

Exploring Student Burnout Among Freshman of Higher Vocational Colleges in China

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Abstract: Student burnout has become a common phenomenon of higher vocational students, and even among the freshmen. In order to make better countermeasures, we need to reveal the reasons. The purpose of this study is to explore the causes of freshman's burnout in a general higher vocational college. This study adopts the qualitative research method provided by the case study paradigm, and collects data from 4 interviewees through in-depth interviews, researchers' observations and literature analysis. The empirical results of the study show that the causes of the freshman's burnout comes from many aspects, such as the internal causes: failure of time management, cell phones addition, lack of learning motivation, low self-efficiency and emotional disturbance, and external reasons: curriculum and examination setting, as well as the influence of teachers and peers. To sum up, the data show that freshman's burnout needs the attention of educators and students themselves, and effective intervention measures should be strengthened to achieve better educational effects.

Keywords: Higher Vocational Colleges; Freshman; Student Burnout; Causes

Introduction

With the "Belt and Road" strategy and the "Made in China 2025" plan put forward, the demand for vocational and technical talents in China is increasing day by day, and the development of higher vocational education is facing more prominent challenges. Improving the quality of higher education is a key step in the development of the country and social progress. At present, many college students are under great psychological pressure, and they show signs of learning burnout, such as loss of interest in learning, low learning efficiency and reduced academic achievement (Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002), whose essence lies in the emotional, attitudinal and behavioral exhaustion of students when their abilities cannot meet their learning needs (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela--Aro, 2013).

The current situation of student burnout is highly related to reality and shows different characteristics due to the background of the times, the external environment and individual characteristics (Yang, & Farn, 2005; Jacobs & Dodd, 2003; Slivar, 2001). In China, the learning cycle of higher vocational education is three years according to the teaching requirements. The first year is a year for students to adapt to the new environment. The renewal of ideas and the transformation of environment bring changes to freshman's cognition and behavior. The adaptation in the first year will affect the performance of the whole university period. Therefore, to study the student burnout of freshmen in schools, find out the practical reasons and formulate effective strategies to prevent the continuous development of student burnout and even its continuation into job burnout, which brings troubles to individuals, families and even society, is a problem that researchers need to continuously explore (Sun, 2019).

1. Literature review

1.1 Student Burnout

There are many differences between student burnout and job burnout (Yang, Lian, et al., 2005). Yang(2005) believed that under the background of intensified academic competition, Chinese students' learning burdens were also intensifying. Liao and Ren(2013) found a negative correlation between academic burnout and social support through the survey. Xue(2008) believed that to accurately predict the variables of college students' burnout, we should focus on analyzing the number of social support and satisfaction. In the aspect of family environment, Chen(2007) found that students' native environment and parental education were included in the factors that affected students' learning status. Mills and Huebner(1998) found that four personality traits (extroversion, neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness) are closely related to emotional exhaustion in burnout, especially the dimension of extroversion has obvious effect on burnout. Zeng(2015) found through the study of stability that student burnout is largely related to emotional fluctuations. And students' motivation at different stages contains different contents (Wang, 2012; Li, 2016). Brissie (1988), Green Glass (1988) and House (1991) through research all think that the level of burnout of the less efficient is often higher, which is the same as the research results of many domestic scholars. Densten(2005) deeply understood the academic burnout of college students, and found that the degree of burnout and their own coping styles have a very close correlation. Moneta(2011) believes that students have a positive coping style and a low level of burnout.

1.2 Vocational colleges' student burnout

Current research results on vocational college student burnout generally show that vocational college students are seriously tired of learning and the incidence of student burnout is high (Pan, 2014; Gao, 2013; Zheng & Xing, 2017). Pan(2014) believes that the burnout of sophomore students is prominent. There is a significant difference in academic burnout of higher vocational students among disciplines, and the burnout of liberal arts students is particularly prominent. It was found that the burnout of higher vocational students was higher than that of undergraduate students, and the aspects of low sense of achievement and low mood were prominent (Shu, 2009), and the differences existed in gender, whether only child or non-only child, and grade. Student burnout was related to core self-evaluation, professional commitment, and emotional commitment (Gao, 2013).

