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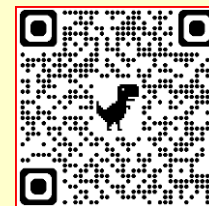
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Professional Identity Challenges and Burnout Risks among Physical Education Teachers in County-Level Middle Schools: A Case Study of Siyuan Middle School

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ABSTRACT

Professional identity is a key psychological foundation for teachers' long-term development, work engagement, and occupational commitment. For physical education teachers in county-level middle schools, however, professional identity is often challenged by heavy workload, limited social recognition, low income satisfaction, weak career advancement opportunities, and the marginal status of physical education under exam-oriented educational culture. Taking Siyuan Middle School in Suichuan County as a case, this paper explores the professional identity challenges and burnout risks experienced by physical education teachers. Drawing on questionnaire data from 18 physical education teachers and semi-structured interviews with 6 teachers, the study analyzes how workload pressure, remuneration dissatisfaction, subject marginalization, and insufficient institutional recognition affect teachers' professional enthusiasm and sustainable growth.

The findings show that physical education teachers at Siyuan Middle School generally possess a basic sense of responsibility and professional commitment, but their professional identity is weakened by structural constraints. Teachers undertake an average of 16.5 regular physical education teaching periods per week, and 66.7% of them also hold additional duties such as homeroom teacher, logistics work, club guidance, sports team training, morning exercise organization, and school sports event management. Their overall income satisfaction mean is only 2.56, indicating a relatively low level of satisfaction. The most strongly perceived influencing factor is the exam-oriented education mindset and the low status of physical education, with a mean score of 4.67. Interview evidence further shows that some teachers experience invisible discrimination, emotional fatigue, reduced innovation, and signs of burnout. The paper argues that the professional identity crisis of physical education teachers is not simply an individual psychological problem but a result of the interaction between workload, recognition, evaluation, and school culture. To strengthen professional identity and reduce burnout risk, schools should establish fair workload recognition, improve incentive mechanisms, enhance the status of physical education, provide emotional and professional support, and create career development pathways that make teachers' professional value visible.

KEY WORDS: physical education teacher; professional identity; burnout risk; workload; social recognition; county-level middle school

1. Introduction

The professional development of teachers depends not only on knowledge, skills, and training opportunities, but also on whether teachers can form a stable and positive professional identity. Professional identity refers to teachers' understanding of who they are as professionals, how they interpret the value of their work, and how they position themselves within the school and society. A strong professional identity helps teachers maintain commitment, respond to challenges, and pursue continuous improvement. A weak or conflicted professional identity, by contrast, may lead to low motivation, emotional exhaustion, reduced teaching innovation, and even occupational withdrawal.

For physical education teachers, professional identity has particular complexity. Physical education is closely related to students' physical health, psychological resilience, teamwork, safety awareness, and lifelong exercise habits. However, in many school contexts, especially in county-level and rural middle schools, physical education is still treated as less important than examination subjects. Physical education teachers may be seen more as coaches, activity organizers, or student managers than as full educational professionals. This status ambiguity can weaken their sense of professional dignity and reduce their motivation for long-term development.

Siyuan Middle School in Suichuan County provides a useful case for examining this issue. The school's physical education teachers work in a county-level educational environment shaped by urban-rural integration, limited resources, and strong academic performance pressure. Their work includes regular physical education classes, morning exercises, sports team training, student physical fitness testing, sports competitions, equipment management, safety supervision, and various temporary tasks. These responsibilities are important for school life, yet they are not always fully recognized in workload calculation, performance evaluation, salary distribution, or professional title advancement.

Previous studies on teacher professional development have emphasized the importance of individual motivation, school support, and policy environment (Day, 1999; Guskey, 2002). Burnout research also shows that emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment are closely related to workload, recognition, and organizational climate (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). For physical education teachers, these issues may be intensified because their labor is often physically demanding, time-consuming, and dispersed across classroom and extracurricular contexts.

