

Family Socioeconomic Status and Students School Burnout

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Abstract: Burnout is a construct firstly applied to job context but later it's also found among students. As for its formation factors, a vast majority of studies have mainly focused on demographic aspects and individual traits, taking family socioeconomic status (FSES) into little consideration. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to comb the existing literature elucidating association between FSES and school burnout to understand the research status quo and encourage further studies. After a thorough study of the available research, this paper finds that FSES in academic achievement has been well discussed but its potential impact on school burnout was noticed only until recent years with related literature relatively rare. But researchers have agreed on that FSES can negatively predict school burnout and some moderating variables (e.g., self-resilience, self-control, boredom) and mediating variables (e.g., parental rearing style, subjective well-being) have been studied separately. To date, however, no consensus has been reached on the exact extent of effect FSES on school burnout, moderation and mediation variables still remains rather poorly understood, and other factors like gender, grade and cultures need further consideration. This paper combs the historical background, research status quo and future research directions of the issue on correlation between FSES and school burnout, which not only enriches studies on school burnout but also will provide some reference for parents, schools or social institutions to adopt more targeted ways for better school burnout prevention and treatment.

Keywords: Family socioeconomic status, School burnout, Academic achievement

1. Introduction

School burnout is a syndrome caused by continuous exposure to stress under school context featuring a tremendous drain on students' mental and physical resources, resulting in their energy exhaustion and avoidance behaviour such as truancy, absence from class, or even dropout [1-4]. Apart from its negative impact on students' academic performance, school burnout can bring about serious detriment to students' psychological well-being, resulting in anxiety, frustration, even depression [2]. And the relation between school burnout and depression has been confirmed by many studies [5]. World Adolescents Health issued by WHO in 2014 showed 1.3 million adolescents lost their lives in 2012, and depression was among the main killers causing death of adolescents of 10 to 19 years old [6].

Besides in field of education, family socioeconomic status (FSES) perhaps is the most widely and frequently discussed construct. Coleman [1] carried out a study of more than 600 thousand students from four thousand schools in America. Later he published the well-known Coleman Report. This

report shows that children's FSES could serve as a dominant factor affecting academic achievement, even playing a greater role than schools in terms of students' academic performance [1]. Since the publication of this report, researchers have conducted a great number of investigations into correlation between FSES and academic achievement. Although the strength of their relation hasn't been reached a consensus on, increasing research has demonstrated FSES can positively predict a child's academic achievement [3,7]. The significance of education to both individual and the country cannot be underestimated and academic achievement particularly has profound influence on students lifelong development. Thus to find out what influences academic achievement is vital. At present most related studies lay their emphasis on exploring the psychological factors (e.g., personality, motivation) but still some researchers begin to notice the relation between school burnout and academic performance. In 2021, for the very first time a meta-analysis on correlation between school burnout and school attainment among 100,000 students was conducted by Madigan [3], showing burnout did work as an important passive predictor of one's academic attainment.

To sum up, the fact that school burnout has negative impact on students' psychological well-being and that it can also have detrimental effect on students' academic achievement make it of great importance to work out its formation mechanism and affecting factors.

In fact, ever since the construct "burnout" was put forward by Pines and Katry in 1980 [8], a good many studies both at home and abroad have been carried out to explore influencing factors concerning burnout. From demographic perspective, Maslach holds that burnout has a relation with gender [2]. But researchers shifted their attention to external situations when studying the formation of school burnout. Jacobs & Dodd [9] launched a survey among 145 college students and found that ones' subjective feeling of being overworked could forecast emotional exhaustion, while objective measurement of academic load was not always related to school burnout; and other studies have emphasized the role the individual traits play in school burnout. In this specific aspect, one's resilience, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-actualization, personality and so on have all been taken into consideration to explain the reasons underlying school burnout [10-11].

However, relatively little research has studied the effect of FSES on school burnout. Since FSES can positively predict individual's academic achievement as explored earlier, it may be reasonable to hypothesize that it could also result in school burnout. In fact, some researchers have confirmed this. Scholars have found that students who comes from families with a high FSES seem more passionate and more likely to fully devote themselves to study process [12]. As a result, those students with a higher FSES generally experience less burnout [13]. And according to Family Invest Model, families with a stronger economic power, more social and human capital can provide more support for their kids' overall growth and in turn arouse their interest in study, causing relatively lower school burnout.

