

Study on the current situation of occupational stress and countermeasures of elementary school teachers in the context of double reduction policy

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore the current situation of the sources of teachers' stress under the Chinese double-reduction policy. We conducted one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with five Elementary school front-line teachers and analyzed the interview results based on Colaizzi's seven-step method to distill four themes: "guaranteeing teaching quality, excessive workload, parental absence and anxiety, and difficulties in policy implementation", and proposed coping strategies to reduce teachers' occupational stress and promote the implementation of the double-reduction policy.

Keywords: double-reduction policy; teachers' occupational stress; coping strategies

1. Introduction

The double reduction policy mainly refers to the effective reduction of the excessive burden of homework and the burden of out-of-school training for students at the compulsory education level in China's education sector. The implementation of the "double reduction" policy in July 2021 has brought about a series of changes in school education and teaching reform, such as increased after-school services, reduced homework, increased classroom efficiency, reduced extracurricular training, and increased parental expectations, which have greatly affected teachers' daily activities. This change has consequently brought new challenges and pressures to the teachers, which has impacted the psychological health of primary and secondary school teachers, and some studies have shown that teachers are a high prevalence group for depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems (Yang et al,2019)[1]. Teachers' psychological problems not only affect teachers' work behaviors and trigger teacher burnout, but also affect students' learning behaviors and interpersonal relationships, etc.

Teachers' occupational stress is an unpleasant emotional experience such as anger, anxiety, tension, and frustration due to teachers' own qualities and various external aspects (Kyriacou, 2001)[2]. Among the many studies on teachers' occupational stressors, different researchers have suggested different aspects of teachers' occupational stressors. Trendall (1989)[3] found that there were four most obvious stressors for teachers: heavy load, poor student behavior, lack of time, and large class size. Kyriacou (1987)[4] suggested difficulties in managing classroom discipline, time crunch, low social status, low work environment support, lack of motivation of students to learn, and poor interpersonal relationships among colleagues as different stressors. Some researchers listed 10 sources of teachers' stress: lack of government support, frequent changes, lack of information about these changes, teachers not getting the respect they deserve, national curriculum, disproportionate pay and workload, student evaluations, problematic student behavior, lack of non-contact time, and lack of link between teaching and promotion (Dunham et al, 1998)[5]. In China, on the other hand, researchers have suggested that the main sources of teacher stress are: student factors, teaching load, grade pressure, self-development needs, career expectations, academic titles, and interpersonal relationships (Shao Guanghua et al, 2002; Xu Fuming et al, 2002)[6][7], and among them, studies have also shown that three factors, namely student factors, teaching load, and grade pressure, significantly predict teachers' occupational stress. In comparison with foreign studies, it is not difficult to find that grade pressure does not significantly predict teachers' occupational stress in foreign countries, so this factor is considered to be a particular influential factor in the context of teaching in China. Primary and secondary school teachers are prone to higher levels of occupational stress in their educational work due to increased burdens caused by

student achievement as well as promotion targets.

Although scholars in China and abroad have proposed a variety of factors as sources of teachers' occupational stress, with the deepening of China's basic education reform and the advancement of teachers' professionalization, more and more and higher demands have been made on teachers, in particular, in the context of the double reduction policy, the new working environment of teachers, the break in the rhythm of work, the reduction in class time, the reduction in the amount of homework, the addition of after-school services, and the change in the classroom model while ensuring the quality of teaching, will bring new changes to the sources of stress for teachers.

In the traditional way of teaching, under the requirement of "grade-only theory", overburdened homework is a major problem in almost all elementary school, and the double reduction policy requires teachers to change the way of teaching to improve students' mastery of subjects by assigning a lot of homework and design more flexible and targeted homework. With the development of modern information technology and the implementation of the policy, teachers need to teach more vividly in the classroom and master the use of more intelligent devices to improve students' participation in the classroom. Whether teachers who are adapted to traditional teaching will be uncomfortable with the educational reform and the mastery of the use of intelligent devices, which will increase their workload and thus lead to excessive pressure on teachers.

