

Overview of the research on the multi-level conflict mechanism of emotional labor of physical education teachers——Integration based on the theory of social ecosystem

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Abstract: *In the current educational environment, teachers, as a special professional group, require them not only to have professional knowledge and teaching skills, but also to deal with complex interactions with students, parents, colleagues and various social roles. The problem of ecological development of physical education teachers is becoming more and more serious, and it has become an endogenous problem affecting the professional development of physical education teachers. Using the documentary and the logical analysis, based on the social ecosystem theory, from the three-dimensional perspective of physical performance-emotional management-institutional restraint, we explore how to innovate and repair the ecological problems of physical education teachers. Through three-dimensional synergy, it aims to provide systematic and scientific solutions for physical education teachers and promote physical education teachers.*

Keywords: *Physical education teacher, Emotional labor, Ecological theory, Conflict mechanism*

1. Introduction

Teachers are not only the transmitters of knowledge, but also the guides of students' emotions and behaviors. They need to manage their emotions in the teaching process, and at the same time regulate students' emotions to promote learning effects. In the career of teachers, emotional labor is the "third kind of labor" of primary and secondary school teachers, and the professional development of physical education teachers is the endogenous driving force of their career development. At present, the academic community's research perspective on the emotional labor development of physical education teachers is relatively single, mostly limited to the description of surface phenomena, and lacks profound logic of the intrinsic development of emotional labor of physical education teachers. Based on this social ecology theory, it provides a new analytical framework and development ideas for the emotional labor development of primary and secondary school physical education teachers.

2. Interpretation of connotation

2.1 Interpretation of the connotation of emotional labor

Emotional labor is a concept introduced by Hochschild in 1983 in his book **The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling**, which posits that individuals engage in emotional labor alongside physical and mental work. The scholar argues that professionals must actively regulate their emotions to meet organizational norms or role-specific requirements, thereby creating an emotional environment aligned with work objectives. This emotional management behavior constitutes emotional labor^[1]. Hochschild categorizes emotional labor strategies into two types: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting refers to individuals adjusting observable behaviors (e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice, body language) without altering their internal emotional states to conform to emotional expression rules in organizational or professional contexts. Deep acting involves individuals consciously modifying their emotional experiences through cognitive adjustments and psychological suggestion, ensuring both internal emotional states and external expressions align with corresponding emotional rules^[2]. Unlike Hochschild's emphasis on the perceptual rules of emotional labor, Ashforth (B.E.) and Humphrey (R.H.) focus on the displayrules of emotional labor. They define emotional labor

as the display of emotions that conform to performance norms. This perspective emphasizes that individuals can exhibit behavior consistent with performance rules without conscious emotional regulation, thereby viewing the natural expression of genuine emotions as a third strategic approach to emotional labor^[3]. A groundbreaking study in emotional labor research was conducted by Grandey (A.A.). Grandey's work introduced the psychological theory of emotion regulation, positing that emotional labor refers to the process of emotional regulation and expression undertaken by individuals to achieve organizational goals, and proposed the classic emotional labor model^[4]. When employees' true emotions diverge from the organization's "expression rules," three primary emotional expression patterns typically emerge: The first is surface-level enactment, where employees adjust only external emotional displays (e.g., tone of voice, body language, facial expressions) without altering their inner feelings, responding to interactions through "forced smiles" or "mechanical responses." The second is deep-level enactment, where employees actively regulate their internal emotional experiences (e.g., through psychological suggestion or perspective-taking) to align their true feelings with external expressions, achieving "consistent inner and outer" emotional presentation. Additionally, there exists an ideal state of natural expression, where employees' genuine emotions and external displays perfectly align with the organization's prescribed emotional rules, naturally meeting professional requirements without deliberate emotional management.

