

# Overburdened Chinese Compulsory Education Teachers

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**Abstract:** *The universalization of “nine-year compulsory education” in China has significantly augmented the teaching force at this level. Compulsory education teachers are the most crucial human resource for the development of this system. However, they have been under disproportionately heavy work burdens, which are detrimental to their mental and physical health and compromise the quality of education. This article focuses on presenting the signs of overburden among compulsory education teachers and pinpointing its causes, with the purpose of contributing to alleviating the job strain of this group and developing a sustainable compulsory education.*

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**S**UBSTANTIAL attention has been paid to the issue of student burden reduction recently, and research on how to lighten students' academic burden has been carried out in various dimensions and has achieved significant outcomes (Wang, 2022). At the same time, it is noteworthy that overburden remains pervasive among compulsory education teachers (in China, compulsory education officially includes primary and junior secondary schooling). Job burnout is damaging teachers' mental and physical health, potentially degrading the quality of education and negatively impacting student development (Wei, 2022). This study seeks to reveal the harms of excessive burden of work on compulsory education teachers as well as its sources and to explore measures for alleviating teacher job pressures.

## **Signs of Overburden in Chinese Compulsory Education Teachers**

Official statistics show that the number of full-time compulsory education teachers in China has experienced a steady increase, reaching 10.6546 million in 2022, with 6.6294 million primary teachers and 4.0252 million junior secondary teachers (Ministry of Education, 2022). Despite the expansion of the teaching staff, teaching itself has become one of the most stressful professions in China. There are multi-faceted factors in the mounting pressures on compulsory education teachers, including workload-, student-, and parent-related factors.

### ***Disproportionately Long Working Hours***

In China, legal working hours for the ordinary work force are 40 hours per week, which means eight hours for each of the five workdays (State Council of China, 1994). Nevertheless, the majority of compulsory education teachers work far more than eight hours every day. According to the Ministry of Education's "National Education Supervision Report 2008," 90% of compulsory education teachers need to work on weekends, resulting in their average weekly working hours far exceeding 40 hours (Ministry of Education of China, 2008). Between 2002 and 2016, Xu (2017) conducted a three-phase survey on the job strain of primary, secondary, and kindergarten teachers from all types of schools in Ningbo City. A longitudinal comparison of the data showed that the percentages of teachers working more than eight hours a day, teachers working more than ten hours a day, and those working more than eight hours a day at weekends significantly rose over the 15 years. Through a sampling survey of compulsory education teachers across the country, Wang (2020) discovered that, on average, primary and secondary school teachers in China worked 8.97 hours every day in schools and spent

2.14 hours handling teaching-related duties after work. As per a 2023's survey on the workloads of primary and secondary school teachers in 31 provincial administrative regions by Beijing Foreign Studies University's Center for Chinese and Foreign Education Law Research, Chinese compulsory education teachers worked 54.5 hours per week on average, far exceeding 44 hours, the maximum working hours specified by the Labor Law (Sun & Zhang, 2023).

What needs to be highlighted is that out-of-hours duties consume considerable amounts of personal time for the teacher. It is common for compulsory teachers to prepare lessons, provide individual tutoring, and grade student homework in off-work time. They often have to address school duties on weekends and even during holiday breaks, time that should be spent on leisure activities or with the family. The home has become a secondary workplace for the teacher. This is a severe infringement on the right of the teacher to rest and leisure, increasing the risk of burnout among teachers (Xu, 2022).

According to data from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, nearly 80% of the teacher participants from Shanghai claimed that they lost a lot of personal time to work and that the consequential sacrifice of the teacher's physical and mental health and family life had a negative impact on their professional development in the long run (Zhu, 2020). Li and Liu (2020) argued that the loss of private time made the teacher feel like a working machine. Exceedingly drained and emotionally exhausted, they perceived a strong sense of emptiness.

