

Occupational Burnout and Job Satisfaction in Chinese Private Primary Schools: A Conceptual Framework of Demographic Moderation

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of China's "Double Reduction" policy and the rapid modernization of basic education, private primary school teachers in Western China face a unique professional environment characterized by high accountability, market-driven instability, and intensive emotional labor. While the inverse relationship between occupational burnout and job satisfaction is well-established, existing literature often treats teachers as a homogeneous group, overlooking how individual backgrounds condition this dynamic. This paper addresses this theoretical gap by proposing an integrative conceptual framework specifically for the Chinese private education sector. Drawing upon the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory, we argue that the translation of burnout into dissatisfaction is not a uniform physiological reaction but a contingent process modulated by a "Demographic Filter." We posit that professional characteristics (such as the high-demand role of Homeroom Teachers and low tenure) and socio-economic factors (such as salary level and marital status) act as critical moderators that either amplify or buffer the psychological toll of stress. By synthesizing these perspectives, this study moves beyond generic stress theories to offer a nuanced, equity-based model for understanding teacher well-being, providing actionable insights for school administrators to implement differentiated support strategies in a high-pressure educational landscape.

Keywords

Occupational Burnout; Job Satisfaction; Demographic Moderation; Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model; Social Exchange Theory; Private Primary Schools

1. Introduction

Teacher well-being constitutes the bedrock of educational quality and school effectiveness, serving as a critical indicator of a healthy educational ecosystem. In the rapidly shifting terrain of China's basic education system, the psychological state of teachers has transcended individual concern to become a systemic issue affecting

institutional stability. While the relationship between occupational stress and professional satisfaction is a central theme in educational psychology, the specific dynamics within China's burgeoning private sector remain under-explored. This section delineates the macro-context of educational reform, identifies the critical tension between occupational burnout and job satisfaction, and underscores the urgent need to examine these dynamics through a nuanced demographic lens.

1.1. The Evolving Landscape of Private Education in China

Education has long been prioritized as a strategic pillar for national development in China. In recent years, the landscape of basic education has undergone profound transformation driven by high-level policy initiatives aimed at improving teaching quality and relieving academic burdens. These reforms have significantly altered the professional environment for educators. Within this broader national framework, private schools have emerged as a significant component of the education system, yet they operate under distinct market mechanisms compared to public institutions. Teachers in the private sector often face precarious working conditions characterized by high workload demands and performance-based accountability, which differ markedly from the stable tenure systems found in public schools (Han, Yin, & Wang, 2020).

Evidence from recent studies suggests that this specific environment places unique pressures on private school teachers. Unlike their public school counterparts who benefit from government-backed stability, private school teachers must navigate a landscape defined by intense competition and parents' high expectations for academic achievement. This context often translates into a work environment where resources are constrained while demands remain excessively high, creating a fertile ground for occupational stress (Bao & Fang, 2021). Consequently, understanding the psychological toll of this environment is essential for maintaining a sustainable workforce in the private education sector.

1.2. The Dual Crisis

The intensifying work environment in private schools has precipitated a "dual crisis" characterized by the prevalence of occupational burnout and a concurrent decline in job satisfaction. Occupational burnout, theoretically conceptualized as a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, arises when the interpersonal stressors of the job become chronic (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In the context of Chinese schools, teachers are expected to perform intense emotional labor, balancing instructional duties with moral education and student care.

Current literature indicates that such burnout acts as a potent corrosive agent against job satisfaction—a construct reflecting teachers' affective and cognitive evaluation of their work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). When teachers deplete their

emotional resources, their intrinsic motivation and satisfaction with extrinsic rewards inevitably diminish. This relationship is critical because low job satisfaction is a primary predictor of turnover intention (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). In the private sector, where salary fairness and work conditions are pivotal concerns, this cycle of burnout and dissatisfaction poses a severe threat to the continuity of instruction and the overall quality of education (Wu & Zhang, 2020).

