

Dilemma and Breakthrough: Research on the Reasonable Burden Reduction of Primary and Secondary School Teachers from the Perspective of Educational Ecology

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How to cite this paper: Su, P. D. (2023). Dilemma and Breakthrough: Research on the Reasonable Burden Reduction of Primary and Secondary School Teachers from the Perspective of Educational Ecology. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 165-173. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2023.111014>

Received: January 1, 2023

Accepted: January 17, 2023

Published: January 20, 2023

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Abstract

Optimizing school education and teaching ecology and reasonably reducing teachers' workload are important links to promote the high-quality development of basic education. Based on the existing research on the burden of primary and secondary school teachers, this paper believes that the extra burden and excessive burden should be reasonably reduced, and based on the theoretical perspective of education ecology, from the three main dimensions of teacher niche, the most appropriate principle, and the flowerpot effect, analyzes the practical dilemma of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers, and explores the corresponding breakthrough path. According to the research, it is an effective way to break through the dilemma of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers by reconstructing teachers' niche, enhancing teachers' subjective consciousness, eliminating environmental limiting factors, breaking through the flowerpot effect, and strengthening internal and external linkage and evolution according to the principle of optimum.

Keywords

Primary and Secondary School Teachers, Burden, Educational Ecology, Reasonable Burden Reduction

1. Introduction

The reasonable burden reduction of primary and secondary school teachers is an important starting point for the high-quality development of basic education, as

well as the premise and condition for the reasonable burden reduction of primary and secondary school students. At the end of 2019, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued *Several Opinions on Reducing the Burden of Primary and Secondary School Teachers and Further Creating a Good Environment for Education and Teaching*, which attracted extensive attention from the whole society and also marked a new stage in the work of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers in China. However, recent studies have shown that the situation of burden reduction of primary and secondary school teachers is not ideal at this stage, and even there is a new trend of “teachers’ burden is getting heavier and heavier” in some places (Feng, 2022). The work of burden reduction of primary and secondary school teachers has entered a “deep-water area”. Therefore, how to reasonably reduce the burden of primary and secondary school teachers has become a very realistic research topic. This study will use the theory of educational ecology, which can provide a unique perspective and analytical framework for educational research, to analyze the difficulties faced by primary and secondary school teachers at this stage, and explore an effective path for reasonable burden reduction of primary and secondary school teachers.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Burden of Primary and Secondary School Teachers

“Burden” is a neutral word. As a verb, it refers to “bear, bear”. As a noun, it refers to “work, responsibility, pressure, and cost”. It can be understood as “bear the corresponding work, responsibility, pressure, and cost”. The “burden of primary and secondary school teachers” can be divided into broad sense and narrow sense (Wang & Wang, 2013). The broad sense of the burden of primary and secondary school teachers refers to the work, responsibility, pressure and cost that primary and secondary school teachers need to bear in the whole social life, including the family burden, school burden and social burden, as well as the work burden and non-work burden. In the narrow sense, the burden of primary and secondary school teachers mainly refers to the school burden and work burden. This study discusses the burden of primary and secondary school teachers in a narrow sense, that is, the burden of teachers’ work in schools.

From the perspective of teachers’ responsibilities and responsibilities, the burden of primary and secondary school teachers can be divided into two types: internal and external. It is a reasonable, normal and necessary responsibility that primary and secondary school teachers must bear. The extra burden refers to the work, pressure and cost that must be undertaken beyond the teachers’ responsibilities as stipulated by laws and regulations. It is unreasonable, abnormal and unnecessary, and needs to be reduced reasonably. To some extent, the burden of primary and secondary school teachers can be divided into three types: moderate burden, excessive burden and light burden. The latest research shows that the current situation of excessive burden of primary and secondary school teachers

is relatively common (Dong, Liu, & Zhang, 2022). This study will explore the effective ways to reduce the burden of primary and secondary school teachers in accordance with the situation of extra burden and excessive burden.