### ***Excessive Non-Instructional Duties***

In addition to day-to-day teaching-related duties, compulsory education teachers face a plurality of non-instructional tasks, including involvement in top-down inspection and evaluation, meetings, administrative affairs, training, and more. Typically, they have 10–18 lessons to teach each week. Nonetheless, endless meetings, competitions, commemoration services, questionnaires, and various forms of assessment constitute overwhelming burdens on teachers (Qiao, 2021). As per the 2017 "Report on Reducing Teachers' Non-Instructional Duties" released by the New Education Research Institution, Chinese teachers averagely spent less than 1/4 of their total working time on instruction and teaching-related preparations, with the rest 3/4 being occupied by onerous and time-consuming non-teaching tasks (Newschool Insight Media, 2020).

Research on teacher work burden showed that workloads induced by miscellaneous non-instructional duties are disproportionately heavy for compulsory education teachers. Li (2021) claimed that primary and secondary teachers in China devoted only 20% of their total working hours to

teaching, which means that non-teaching workloads took up nearly 80% of their working time. Excessive non-instructional responsibilities have led to a pervasive overburden of teachers, resulting in a lack of time for self-improvement in professional expertise. In his survey on “contributors to meaningless consumption of energy in teachers,” Li (2017) discovered that teachers’ day-to-day work was inundated with all sorts of “seemingly important issues” such as submitting reports, filling out formats, participating in assessment, and collaborating with administrators on inspections, which would consume 3/4 of their working time. These constant “disruptions” not only infringed on regular school schedules but also imposed negative impacts on teachers’ emotional and psychological states, leading to a loss of professional enthusiasm and aspirations in them. Huang et al. (2019) used the OECD’s parameters as a framework of reference and found that Chinese teachers have longer weekly working hours, more working days within one academic year, but less time spent on teaching than their counterparts from other OECD nations. Based on a comparison of the workload and work composition between junior secondary teachers from Shanghai and other high-achieving countries, Zhang (2022) described the work paradigm of Chinese teachers as an exemplary illustration of the “Asia-Pacific model” of excessive working hours but low weight on instructional workloads.

## ***The Double Reduction Policy Exacerbates Work Burden***

The issue of on-campus after-school service was first raised in the “Guiding Opinions on the Provision of After-School Service for Primary and Secondary School Students” released by the Ministry of Education in February 2017. In the “Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Compulsory Education Students” (hereinafter referred to as the Double Reduction Policy) issued by the State Council in July 2021, improving the quality of after-school service was reaffirmed as one of the main measures for lessening student academic burden and enhancing education outcomes at the compulsory education level. Higher-quality after-school service meant additional responsibilities for compulsory education teachers, the primary providers of the service. In the meantime, amid the stringent restrictions and regulations on off-campus tutoring and training services, more public attention was focused on the quality of formal schooling. As a result, teachers’ working hours and workloads significantly increased (Wang & Ru, 2023).

Furthermore, the Double Reduction Policy initiated the reform of homework assignments, marking a transition of emphasis from the quantity of homework to the efficacy of in-class instruction. This requires teachers to

advance their competence in in-class teaching and assignment design in a timely manner to adapt to the new work environment and its requirements. In the short term, it poses extra pressure on compulsory education teachers (Zhou, 2023).

Kong (2023) investigated the work burden of primary teachers in Dongchangfu District, Liaocheng City, Shandong Province, in 2022. Nearly two-thirds of the 196 participants claimed their workload increased under the Double Reduction Policy due to the additional stipulations on after-school service, homework assignments, and other matters. A fifth grade English teacher was quoted in his study as saying that the reduction in students' burden resulted in an increase in teachers' workloads as students are now required to complete homework at school, and the provision of after-school service and care and oversight on vacations means that teachers take over responsibilities originally resting with parents.

## **The Consequences of Overburden on Compulsory Education Teachers**

### ***Damaging Teachers' Mental and Physical Health***

Mental and physical well-being have direct effects on teacher performance. A physically fit teacher can fulfill instructional tasks smoothly without disruptions from their illnesses. Psychological well-being enables teachers to cope with challenges and difficulties in work more optimistically and to have more effective communication with students (Li, 2003). However, current overly heavy workloads have elicited a variety of health issues in compulsory education teachers.