1.3. The Necessity of a Demographic Perspective

While the inverse relationship between burnout and job satisfaction is well-documented, a significant theoretical gap persists regarding the conditional nature of this link. Existing studies often treat teachers as a homogeneous entity, assuming that occupational stress affects all individuals uniformly regardless of their personal or professional background (Xie, Li, & Chen, 2020). This assumption is particularly problematic in the complex ecosystem of Chinese schools, where workforce diversity is high.

It is argued here that the mechanism linking burnout to satisfaction is nuanced and heterogeneous. Demographic characteristics—specifically job role (such as the distinction between a Homeroom Teacher and a Subject Teacher), tenure, salary level, and marital status—likely function as critical moderators. These factors serve as a filter through which teachers interpret their professional reality. For instance, the demanding role of a homeroom teacher may amplify stress compared to subject teachers (Wang & Li, 2019), while age and experience may provide coping resources that buffer against burnout (Zhou & Liu, 2021). Similarly, social support derived from marriage can mitigate the negative effects of work stress (Jiang & Li, 2022). Therefore, this paper aims to construct a conceptual framework that integrates the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory to elucidate how these demographic variables buffer or amplify the impact of burnout.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

To provide a robust analytical structure for examining the complex interplay between occupational stress and professional satisfaction, this study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory (SET). While the JD-R model elucidates the psychological mechanisms through which work characteristics deplete teachers' energy, Social Exchange Theory offers a lens to understand how individuals evaluate these costs against potential rewards. Together, these theories form a comprehensive framework for explaining not only the direct impact of burnout but also how this impact is conditioned by the specific demographic and professional profiles of teachers in China's private education sector.

2.1. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model has emerged as a dominant paradigm for understanding occupational well-being. It posits that all job characteristics can be classified into two overarching categories: job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or psychological effort and are associated with physiological and psychological costs. In the context of Chinese private schools, these demands are particularly acute, manifesting as excessive teaching loads, administrative burdens, and the intense emotional labor required to manage parent-school relationships. Conversely, job resources are the functional aspects of the job that help achieve work goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal growth.

This study specifically draws upon the "health impairment process" postulated by the JD-R model. According to this process, when job demands are chronically high and resources are insufficient to buffer them, employees experience a depletion of energy, leading to emotional exhaustion and health problems (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). Recent empirical evidence from the Chinese educational context supports this mechanism, suggesting that the imbalance between the high accountability pressures of private schools and the limited institutional support available directly precipitates teacher burnout (Wu, Liu, & Zhao, 2021). Thus, the JD-R model provides the causal explanation for why the specific work environment of private primary schools leads to the erosion of teachers' psychological well-being.

2.2. Social Exchange Theory (SET)

While the JD-R model explains the genesis of burnout, Social Exchange Theory provides the necessary theoretical leverage to understand the moderating role of demographic characteristics. SET views social behavior as the result of an exchange process wherein individuals weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships (Song & He, 2019). Applied to the workplace, teachers engage in a reciprocal relationship with their schools: they invest time, effort, and emotional commitment in exchange for tangible and intangible rewards, such as salary, professional recognition, and career stability.

Within this framework, occupational burnout represents a significant "cost" in the exchange relationship. When this cost becomes excessive, the perceived value of the employment relationship diminishes, leading to reduced job satisfaction. Crucially, however, the evaluation of this cost-benefit ratio is subjective and varies across different teacher subgroups. Demographic characteristics such as tenure, salary level, and marital status function as determinants of an individual's "comparison level" or resource baseline. For instance, adequate financial compensation (salary) can serve as a powerful reward that balances the psychological costs of stress, maintaining the equilibrium of the social exchange (Han, Yin, & Wang, 2020). Similarly, age and experience may alter a teacher's expectations and coping resources, influencing how

they calculate the worth of their professional investment (Zhou & Liu, 2021). By integrating SET, this study moves beyond a deterministic view of stress to a more dynamic understanding where demographic factors actively shape the translation of burnout into job satisfaction.