Given the importance of grasping a whole picture of school burnout for better future prevention and treatment, it is useful to examine the impact of the least discussed FSES on school burnout. Thus, the present paper is firstly to synthesize the existing related studies concerning this very topic and then locate research gaps in this area for future investigation. It includes 4 parts: (1) introduction part; (2) introduction of school burnout (i.e., definition, measurement); (3) the effect FSES exerts on school burnout (i.e., theories, moderating and mediating variables, other factors); (4) limitation and future research direction.

2. School Burnout

2.1. Definition

2.1.1. Burnout

The word “Burnout” firstly appeared in literature depicting one’s fatigue, shattered ideal, and loss of enthusiasm and so on [2]. In 1974, American clinical psychologist Freudenberger [14] suggested the term “Job Burnout” for the very first time to describe employees’ state of emotion and energy exhaustion due to excess demand from their job in helping professions. Since then, researchers have conducted a wide range of in-depth studies on burnout syndrome but later this construct has been applied to any professions. But as for the strict definition of “burnout”, up to the present, a consensus has not been reached yet.

Researchers like Freudenberger [14] defined “Burnout” as emotional conflict one experienced when he or she failed to fulfill the expected goal. They held that unrealistic ambition and increasingly widening gap between one’s goal and what he or she really achieved in life could result in psychological disillusion and emptiness which consequently would cause individual burnout syndrome. And this kind of burnout could be found in all professions [14]. Other researchers like Maslach and Pine explained Burnout from emotional exhaustion perspective [2,8]. Maslach [2] described Burnout as physical, mental, and psychological exhaustion, due to which people feels overwhelmed by long-time fatigue, despair, frustration, as well as negative self-concept and detached attitude toward life and work. This construct was also firstly introduced in helping professions but later Maslach amended his theoretical model to describe such state in any field. Different from Maslach [2], Pines [8] did not limit burnout to helping professions from the very start. In his view, burnout could also happen in other situations like political conflict, marriage and so on. And he described burnout as physical and psychological exhaustion resulted from an individual being subjected to excessive demands on his or her resources for a prolonged period of time [8]. Still others have given their own perception of burnout. Schaufeli et al. regards burnout as a series of negative mental experience arising when individuals perceive themselves to be in an unequal position in society, that is, what they pay for their work does not match what they receive in return [15].

2.1.2. School Burnout

Despite the fact that burnout in the very beginning was a work-related syndrome, an analogy can be drawn between job burnout and school burnout. Just like employees, the main task for students is to study and they have to spend at least 40 hours in school. And just like employees, students should study in a fixed place (school), and they have required task (study assignment) to accomplish every day and they also have to obey some certain rules (school rules and regulations). And still like employees, students want to receive something (knowledge, scores) from their study tasks to establish confidence and self-esteem, thus meeting their demands of self-actualization.

For the moment, studies on school burnout both at home and abroad basically use the concept of job burnout, especially that of Freudenberger [14] and Maslach [2]. Hui-chen Yang [10], a scholar from Chinese Taiwan, defines school burnout as: students suffer from emotional exhaustion, lack of humanization and low sense of achievement due to huge school pressure, study load and other individual factors. And the three dimensions of job burnout can also be employed in school context [2,15], where exhaustion is a kind of feeling emerging from study process, cynicism means that one holds a detached attitude towards school and studies and decreased personal achievement describes a doubt of his or her own academic capacities [16].

2.2. Measurement of School Burnout

In 1981, Maslach and Jackson [2] worked out Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI:Maslach Burnout Inventory) firstly introduced into helping professions which includes 22 items and measures 3 dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (9 items), depersonalization (5 items), and diminished personal accomplishment (8 items). But when employed to measure burnout in other professions, the items of emotional exhaustion often overlap with those of depersonalization. So Schaufeli et al. amended MBI and changed the three dimensions to exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy and thus formed MBI-GS (MBI-General Survey) now extensively applied to almost all kinds of job contexts [15].

At present, to measure school burnout in their studies, scholars often refer to MBI and only make some textual amendments. So different researchers will have different versions of MBI. Schaufeli et al. invented MBI for students according to the earliest version of MBI [15]; Gold et al. studied students in the Normal universities to investigate their future burnout in teaching. They used MBI-Form Ed. (MBI-Educator Survey) in their study and made some changes in terms of working location, objects and the nature of job. Their amended scale was called CSS (College Students Survey) [17]. Yang modified the location, object and job nature of MBI-GS to explore school burnout among college students in Taiwan [10].

