

Why Teaching and Research Activities Lack Vitality?: A Probe into the Basic Psychological Needs of Teachers

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Abstract: Teaching and research activities are of great significance to the professional development of teachers. The basic psychological needs of teachers include autonomy, competence, and attribution. The engagement of teachers in teaching and research activities can be analyzed from these three perspectives. Under the management system of teaching and research, teachers generally lack autonomy in the organization of teaching and research activities; they are also lack scientific research knowledge and ability; in addition, under the influence of harmonious interpersonal relationships and the culture of individualism, there is a dearth in real communication among teachers. In light of this, we propose targeted countermeasures to promote the vitality of teaching and research activities.

Keywords: Teaching and research activities; Vitality; Teachers; Basic psychological needs

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1. Introduction

Ever since the beginning of the new century, we have seen a growing trend of refinement and excellency in the education for teachers. The term “teacher development” has been defined as teachers’ professional and lifelong growth. Moreover, the appeal of “Let Teachers Be Researchers” is now on the rise. As a platform and carrier of cooperation and research for teachers, teaching and research activities play an essential part in teachers’ professional development. Functioning as the subject of teaching and research activities, teachers have a significant influence on the vitality of these activities, such as the affirmation of value, emotional experience, and proactivity of participation. Therefore, it is of great significance to improve the realistic value of teaching and research activities as well as teachers’ professional development, so as to discover the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems rested in the process, analyze the attributing factors, and put forward targeted countermeasures.

2. Behaviors attributing to the lack of vitality in teaching and research activities: From the perspective of teachers

The organization of teaching and research activities, embodying cooperative research, aims to reinforce the mutual study among teachers and their teaching quality. However, after several decades of development,

the concept of delicacy management has permeated all aspects of school management, and the function of teaching research for teaching and research groups has declined. The executive function of management bore by teachers is expanding, thus reducing it to a primary level of administrative function in school to some extent. The marginalization is caused by the neglect of communication, research and discussion ^[1], and reflection among teachers, which are the three aspects that can enhance the cooperation among teaching and research groups. As a result, teachers lack the proactivity and initiative to take part in teaching and research activities, leaving the necessary sharing and cooperation among teaching groups in latency.

2.1. Dutiful educator: Weak research awareness

The world is changing rapidly, and at the same time, there are constant updates to the educational theory with corresponding reforms deepening. The idea of “invigorating education through science and research” has become the main direction of school development. In the complex trend of education, only when teachers are equipped with awareness of science and research can they develop initiative and adapt to the current changes. This demands the construction of teachers’ dual identity, which signifies that teachers are not only individuals who “preach” their thoughts and dispel doubts, but also researchers of educational practice who possess awareness of science and research and can incisively discover the underlying problems in educational practice, and thus adopt scientific methods to study and solve these problems realistically. Without research as a way of support, teaching will remain a mere low-level repetition ^[2]. In actuality, teachers focus solely on their main duties; they lack proactivity and the awareness of science and research. Full of resistance to daily teaching and research activities, they have little consciousness for reflection following any research activity. Therefore, translating the achievements acquired through research activities into their own teaching strengths would be a major challenge for teachers.

2.2. Seemingly harmonious community: Lacking the concept of cooperation and sharing

People, both at home and abroad, in the past and at present, have always placed a high value on the idea of cooperation. For example, the sayings, “The time isn’t as important as the terrain, but the terrain isn’t as important as unity with the people,” from Mencius, a philosopher, politician, and educator during the Warring States period, and “Learning alone without exchanges with others will lead to ignorance,” as recorded in “The Note of Learning,” clearly depict the value of cooperation. However, for a long time, teachers have only been concerned about their own affairs, with little communication or positive attitude for cooperation among them, due to factors such as departmental instruction as well as the exam-oriented and teacher performance evaluation system based on student scores. In teaching and research activities, the spirits of experience exchange and knowledge sharing are needed among teachers. Although there are interactions concerning work arrangements between teachers and leaders of research groups, the lack of emotion and cooperation in studies is apparent.