In summary, this study intends to explore the current situation of the sources of teachers' occupational stress under the double reduction policy through the interview method, and finally to propose coping strategies in order to reduce teachers' occupational stress and create a better educational and teaching environment.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects of interview

In this study, based on the principle of combining purposive sampling and convenience sampling, five elementary school teachers were selected as interviewees by open recruitment and invitation, and the specific information is shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Basic information of the interviewed teachers

No.	Gender	Age	Title	Years of work	Subjects taught
S1	Female	50	first class	30	Language
S2	Female	34	first class	13	Language
S3	Female	45	first class	26	Maths
S4	Female	35	second class	10	English
S5	Female	30	second class	9	Physical Education

2.2. Research process

2.2.1 Interview outline and data collection

This study used semi-structured interviews which are informal in-depth interviews following a rough outline. The interview outline was designed to focus on teachers' perceptions of the pressures that existed after the implementation of the double reduction policy and the ways to address them. The questions consisted of three main parts, the first of which was to obtain background information about the interviewee, such as "How many years of teaching experience do you have now?" "What are the subject you teach?" Then, the questions explored the pressure of teachers after the double reduction policy, such as "What changes and pressure do you think your work has brought after the double reduction policy?" "What specific tasks do you think are stressful for you?" Finally, we explored ways to address teachers' stress and their expectations, such as "What are your main ways of relieving stress at work?" "What forms of measures do you most look forward to to reduce your stress?"

Due to the impact of the epidemic, this study adopted an online interview method, in which a one-to-one online interview of about 30 minutes was conducted with the interviewee's consent and

recording. In the interview, the interview outline mainly served to control the topic and direction of the interview, and assisted the interviewer to conduct a more comprehensive preliminary collection of relevant information, so the main content of the interview remained basically the same for different interviewees, but the specific way of questioning would be different, and the key points would be followed up during the interview to grasp the details about the key issues and prevent the omission of key information. The transcription of the interview data is completed within 24 hours after the interview is completed.

2.2.2 Data analysis

This study used the Colaizzi seven-step method to analyze the interviews (Liu Ming, 2019)[8]. The specific steps were as follows: a: the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into text, and the transcripts totaled approximately 32,000 words. The researchers repeatedly read the transcribed interview transcripts to immerse themselves in the textual material and familiarize themselves with it; b: the researchers analyzed the material word by word, identifying and extracting important and meaningful statements related to the research questions; c: the researchers generated codes by summarizing the recurring ideas; d: pooling the coded ideas, repeatedly reflecting on the codes, searching for meaningful common concepts, and forming theme prototypes; e: describe each of the generated themes in detail and introduce excerpts from the participants' typical original descriptions; f: construct themes by putting similar themes and their descriptions together for iterative reflection and comparison, identifying and extracting similar ideas; g: return the generated theme structures to the study participants for validation, asking whether their true experiences were captured to ensure the results are accuracy.

3. Results and analysis

This study extracted four themes from the exploration of teachers' sources of job stress after the double reduction policy: teaching quality assurance, work overload, parental absence and anxiety, and difficulties in policy implementation.

3.1. Theme 1: Teaching quality assurance

Test scores are the most directly pursued quality indicator of schooling in primary and secondary schools. (Xu Fuming et al, 2002)[7] Under the implementation of the double reduction policy, the reduction or even elimination of homework has led to changes in teachers' teaching patterns, and teachers' concerns about teaching quality assurance and student achievement improvement have induced occupational stress among teachers. S1: "In the lower and middle grades, basically there is no homework in the evening, so we have to be very demanding in terms of the design of homework in addition to the required teaching in the limited time available." S2: "Because there is no written homework, time in school becomes tight because it is impossible to meet the grade requirements in the lower grades without practicing writing with the pencil." Safeguarding the quality of teaching and learning has also led teachers to perceive greater pressure in the context of reduced class time in the main subjects but unchanged performance indicator tests. S3: "The main indicator of the education system to assess schools is to see how the test results of the sixth grade, both school leaders and parents, there is no relaxation of the score, so the double reduction for us ordinary teachers is not any great change, even more difficult than before."