Continuous, intensive pressures have serious consequences for teachers' physical health, inducing problems such as fatigue, insomnia, and cardiovascular diseases. A survey on the current work burden of primary and secondary teachers in 2019 showed that the majority of primary school teachers were experiencing intensive pressure, with 80% of them suffering from throat and neck bone conditions and 68% suffering from work stress-related sleep disorders (Xiong & Jiang, 2019). Disorders like these not only had chronic, detrimental effects on their physical well-being but also severely disrupted their work and personal lives. Approximately one-third of teachers polled were considering a change in profession.

Mounting work burden also instigates psychological issues in teachers, such as anxiety and depression. The Blue Book of National Mental Health 2019 showed that the mental health of Chinese teachers was deteriorating year by year and that, in general, primary and secondary teachers had lower levels of mental healthiness than university teachers. In 2019, *Tomor-*

row, a journal under the China Teacher Education and Development Association, published a study on the psychological health issues of teachers. Its data showed that 32.4% of the teachers surveyed reported exceedingly high pressures of work, that 72% of them claimed to have mental health problems, and that 61.2% of primary and secondary teachers polled exhibited signs of anxiety (Newschool Insight Media, 2020). The undesirable mental state of teachers had negative impacts on their behaviors at work, thereby compromising teaching efficacy as well as other educational outcomes.

### ***Degenerating Teachers' Quality of Education***

At the compulsory education level, the teacher bears multi-faceted responsibilities for students. Apart from helping the young children build up a solid knowledge foundation for future development, the teacher needs to direct them to cultivate sound outlooks and values (Jiang & Yin, 2021). An overburdened teacher cannot well balance all the roles they need to play. First, an exhausted teacher may have difficulties concentrating on their instruction or developing well-prepared teaching plans, with the consequences of making mistakes in delivering the lessons. This will adversely affect student learning outcomes and academic performance (Hua, 2018). Second, under constant pressure, the teacher may fail to pay adequate attention to the varying needs of students, making some of them feel neglected (Jiang & Yin, 2021). Particularly, those students struggling with schoolwork need extra support from their teachers, including tailored tutoring and learning materials. They can hardly reach such support with distracted teachers (Wang, 2014). Third, a physically and emotionally drained teacher can easily get impatient or lose their temper in a classroom setting. This is unfavorable to healthy teacher-student relationships and may diminish students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning.

### ***Damaging the Teacher's Public Images***

The teacher is supposed to be a role model for their students and is somewhat canonized by society. Improper remarks and behaviors of teachers triggered by unreasonable work pressures may arouse dissatisfaction among students and parents and criticism from the public, damaging public images of teachers and reducing positive social evaluation of them (Zheng, 2021). Public evaluation is closely related to the teacher's perception of pressure. Positive evaluation from the public contributes to alleviating teachers' pressure by making them feel respected and recognized. On the other hand, negative social evaluation can enhance their stress levels by undermining their self-worth.

The media often represents public evaluation of teachers. Amid the expeditious development of the Internet, the importance of media has been growing, and its regulation has also become increasingly difficult. In the coverage of major educational events, some new media channels purposefully spread misleading or sensational material, which may tarnish the image of the teaching profession as a whole. Thus, negative news about educational issues in return increases the psychological burden on the teacher (Lu & Zhou, 2014).

## **Reasons for Overburdening Compulsory Education Teachers**

### ***Progression Rate-Focused Education***

The progression rate of a junior secondary school at the compulsory education level represents the percentage of students admitted to general senior secondary schools after participating in the senior secondary school entrance examination. Progression rate-focused education pursues one-sided growth in senior secondary school admissions, disregarding the needs of the student for comprehensive development. Under this education paradigm, the teacher implements an instruction inconsistent with the national compulsory education curriculum program and course standards. The teacher often incorporates advanced learning materials into the current curriculum while eliminating or reducing subject matter deemed irrelevant to the high-stake examination. Schools and school districts frequently sponsor unified exams and mock entrance exams as test-ability training. Teachers must devote extra time and energy to helping students prepare for these tests. In Chen's (2007) research on teacher work burden, X School from a mountainous area was cited as a case study. It was a junior secondary school with 21 classes, and for three consecutive years, it was among the few top schools in the local county in terms of progression rates. Its principal, S, received the county- and municipal-level Excellent Principal Awards. Principal S held a mobilization meeting of all faculty and staff right after the recent senior secondary school entrance examination and declared that the school was targeting a 10% increase in the progression rate in the next year. That meant the next year's progression rate for the school needed to rise to 95% to be the number one among all schools in the county. All teaching staff fell into deep fear of the prospect of onerous duties fueled by this target.