2.2. Theory of Educational Ecology

“Educational Ecology” is a discipline that uses ecological principles and methods to study educational phenomena and problems. American scholar Cremin (1976) first proposed the term “ecology of education”. He combined ecology with pedagogy to study the internal factors of education and the relationship between education and external environmental factors. He regarded education as an ecosystem, in which the internal factors are interrelated and interacted with each other, and closely linked with external environmental factors, presenting a kind of coordination and contradiction, a state of balance and imbalance. As a subsystem of the social ecosystem, the educational ecosystem itself has the basic functions of material circulation, energy flow, information transmission, self-regulation and repair mechanism, and will also be restricted by other subsystems of the social ecosystem.

The education ecosystem is composed of the subject and the environment, and there are connections and interactions between the subject and the environment. Educational ecological subject refers to individuals or groups in the educational ecosystem. Different individuals or groups have different space-time positions and functional positions in the educational ecosystem, which shapes that different subjects in the educational ecosystem have different niches. The ecological niche of primary and secondary school teachers in China is in the leading position in the process of education and teaching, and the functional position is in the key position of teaching and promoting the all-round development of students.

The educational ecological environment is a complex composed of many factors, which are usually called ecological factors, and can be divided into promotion factors, invasion factors and restriction factors according to different functions (Lei, 2019). In the education ecosystem, these ecological factors can better promote the survival and development of the subject only if they maintain an appropriate limit in terms of quantity and quality, which is the principle of optimum. Limiting factors refer to those factors that can restrict the development of ecological subjects and even cause survival crisis. In the education ecosystem, the most important limiting factors in the environment are energy flow and information flow (Wu & Zhu, 1990). Energy flow usually refers to the education funds and materials invested, while information flow mainly refers to the new education concepts and methods related to education.

The educational ecological environment is a complex composed of physical environment and non-material environment, which can provide a stable environment suitable for teachers’ professional growth. However, if it is in a local environment for a long time, it will also lead to the decline of teachers’ environ-

mental adaptability and competitiveness to a certain extent, leading to the weakening of teachers' work initiative and creativity. This phenomenon is called the flowerpot effect. By taking a variety of initiatives that are not conducive to teachers' professional growth, we can reasonably reduce some of the burdens that are not conducive to teachers' professional growth, and constantly stimulate the enthusiasm and creativity of primary and secondary school teachers in education and teaching, so as to minimize the negative impact of the flowerpot effect.

3. The Realistic Dilemma of Reasonably Reducing the Burden of Primary and Secondary School Teachers

From the perspective of the theory of educational ecology, we can find that the current situation of teachers' burden reduction in primary and secondary schools has some realistic dilemma, such as the imbalance of teachers' niche, the burden is beyond the proper range, and the negative effect of the flowerpot effect is highlighted.

3.1. The Imbalance of Teachers' Niche

The main manifestations of the imbalance of teachers' ecological niche are that teachers' limited resources and energy are dispersed by multiple roles, and teachers' subjective consciousness is insufficient. In the educational ecosystem, each educational ecological subject has its own role and position, and exerts its energy within a certain space and time range. However, the limitation of resources leads to the phenomenon of resource competition and energy dispersion under the condition of multiple roles. Teachers' time and energy are limited, that is to say, the resources and energy contained in individual teachers are not inexhaustible. Under the dispersion of many responsibilities and tasks within multiple roles, teachers' limited energy is squeezed by the competition from the outside world, which consumes teachers' limited life energy.

The multiple fields of social ecosystem endow teachers with multiple roles (Long & Zhou, 2022). In the social field, teachers play the role of inheriting cultural knowledge and developing human resources, both of which require teachers to constantly learn business knowledge, accumulate and enrich their own experience, and improve their ability to teach and educate people. In the family field, teachers play the role of managing family affairs and taking care of relatives, both of which require teachers to take time, energy and property to do a good job. However, in reality, more teachers will work overtime, and even need to complete some work tasks at home, which will inevitably lead to the imbalance between work roles and family roles, thus causing family conflicts and destroying the harmonious atmosphere of the family (Wei, 2022). In the school field, teachers play a series of important roles, such as teaching activists, project researchers, school administrators, and home school communicators. These roles often blur the boundaries of teachers' work, and ultimately lead to the reduction of teachers' self-awareness.