3.2. Theme 2: Work overload

Teachers are tired of participating in school activities outside of their regular teaching duties and of work having to be done outside of work hours (Peng Xiaohu, 2012)[9]. In this study, respondents indicated that teachers needed to spend more time designing assignments, implementing classroom reforms, etc. due to the change in teaching mode, and the difference in actual results led to the need for teachers to spend extra time on self-improvement and deepening instructional design, and the increased workload made teachers perceive more pressure and difficulties. S3: "There are more requirements for children to apply what they have learned, but in the actual classroom it is very difficult for teachers, the time spent and preparation may take at least 3-4 times more time than the original kind of knowledge teaching course, and in addition, another problem with arranging for the implementation of such courses is that each child has different hands-on skills, so such courses are very difficult to implement in the classroom." S4: "Nowadays, the requirements for assigning homework are also very high, and it

needs to achieve the effect of learning from the past, not only to be effective, but also to be interesting, and to be different from each students, and to assign homework in a hierarchical way, with basic homework and extended homework. Designing assignments also takes time and requires thinking. Our time is fully scheduled every day, and if a teacher wants to have self-growth, he have to work extra hours after work and at home to achieve it."

The increase in after-school extended hours has resulted in teachers working longer hours in other words, and this has led to teachers being more likely to feel fatigued. S2: "The most intuitive feeling is about the rest time, we used to get out of school at 5:30 p.m. The latest batch was 5:30 p.m., but now school doesn't end until 6:00. Teachers like us who arrive at 7:00 am., it's early enough to get off at 7:00 p.m., so the school time is really up to 12 hours." It is worth noting that subtopics such as phonics, physical education, and aesthetics, according to respondents, have received more attention after the double reduction policy, leading to an increase in display activities and extended after-school services, which on the one hand has increased the workload of teachers and led to increased work pressure on teachers, S4: "In terms of workload, in addition to the workload of 16 classes per week, there is also an increase in the number of hours, depending on how many classes you have in a week, there is an increase in the corresponding hours, and apart from the increase in hours, more time has to be spent on lesson preparation. After the implementation of the double reduction policy, physical education performance is more valued, and teachers may have to spend more energy on those late bloomers and think about ways to direct them to exercise", On the other hand, since the after-school extended service is chosen according to students' own interests, students are more motivated to participate in the classroom, which reduces teachers' pressure in teaching and is more conducive to the selection of students specializing in sports, S4: "Because sports is different from language, mathematics and English, everyone will have their own corresponding specialties, like basketball or athletics or other ball games. During the class, if it is in a large class of more than forty students, it is more difficult to teach these specialties, instead, in this case, the students are interested to enroll in my course, the students are interested and I have time, which has some relative benefits to promote the training of my specialties."

3.3. Theme 3: Parental absence and anxiety

The promulgation of the double reduction policy rectified the out-of-school training, and out-of-school tutoring in the main subjects was banned. In the past, out-of-school tutoring facilitated students' learning to check for gaps and, to a certain extent, relieved parents' anxiety about their children's learning and education. Interviewees said that after the implementation of the double reduction policy, teachers need to check the gaps of a large number of students specifically, which increases the workload, and at the same time, teachers perceive a higher level of pressure and anxiety due to the anxiety of parents, S2: "The student has gaps in his learning and has not mastered the knowledge taught by the teacher in class, and the parents do not have time to tutor him after class, how can this gap be filled? Only back to school again, let the teacher to tutor him, but the number of students is so much that this is also a pressure point for teachers." S3: "The double reduction policy has just been implemented and parents are very anxious about it and they will transfer their anxiety to the teachers and make extra demands on the teachers."

The implementation of the double reduction policy is still in progress, and parents' understanding of it is rather one-sided. According to the interviewees, the lack of parents' understanding of the double reduction policy has led to the absence of family education in education, and teachers need to spend more time guiding the physical and mental growth of students, which has increased the burden of teachers. S4: "Perhaps parents have a rather one-sided understanding of the double reduction policy, thinking that teachers can no longer assign so much homework, and children do not have to go to cram school, they are finally relieved, but they forget to educate their children at home. The school is concentrating on the child's learning and development, but the most important aspects of a child's life, such as character, personality, habits and learning rules, are actually more influenced by the family, but many parents are not aware of it."