While many studies have also confirmed the reliability and validity of the three dimensions of MBI, some argue that in fact only the exhaustion dimension is necessary in MBI and the other two dimensions actually are incorporated in exhaustion: depersonalization is a way to deal with exhaustion and inefficacy the result of exhaustion. Pine et al. [8] established their own definition of Burnout only taking exhaustion into consideration and then formulated their own scale-Burnout Measure (BM) aimed to survey individual's burnout from three dimensions: physical, psychological and emotional exhaustion. And each dimension includes 7 items and the frequency of every single item in the subjects' lives will be measured with the score from 1 (never) to 7 (all the time). The validity coefficient of BM's three dimensions is 0.82, 0.84, 0.84 respectively. Like MBI, BM can also be applied to measure school burnout. But Salmela-Aro et al. [16] found in their studies that measuring three factors can better reflect school burnout instead of one factor.

2.3. Causing Factors of School Burnout

As for the causing factors, a good many related studies have been carried out but focus mainly on demographic ones (e.g., gender, age, grade, etc.), personal traits (e.g., self-efficacy, personalities). To date, it has been confirmed that FSES can have significant impact on one's academic performance and future lives, and the role FSES plays in child academic achievement has also been well discussed in education research [18] and thus how FSES affects school burnout is attracting increasing attention, which is the main discussion in the next parts.

3. Effect of FSES on School Burnout

3.1. Theories of How FSES Effects School Burnout

Family invest theory [19] hold that FSES can reflect their overall economic, labor, and social capital. Students of a higher FSES presumably have abundant capital invested to them and they will enjoy a more favorable condition to learn; By contrast, children of a low FSES could have fewer educational chances since their development in education may be negatively affected by lack of needed educational resource. Children under such situation are more likely to lose interest and motivation towards their learning.

But the effect of FSES can also be mitigated, mediated, and moderated by a series of variables. According to family stress model [20], economic pressure can have a very detrimental influence on the marital relationship. There tend to be more conflicts and stress in families of lower SES. And the couple may have to spend more time in making a living thus decreasing the time spent on their kids, all of which will negatively impact their mental and psychological well-being and consequently leads to the kids' school burnout. In 2016, Chen et al. [13] confirmed this in their study. They found family cultural and emotional environment function as mediating and moderating factor respectively in relation between FSES and academic burnout. In a low conflict environment, FESE does not obviously affect learning burnout, suggesting a high-conflict environment does increase the negative influence low FSES has on school burnout among adolescents [21].

FSES can also negatively influence school burnout via meditating variables such resilience, self-efficacy, self-control, life satisfaction, parental rearing style and the relation between FSES and those variables have been well documented.

3.2. Mediating and Moderating Variables between FSES and School Burnout

Scholars like Chen et al. [13], Wu et al. [22], Cheng, [23], Virtanen et al. [25], Kinnunen [26] all devote their efforts to investigating the mediating and moderating roles between FSES and school burnout. Their results are consistent: FSES not only directly predict school burnout but also indirectly predict it via mediating or moderating variables such as smoking, boredom, self-control self-concept, family emotional environment or self-efficacy. Through a survey among 1201 middle and high school students, Chen et al. [13] found that parenting rearing style could mediate the relation between FSES and school burnout in that kids raised by democratic and positive parents are more likely to adopt an active attitude toward study and verse versa. Luo et al. [21] through their study among middle school students shows that one's self-control, the capacity to adjust one's behavior for a certain set goal, can decrease the impact a lower FSES has on school burnout. And with the wide use of smartphones, mobile phone addiction has become more and more serious among students especially college students. Cheng [23] explored in his study how boredom and reliance on smartphone mediated FSES and school burnout. College students of a lower FSES are more likely to feel bored, lonely and isolated since they may have fewer emotional support from parents thus depending on their smartphone more which will increase the possibility of school burnout.

But Chen et al. [13] also noted that due to the specific Chinese Educational System, for students from a low FSES, the only way to change their fate is to succeed in Gaokao, they may not easily suffer from burnout. And this is in line with Korean Scholar Lee et al. [24]. After launching an investigation among 3129 secondary school students via multilevel approach, they came to the conclusion that FSES is strongly related to school burnout and school burnout is higher among students of a higher FSES while lower among those of a lower FSES and the reason lies in that students from higher FSES can have access to rich resources and have a guaranteed future even without success in their study but the case is just the contrary for those from a lower FSES. And still Finnish scholars Virtanen et al. [25] in their research showed that FESE was not related to academic burnout among lower middle school students due to the truth that Finnish government will do its best to ensure that every student enjoys equal educational resources.