The first paper based on this thesis analyzed the overall status and influencing factors of physical education teachers' professional development. The second paper focused on constructing a school-based support system. This third paper turns to the emotional and identity dimension of teacher development. It asks three questions: What professional identity challenges do physical education teachers at Siyuan Middle School face? How do workload, income satisfaction, and social recognition affect burnout risk? What strategies can be used to strengthen professional identity and reduce burnout?

The central argument of this paper is that professional identity and burnout risk should not be understood only as individual psychological issues. They are produced through the interaction between teachers' daily work, institutional evaluation, school culture, social recognition, and development opportunities. Therefore, improving physical education teachers' professional

identity requires structural and cultural changes, not only personal adjustment.

2. Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on three concepts: professional identity, burnout, and ecological support.

Professional identity refers to the way teachers understand their professional role, value, responsibility, and future development. It is not fixed; rather, it is continuously shaped by teaching experience, relationships with students and colleagues, school evaluation, policy expectations, and social recognition. For physical education teachers, professional identity involves a dual role. On one hand, they are sports skill instructors who teach movement, technique, and physical fitness. On the other hand, they are educators who promote health, discipline, cooperation, resilience, and holistic student development. When the educator role is not fully recognized, teachers may feel that their work is underestimated.

Burnout is commonly understood as a psychological syndrome involving emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion refers to the feeling of being drained by work. Depersonalization refers to distancing oneself from students or work responsibilities. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to a declining sense of effectiveness and professional value. In the context of physical education, burnout may appear as declining enthusiasm for teaching, reduced willingness to innovate, mechanical completion of tasks, avoidance of professional learning, and loss of confidence in career development.

Ecological support emphasizes that teacher identity and burnout are shaped by the interaction between individual and environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that individual development is influenced by multiple layers of environment, including direct workplace relations, organizational structures, policy systems, and cultural values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Hargreaves and Fullan's professional capital theory also indicates that teachers need not only individual expertise but also social capital and decisional capital, including collaboration, trust, autonomy, and recognition (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Based on these perspectives, this paper analyzes physical education teachers' professional identity and burnout risk through four dimensions: workload pressure, remuneration and incentive satisfaction, subject status and social recognition, and career development support. These dimensions are interconnected. Heavy workload consumes teachers' energy; low remuneration weakens their sense of fairness; subject marginalization damages professional dignity; and limited career support reduces future expectations. Together, these factors may transform normal occupational pressure into burnout risk.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Site and Participants

This study is based on Siyuan Middle School in Suichuan County, China. The research participants were all 18 in-service physical education teachers during the 2024–2025 academic year. The teachers differed in age, teaching experience, educational background, professional title, and work responsibilities. The school context is suitable for analyzing professional identity because it reflects many common features of county-level middle schools, including limited resources, strong academic pressure, and multiple demands placed on teachers.

3.2 Data Sources

The study used a mixed-methods case study design. Quantitative data came from a questionnaire administered to all 18 physical education teachers. The questionnaire included items on teacher demographics, workload, income, job satisfaction, professional development motivation, perceived influencing factors, and development constraints. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with 6 teachers. The interviews explored teachers' daily work experience, feelings about professional status, workload pressure, income satisfaction, school recognition, and expectations for improvement.

The single-case approach was suitable because it allowed the study to examine teachers' professional identity within a real institutional environment (Yin, 2018). Questionnaire data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mean values. Interview data were analyzed thematically, focusing on repeated themes such as workload burden, invisible labor, low recognition, professional dignity, emotional fatigue, and burnout risk. The qualitative analysis followed the general logic of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.3 Focus of Analysis

This paper does not attempt to measure burnout through a standardized psychological scale. Instead, it analyzes burnout risk as reflected in teachers' work conditions, satisfaction levels, interview narratives, and professional development constraints. The aim is not to diagnose individual teachers, but to identify institutional and cultural conditions that may weaken professional identity and increase burnout risk.