3. Development of Propositions

Building upon the theoretical integration of the JD-R model and Social Exchange Theory, this section delineates the specific pathways through which occupational burnout influences job satisfaction. We argue that this influence is not a monolithic process but is structurally conditioned by the individual's professional profile and socio-economic context. Consequently, three propositions are developed to explicate the direct erosion effect of burnout and the moderating mechanisms of professional characteristics (job role and tenure) and socio-economic factors (salary and marital status).

3.1. The Erosion Effect

Consistent with the health impairment process of the JD-R model, occupational burnout acts as a primary antagonist to job satisfaction. Emotional exhaustion, the core dimension of burnout, drains the psychological resources necessary for teachers to find pleasure in their work or to engage meaningfully with their students. When teachers feel emotionally overextended, they are less likely to perceive their work environment, remuneration, or professional recognition positively. Furthermore, depersonalization—a defensive coping mechanism characterized by detachment—directly undermines the intrinsic rewards of teaching, such as the sense of relational connection with students (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Empirical studies within the Chinese educational context have corroborated this negative correlation, suggesting that as burnout levels rise, the perceived quality of the employment relationship deteriorates (Zhang & Zhu, 2008). In the resource-constrained environment of private schools, where demands are high and external supports are often fluctuating, this erosion effect is likely to be particularly pronounced. Therefore, we posit that burnout functions as a critical stressor that directly degrades the multifaceted construct of job satisfaction.

Proposition 1: Occupational burnout has a significant negative impact on the job satisfaction of private primary school teachers.

3.2. The Professional Filter

The impact of burnout is filtered through professional characteristics, specifically the teacher's job role and tenure. In the Chinese educational system, the distinction between a "Homeroom Teacher" (Banzhuren) and a subject teacher is profound. Homeroom teachers bear a "double burden," responsible not only for academic instruction but also for comprehensive class management, student moral education,

and continuous communication with parents (Wang & Li, 2019). This role overload creates a scenario where the same level of emotional exhaustion may lead to a more severe drop in satisfaction for homeroom teachers compared to their subject-teaching counterparts, as their capacity to cope is overwhelmed by the sheer volume of demands (Sun & Xia, 2018).

Parallel to job role, tenure serves as a proxy for professional resilience and resource accumulation. Novice teachers, who are often in the process of establishing their professional identity, typically lack the classroom management skills and emotional regulation strategies developed over years of practice. Consequently, they are more vulnerable to the shock of burnout (Ingersoll, 2001). In contrast, veteran teachers may possess greater efficacy and institutional knowledge, allowing them to maintain a baseline of satisfaction even when experiencing stress (Zhou & Liu, 2021). Thus, professional characteristics act as a filter that can amplify the detrimental effects of burnout.

Proposition 2: Professional characteristics moderate the relationship between burnout and job satisfaction. Specifically, the negative relationship is stronger for homeroom teachers and novice teachers compared to subject teachers and experienced teachers.

3.3. The Socio-Economic Buffer

From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, the translation of burnout into dissatisfaction is also contingent upon the resources available to the individual, specifically financial compensation and social support. Salary is not merely an economic metric but a tangible signal of professional value and institutional recognition. In private schools where pay disparities can be significant, teachers receiving lower salaries may perceive burnout as a high "cost" with insufficient "reward," thereby exacerbating their dissatisfaction (Han, Yin, & Wang, 2020). Conversely, a higher salary level can function as a compensatory buffer; while it does not eliminate burnout, it balances the social exchange equation, mitigating the intensity of the dissatisfaction (Song & He, 2019).

In addition to financial resources, marital status represents a critical source of external social support. The emotional backing provided by a spouse can serve as a psychological reservoir, helping teachers recover from the emotional labor performed at school (Jiang & Li, 2022). Unmarried teachers, particularly those living alone in urban centers like Kunming, may lack this immediate support system, rendering them more susceptible to the spillover effects of work stress. Consequently, socio-economic factors act as a buffer that can dampen the negative impact of burnout.

Proposition 3: Socio-economic factors moderate the relationship between burnout and job satisfaction. Specifically, higher salary levels and being married buffer the negative impact of burnout on job satisfaction.