### ***Ambiguity of the Teacher's Responsibilities***

In China, the roles that the teacher plays are plural, including educational roles such as the instructor, tutor, advisor, and evaluator as well as administrative ones such as the organizer, administrator, and communicator. Social development and educational advancement constantly generate new roles for teachers and add fresh responsibilities to them. Amid the increasingly intense competition between schools, teachers are required to provide a variety of services for parents, such as parenting education and counseling. Under the novel pedagogy that advocates fostering the student's problem-solving and innovative abilities, the teacher themselves needs to develop innovative capabilities first in order to become a qualified director for students. The ongoing educational reform requires the teacher to actively engage in educational research, and thus they need to be a capable researcher. The definition of the teacher's primary roles is complicated by the excessive responsibilities imposed on them. In fact, teaching is just one of many professions in the age of division of labor and a means of making a living. The notion of the all-mighty educator places teachers under unnecessary pressure (Chen, 2007).

### ***Influences of Social Culture***

Traditionally, the “sage” or “perfectionist” was the images of the teacher. Confucius and Mencius were their earliest models. In the modern age, people have regarded noble-minded educators who aspire to save and strengthen the nation as exemplary teachers. The combination of the two notions contributes to the ideal public expectations of teachers, who must be morally perfect and academically proficient (Li, 2014). Such personal and professional images of the teacher do not allow even minor defects. Other professions do not have to adhere to a code of ethics as strict as that of teachers. The need to be exceedingly cautious aggravates the psychological pressure on the teacher. In addition, there is a substantial gap between the high profile society gives teachers and their actual socioeconomic status, resulting in their low levels of happiness, job satisfaction, and sense of gain (Li, 2022).

### ***Parents' Overly High Expectations of Teachers***

According to the “*Report on Education Anxiety Indexes of Chinese Parents*” issued by SmartStudy, an educational technology company, in 2018, parental education anxiety is pervasive in China. To transfer the anxiety to teachers, parents choose to assume that teachers should take full responsibility for their child's education when they start school. In their minds, if their child does not do well at school, it is due largely to the teachers' incompetence. On the one hand, parents welcome teachers' constant nudges to their child for the latter's excellence in academic performance; on the other hand, they will not hesitate to lodge complaints against the teacher whenever their child



says they have been wronged in the school. The bulk of private tutoring and training institutions closed as a consequence of the implementation of the Double Reduction Policy. The majority of parents feel happy about it but expect teachers to do more to make up the gap in tutoring services. These unrealistic expectations from parents are a source of stress for the teacher (Fang & Liu, 2022).

### ***Competition for Professional Titles***

The professional title is one of the primary indicators of the teacher's professional standing as well as a valuable honor to the teacher awarded with it. The teacher evaluation system, initiated in 1886, includes the current practice of teacher professional title rating. It is meant to encourage initiative in the work of teachers and couple their salaries and perks to their performance. Nonetheless, there have been issues arising from its implementation, fueling an extra work burden for teachers. First, the number of professional titles across all ranks is limited. The criteria for professional titles vary in different districts, and there is an unbalanced distribution of the awards between schools. The teacher needs to compete extremely hard with their colleagues to win the targeted title, which arouses tremendous psychological pressure among them. Second, the preparations for professional title applications are also burdensome. The applicant needs to submit a large variety of materials to verify their qualifications, which is time-consuming. Besides, they need to earn as many accolades as possible to make themselves competitive, and as a result, they must participate in all sorts of contests, such as the demonstration lesson contest. In addition, there are subjective factors in the professional title rating. It is difficult for the evaluators, usually the school leaders, to make a completely impartial, objective assessment. That complicates interpersonal relationships between teachers (Yang, 2022).