2.3. Step-by-step learner: Negative attitude toward participating in research activities

School research activities are task-oriented and basically a part of teachers’ own responsibilities. Therefore, much “objective endeavor” exists among them. When observing themselves through “subjective endeavor,” teachers may find many problems. For instance, since they are in a state of “only listening,” they lack proactivity in communication and seldom take part in discussions on issues. Besides, healthy conflicts rarely occur because they are afraid that these conflicts may affect the harmonious relationship among colleges. Since they themselves dislike criticism, they tend to distant themselves from making criticism on others to maintain their working relationships ^[3]. Moreover, many teachers are reluctant to participate in optional research activities.

3. Reasons for the lack of vitality in teaching and research activities: From the perspective of teachers' basic psychological needs

The concept of basic psychological needs originated from the theory of self-determination, a motivation theory that was raised by two American psychologists, Deci and Ryan, in the 1980s. It focuses on the process of self-determination in human behaviors. In the theory of self-determination, basic psychological needs are regarded as key factors for people's healthy development and as triggers of effective behaviors, including autonomy, competence, and attribution ^[4]. Among these, autonomy stresses an individual's willingness and initiative of behaviors; competence highlights an individual's competency to undertake a certain activity; attribution focuses on an individual's sense of community and harmonious relationships with others. When an individual's basic needs are met, the individual's behaviors and self-development will be more effective and healthier. On the other hand, if an individual's basic needs are neglected, the individual will react in a negative way. The reasons for teachers to act negatively in research activities might have gotten a glimpse from the contents of satisfaction with the three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and attribution.

3.1. Autonomy: The teaching and research system takes away the rights of teachers to organize and participate in teaching and research activities

Autonomy focuses on the rights of teachers for self-determination to participate in research activities and self-management with regard to the ways they are conducted. However, the current teaching and researching groups in primary and middle schools have become bottom-management organization in schools with dual functions, researching on teaching and administrative management, while teachers remain at the bottom line under this management system, losing the freedom of joining in research activities and lacking the rights of managing on their own. Taking a teaching and research activity as an example, after the tasks have been delivered by the school administrators, group or grade leaders, as managers possessing "firm rights," would undertake the routine work of theme decision and medium-term inspection. Teachers, though, are the subjects of practice, they are relegated as passive performers of administrative order. The teaching and research groups would then complete the tasks through an inflexible process: school or group leaders deliver research tasks → teachers claim the tasks and complete them respectively → outcomes are put together. In that case, the participation in research is in fact a way of fulfilling tasks passively for teachers, which is opposite to their willingness to participate. The subject of researching is the faculty. It is difficult to meet the requirements of every teacher, and there is a likelihood that some of them do not have the same need. Therefore, adding extra work out of their individual needs would undoubtedly increase their burden, and thus trigger their resistance.

3.2. Competence: Teachers lack the necessary know-how and skills for scientific research

Competence highlights the feeling of competence and the need for self-actualization in teaching and researching for teachers. If teachers are equipped with comprehensive theoretical grounding and practical skills, their motivation to achieve will be ignited, and they will perform better during research activities. Otherwise, a lack of competence causes teachers to carry themselves with timidity and fear. Corwin, an American socialist, has put forward 10 standards for one to be called "proficient." Among the 10 standards, two of them include being equipped with specialized know-hows and skills and being engaged in research and putting theory into practice. The cultivation of educational theory is the basis and prerequisite for teachers to carry out research on teaching, while the ability of researching is the support and guarantee of its success. In reality, however, although frontline teachers are usually very knowledgeable and have the ability and experience of teaching, their educational theories and research capabilities are substandard. Without source and constant updates, teachers would lack the confidence to participate in research activities,

and thus remain dormant due to knowledge and ability deficiencies, even if they had the desire for them. Moreover, they may feel nervous or anxious and may be afraid to express their own ideas. As a result, they may be reluctant to communicate with others.