Among the existing research results, most of them adopt the quantitative research method to analyze the causes of student burnout for comparative analysis, and few research results focusing on higher vocational freshman's burnout. Freshman is the initial stage of a university. It is of certain significance to find out the causes of freshman's student burnout and the effective countermeasures to make up for the gap in the current research on student burnout.

2. Materials and methods

This study used a basic qualitative approach to collect and analyze data to answer the research questions, which aimed to explore the student burnout among freshman in higher vocational colleges. A basic qualitative approach is interested in (1) how freshman interpret their experiences on burnout; (2) how they thought the reasons; and (3) how they overcome the burnout. An interview guide was created for the purpose of conducting in-depth interviews, The participants are freshmen from a common college in China, 2 boys and 2 girls from different majors. Every interview was recorded word for word. Then analyze the records to determine the manually identified codes, categories and topics. When assisting in data management and analysis, Nvivo software is used, which helps to save time in the data analysis process.

3. Results and discussions

As we can see in the interview, participants have different performance of burnout, which is mainly divided into two categories: low emotional sense and misbehavior. A and B mentioned "lack of enthusiasm for learning" and "have no interest in class", C and D clearly put forward "inner anxiety", "tension" and "resistance to learning". And A, B, C and D all

mentioned that they could not listen carefully in class when they are facing burnout, and always do things unrelated to study such as chatting, playing cell phone or dozing off, procrastination on assignments is also a common behavior.

3.1 The main causes of freshman's burnout

Based on the interview sessions, two themes were identified to answer the research question, what causes freshman's burnout?

3.1.1 The internal causes of the freshman's burnout

There are many internal causes relate to the freshman's burnout, such as failure of time management. Students' desire to develop themselves in many ways conflicts with their time management ability, which makes them have to back down in some way. A and D are members of the student association, they mentioned that there were too many things in the student association, which resulted in the conflict of their study time and scattered their study energy, leading to the slackness in class and improper time management after class.

A: Maybe there are more things in the recent period, and then other times are busier than the class time, the class time may become a time to relax instead.

D: There are many things in the student association, which dilutes a lot of my study time, disperses my energy, aggravates my anxiety, and leads to a lack of concentration in class.

Compared with the time management ability, another factor which worth our attention is addiction to cell phones. According to the survey data of college students using mobile phones by Leung(2008), up to 28.7% of college students are addicted to cell phones. There is no doubt that cell phone addiction will make students lose creativity, produce inert thinking, loss of enthusiasm for learning.

A: I especially like reading novels on my mobile phone.

B: Between the study task and the game task, I will give priority to the completion of the game task in a high probability.

C: Spend a lot of time playing mobile phones in class is normal in my class.

In the first year of college, the study is mainly based on basic knowledge and with less professional knowledge and practical knowledge. Influenced by bad values, many freshmen cannot realize the significance and value of study, which results in the weakening of learning motivation and the loss of the overall study plan for the college.

B: It is only when this kind of knowledge is needed that it will be ingested. Math and English, I don't know what's the use. I don't have a strong desire to learn.

C: Studying for me, it is helpful to the exam, for the graduation certificate. To improve my educational background is for a job where I can support myself and earn money. Money is not necessarily happy, no money must be painful.

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, we found that lack of good learning habits and learning methods lead to difficulties in improving grades, or have a sense of frustration and low efficiency, which will affect the enthusiasm of learning and reduces the sense of efficiency.

B: My grades have not been very good all the time, from high school to college.

C: I feel that nothing I can change, and then I relax.

D: Sometimes I want to learn, but knowledge is connected in series. I can't understand the front and the back, and then I give up.

The way people deal with emotions will also have an impact on people's behavior choices, so emotional disturbance also seems to have some impact on students' burnout according to A, C and D's experience.