4. Findings

4.1 Physical Education Teachers Maintain Basic Professional Commitment

The study shows that physical education teachers at Siyuan Middle School generally maintain a basic sense of responsibility toward students and school work. They participate in regular teaching, organize school sports activities, guide student training, and support school-level physical education events. Many teachers recognize that physical education is important for students' health, teamwork, discipline, and emotional development.

This finding is important because it shows that the problem is not a simple lack of professional ethics. Teachers are not indifferent to their work. On the contrary, they often invest considerable time and energy in tasks beyond regular classroom teaching. Their work supports the normal operation of school sports and contributes to students' physical development. However, this commitment exists within a difficult structural environment. When teachers' effort is not sufficiently recognized, professional commitment may gradually turn into fatigue.

Therefore, the professional identity challenge is not caused by weak responsibility alone. It emerges when teachers' responsibility is repeatedly demanded but not equally supported, rewarded, or respected. In this sense, professional identity is closely related to organizational justice and professional recognition.

4.2 Heavy Workload Creates Persistent Pressure

Workload is the most direct source of pressure. The questionnaire results show that physical education teachers at Siyuan Middle School have an average of 16.5 regular physical education teaching periods per week. In addition, 66.7% of teachers hold additional duties, including homeroom teacher work, logistics, club guidance,

morning exercise organization, sports team training, competition preparation, physical fitness testing, and equipment management.

This workload structure is different from that of many other subject teachers. Physical education teachers' work is dispersed across different times and spaces. They may need to arrive early to organize morning exercises, teach during the day, train sports teams after school, prepare for competitions on weekends, and manage equipment or safety issues outside class hours. These tasks are often fragmented and physically demanding.

Interview evidence shows that some teachers' workdays extend far beyond normal hours. One teacher described teaching 16 physical education classes per week, serving as a homeroom teacher, arriving at school early for morning exercises, training the track and field team after school, organizing grade-level sports activities, preparing for school sports meetings, and managing sports equipment. Such work intensity leaves little time for rest, reflection, family life, or professional learning.

Heavy workload affects professional identity in two ways. First, it reduces teachers' energy for self-development. When teachers are physically and mentally exhausted, they are less likely to engage in reading, research, lesson innovation, or reflective writing. Second, it weakens their sense of fairness. If heavy work is treated as normal obligation rather than recognized professional contribution, teachers may feel that their labor is invisible.

4.3 Low Income Satisfaction Weakens Occupational Commitment

Income is not the only factor affecting teacher motivation, but it is an important indicator of professional recognition. The survey results show that income satisfaction among physical education teachers is relatively low. Two teachers earn below 4000 yuan per month, 11 teachers earn between 4001 and 5000 yuan, 4 teachers earn between 5001 and 6000 yuan, and only 1 teacher earns above 6000 yuan. The overall income satisfaction mean is 2.56, indicating a low level of satisfaction.

The problem is not simply the absolute income level. More importantly, teachers compare their income with their workload, responsibilities, and professional contribution. When teachers undertake teaching, training, competition organization, student management, and safety responsibilities but receive limited financial recognition, they may feel that the return does not match the effort. This mismatch can weaken professional identity and increase emotional exhaustion.

Low income satisfaction may also reduce teachers' willingness to invest in optional professional development. Training, research, and curriculum innovation often require additional time and energy. If teachers already feel overloaded and under-recognized, professional development may be perceived as another burden rather than an opportunity. This helps explain why teachers' development motivation is often driven more by external requirements such as professional title evaluation than by intrinsic interest.

However, this does not mean that money alone determines professionalism. The issue is the combination of low satisfaction, heavy workload, weak recognition, and limited career opportunity. When these factors appear together, they create a background condition in which burnout risk increases.

4.4 Subject Marginalization Damages Professional Dignity

The strongest perceived influencing factor in the survey was the exam-oriented education mindset and the low status of physical education, with a mean score of 4.67. This shows that teachers

regard subject marginalization as the most serious obstacle to professional development. The second strongest factor was the level of importance and support given to physical education by school leadership, with a mean score of 4.56.