2.2 Interpretation of the connotation of social ecology

Social ecology is a research methodology that integrates individuals with their social environment. Evolving from biological ecology, human ecology, systems theory, and psychological ecology, it features a "broad interdisciplinary perspective focusing on the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of human-environment relationships ." Social ecology serves as the theoretical foundation for social ecological models, with the "Ecological Framework for Human Development" being recognized as the most widely adopted model in this field^[5]. In the 1980s, American scholar Bronfenbrenner established the theoretical framework of human development ecosystems. He pioneered the application of social ecology theory in psychological research, categorizing environmental factors influencing individual behavior into four systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem refers to the immediate environment interacting with individuals; the mesosystem consists of connections between microsystems and their immediate environment; the exosystem comprises external environmental conditions indirectly affecting behavior, formed through interactions and processes among two or more microsystems; the macrosystem encompasses culture and subcultures within micro-, meso-, and exosystems, representing the complete social environment and ideological background that directly or indirectly influences individuals' experience acquisition, role acquisition, and knowledge absorption. Social ecology theory emphasizes examining individuals within environmental systems, focusing on how ecosystems interact with individuals and influence their behaviors, thereby revealing how families, schools, and society guide individual development. The theory posits that ecological factors affecting individual behavior—such as personal, social, physical, and policy factors—primarily occur in psychological, familial, school, and community domains. These domains are then classified into inner, subinner, and outer layers based on their proximity to individual behavior.

Teachers' emotional labor profoundly influences students and their behaviors. As Fredrickson noted, effective emotional management not only fosters harmonious teacher-student relationships but also stimulates students' learning motivation, enhances creativity and memory, thereby facilitating better adaptation to school life. This high-pressure, emotionally demanding work environment makes teachers quintessential emotional laborers. However, such emotional labor comes at a cost. Prolonged emotional strain may lead to occupational burnout, increased psychological stress, and even impact teachers' mental health and teaching effectiveness. Addressing and optimizing teachers' emotional labor is not only crucial for improving job satisfaction and well-being but also vital for enhancing educational quality and promoting professional development. Optimization strategies for teachers' emotional labor can be explored and implemented at four levels: individual, institutional, societal, and familial. At the individual level, this involves strengthening teachers' self-regulation skills and professional awareness. At the institutional level, supportive organizational culture and technical support can help alleviate work pressure. Societal improvements should focus on enhancing teachers' compensation and refining training systems. Familial support requires strengthening family involvement and creating a supportive environment. Through these approaches, we can effectively reduce teachers' emotional labor burden, boost their work enthusiasm, and improve overall teaching effectiveness. The social ecological model posits that human development is influenced by multiple interconnected ecosystems. These systems include microsystems, mesosystems, external systems, and macrosystems. Microsystems refer to the

immediate environments where individuals interact and experience daily activities, encompassing family, peers, schools, and other significant social settings. Mesosystems highlight the interconnections and interactions between different microsystems in an individual's life, emphasizing the importance of relationships and impacts when these microsystems overlap or intersect. External systems are environmental frameworks within an individual's developmental ecosystem that may not directly participate in their life but exert direct or indirect influences. Macrosystems represent the broader social environment and ideological context in which individuals operate, specifically including political institutions, economic models, cultural traditions, social forms, and structures formed through a society's long-term development^[6].

3. Emotional labor characteristics of physical education teachers from the perspective of ecology

The theory of educational ecology examines the relationship between educational entities and their surrounding environment, emphasizing holistic value analysis. It advocates that the development of these entities should be a dynamic process aimed at achieving long-term sustainability^[6]. Teacher burden refers to the educational responsibilities, professional pressures, and associated costs borne by teachers in their school education work. The multi-level conflict characteristics of physical education teachers' emotional labor are primarily manifested in three aspects.

3.1 Emotional labor of physical education teachers under physical performance

In recent years, "sports" have increasingly become a universal and objective "social reality" in the daily lives of the general public^[7]. Today, sports not only serve as a political institution, economic phenomenon, educational tool, media medium, and reflection of social ideology, but also demonstrate a trend toward becoming a lifestyle for humanity^[8]. From the perspective of micro-subjects, whether on the globally watched Olympic stage, the scenic marathon tracks, or private family living spaces, scenes of people engaging in sports activities are ubiquitous. Through various forms of physical exercise, people gain health, happiness, and even the meaning of life^[9]. However, the flourishing landscape of sports as a social reality is starkly contrasted with the long-standing awkward position of sports in public and academic perceptions^[10]. On one hand, sports have long been regarded by the public as relatively "low-end" activities. Many cultures worldwide hold stereotypes about sports talents, such as "simple minds and well-developed limbs," while sports are often seen as physical training requiring minimal textual explanation^[11]. Students generally enjoy sports but dislike physical education classes, leaving schools and PE teachers in an awkward position^[12]. As a crucial component of school sports, PE classes face numerous external criticisms and ideological deviations. In the current educational system, where student-centered approaches prioritize individual development, the teaching process often leads to unprincipled indulgence of students' demands, turning PE classes into "free-range sheep classes." Contemporary physical education classrooms are witnessing a paradoxical struggle: students yearn to unleash their innate vitality through sports and revel in unrestrained joy, yet the pedagogical system constructs an invisible web of "disciplinary codes" and "technical standards," constraining both their bodies and minds. When the aspiration for "free running" clashes with the rigidity of "standardized movements," the behavioral friction between teachers and students merely reflects the surface of this conflict. The deeper issue lies in how physical education, under the guise of "norms," is eroding students' most authentic passion for sports.

