. At the practical level, in-depth analysis of these influencing factors and the proposal of targeted, actionable improvement methods can provide decision-making references for local education administrative departments and school administrators to formulate teacher support policies, improve school management, and foster a positive organizational atmosphere. This effectively intervenes and prevents teacher burnout, ensures the stability and professionalism of the teaching workforce, and ultimately promotes the continuous improvement of secondary education quality in underdeveloped regions.

2. Methodology and Results

2.1 Research Methods

A systematic literature review was conducted following standard procedures. The core search focused on the past five years (2021-2025) to ensure research timeliness and cutting-edge relevance. Relevant literature was retrieved

using the keywords “teacher burnout,” “underdeveloped regions,” and “secondary education” through the CNKI and Web of Science databases. Supplementary searches (1996-2020) aimed to enhance the review's comprehensiveness and provide historical context.

Inclusion criteria are defined as follows:

(1) This study focuses on the phenomenon of work burnout among secondary school teachers in underdeveloped regions, or its influencing factors, coping strategies, and current status, aligning with the core research topic; (2) The research subjects are explicitly identified as in-service secondary school teachers in underdeveloped regions; (3) Academic literature (Chinese core journals, CSSCI, SSCI/SCI papers, doctoral/master's theses) must feature a complete research design and valid conclusions.

Exclusion criteria include:

(1) Literature irrelevant to the theme or with low relevance that only sporadically mentions keywords; (2) Non-academic works (e.g., newspaper commentaries, popular science articles) and duplicative studies; (3) Inappropriate research subjects (e.g., urban teachers, elementary school teachers) or lack of clear geographic and educational stage definitions; (4) Incomplete or low-quality literature (e.g., missing full text, unreasonable arguments, non-standard research methods).

Following screening based on the above criteria, 16 studies were ultimately included.

To obtain first-hand and in-depth empirical data, this study selected a secondary school (hereinafter referred to as Secondary School A) in an underdeveloped region of western China as the research site. Using purposive sampling, 10 teachers with differences in teaching experience, subject, professional title, and position were selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview outline was designed around key dimensions such as work experience, stressors, social support, and professional achievement. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and the content was recorded in detail. Subsequently, qualitative content analysis was employed to code and categorize the interview transcripts, extracting core themes.

2.2 Research Results

The following research results are obtained for the causes of teacher burnout in Secondary School A:

A lack of teaching fulfillment. Ms.Li (Chinese teacher) explained, “Our school's admission cutoff scores are significantly lower than those of municipal schools, so our students have weaker academic foundations and find learning more challenging.” Mr.Zhang (math teacher with six months of experience) added, “I'm at a loss--how can I make them enjoy learning math?” These responses high-

light how teachers struggle to achieve professional fulfillment due to students' weak academic foundations and slow progress in academic improvement.

Insufficient family support. Among the 10 interviewed teachers, 8 were relocated from other regions. They shared that working in underdeveloped regions meant their daily routine revolved around school and faculty housing, while their families lived in urban centers, often only returning on weekends. This highlights how remote postings limit family interaction, leaving teachers unable to receive timely care and support from their loved ones.

The school administration provided inadequate support. Interviews revealed that four teachers had been abruptly reassigned to new classes without prior consultation. Two of these teachers subsequently faced student issues such as absenteeism and classroom conflicts. When seeking help from the school, they received mostly empty words of comfort rather than concrete solutions. In addition, Mr. Wang (English teacher) stated: "The school has quotas for external training programs each time, but it's often the school administrators who attend. Regular teachers rarely get training opportunities, and the content of these trainings doesn't align well with our school's actual circumstances." The school administration disregards front-line teachers' input in decision-making, leaving educators without support when facing teaching challenges. Furthermore, the school shows little concern for whether the participants and content of teacher training programs align with its own needs.