4. The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the propositions developed in the preceding section, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework to systematically explain the variability in teacher well-being. Unlike traditional linear models that assume a uniform impact of stress, the proposed framework posits that the translation of occupational burnout into job satisfaction is a contingent process. This section synthesizes the theoretical perspectives of energy depletion and social exchange, delineates the mechanistic operation of the "Demographic Filter," and clarifies the specific applicability of this framework within the high-stakes environment of Chinese private primary schools.

4.1. Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

The proposed framework moves beyond a simple causal correlation by synthesizing the physiological perspective of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model with the sociological perspective of Social Exchange Theory (SET). While the JD-R model effectively explains the energy-depletion pathway—where excessive demands lead to emotional exhaustion—it does not fully account for the evaluative pathway where individuals assess the worth of their continued investment in the job (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

By integrating these two theories, the framework establishes a dual-process mechanism. First, occupational burnout acts as the independent variable, representing the depletion of psychological resources. Second, the individual teacher employs a cognitive "calculus"—grounded in Social Exchange Theory—to determine if the remaining satisfaction justifies the emotional cost (Song & He, 2019). This synthesis suggests that job satisfaction is not merely a reaction to working conditions but a dynamic outcome of how teachers weigh their "inputs" (emotional labor and exhaustion) against their "outcomes" (financial and social rewards) within the organizational structure.

4.2. The "Demographic Filter" Mechanism

Central to this framework is the concept of a "Demographic Filter." We propose that the causal flow from occupational burnout to job satisfaction is intercepted and modulated by this filter, which consists of the teacher's professional and socio-economic characteristics. This mechanism operates through two distinct functions: Amplification and Buffering.

The Amplification function occurs when professional characteristics intensify the perception of resource depletion. For instance, the role of a "Homeroom Teacher" acts as an amplifier; the multifaceted demands of this position mean that a unit of burnout leads to a disproportionately larger drop in satisfaction due to role conflict and overload (Wang & Li, 2019). Similarly, novice status amplifies vulnerability due to a lack of accumulated coping resources (Ingersoll, 2001).

Conversely, the Buffering function occurs when socio-economic factors provide ex-

ternal resources that absorb the shock of burnout. High salary levels and marital stability act as buffers. Teachers possessing these resources may experience high burnout but maintain a moderate level of satisfaction because the perceived "social exchange" remains balanced by financial security or emotional support (Han, Yin, & Wang, 2020; Jiang & Li, 2022). Thus, the "Demographic Filter" explains why teachers in the same school environment exhibit divergent levels of satisfaction despite facing identical stressors.

4.3. Contextual Applicability

This text-based model is specifically calibrated for the private education sector in Western China. Unlike public schools where *bianzhi* (tenure) provides a structural safety net, private school teachers operate in a market-driven context where employment is contingent on performance (Wu, Liu, & Zhao, 2021). The framework highlights that in such a precarious environment, the "Demographic Filter" becomes the primary determinant of professional survival.

For example, young, unmarried teachers with low tenure in private schools lack both the professional resilience (from experience) and the socio-economic buffers (from salary or family), making them the most vulnerable group in the proposed model. In contrast, experienced teachers with higher salaries are better positioned to withstand the "dual crisis" of burnout and market instability (Zhou & Liu, 2021). This contextual specificity ensures that the framework addresses the unique institutional realities of Kunming's private education landscape rather than applying generic Western models without adaptation.

5. Discussion and Implications

The conceptual framework developed in this study offers a structured lens for understanding the complex mechanisms linking occupational burnout to job satisfaction among private primary school teachers in Western China. By moving beyond a generic analysis of stress, this paper has highlighted how individual demographic characteristics filter the impact of professional exhaustion. This section discusses the theoretical advancements made by this integrative model, outlines concrete strategies for educational practitioners to enhance workforce stability, and acknowledges the boundaries of the current conceptualization to guide future empirical inquiries.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in the localization and integration of established Western theories within a specific Chinese educational context. While the Job Demands-Resources model has been widely applied globally, its application often overlooks the unique institutional characteristics of China's private sector, where market instability intersects with intense policy-driven account-

ability. This study advances the literature by operationalizing the "Demographic Filter," a mechanism that challenges the assumption of homogeneity among teachers. It demonstrates that the path from burnout to dissatisfaction is not a fixed physiological reaction but a variable psychological evaluation conditioned by one's professional and socio-economic status.