This finding suggests that professional identity is deeply shaped by school culture. If physical education is treated as secondary to examination subjects, physical education teachers may feel that their work is less valued even when they work hard. This affects professional dignity. Teachers may ask themselves: If my subject is not important in the school, is my professional role important?

Interview data reflect this emotional experience. One teacher stated that physical education is often discussed last in school teaching meetings, and parents focus mainly on academic performance while overlooking the hard work of physical education teachers. The teacher described this invisible discrimination as even more discouraging than low pay. Another teacher noted that main subjects sometimes squeeze physical education classes, and sports competition results are not valued as much as academic examination scores.

These statements reveal that recognition is not only material. It is also symbolic. Meeting order, timetable protection, leadership attention, parent attitudes, award systems, and public language all send messages about whether physical education is valued. When these messages repeatedly place physical education at the margins, teachers' professional identity is weakened.

4.5 Burnout Risk Appears through Fatigue, Reduced Innovation, and Developmental Withdrawal

The data do not diagnose burnout through a clinical scale, but they show clear burnout risks. Heavy workload, low income satisfaction, and low subject recognition have already begun to affect some teachers' enthusiasm and professional identity. The thesis notes that some teachers show signs of burnout, declining enthusiasm, and lack of innovation.

Burnout risk appears in several forms. The first is emotional fatigue. Teachers feel tired not only because of physical work, but also because their effort is not fully recognized. The second is mechanical task completion. When teachers are overloaded, they may focus on completing required tasks rather than improving teaching quality. The third is reduced innovation. Innovation requires energy, confidence, time, and institutional support. If teachers feel that new efforts are unlikely to be recognized, they may avoid experimentation. The fourth is developmental withdrawal. Teachers may attend training or teaching research activities only because they are required, without transforming these activities into genuine professional growth.

This pattern suggests that burnout risk is closely related to professional development. Burnout does not only affect teachers' emotions; it also affects their learning behavior, research engagement, classroom creativity, and career planning. Therefore, reducing burnout risk is not separate from promoting professional development. It is a precondition for sustainable development.

5. Discussion

5.1 Professional Identity Is Structurally Produced

The case of Siyuan Middle School shows that professional identity is not formed only by personal belief. It is produced through daily interactions between teachers and their institutional environment. Teachers' sense of professional value depends on whether their work is visible, whether their subject is respected, whether their workload

is fairly recognized, and whether their development has a future pathway.

This finding challenges a simplistic view that teachers only need to strengthen personal motivation. Of course, individual motivation is important. However, motivation cannot be sustained if the environment continuously sends negative signals. A teacher may believe in the educational value of physical education, but if classes are frequently displaced, meetings ignore physical education, evaluation focuses mainly on academic subjects, and extra work is not counted, professional confidence will gradually weaken.

Thus, professional identity should be understood as both psychological and institutional. Strengthening it requires changes in school culture, evaluation systems, workload recognition, and career development support.

5.2 Burnout Risk Comes from Mismatch between Demand and Recognition

The findings show a clear mismatch between what physical education teachers are asked to do and how their work is recognized. They are expected to teach, train, organize, supervise, protect safety, manage activities, and contribute to school culture. Yet recognition in terms of salary, evaluation, status, and career advancement remains limited.

This mismatch is a major source of burnout risk. Burnout does not arise only because teachers work hard. Many teachers can accept hard work if they feel that the work is meaningful, respected, and fairly rewarded. Burnout risk increases when high demand is combined with low recognition. In this sense, the problem is not workload alone, but workload without adequate value recognition.

5.3 Physical Education Teachers Need Both Emotional and Professional Support

Professional identity support should include both emotional care and professional development. Emotional support helps teachers feel respected and understood. Professional support helps them improve competence and see a future career pathway. If schools provide only emotional encouragement without changing workload and evaluation, the effect will be limited. If schools provide training without recognition and time protection, teachers may see training as additional pressure.

