
Characteristics and Improvement Paths of Parenting Anxiety Among Young Teachers in Compulsory Education in Shaanxi Province

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Abstract: Existing studies have rarely focused on the current status of parenting anxiety among teachers in the compulsory education stage. Yet, such anxiety exerts considerable social impacts, which makes this research of notable practical significance. This study conducts an empirical investigation on 567 young teachers in compulsory education in Shaanxi Province by adopting questionnaire survey and interview methods. It aims to analyze the characteristics of parenting anxiety among this group and propose targeted improvement paths. The findings reveal several prominent characteristics of the group's parenting anxiety: the overall level of parenting anxiety is relatively high, with female teachers experiencing higher anxiety than male counterparts; in terms of age at childbirth, teachers with more than five years of work experience report the lowest anxiety levels; among the group, mothers in traditional families with three generations living together have the lowest anxiety levels; and parents in two-child families show lower parenting anxiety than those in one-child families. Accordingly, based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development, this study explores improvement paths from four dimensions: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. It is expected to provide valuable references for alleviating the role pressure of young teachers and enhancing their professional well-being.

Keywords: Compulsory education; Young teachers; Characteristics of parenting anxiety; Improvement pathways

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of parental parenting anxiety has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. This anxiety has been continuously amplified by multiple factors, including the implementation of the universal two-child and three-child policies, educational stratification, online media publicity and marketing campaigns. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified parent-child relationships to a certain extent. These circumstances have further exposed the deficiency in family education capabilities. Excessive parental anxiety exerts a profound and negative impact on the physical and mental development of both parents and children. President Xi Jinping emphasized that "the family is the first school in life, and parents are children's first teachers. We must teach children well the 'first lesson of life' and help them fasten the first button of life well." Parents' emotions, attitudes and behaviors exert a subtle and lasting influence

on the physical and mental growth of their children. Existing studies have paid little attention to parenting anxiety among teachers in the compulsory education stage. However, affected by their professional roles, this group does experience parenting anxiety, which brings about notable impacts. With the advancement of the national “Double Reduction” policy in compulsory education, teachers in this stage have to work longer hours. For young teachers, this means less time to accompany their children. This situation has to a certain extent led to parenting anxiety among teachers who are also parents. Moreover, due to their professional identities, their anxiety not only affects themselves and their families, but may even spread to their students and the students’ parents. Therefore, an investigation and research on the parenting anxiety of young teachers in compulsory education against the background of the “Double Reduction” policy is of great necessity. Exploring the characteristics and improvement paths of their parenting anxiety can provide useful references and insights for relevant government departments to understand the current situation of this group and further promote the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy^[1].

2. Research design

2.1. Concept definition

Young Teachers in Compulsory Education: This study adopts the definition from The Great Dictionary of Education. The research subjects are defined as teachers who engage in frontline teaching in primary and junior secondary schools (Grades 1 to 9) and are aged 35 years old or below.

Parenting Anxiety: The term “anxiety” falls within the scope of psychological research. It refers to a state of tension and fear formed when individuals feel their self-esteem is continuously threatened due to worries about failing to achieve goals or overcome obstacles. This study mainly draws on the definition of parenting anxiety proposed by Sang Biao. It focuses on parenting anxiety in families with minors aged 0 to 12, in accordance with medical standards.

2.2. Research methods

The core research question of this study is to explore the characteristics and improvement paths of parenting anxiety among young teachers in compulsory education in Shaanxi Province under the background of the “Double Reduction” policy. To address this core question effectively, this study conducts research from the perspectives of Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development and Erving Goffman’s impression management theory. It adopts a mixed-methods approach combining questionnaire survey and interview methods.

2.3. Research subjects

This study selected 567 young teachers in compulsory education in Shaanxi Province as the research subjects to investigate their parenting anxiety. A total of 567 questionnaires were distributed, and 550 valid questionnaires were retrieved. The questionnaire was designed based on the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS), with demographic variables and anxiety types as the key design factors. It consists of two main parts. The first part collects the demographic information of the respondents, including gender, age, educational level of parents and family structure. The second part focuses on the dimensions of children’s physical development, behavior, emotion and cognition. In addition to the questionnaire survey, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 30 teachers. The interview outline was designed around several core dimensions: teachers’ overall evaluation of their own parenting anxiety, their assessment of how their profession influences family parenting, the unique causes of parenting anxiety among teachers, and the support they need in the process of parenting. With the informed consent of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded and noted down in writing. The researcher then sorted out and analyzed all the interview results systematically^[2].