3.4. Theme 4: Difficulties in policy implementation

Teachers have different levels of pre-existing cognition and work in very different styles, not all teachers follow a uniform model in dealing with problems, they may accept some changes and reject others (Jin et al, 2022)[10], schools are still exploring how to implement the double reduction policy more effectively, according to the interviewees, the lack of specific implementation plans as well as

guidance leads to teachers not having a clear direction, teachers feel their way through the implementation based on their own teaching experience, and there is some difficulty in developing specific implementation measures. S4: "Now the policy is just promulgated down, there is no a specific implementation of the program and guidance, everyone shows his talent, and that is a kind of confusion. Each teacher's ability is different, so there is no unified guidance, and it is still very difficult to implement the details, and the teachers are under great pressure." S1: "It's still stressful for older teachers to make pedagogical changes, especially if they need to do it without examples or guidance."

4. Discussion

4.1. Strengthen home-school cooperation and promote parental involvement

In this study, the results showed that the absence of parents and their anxiety about their children's education increased teachers' workload, and parents' anxiety was easily transmitted to teachers. In the process of elementary school students' growth, school and family are the most profound influences on them, and only through home-school cooperation can a new situation of moral education for elementary school students be reshaped. Home-school co-education is of great significance in correcting students' misbehavior and shaping their personality qualities. Therefore, schools and teachers should strengthen communication with parents and make more parents understand the significance of the double reduction policy through parent-teacher conferences, and at the same time, they should work closely with parents in their daily work to provide timely feedback to parents on their children's deficiencies and jointly guide their children's physical and mental health development.

4.2. Paying attention to teachers' needs and reasonable allocation

In this study, teachers generally responded that after the implementation of the double reduction policy, teachers need to spend a lot of time on innovation and self-exploration in order to ensure the quality of teaching, on the other hand, in the process of this change, due to the reform in many aspects, teachers' workload increases and working hours are extended, which leads to the increase of teachers' burden and pressure. Therefore, schools should pay attention to teachers' occupational achievement and satisfaction, meet teachers' active and reasonable needs for teaching innovation, provide fertile ground for teachers' teaching innovation in the environment of "double reduction" policy, stimulate teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, provide more opportunities for teachers to further study and meet the development needs of teachers at different levels, increase cooperation opportunities with universities and experts, and provide support for teachers' teaching innovation. We also provide support for teachers' teaching innovation by increasing cooperation opportunities with universities and experts, and forming teams of excellent teachers to bring into play the guidance and demonstration needs of famous teachers. By improving teachers' own professional development, we can reduce the sense of powerlessness in teaching, thus effectively guaranteeing teaching quality and reducing teachers' occupational stress.

Schools should also reasonably divide the workload among teachers involved in after-school services and avoid a "one-size-fits-all" situation. Schools should make flexible arrangements for after-school services according to their specific conditions, especially for older teachers and teachers with special family members who need care; and fully consider the specific school conditions of different grades to explore a "flexible school leaving system" for students and a "flexible work system" for teachers. Teachers should be given sufficient discretionary time for professional development and reflection on teaching, and their wishes and aspirations should be taken into account so that they can reasonably divide their workload and arrange an appropriate workload, thus reducing their occupational stress.

4.3. Establishing demonstration sites, effectively guide teachers' development

Some of the teachers in this study showed that due to the lack of a clear guidance, there is confusion in the implementation of the policy and repeated teaching design reform due to the difference in teachers' cognitive level and individual ability, thus increasing teachers' occupational stress and easily inducing teachers' burnout, which affects the implementation of the policy. Therefore, the government, as the "head of the school and family", should lead and guide the implementation of education and teaching development in primary and secondary schools. Not only should it clarify the positioning of education and teaching goals and establish long-term strategic planning, but also improve the education

system to fundamentally solve the problem of pressure for further education and help the transformation and upgrading of out-of-school training institutions, etc. In the specific implementation process, schools can be selected as demonstration sites in different regions to provide training and guidance for teachers so that they can adapt to the implementation of the policy more quickly and improve the quality level of teaching in the teaching reform, thus reducing teachers' discomfort with the reform, lowering their professional pressure, stimulating their enthusiasm for teaching, and promoting the return of education to its essence.

5. Shortcomings and Prospects

The interviewees in this study were all from an urban elementary school, but there were differences in the degree of implementation of the double reduction policy in different regions and different schools, so the findings of the study have some limitations. In the future, we need to further expand the study group, analyze the occupational stress of teachers in different institutions and different groups of teachers with different years of teaching, explore the changes brought from double reduction policy for teachers of different subjects and different ages, as well as the sources of stress, and propose relevant improvement measures.

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