3.2. The Burden is Beyond the Proper Range

The burden of primary and secondary school teachers is beyond the appropriate range, which mainly means that the types and quantities of teachers' burden are beyond the reasonable limit and play a role of limiting factors. With the continuous progress of new science and technology, the educational environment and process seem to be much more convenient, but also become increasingly complex, teaching tasks and teaching methods are also increasingly diversified, which makes the types of primary and secondary school teachers' burdens more and more complex (Wan & Zhao, 2022). Teachers are not only responsible for daily routine work such as preparing lessons, correcting homework, tutoring students, and class management, but also for non-daily routine work such as training and learning, open classes, activity evaluation, preparation for inspection, and home visits. In this case, primary and secondary school teachers are too busy to cope with the situation, and they are prone to fall into a vicious circle of hasty and helpless treatment of work.

The increase in the number of primary and secondary school teachers' burdens and the lengthening of their working hours are important reasons for teachers' increasing sense of burden and often showing fatigue and anxiety. Many primary and secondary school teachers work for more than eight hours a day, and even take their work home to stay up late at night to complete it. It seems that there is always a lot of work that cannot be done, which is continuous. Teachers' time is limited, the longer they spend at work, the less time they spend with their families. Some teachers may even bring their bad emotions home, causing tension between teachers and their families. At the same time, too much work burden may also lead to the increase of teachers' turnover intention, which is not conducive to the stability of the education ecosystem.

3.3. The Negative Effect of Flowerpot Effect Is Highlighted

The negative effects of flowerpot effect are mainly embodied in the formalization of teacher training and the instrumentalization of teacher evaluation. When teachers participate in pre service and in-service training, schools tend to pay more attention to their guidance in education and teaching, but lack relevant guidance for teachers to handle multiple tasks at the same time, which easily makes teachers fall into a passive state when they encounter too many and too heavy tasks. At the same time, sometimes teacher training seems to be standardized and specific, but it may be more like the "prescribed actions" that the school arranges for teachers. When teachers are overburdened with other things, they may complete these "prescribed actions" in form, but they have little benefit in practical effect.

Promoting teachers' professional development through teacher evaluation is a priority for schools when formulating teacher evaluation indicators. Therefore, schools develop evaluation indicators based on various work tasks, with the purpose of promoting teachers to actively play their abilities and achieve their

goals. However, in the face of complex workload, teachers often find it difficult to calm down to think and solve problems in depth, but regard work tasks as a tool to obtain high evaluation scores, which makes teachers lack autonomy and direction of professional development over time (Song, Hao, & Yu, 2021). That is to say, this kind of teacher evaluation is like a flower pot, which confines teachers in a narrow internal space, lacks interaction and interconnection with external space, and hinders their greater development.

4. The Breakthrough Path of Reasonable Burden Reduction for Primary and Secondary School Teachers

From the perspective of educational ecology theory, from the three dimensions of teacher niche, the most appropriate principle and flowerpot effect, we can not only examine the realistic dilemma of reasonable burden reduction for primary and secondary school teachers, but also provide effective breakthrough path for teachers to reduce their burden reasonably.

4.1. Reconstruct Teachers' Niche and Enhance Teachers' Subjective Consciousness

Primary and secondary school teachers play multiple roles, bearing expectations from society, families, schools and other aspects, and sometimes it may be some unrealistic expectations. Under the pressure of such high expectations, primary and secondary school teachers' sense of burden is getting heavier and heavier, which greatly hinders teachers' physical health and professional development. Therefore, one of the prerequisites for reasonable burden reduction is to correctly understand the multiple roles of teachers and the role conflicts arising therefrom (Zhang & Yan, 2022). In the social ecosystem, all sectors of society should correctly understand the complexity of teachers' profession, establish reasonable expectations for teachers' roles, and return teachers to the correct ecological position. The public and educational administrators should give more understanding and support to teachers, and give some tolerance and understanding to teachers' occasional work omissions, so that primary and secondary school teachers can put down their psychological burden and devote themselves to their busy work.