3.3. Attribution: The harmonious view of interpersonal relationships and insular individualism hinder the communication among teachers

Attribution focuses on sincere interactions among teachers and their sense of community toward the whole faculty. In any research activity, attribution is embodied in the earnest expression of ideas and the sharing of personal teaching experiences by teachers to promote mutual progress for the research community.

For one thing, harmonious interpersonal relationships lead to superficial communications among teachers. The pursuit of harmony highlights the ineradicable value of the Chinese people under the reciprocal effects of a superstructure that is influenced by Confucianism, such as the theory that man is an integral part of nature, etiquette and ethics thoughts, and state ideology, and an understructure that is defined by the agriculture-based mode of production and the society of kinship ^[5]. From the perspective of the Chinese nationality, collectivism is favored over individualism, signifying that people, especially human relationships, are given priority, and tenderness and harmony are advocated so that people may come to avoid conflicts ^[6]. In research activities, teachers are rarely involved in conflicts or opposition as they fear that offensive words may breakdown the harmonious relationships among colleges. Therefore, it is less likely for them to point out the weaknesses of others and express varied ideas. As a result, their communication remains superficial with elements of compliance.

For another thing, the culture of individualism has deepened the existing gap within teachers, causing the alienation of research groups and turning them into a “false community.” The departmental teaching decides on the job specifications for every teacher, who in fact has his or her own teaching style and holds different cognition and understanding toward teaching. As a result, there is no cooperation within the faculty. Under the pressure of enrolment rates and the influence of the performance evaluation system, a competitive awareness has taken precedence among them, thereby making it harder for them to exchange work experience openly and affecting their rational cognition to cooperate.

4. Enhance the vitality of teaching and research activities and promote the professional development of teachers

The aspiration of teaching and research activities is to promote the professional development of teachers themselves. However, teachers are relegated to passive subjects who mindlessly perform given tasks, losing their rights to participate and organize activities as well as the necessary knowledge and ability for conducting scientific research. False communication and the absence of authentic cooperation consequently result in the lack of vitality in research activities. Focusing on the aforementioned problems and reasons, the basic psychological needs of teachers should be met to enhance their initiative to take part in research activities.

4.1. Empowerment: Strengthen teachers’ rights for self-decision and self-management

It is impossible for the operation and organization of school to take effect without the work of school leaders. However, the rights of the leaders are similar to double-edged swords. When their rights are used in ways where people are encouraged to make joint efforts, they play a positive role in leading the faculty. Nonetheless, when their rights are imposed unreasonably and the rights structures are infinitely exaggerated, which may lead to authoritarianism, teachers inevitably become slaves of their rights and subjectivity. Consequently, their autonomy and desire to participate in research activities will decline. For this reason, empowering their rights is of great significance. First of all, the reorientation of the function of research

groups should be done. In fact, research groups are literally the micro professional learning community. The meaning of its existence is “learning” rather than as a management facility. It is advisable to apply the value of the professional learning community to promote the transformation of the function of research groups, emphasizing “proficiency” and “learning.” Second, it is necessary to empower teachers’ rights in research activities. As a matter of fact, it is impossible for teachers to automatically make decisions whether or not to participate within a short time. Moreover, compulsory participation, to some extent, will limit their initiative. As a result, their equity enhancement is seen mainly in decision of research theme and organization of research patterns. Only research based on problems faced by teachers in teaching practice can stimulate their initiative and activity. In that case, the determination of research themes and concrete methods to carry out research activities are not under the leaders’ personal willingness; instead, they should be jointly discussed and determined after taking into consideration of the advice from teachers and complying with their personal willingness and factual needs.