3.2 Emotional labor of physical education teachers under emotional management

Education, as an emotionally demanding profession, requires teachers to invest significant emotional labor. Prolonged emotional strain directly or indirectly impacts professional burnout, and physical education teachers are no exception. During PE instruction, teachers engage in intense face-to-face verbal or physical interactions with students, where their emotional labor influences student behavior. Fredrickson (1980) emphasized that effective emotional management by teachers not only fosters harmonious teacher-student relationships but also stimulates learning motivation, enhances creativity and memory, and facilitates better adaptation to school life^[13]. Conversely, inadequate emotional regulation in teaching settings may trigger student anxiety, diminish learning motivation, and negatively affect teacher-student relationship development. Although educational policies have yet to establish clear guidelines for teachers' emotional labor, educators inherently bear the responsibility of emotional management as professional practitioners. This responsibility manifests not only through active compliance with implicit social expectations and school culture but also requires internalizing

emotional regulation as an integral part of professional competence. For instance, in PE classrooms where primary teaching environments are sports fields and facilities, students often engage in playful activities. Teachers must avoid displaying inappropriate emotions like irritability or anger, while continuously adapting to subtle environmental supervision and practicing emotional management.

3.3 Emotional labor of physical education teachers under institutional constraints

Organizational identity refers to the deep resonance and sense of belonging that school members develop cognitively and emotionally toward their organization's values, goals, and culture, manifested as the internalization process of integrating organizational interests into their self-concept^[14]. Although the procedural expansion of institutional empowerment has achieved breakthroughs in regulating teacher behavior, it cannot conceal the "emotional hollowing-out" crisis revealed in occupational burnout and role alienation^[15]. Distributed leadership, through empowering decision-making participation and shared responsibility mechanisms, dissolves the alienation felt in traditional vertical management, enabling teachers to perceive an enhancement of professional discourse power in governance practices^[16]. When various types of organizations implement performance management, they all consider decomposing organizational goals layer by layer and ultimately closely linking them with employee behaviors. This principle also applies to school organizational management. As a composite of institutional environment and relational networks, the school atmosphere strengthens organizational identity through dual-path driving effects. Physical education teachers tend to actively internalize educational norms, shifting emotional expression from external rule compliance (superficial emotional labor) to emotionally grounded commitment rooted in professional beliefs (deep emotional labor).

4. Diagnosis of physical education ecological fracture: the real dilemma of emotional labor of physical education teachers

4.1 Microsystem: the conflict between multiple roles and execution gap

Every individual in social systems assumes specific social roles and fulfills tasks assigned by these roles. As a unique professional group, teachers must not only possess specialized knowledge and teaching skills but also navigate complex interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and various social roles. In physical education classrooms, teachers serve as facilitators tasked with imparting knowledge, skills, and moral education while attempting to regulate student behavior. However, due to students' physical and psychological immaturity, they often resist excessive constraints, leading to subtle conflicts between teachers and students. Confronted with diverse demands from school administrators and parents, PE teachers frequently experience tension and fatigue. They must balance physical and mental labor to complete teaching tasks while managing emotions to meet institutional requirements without compromising students' healthy development. Traditional teaching concepts exhibit significant cognitive biases, with their core limitation being the oversimplification of classroom instruction as a one-way knowledge transfer process from "teacher as subject to student as object." This mindset assumes complete control over classroom dynamics and teaching outcomes, essentially neglecting the dynamic nature of teacher-student interactions in educational activities and obscuring the essential role of classrooms as spaces for generating diverse values. On the other hand, the educational requirements of school physical education in the new era not only clarify the instrumental value of physical education curriculum in knowledge transmission and skill cultivation, but also emphasize its value leading function in the ideological field, which undoubtedly forms a breakthrough reconstruction of the single-minded thinking of "only knowledge transmission" and "only teacher dominance" in traditional teaching concepts.