3. Discussion and analysis: characteristics and causes of parenting anxiety

3.1. Young teachers in compulsory education have a relatively high level of parenting anxiety, with female teachers experiencing higher anxiety than male teachers

Most young teachers scored within the normal range of anxiety, but the overall anxiety index of the group is relatively high. This may be because teachers possess more professional parenting knowledge than ordinary parents. When they compare their own children with peers, they are more likely to experience anxiety. In addition, under the background of the “Double Reduction” policy, the working hours of this group have been extended, which has greatly shortened the time for parent-child interaction at home. Among the group, mothers show a higher degree of parenting anxiety than fathers. The main reason for this is the pressure from the dual social expectations imposed on female teachers—both cultural and social role expectations, especially the expectation of motherhood. The social expectations mentioned in this study mainly include the expectations for teachers and mothers in traditional social culture. They also include the expectations from the teachers’ social circles, such as their families, friends and colleagues. Many teachers mentioned in the interviews that society and their families hold high expectations for them, believing that “as mothers who are also teachers, they should be able to educate their own children well”. In addition, the anxiety caused by female teachers’ self-expectations is mainly reflected in four aspects. First, they are overconfident in their own parenting abilities and have high expectations for their children, making them unwilling to accept others’ suggestions. When others’ opinions, especially those of non-professionals, conflict with their own, they often refuse to listen modestly to others—especially the elderly family members—and insist on their so-called professional and correct views. Second, they will experience strong worry and anxiety when their actual parenting performance fails to meet their own high expectations. Third, they are reluctant to acknowledge and face the fact that they suffer from severe parenting anxiety, and even refuse help from others. Fourth, the survey data of this study shows that many female teachers believe that “if they fail to meet these high expectations, they will inevitably experience overwhelming pressure that is hard to control”.

3.2. In terms of age at childbirth, teachers with more than five years of work experience have the lowest anxiety levels

Generally speaking, teachers with more than five years of work experience have accumulated rich theoretical knowledge and practical experience in their professional fields. They can solve various problems arising in primary and secondary school teaching scenarios with relative ease. Specifically, in terms of economic conditions, after five years of work, teachers have built up a certain economic strength. This solid material foundation for parenting effectively reduces their anxiety in this aspect. In terms of personal career development, teachers’ daily work mainly includes teaching tasks such as lesson preparation, classroom teaching, homework correction and class management. Teachers with more than five years of experience have sufficient teaching experience to cope with these tasks calmly and efficiently. In terms of personal growth, the primary concerns of young teachers are professional title promotion and position promotion. After several years of work experience, these issues have been relatively resolved for most teachers in this group. There is also an important factor that affects teachers’ personal mindset: interpersonal relationships. Here, interpersonal relationships refer not only to the relationships between colleagues, but also to those between teachers and students. Teachers with more extensive work experience often master certain skills in handling teacher-student and colleague relationships. They can build harmonious and positive interpersonal connections in the workplace. All the above factors together enable teachers to face the arrival of a new baby in the family with a calm and composed attitude.

3.3. Among the group, mothers in traditional families with three generations living together have the lowest anxiety levels

From the perspective of the questionnaire scores, different parenting styles are also a major influencing factor of teachers’ parenting anxiety. To a certain extent, three-generation cohabitation is regarded by this group as a relatively ideal parenting model at present. Against the background of the “Double Reduction” policy and the society’s widespread concern about

the mental health of primary and secondary school students, the work intensity of young teachers in compulsory education has been continuously increasing. Extended working hours have drastically reduced their parent-child interaction time, making it difficult for them to meet the practical needs of caring for their young children. Compared with nanny care and grandparent care on workdays only, three-generation cohabitation can provide young teachers with immediate practical help and psychological satisfaction in the process of parenting. As Sukhomlinsky once said, “Unfortunately, there is a contradictory phenomenon in real life: teachers who educate other people’s children have no time to educate their own.”