Furthermore, by synthesizing Social Exchange Theory with the health impairment process, this framework deepens the understanding of job satisfaction. It suggests that satisfaction is not merely the absence of stress but the result of a cognitive calculus where teachers weigh their emotional costs against their accumulated resources. This perspective enriches the discourse on teacher well-being by reframing demographic variables—such as tenure and salary—not just as background statistics, but as active resources that buffer the "cost" of burnout. This shift allows for a more precise prediction of which teacher subgroups are most at risk of attrition in high-pressure environments.

5.2. Practical Implications

From a managerial perspective, the proposed framework underscores the necessity of moving from equality-based management to equity-based support systems. School administrators must recognize that the "Homeroom Teacher" is not merely a job title but a high-risk category for rapid satisfaction decline. Consequently, schools should consider restructuring this role to reduce administrative redundancy or implementing differential compensation schemes, such as specific position allowances, to rebalance the perceived social exchange.

Additionally, the buffering role of tenure and marital support suggests that novice and unmarried teachers require distinct intervention strategies. For early-career teachers, schools should prioritize mentorship programs that accelerate the accumulation of professional resources, thereby artificially creating the resilience that usually comes with tenure. Regarding the socio-economic buffer, while private schools may face financial constraints, ensuring that salary structures are transparent and competitive remains paramount. Where financial increases are limited, administrators should focus on enhancing non-monetary rewards—such as professional recognition and clear career advancement pathways—to mitigate the eroding effect of burnout on satisfaction. Ultimately, the goal is to create a supportive ecosystem that accounts for the specific vulnerabilities of different demographic groups rather than applying a uniform wellness program.

5.3. Limitations & Future Research

While this study provides a coherent theoretical framework, it is limited by its conceptual nature. The propositions developed herein rely on the synthesis of existing literature and theoretical deduction rather than direct empirical validation. Consequently, the magnitude of the "Demographic Filter" effect remains to be quantified.

Future research should prioritize empirical testing of this model using quantitative methods, such as Structural Equation Modeling, with large-scale samples from private schools in diverse regions.

Moreover, the current framework focuses primarily on demographic moderators. Future inquiries could expand this model by incorporating psychological traits, such as resilience or self-efficacy, to examine how they interact with demographic factors. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to track how the relationship between burnout and satisfaction evolves as teachers transition through different life stages and career phases, providing dynamic insights into workforce retention.

6. Conclusion

The stability of the teaching workforce in China's private primary schools is pivotal for the sustained success of the nation's educational modernization agenda. This paper has argued that while occupational burnout poses a severe and direct threat to job satisfaction, its destructive impact is far from uniform across the teaching population. By constructing an integrative conceptual framework that bridges the physiological focus of the Job Demands-Resources model with the sociological insights of Social Exchange Theory, we have illuminated the regulating power of individual characteristics.

The central thesis of this study is the operation of a "Demographic Filter"—comprising job role, tenure, salary level, and marital status—which determines whether a teacher succumbs to professional dissatisfaction or maintains resilience in the face of stress. We have posited that vulnerable groups, such as novice homeroom teachers and those with lower financial or social support, experience burnout not just as fatigue, but as a fundamental imbalance in their social exchange with the school. Conversely, resources such as experience and adequate remuneration serve as vital buffers that protect the teacher's professional commitment.

Ultimately, addressing the "dual crisis" of burnout and dissatisfaction in Western China's private education sector requires a paradigm shift in management. School leaders and policymakers must move beyond generic stress-management initiatives to adopt differentiated, equity-based strategies that target specific demographic vulnerabilities. Only by recognizing and fortifying the unique needs of diverse teacher subgroups can private schools transform their work environments from sites of resource depletion into ecosystems of professional sustainability.

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