4.2 Zhongguan System: The Conflict between Institutional Constraints and Professional Development

In China's education system, the government serves dual roles as both organizer and manager of primary and secondary education. Its overreach manifests in "full control of personnel, financial, and resource allocation rights, leaving schools with virtually no autonomy"^[17]. Professional development for physical education teachers is both an inherent requirement and fundamental driver for building a high-quality teaching workforce, as it remains the essential path for enhancing pedagogical expertise. On one hand, schools, operating under government leadership, often find themselves in a

disadvantaged position. When assigned tasks by higher authorities, they are compelled to accept mandatory assignments without refusal, which inevitably increases teachers' workload beyond core teaching responsibilities. On the other hand, current school management systems predominantly reflect a control-oriented philosophy^[18], with efficiency-driven and utilitarian approaches prevalent. Many schools maintain "one-dimensional, linear management models". Physical education teachers, like their counterparts in other disciplines, face evaluations for professional titles and workload assessments. While teaching proficiency and instructional skills are key criteria, the hidden workloads—such as extensive lesson preparation, parent communication, and professional training—are often overlooked. Clearly, the professional development of physical education teachers results from the interaction between individual teachers and their environment. It requires not only continuous personal effort but also a harmonious ecosystem of supportive factors within their professional context.

4.3 External System: The Conflict between Policy Discrimination and the Real Environment

With the rapid development of modern society, employers are setting increasingly higher diploma requirements, while education authorities prioritize college admission rates and academic performance in talent cultivation. Constrained by practical conditions and influenced by the "intellectual over physical" mindset coupled with exam-oriented education, physical education classes, though mandated, often face class hour allocations being diverted. During rainy weather, many schools convert PE classes into indoor self-study sessions, leaving only a handful of institutions that strictly adhere to teaching schedules. This situation further undermines the social expectations and career prospects of physical education teachers. The prevalence of the "uselessness theory" in PE education and societal neglect have spawned abnormal teaching practices that deviate from sports' inherent nature and educational development principles. Through research on physical education teachers' promotion rates, curriculum prioritization, social recognition of athletic talents, and parental acceptance of children pursuing sports careers, quantitative analysis reveals potential biases in the stratification of knowledge and the resulting professional stigmatization, exposing underlying conflicts in disciplinary value perceptions. Despite continuous academic exploration of teaching models like "joyful sports," "exercise prescriptions," and "physical health curricula" and their active promotion, fundamental improvements in PE teaching quality remain constrained by systemic bottlenecks. While contemporary school education champions the "student-centered" philosophy, emphasizing respect for individuality, preferences, and emotional experiences, it has fallen into two extremes in practice. On one end, teachers dominate knowledge transmission, reducing classrooms to mechanical explanations and repetitive drills—a teacher-centered, didactic teaching dilemma. On the other, there's a one-sided interpretation of student agency, leading to unprincipled indulgence of student interests and lax classroom management, resulting in inefficient teaching models like "free-range classes" and "free-activity sessions." This binary opposition in teacher-student roles not only deviates from the professional essence of physical education but also undermines the practical value of the "student-first" approach, becoming a deep-seated contradiction that hinders the quality improvement of physical education.

4.4 Macro system: the conflict between social expectations and scene adaptation

There is a misalignment and bias in the perception of the teaching profession. It is generally believed that the work of teachers is easy, the welfare is excellent, and the social status is high. The duty of a teacher is to be a responsible teacher, to set an example and serve students. The society's understanding of teachers gives teachers a luxurious hat, which is not only an affirmation of teachers, but also brings more responsibilities and requirements, which invisibly brings a lot of psychological pressure to teachers. The adaptability of sports requires students to attend classes outdoors and have a large space for activities, which requires physical education teachers not only to lead students' sports, but also to be the caregivers of life. These expectations double aggravate the burden on teachers in the school field, making teachers at a loss and in contradiction.

5. Reconstruction of the emotional labor ecological path of physical education teachers: from fracture to resilience

5.1 Awakening Life Consciousness: Growth Thinking and Professional Planning Help

From an ecological theory perspective, the core concept of physical education teachers' professional development advocates integrating career growth with personal development, transcending the

traditional binary opposition between "individual" and "society". Through collaborative symbiosis, it unifies career demands with the social ecosystem's positive interaction under the overarching goal of "sustainable teacher development". Physical education teachers can enhance self-regulation by cultivating growth mindset – viewing challenges and failures as opportunities for growth and learning. According to the resource conservation theory, when teachers achieve complete psychological detachment during non-working periods, actively engage in physical and mental recovery activities, and consciously conserve psychological energy, it helps restore dynamic balance between physical and mental resources. Self-development awareness, as the intrinsic subjective driving force for professional growth, plays a central role in continuously stimulating individual development momentum to ensure stability and adaptability of teachers' positions within the professional ecosystem (i.e., teacher niche). To comprehensively develop physical education teachers' internal driving energy, it is essential to clarify role positioning, strengthen responsibility commitment, maintain work enthusiasm, awaken teachers' "life consciousness" as subjective awareness, and promote their sustainable development.