To sum up, majority of studies agree that association exists between FSES and school burnout but still different variables such as cultures, genders, grade should also be taken into consideration to get a clearer picture.

3.3. Culture, Gender, Grade and Other Affecting Factors

From the existing literature, it is obvious that school burnout syndrome is a worldwide phenomenon. Researchers have carried out their surveys of FSES and school burnout in the context of China and Korea [21-24]; and scholars like Samela, Sanna have expounded their studies in Finland [5,12,16]; and studies conducted among students in UK, USA, Belgium and other European Countries have also been found [3,15]. It seems that FSES can be a factor of school burnout regardless of one's nationality, but the extent varies from countries. Kinnunen, et al. [26] found that mean of school burnout varied between countries and was lowest in Portugal (2.70) and highest in Germany and Italy (3.21 and 3.20 respectively). Therefore, in studying FSES on school burnout, conclusion in one country should be generalized to other countries with caution.

What's more, school burnout syndrome can happen among students from middle school and high school all the way to college. But according to Sanna [11], in their longitudinal study from 2006 to 2019, they showed that school burnout enhanced among girls while slightly decreased among boys over time; and studies [21-23] demonstrate coefficient of school burnout is highest among high school students and this may be explained by the competitive Gaokao and huge workload. Thus, when scrutinizing FSES and school burnout, grade and gender should also be taken into consideration.

4. Limitation and Future Research Direction

From discussions above, it can be seen that a common consensus has been reached since very early that FSES plays a noteworthy role in one's academic achievement but until quite recent years have researchers associated it with school burnout (one deterrent to academic achievement). When it comes to school burnout, a volume of research has been performed to scrutinize its causing factors while only briefly mentioning FSES as an external factor and studies which exclusively elucidate correlation between FSES and school burnout are relatively scant. More future research is needed in this area.

And after having combed the existing studies on FSES and burnout, this article finds that to date researchers have not agreed on what extent FSES can exactly contribute to school burnout. Considering the fact that different cultures have their specific situations, finding of one country may not be generalized to another. Thus, future study should take affecting factors such as culture, gender into consideration and try to figure out a more detailed and accurate answer.

Besides, although scholars have begun to scrutinize possible mediating and moderating variables between FSES and school burnout such as self-control, parental rearing style, boredom, self-resilience and so on, studies on each single variable are still quite scare, and mechanism underlying FSES and school burnout still remains poorly understood. Thus, future research can continue to carry out in-depth survey into all the mentioned variables respectively and then offer more clear relation between FSES and school burnout.

What is more, up to the present, almost all the related literature obtains their results through cross-sectional study, and therefore longitudinal studies should also be conducted in the future.

5. Conclusion

Burnout is a work-related construct but it has also been found in school context. Lots of research has been launched to investigate the impact school burnout has on children's psychological well-being and academic achievement, as well as its causing factors. As for the affecting factors, most studies mainly focus on the internal ones and external factors like FSES are rarely discussed. Therefore, this paper is to comb the extant literature which exclusively explore correlation between FSES and school burnout so as to get a full picture of research status quo of this specific question and encourage future studies in this area as well.

In the combining process, this paper finds that the role of FSES in children academic achievement have been well documented while its possible influence on school burnout found among students regardless of nationalities, gender and grade, only attracts researchers' attention in recent years with relatively scant studies. And the scant existing literature has confirmed that FSES can negatively predict school burnout, and this kind of influence can be moderated by factors like self-resilience, self-control, boredom and mediated by factors like parental rearing style, subjective well-being and so on. But to date no consensus has been reached on the exact extent of influence FSES may exert on school burnout and moderation and mediation variables still remains relatively poorly understood. Other factors such as gender, grade and cultures can also affect the study result. Therefore, to solve those questions, more studies are needed in the future for a much more comprehensive understanding of exactly how FSES affects school burnout.

Given that school burnout can cause serious damage both to children's psychological well-being and academic achievement, figuring out its causing factors becomes rather urgent. This paper highlights the long time ignored FSES in school burnout's formation process and based on the findings better preventive measures may be taken by parents, schools and social organizations.

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