4.2. A research innovation training system: Improve teachers’ research ability

The training of teachers’ research ability should contain elements of systematicity, persistency, and pertinency. Systematicity emphasizes the integrity of learning. For instance, a training that allows teachers to complete a whole set of research projects under the leadership of experts and develop their scientific thinking and research ability in practice would be beneficial. Persistency stresses the coherence and ladder-like developing pattern of teachers’ training in order to solve the problem of acquiring fragmented knowledge. The training should include step-by-step instructions and deepen the teachers’ understanding of teaching. Pertinency focuses on the way of training, in which the traditional way of training should be disposed of; in addition, the practical needs of teachers should be prioritized, and their room for self-decision should be expanded to improve their enthusiasm for involvement and solve the existing problems in teachers’ professional development. As shown in **Table 1**, “Teaching and Research Supermarket,” a training system that has been established by a teaching and research office in a district of Jiangsu Province, is taken as a valuable example.

Table 1. Setting of “Teaching and Research Supermarket” in the district of Jiangsu Province ^[7]

Principle	Utilize differentiated resources to conduct training for teachers.
Subject set	National Laboratory of Specimen Teaching Materials for Various Disciplines, teaching case study room, thesis writing guidance room, class teacher’s studio, <i>etc.</i>
Teacher resources	Full-time and part-time teachers, academic leaders, and backbone teachers.
Principle of activity	Combine scattered and concentrated as well as regular and irregular ways.

In “Teaching and Research Supermarket,” multiple study rooms are apportioned for textbook research and case analysis. Teachers can determine the direction of training in line with their own development and carry out specific studies to meet their own needs. The teachers’ team consists of both full-time and part-time teachers, and even academic leaders. The team not only resolves the problems of understaffed regional instructors and weak training, but also provides practical and professional instructions. The flexible application of combining scattered and concentrated as well as regular and irregular ways offers teachers distributed guidance, adjusts to their teaching schedule, and offers professional learning opportunities to teachers.

4.3. Build a shared vision: Increase teachers’ attribution and cohesion

Vision, which means hope or a blueprint of a goal, is a universal pursuit of value and a practical

development plan. Derived from the theory of community, “shared vision” is a universal desire for a community, a common pursuit of value for all members, and a bond connecting individuals [8]. Shared vision, as the most stimulating factor in organizations or communities, is able to integrate personal vision and connect individuals with different traits. Functioning as an environmental support for all school affairs, shared vision enables teachers to have a common purpose, to carry out efforts in the correct way, and to develop shared views of teaching, students, and curriculum, which are all beneficial to increasing teachers’ attribution and cohesion. As a result, their subsequent joint efforts would benefit the development of the school and leave a subtle influence on the course and effect of all school affairs. It is of great importance for research groups to enhance the attribution of teachers toward themselves so as to establish concrete plans and arrangements according to the shared vision and reach a consensus toward the goal of teachers’ work.

4.4. Create a cultural atmosphere where conflicts and harmony coexist: Promote the sharing of knowledge among teachers

Influenced by the social culture that embodies harmonious interpersonal relationships, teachers seem to have good rapport with each other when they are involved in research activities. However, this picture is, in fact, attributed to the absence of conflicts with others, the failure to express individual perspectives, and a mirroring of other people’s ideas. The development of research activities requires meaningful cooperation from teachers and underlines their real and heartfelt cooperation, rather than a superficial one. In the western world where liberalism prevails, the heterogeneity in individuals is regarded as an indication of one’s personalities. Although conflicts and contradiction between colleges may occur as a result of the event where teachers place strong emphasis on their own expression and come up with risky ideas [9], the prospect that teachers can freely share whatever they have in mind carries a positive connotation. If teachers focus on “reasoning” instead of “relationships,” they would then put forward creative ideas, which have positive effects on the development of the group. On the contrary, teachers in China do enjoy the cooperative platform of teaching and research groups, but they are shy to express themselves due to the fear of conflicts arising [10]. In this context, it is important to learn from the merits of others based on the advantages of the cooperative platform and expand the teachers’ understanding of the term “conflict.” For example, teachers should be encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and build interpersonal relationships, express themselves openly, carry out brainstorming activities actively, and propose creative ideas to put them into practice. “Conflicts” can generate a “catfish effect,” which is conducive to breaking the state of long-lasting harmony, and thus promote the vitality of research activities.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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