A: There may be some trivial disputes with my roommates because of the cleaning of the dormitory interior, which then leads to some emotional fluctuation, making me feel exhausted and lose the enthusiasm for study.

C: Most of my mentality is not easy to improve, but goes to the negative.

D: I felt very upset, and the working environment was still very noisy. I felt agitated and didn't want to study.

3.1.2. The external causes of the freshman's burnout

In the interview we also care about their curriculum and examination settings, class atmosphere, teachers' teaching style, and their peers have shown certain influence.

There are some merged classes in the courses of higher vocational colleges and most universities in China. Students from different classes share teaching resources in a large-capacity classroom. Sometimes, the number of students even exceeds 150. In this environment, the disturbance to students is far greater than that to small-size classes.

A: The merged classes teaching made me feel "disgusted".

D: I was excited when I heard we will have the first practical training this semester, but after doing it, I found it was quite boring.

In addition, the setting of exams will also affect students' learning attitude. If the exam is too simple, students can easily pass the exam without conscientiously completing their study task, which will greatly affect the enthusiasm of learning and greatly reduce the sense of accomplishment gained from learning.

B: The exam is quite simple, so basically you can pass it without effort.

C: Although I am not serious in classes, I still pass it because it was really too easy.

Another important reason is the teacher's influence. Different from the independent thinking and autonomous learning ability of students in other levels of higher education such as graduate students, higher vocational students are more dependent on teachers. After the enrollment expansion of higher vocational colleges, teachers are generally facing enormous pressure. The job burnout of some teachers has obviously affected the students.

A: I feel that the learning atmosphere of Advanced Mathematics in our class is not as good as before.

C: Teachers pay less attention to me, and now I don't want them to.

D: If the teacher has a good class management, and then the train of thought is clear, so I can keep up with his rhythm. However, if not, then I will feel that the teacher does not understand it and I will probably get bored.

In addition to getting along with the teacher in school, there is an important interpersonal relationship between peers.

A: I feel that burnout is greatly influenced by my classmates.

B: If my classmates asked me to play together, I couldn't refuse definitely, so I will play with them.

C: The people around me, around the place where I sit, most of them are those who likes to play in class, then I think they all play, I can play too, it doesn't matter.

D: This semester, I feel that every student is more daring. They play mobile phone and chat in class, and my thoughts are affected to a certain degree.

Conclusion

The results of this research show that the freshmen in of higher vocational colleges have two main performances of student burnout: low emotional sense and misbehavior. The causes of the freshman's burnout come from many aspects, from internal reasons: failure of time management, cell phones addiction, lack of learning motivation, low self-efficiency and emotional disturbance. From external reasons: curriculum and examination setting, affect from teachers and peers.

These findings have implications: freshman's burnout is very common in higher vocational colleges, As a result, we must pay attention to the intervention of students' burnout from the beginning of college. As we can see from the interview, reasons come from schools, teachers, peers and the students themselves. Student burnout is a phenomenon that hinders their all-round development. If the schools, families and students do not pay enough attention to it and let it develop from student burnout to job burnout, it will not only waste the educational resource, but also affect the normal operation of the whole society.

Implication of practice: the aim of this study was to explore the freshman's burnout in a common higher vocational college. It provides direct empirical data on freshman's burnout, focusing on some of the most direct causes of freshman's burnout. The results of this study are also of some significance to help freshmen overcome burnout. The qualitative nature of this study provides valuable experience and enlightenment for the educational management of higher vocational colleges in China, the results will make higher vocational colleges and freshmen realize the negative effects of freshman's burnout.

Another important implication of this research comes from the correlation between our curriculum and examination settings and vocational college freshman's burnout. The report of China Vocational Education Commission (2018) puts forward the requirements of improving the curriculum and assessment methods of higher vocational colleges. However, our findings have pointed out the direction for the reform of curriculum and evaluation methods.

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