### **Recommendations on Alleviating the Work Burden of Compulsory Education Teachers**

In response to the issues with the work burden of compulsory education teachers, the State Council of China's General Office issued "Opinions on Further Improving Education and Teaching Environments to Reduce the Work Burden of Primary and Secondary Teachers" in 2019. The paper emphasized the importance of burden alleviation for guaranteeing the quality of compulsory education as well as the mental and physical health of teachers (State Council of China, 2019). This article proposes recommendations on this issue in the dimensions of school management, teacher professional competences, and social recognition, as follows:

## ***Improving School Management of Teachers' Workloads***

Reducing miscellaneous tasks that are disruptive to routine instruction is helpful in concentrating teachers on teaching duties and enhancing the quality of instruction. To do so, it is necessary for the school to clearly define the responsibilities of the teacher. School leaders should stringently screen external tasks to avoid engaging teachers in excessive activities that are irrelevant to school-based instructional work. Non-teaching personnel can be assigned school-based non-instructional duties such as classroom hygiene and oversight over student dining. It is also necessary for school leaders to streamline administrative procedures by reducing the number of meetings, eliminating redundant paperwork, and utilizing educational technology to increase procedural efficiency.

Furthermore, ameliorating the teacher evaluation system also helps alleviate the stressfulness of the job of teaching. First, the current teacher evaluation criteria emphasize student examination results over the educational process. To address the overly utilitarian tendency in the educational community, we should formulate a multidimensional teacher evaluation framework. Second, the components of teacher evaluation should be comprehensive to cover various aspects of the teacher's devotion, such as the number of lessons taught, education research outcomes, educational attitudes, and more. Third, a reasonable staff evaluation framework for the school should be stratified, with varied criteria for front-line teachers, administrators, and other logistic personnel. Lastly, the evaluators of teacher performance should be diversified to include school leaders, educational researchers, teaching research group leaders, labor unions, etc.

## ***Focusing on Teacher Professional Competences***

Improving teaching efficiency and effectiveness contributes to the teacher better managing the burden of work. Persistent professional development of the teacher is based on the notion of lifelong learning. They should continuously pursue new information and skills to upgrade their knowledge repertoire and pedagogical expertise. They can increase work efficiency by strengthening their digital literacy and applying educational technology, particularly AI-assisted technology, to day-to-day teaching and education. A teacher's better time management capability is also beneficial for handling workloads efficiently and reaching intended teaching outcomes. In addition, proficiency in stress management can significantly mediate the sense of burden on the teacher. An individual sense of burden is, to a certain extent, objective. There are differences in the perception of pressures at work among

teachers. Measures for making teaching school less stressful include, but are not limited to, remaining positive-minded, making time to unwind, seeking support from colleagues, and communicating with parents in an effective fashion.

## ***Developing a Reasonable Social Attitude towards the Teaching Profession***

The government and educational authorities should work to establish scientific educational goals for society and develop a healthy educational climate where fixations with student progression rates and examination results ought to be discarded. Parents should have a sensible notion of child education and legitimate expectations of teachers' roles. Child development is contingent on a wide range of factors, and the teacher's effort is just one of them. Student academic achievements should not serve as the only criterion in teacher evaluation. A teacher-respected social culture helps increase the teacher's identification with the teaching profession, thus boosting their overall satisfaction.

On the other hand, the misconduct of certain individual teachers may expeditiously garner the intense attention of the public as a consequence of the skewed and misleading coverage of irresponsible media. These inaccurately reported stories have severely tarnished the public image of the teacher and made them live in constant fear of being targeted by the media. Stricter regulation of media reporting on educational events is needed to prevent its detrimental impact on the public's perception of the teaching profession. Objective public opinion is beneficial for fostering a reasonable social environment where the teacher feels respected and recognized and can experience a strong sense of wellbeing in their career.

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