The imbalance between income and workload. Mr. Xia (Physics Teacher) stated: "Outside of class time, the school often requires us teachers to use students' self-study periods for homework explanations. This means we need to prepare more content, which also takes up our own personal time. However, the school hasn't paid attention to this issue." History teacher Ms. Liu explained: "I teach history to three classes alone, which keeps me extremely busy every day. In contrast, city teachers usually only teach one or two classes, yet we earn about the same. With only one supermarket nearby, the variety of goods is limited. When shopping, I often have to travel to the city, and every weekend, I have to commute between the school and the city center, which adds up to a significant expense." This shows that while more classes increase teachers' workload, it does not lead to higher pay, and they still have to cover additional living costs.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Occupational Burnout

Based on the systematic literature review and interviews,

the causes of teacher burnout in less developed areas are multifaceted:

3.1 Personal Aspects

Some teachers may feel powerless to address student issues due to limitations in their professional knowledge and skills. Low self-efficacy among teachers directly exacerbates burnout, which further negatively impacts their psychological resilience, hope, optimism, and self-efficacy [3]. When facing adversity, they lack the ability to respond positively and bounce back effectively. Research findings indicate a significant negative correlation between psychological capital (HERO) and teacher burnout, making it a crucial individual resource for mitigating teacher burnout [4]. Teachers with a high degree of psychological capital can better control their work and working environment, and enhance their ability to cope with professional demands. Therefore, this enhanced sense of control helps increase an individual's likelihood of coping with job burnout [5].

The gap between teachers' aspirations for a fulfilling career in underdeveloped regions and the harsh realities of education there creates cognitive dissonance and psychological conflict. Students' weak knowledge foundation and lack of initiative make it difficult to achieve significant academic improvement in a short period, which in turn makes it hard to gain a strong sense of teaching accomplishment. It is undeniable that respect for teachers and attention to education have also diminished in underdeveloped regions. Research shows that the lack of professional achievement directly exacerbates burnout, particularly in the low-dimensional aspect of personal accomplishment among teachers [6].

3.2 From the Schools Perspective

Schools often overlook teachers agency. School administrators frequently disregard frontline teachers input in decision-making, neglecting their autonomy. Moreover, schools provide inadequate support when addressing teaching or student management challenges. This aligns with research findings: insufficient organizational support significantly diminishes teachers professional well-being and exacerbates burnout [7]. Additionally, overly strict school management fails to effectively motivate teachers. The rigid management style increases work pressure and reduces job satisfaction [8].

Schools lack developmental support for teachers. The limited evaluation criteria for excellence undermine collaborative culture among educators, while a strong teacher learning community and peer support serve as vital resources to alleviate burnout. The restricted quota for

off-campus training programs, coupled with content often disconnected from frontline teaching realities, exacerbates the issue. In underdeveloped regions, teacher training frequently suffers from impractical content and monotonous formats, failing to meet professional development needs. Moreover, schools in these areas tend to overemphasize seniority while undervaluing young teachers' capabilities, discouraging their professional growth. Such career barriers significantly diminish work motivation and heighten burnout risks [9].

3.3 Macro-Socioeconomic and Community Factors

From a macro perspective, educational funding, quality teacher allocation, and development opportunities continue to favor urban areas. Despite receiving special subsidies for rural teachers, their overall income remains disproportionately low compared to the workload and living costs (including children's education and healthcare expenses). The imbalance between compensation and work demands is the primary economic driver of teacher burnout, leaving schools in underdeveloped regions chronically under-resourced [10]. Systemic challenges such as uneven resource distribution and lack of professional support in these areas further contribute to the macro-level factors of teacher burnout [2].

In underdeveloped regions, teachers often have limited time with their families, resulting in diminished family support. Most parents in these areas show little concern for their children's education, leading to insufficient educational support from families. This situation increases teachers' workload and psychological stress. Research indicates that a lack of social support amplifies the impact of work pressure on burnout, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in underdeveloped regions [11].