The responsibilities of each profession have obvious boundaries. Within the boundaries, they bear unshirkable responsibilities and missions. Outside the boundaries, they cannot be imposed on the profession, and the teaching profession is no exception. The premise of reasonable burden reduction for primary and secondary school teachers is to clearly define the responsibilities and obligations of teachers. In the aspect of what should be, teachers are guides of students' learning, promoters of students' development, organizers of teaching activities, practitioners of teaching reflection, practitioners of lifelong learning, etc. These are the due meanings of teachers' main business of teaching and educating people. However, on the practical level, the fuzziness of the responsibility boundary of primary and secondary school teachers has virtually eliminated the au-

thority and discourse power of teachers as the important subject of educational ecology. Therefore, education administrators should protect the legitimate rights and interests of primary and secondary school teachers from the institutional level, so that teachers' workload can return to a reasonable limit, thus promoting the improvement of teachers' subjective consciousness (Guo, 2013).

4.2. Eliminate Environmental Limiting Factors According to the Principle of Optimum

In order to achieve results, teachers in primary and secondary schools should improve the effectiveness of promoting factors and strive to eliminate restrictive factors according to the principle of the most appropriate in educational ecology. On the premise that the total amount of education and teaching tasks is stable, the number of full-time teachers in primary and secondary schools has become the determining factor for each teacher to share his workload equally. Therefore, first of all, we should provide a sufficient number of full-time teachers for primary and secondary schools. When determining the number of teachers, we should scientifically determine the basic staffing and turnover staffing plan according to the number of classes, the number of students, curriculum, teachers' training, childbearing age female teachers and other factors (Pang, Jin, Wang, & Yang, 2022).

Teachers' work has inherent particularity, including not only the main work of education and teaching, but also a large number of hidden work beyond their own duties. In the face of complicated educational situations, it is impossible to make a comprehensive and detailed standard for teachers' workload. However, teachers' workload standards should also be formulated according to the core elements and main tasks of teachers' work, so as to effectively relieve teachers' work pressure and reduce their sense of fatigue and anxiety (Chen, 2022). At the same time, in view of teachers' busy work and lack of rest, we should also pay attention to improving the empowerment of teachers' leisure time, and provide teachers with a harmonious, warm, relaxed and quiet lounge. Besides the compact curriculum teaching, teachers can timely supplement energy and adjust their physical and mental state.

4.3. Breaking through the Flowerpot Effect, Strengthening Internal and External Linkage and Evolution

In the education ecosystem, to avoid too many negative effects of the flowerpot effect, and to promote primary and secondary school teachers to return to the ontological responsibility and professional role of teaching and educating people, we should focus on breaking through the shackles of various formalism and instrumentalism, strengthen the synergy of internal and external linkage mechanisms, and effectively improve teachers' professional quality. Primary and secondary school teachers should pay attention to strengthening self-adaptation, reasonably planning work plans, sorting out priorities and tasks, and completing various work arrangements step by step (Xu & Pan, 2022). When there is too

much work pressure and too many tasks, take positive measures to relieve the pressure, ease the mood, clarify the thinking, and then focus on completing the work task one by one.

For primary and secondary school teachers, the main body of educational ecology, obtaining professional growth is an important way to realize self-value, and teachers have the needs and rights to obtain professional growth and realize self-value. In order to obtain professional growth, primary and secondary school teachers should actively seek external help, and the external should also pay attention to giving teachers more understanding and support. Among them, effective training and learning is the key to promoting teachers' professional development, which can help teachers successfully break through the difficulties in various stages of professional growth, so as to promote teachers to become skilled and expert teachers as soon as possible (Li & Chen, 2019). In addition, at the national level, primary and secondary schools should be given the necessary autonomy in running schools and relatively adequate funding support for running schools. At the school level, schools should actively establish a teacher reward and punishment mechanism that is suitable for their own reality, effectively mobilize the enthusiasm of teachers, and give teachers a sustainable impetus for professional growth.

5. Conclusions

Educational ecology provides an effective theoretical perspective for us to study and solve problems in educational practice. Based on the perspective of educational ecology theory, this study analyzes the realistic dilemma of the process of reducing the burden of primary and secondary school teachers in China, and proposes the corresponding breakthrough path, which has certain value in solving the problem of heavy burden of primary and secondary school teachers.

Admittedly, the main disadvantage of this study is that it has not yet tested the effectiveness of the theory in educational practice. Therefore, the author believes that in the next step of research, it is necessary to apply the theory to practice and develop the theory in practice, so as to truly achieve the goal of reasonably reducing the burden on teachers and constantly promote the professional development of teachers.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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