5.2 School Support Construction: Cultural Creation and Care System Construction

A healthy social ecosystem serves as the foundation for teacher development. Establishing a harmonious social environment hinges on robust institutional safeguards. A supportive school culture provides teachers with a secure and inclusive workplace, enabling them to express and manage their emotions more freely. Within the social ecosystem of teacher development, school administration plays a crucial supporting role. An ecological school management model reserves sufficient institutional flexibility for optimizing faculty structure and facilitating rational mobility, thereby promoting dynamic equilibrium among various structural elements of the teaching community. When combined with genuine public respect, comprehensive understanding, and fair evaluations, these institutional safeguards allow teachers to deeply appreciate the value and honor of their profession, motivating them to actively deepen professional experiences and pursue career growth. On one hand, clear career development goals, continuous professional training opportunities, and regular developmental feedback and assessments ensure that teachers enhance their emotional labor management skills while achieving long-term career advancement. On the other hand, prioritizing the cultivation of physical education teachers' self-reflection abilities helps them critically examine their professional essence, improve professional development capabilities, reflect on teaching practices, and progress through reflection. Such professional development plans enable teachers to better address challenges posed by emotional labor, thereby creating favorable conditions and fertile ground for the formation of a healthy teacher development ecosystem.

5.3 Strengthening social support: treatment improvement and policy guarantee in parallel

The autonomous capacity framework for teacher professional development constitutes the internal ecosystem of pedagogical growth, representing a dynamic equilibrium with structural integrity and comprehensive functionality that integrates teaching autonomy, learning autonomy, and research autonomy. Physical education teachers are inherently practice-oriented, and the most effective developmental approach is the "teaching-research-synthesis" tripartite model. Quality instructional practices help accumulate teaching experience, identify systemic issues through reflection, and reduce conflicts between instruction and learning. Educational authorities should enhance school-based training programs to leverage institutional resources, strengthen physical education teachers' professional identity, and alleviate excessive workloads. While the "double reduction" policy and "integration of physical education and academic education" have elevated teachers' social status, the stereotype of "athletic prowess without intellectual depth" persists. By adhering to ecological chain principles, clarifying teachers' professional roles, elevating their societal standing, and guiding public understanding of their occupational value, we can fundamentally transform societal perceptions and chart a professional development roadmap.

5.4 Strengthen external security: understand and support to promote comprehensive development

Promoting the emotional labor development of physical education teachers requires strengthening external safeguards as a prerequisite, exploring diversified support mechanisms as a foundation, and adhering to the ecological development of physical education teachers as the ultimate goal. All aspects of education, education and its external environment are in an intricate relationship network. The development of physical education teachers cannot be separated from the support of surrounding information and energy. The education department should constantly update the management concept

of school teachers and create a management culture of the teaching and research community. At the school level, we should strengthen the capacity building of the leadership team, do a good job in top-level design, and introduce advanced modern management spirit. Provide stable social support for physical education teachers, and give more tolerance and help to slow-growing teachers. As the direct supervisors of teachers' labor governance, parents should raise their rational awareness and cooperate in the development of teachers. It is necessary to create a cultural atmosphere of supporting teachers, understanding teachers, respecting teachers and re-respecting teaching throughout the whole society, and strive to meet social expectations and adaptation to the situation.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the development of emotional labor among physical education teachers, integrating individual behaviors with sports ecological environmental factors. Grounded in social ecology theory, it analyzes the impact of multi-level environmental factors (micro-mesoscopic-external-macroscopic) on teachers' emotional labor, clarifies the specific roles and interactive mechanisms of various domains in emotional labor dynamics, and reveals the interaction mechanisms between individual behaviors and sports ecological environmental factors. By transcending the flat explanations of traditional social ecology theories, this research constructs a social ecology theoretical model to provide theoretical support for developing more effective emotional management strategies. Based on the social ecosystem theory, it analyzes the impact of micro-medium-external-macro and other multi-level environmental factors on the emotional labor of physical education teachers from the perspective of "physical performance-emotional management-institutional constraints".

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