4. Propose

4.1 Teachers Should Establish a Reasonable Professional Concept

Guiding teachers to develop a scientific and rational professional perspective holds significant practical value. Occupational burnout exerts notable negative impacts on educators' physical and mental health, particularly when there exists a substantial gap between their professional aspirations and actual work experiences. When teachers perceive a stark contrast between their idealized expectations of teaching and the numerous challenges encountered in practice, their burnout levels tend to surge dramatically. This not only compromises their mental well-being

but may also lead to various physical discomforts. Therefore, implementing systematic interventions to help teachers establish proper professional values becomes crucial. Teacher training colleges should incorporate resilience and expectation management modules. School districts could mandate mentoring programs where experienced teachers guide novices on contextual challenges. Specifically, during pre-service training for new teachers, emphasis should be placed on adjusting expectations, encouraging novice educators to adopt a pragmatic approach to teaching. In professional development programs, comprehensive explanations of the multifaceted nature and rich connotations of teaching should be provided, enabling educators to fully recognize that educational work is both challenging and rewarding [12].

4.2 The Key Role of Students in Improving Teachers' Job Burnout

In underdeveloped regions where educational resources are scarce and teacher-student relationships are more intimate, positive teacher-student dynamics help students develop positive emotional connections with schools. These relationships also enhance school engagement, stimulate learning motivation, and improve academic commitment [13]. Implementing highly practical intervention measures involving joint participation of teachers and students in classroom settings can alleviate teacher burnout. The approach primarily focuses on two core dimensions: value recognition and teacher-student relationship building. In the value recognition dimension, teachers and students collaboratively conduct localized emotional expression activities and learning achievement showcases. Students demonstrate their appreciation for teaching, while teachers perceive the value of instruction, with both parties enhancing professional fulfillment through two-way interaction. Regarding relationship building, the model establishes two-way communication channels within classroom contexts. Through daily care and in-depth exchanges, teachers and students cultivate stable and harmonious relationships, effectively alleviating teachers' professional loneliness and life pressures. This classroom-based collaborative intervention model, requiring no additional resource investment, aligns with the educational realities of underdeveloped regions and significantly improves teacher burnout issues.

4.3 The Joint Efforts of Teachers, Schools, and Society

Teachers are among the most vulnerable groups to occupational burnout, with this issue being prevalent in the teaching profession [14,15]. While fragmented interven-

tions may yield limited results, a systematic approach is essential to address teachers' challenges through integrated strategies spanning personal, institutional, and societal dimensions [16]. At the individual level, teachers should receive psychological capital training and stress management guidance to enhance self-empowerment capabilities. Institutionally, schools should streamline administrative processes to reduce non-teaching burdens while fostering collaborative learning communities and positive organizational cultures. Socially, policymakers must strengthen resource allocation and policy support to improve compensation systems for teachers in underdeveloped regions. Only through coordinated multi-pronged measures can effectively alleviate occupational burnout among secondary school teachers in disadvantaged areas, stabilize teaching teams, and inject lasting momentum into educational equity and regional development. Effective strategies should simultaneously focus on resource supplementation, support system development, and individual capacity building, while fully considering local contexts--successful interventions often combine customized professional development programs with optimized organizational support and psychological empowerment [2,4].

5. Conclusion

This study investigates occupational burnout among secondary school teachers in underdeveloped regions. Through systematic literature review and in-depth interviews at relevant schools, it confirms the widespread and severe nature of this issue. The research identifies a multi-layered complex system of contributing factors, including overwork, inadequate support systems, limited career development opportunities, imbalanced rewards, and insufficient personal psychological capital. These factors interact to create a negative feedback loop, ultimately exacerbating teacher burnout and increasing turnover intentions.

The limitations of this study stem from the restricted scope of the selected cases. Future research should expand the sample size to include secondary schools in underdeveloped regions with diverse geographical and educational backgrounds, thereby enabling cross-regional comparative studies. Methodologically, data analysis tools can be employed to more accurately identify the root causes of burnout. For intervention studies, the proposed strategic framework can be employed to design specific measures and conduct empirical validation, providing an actionable practical model for addressing teacher burnout in underdeveloped regions. This approach may yield a set of feasible methods offering reference points for tackling

teacher burnout in these regions.

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