Therefore, support should be integrated. Schools should protect time, provide mentoring, recognize invisible labor, improve evaluation, and publicly affirm the value of physical education. These measures can help teachers transform their professional role from "activity organizer" to "educator of student health and development."

6. Optimization Paths

6.1 Establish Fair Workload Recognition Standards

Schools should calculate the actual workload of physical education teachers more accurately. Regular classes should not be the only counted work. Morning exercises, sports team training, competitions, physical fitness testing, equipment management, safety supervision, and school sports activities should also be included. Teachers who undertake additional duties should receive workload reduction, allowance, or performance recognition. Fair workload recognition can reduce the feeling of invisible labor and improve professional identity.

6.2 Improve Incentive and Remuneration Mechanisms

Income satisfaction should be improved through more transparent and fair performance distribution. Additional sports work should be

linked to reasonable compensation. Teachers who contribute to curriculum innovation, student health improvement, sports culture building, and teaching research should receive recognition in performance assessment and professional title recommendation. Incentives should not focus only on competition results; they should also recognize educational contributions.

6.3 Enhance the Status of Physical Education in School Culture

School leaders should clearly communicate the educational value of physical education. Physical education should be included in school development planning, teaching meetings, parent communication, and student development evaluation. PE classes should be protected from being displaced by academic subjects. School awards and public recognition should include contributions to student health, teamwork, resilience, and participation. These symbolic actions are important for improving teachers' professional dignity.

6.4 Provide Psychological and Collegial Support

Schools should pay attention to teachers' emotional state and burnout risk. Regular communication, peer support groups, mentoring, and informal professional dialogue can help teachers release pressure and share coping strategies. Physical education teaching groups can also discuss common difficulties, such as safety pressure, student discipline, competition preparation, and parent misunderstanding. When teachers feel supported by colleagues, their sense of belonging increases.

6.5 Create Clear Career Development Pathways

Physical education teachers need visible career pathways. Schools can help young teachers set staged development goals, such as becoming competent teachers, backbone teachers, research-oriented teachers, or discipline leaders. Training, mentoring, project participation, and professional title preparation should be connected with these stages. When teachers see a future in the profession, they are more likely to sustain commitment.

6.6 Transform Professional Development into Identity Support

Professional development should not be designed only as technical training. It should also strengthen professional identity. For example, school-based teaching research can encourage teachers to document successful cases of improving student participation or health behavior. These cases can make teachers' educational value visible. Reflection activities can help teachers connect daily work with broader educational meaning. In this way, professional development becomes not only competence improvement but also identity reconstruction.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined professional identity challenges and burnout risks among physical education teachers at Siyuan Middle School in Suichuan County. The findings show that teachers maintain basic professional responsibility, but their professional identity is weakened by heavy workload, low income satisfaction, subject marginalization, limited recognition, and insufficient career support. Teachers' average weekly teaching load is high, many undertake additional duties, and income satisfaction remains relatively low. The strongest perceived obstacle is the exam-oriented education mindset and the low status of physical education.

The study argues that professional identity and burnout risk should be understood structurally. Physical education teachers' difficulties are not simply caused by weak personal motivation. They are produced by the mismatch between high work demand and

insufficient recognition. When teachers' labor is invisible, their subject is marginalized, and their development pathway is unclear, professional enthusiasm may decline and burnout risk may increase.

To address these problems, county-level middle schools should establish fair workload recognition, improve incentive mechanisms, enhance the status of physical education, provide emotional and collegial support, create career development pathways, and transform professional development into identity support. These measures can help physical education teachers regain professional dignity, sustain motivation, and participate more actively in long-term development.

This study is limited by its single-school case and small sample size. Future research may use larger samples, standardized burnout scales, and comparative designs to examine the relationship among workload, recognition, professional identity, and burnout across different school contexts. Nevertheless, this case provides practical insight into how county-level middle schools can better understand and support the professional lives of physical education teachers.

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