3.4. Among teachers, parents in two-child families experience lower parenting anxiety than those in one-child families

First, for most parents in two-child families, the accumulation of parenting experience from raising the first child largely alleviates the anxiety and fear of young teachers when facing unknown situations during the first parenting process. They are more familiar with the laws of children’s growth and can cope with various parenting problems more calmly. Second, the multi-child family structure can effectively avoid the parenting anxiety caused by over-focusing on a single child. It also prevents a series of children’s growth problems arising from excessive attention. In one-child families, parents often place all their hopes and expectations on their only child, which easily leads to excessive anxiety about the child’s growth and development. Third, there is a unique peer parenting model in multi-child families, where siblings can learn from and restrict each other. This model can effectively share the parenting pressure of teachers. It also alleviates the anxiety of teachers caused by factors such as unbalanced parenting time due to heavy work. The mutual growth of siblings makes the parenting process more relaxed and less stressful for parents.

4. Improvement paths of parenting anxiety

Based on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory of human development, this study explores the improvement paths of young teachers’ parenting anxiety from four dimensions: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. The paths are designed to form a comprehensive and systematic intervention system, targeting the root causes of the anxiety^[3].

4.1. Microsystem – Teachers’ personal psychology

First, teachers should properly lower their psychological expectations and accept the idea of an “imperfect child”. Influenced by their professional roles, young teachers often come into contact with many excellent students—so-called “other people’s children”. This unconsciously raises their standards and expectations for their own children. In addition, they take it for granted that as professional educators, their own children should be extremely excellent. As a result, when their children fail to meet these high expectations, they will experience a huge psychological gap, which triggers a series of parenting anxiety problems. Second, teachers should maintain a balanced mindset and learn to be “60-point parents”. The concept of “60-point parents” was first proposed by Donald Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst. He advocated that parents should not shift all their life focus to their children. Instead, they should give their children enough space for growth. This parenting concept can maximize the healthy development of children’s personalities and prevent children from losing their childhood prematurely due to excessive academic and growth pressure. It also helps parents reduce their own parenting anxiety by letting go of the pursuit of perfection^[4].

4.2. Mesosystem – Teachers’ family support

First, it is necessary to advocate fathers’ active participation in the parenting process. In the process of children’s growth, the father’s role is pivotal and irreplaceable. Therefore, various channels should be used to publicize and educate fathers—including male teachers—to establish a correct view of parenting. It is important to promote their transformation from “bystanders” to active “implementers” in the parenting process. Fathers’ active participation is not only conducive to the physical and mental health development of children, but also helps create a harmonious and warm family atmosphere,

thus enhancing the individual happiness index of the whole family. Second, grandparents should be encouraged to actively participate in social parenting lectures and training programs. These programs can help promote the transformation of their traditional parenting concepts and establish scientific parenting views. They can also help grandparents better understand the work difficulties and pressure of young teachers. With this understanding, grandparents can provide more timely and targeted help for young family members in the parenting process, which further alleviates the parenting anxiety of young teachers^[5].

4.3. Exosystem—School support and guarantee

First, schools should pay close and timely attention to the marital and childbearing status of young teachers. They should strengthen communication and exchange between teachers of different working years in both work and life aspects. Schools should further improve the “mentorship pairing” model, which is originally designed for professional development. The improved model should not only play a role in work and teaching, but also help young teachers exchange parenting experience in daily life. This can form an on-campus parenting support community, where teachers can support and learn from each other in parenting. Second, schools should establish a relatively flexible working system. For young teachers with young children at home, appropriate policy relaxations can be made, such as flexible working hours and reasonable adjustment of teaching tasks. This can provide a relatively relaxed working environment for their parenting, effectively alleviating their parenting pressure caused by the conflict between work and family^[6].

4.4. Macrosystem—Social support

First, at the social level, it is necessary to further improve the child care service system and enhance parents’ trust in professional child care institutions. A complete and high-quality child care service system can provide more practical support for young teachers’ parenting, solving their worries about child care when they are at work. Second, relevant government departments should strengthen the management of online media platforms. They should strictly prevent educational institutions from engaging in anxiety marketing behaviors for commercial purposes. These behaviors often exaggerate educational competition and parenting risks, further aggravating parents’ parenting anxiety. At the same time, the society should encourage positive public opinion related to fatherhood, advocating fathers’ active participation in parenting. This can alleviate the psychological burden of female teachers in parenting from the perspectives of social concepts and personal psychology, reducing the dual pressure on female teachers from work and motherhood. Third, the government should introduce targeted fertility support policies for teachers. These policies should include flexible working systems, parenting leave, breastfeeding leave and other welfare measures. These institutional guarantees can effectively alleviate the role pressure of young teachers in the process of parenting and work, reducing their parenting anxiety from the institutional level.

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Disclosure statement

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