


Relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout: Differences between regular and vocational high schools


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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70830/iejcp.2402.21389>

Burnout significantly undermines teacher well-being and effectiveness, with external accountability identified as a key contributor. Although regular and vocational high school teachers face comparable stressors, their distinct workplaces lead to different patterns in the relationship between external accountability and burnout. However, current studies concerning these differences have been inadequate. Therefore, using Labour Process Theory, this study explored how external accountability influences teachers' emotional labour and consequent burnout across different school contexts. This study recruited 395 high school teachers to complete questionnaires measuring external accountability, emotional labour (surface acting, deep acting and the expression of naturally felt emotions) and burnout. The results show that external accountability positively predicts teacher burnout, which is significantly mediated by the expression of naturally felt emotions. Additionally, school type moderates the mediating effect of surface acting, with vocational high school teachers significantly impacted. The findings also highlight the need for differentiated support strategies, particularly for vocational teachers' pedagogical training.

Keywords: external accountability; emotional labour; teacher burnout; vocational high school; regular high school

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INTRODUCTION

Maslach et al. (1996) define burnout as a psychological syndrome characterised by emotional exhaustion (being emotionally overextended and drained), depersonalisation (being cynical and detached from work and other people) and reduced personal accomplishment (decreased sense of competence, efficacy and achievement). Other studies suggest that burnout is a pervasive issue among teachers worldwide, with detrimental consequences for teachers' well-being (Madigan et al., 2023), instructional quality and student outcomes (Madigan & Kim, 2021). To find effective strategies to prevent burnout, education researchers have investigated its antecedents (Agyapong et al., 2023). Among the antecedents is external accountability, defined as formal systems and measures that pressure individuals to explain and justify their decisions and actions to others (Tsang, et al., 2023). Wright (2020) identified this antecedent as a key contributor to teacher burnout, particularly through its deskilling effects.

Labour process theory is often used in studies to examine the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout because it explains how external accountability results in deskilling, work intensification, and the erosion of professional autonomy regarding the technical aspects of teaching (Li & Tsang, 2023; Tsang, 2018; Wright, 2020). However, the theory does not factor in the emotional dimension of teaching. Education researchers (e.g., Benesch & Prior, 2023; Horner et al., 2020; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006) argued that teaching is an inherently emotional labour, positioning emotion management as a fundamental aspect of teachers' work. Therefore, Labour Process Theory may provide an incomplete framework for studying the impact of external accountability on teacher burnout.

Moreover, existing studies have predominantly treated teachers as a homogenous group, potentially obscuring contextual differences. For instance, although regular and vocational high schools constitute distinct contexts that shape teachers' lived experiences and well-being (Barnová et al., 2023), the differential effects of such settings are underexplored. In numerous societies, including mainland China, vocational high schools predominantly serve academically underperforming students who have lower self-efficacy and weaker learning motivation (Chu et al., 2015; Hansen & Woronov, 2013). This student population can create more challenging teaching conditions for vocational high school teachers than those encountered by regular high school teachers. In addition to equipping students with occupation-specific knowledge, skills, and competence for direct workforce entry, vocational high school teachers need to prepare students for pursuing higher education at universities in mainland China (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). However, they may receive insufficient support to achieve such educational goals and are subjected to evaluation and inspection of their work (Agyapong et al., 2023). These conditions potentially create different patterns in how external accountability relates to burnout between regular and vocational high school teachers. Examining the difference between regular and vocational high school teachers

will deepen our understanding of how external accountability influences teacher burnout across diverse school settings.

This research examines the difference by first extending Labour Process Theory to include emotional labour as a mediating factor in teacher burnout. Secondly, it conducts a comparative analysis using school type (regular versus vocational) as a moderator to determine whether school setting is a significant factor. The study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of teacher burnout under external accountability pressure across diverse school settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

External accountability and teacher burnout

Teacher burnout has been widely investigated in the context of external accountability (Wright, 2020). In these studies, Labour Process Theory is widely used to explain the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout (Wang, 2025). The theory states that external accountability implies institutional mistrust of teacher professionalism, leading to the imposition of external measures, such as key performance indicators and report cards to monitor and control teachers' work (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014; Hardy et al., 2019). Thus, in the context of external accountability, teachers are likely to lose professional autonomy and authority when deciding what, when, why and how to do their work, leading to a sense of deskilling or deprofessionalisation (Wright, 2020). Deskilled teachers tend to be restricted to executing tasks assigned by external authorities, such as policy-makers and school administrators. Even when they perceive these tasks or work procedures as meaningless, they tend to be powerless to challenge or refuse them, resulting in work intensification (Thompson et al., 2021; Tsang & Kwong, 2016; Ji et al., 2024). This condition tends to make teachers prone to stress, exhaustion and depersonalisation and, ultimately, to burnout (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014).

As in other education systems, mainland China has adopted external accountability structures to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of school education, increasing the system's formalisation and bureaucratisation (Green, 2023), including educational inspections and teacher performance evaluations (Rasmussen & Zou, 2014). Teachers are held accountable for student test scores, with their salaries often tied to standardised assessment outcomes (Zhang & Liu, 2021). This system tends to constrain teachers' professional autonomy, narrowing their focus to test-aligned instruction and encouraging teaching to the test, as pedagogies are primarily driven by their efficiency in boosting scores (Wang, 2025). Thus, teachers in mainland China often face deskilling and work intensification (Wong, 2006), which generate negative emotional experiences and lead to burnout (Yang et al., 2019).

The following hypothesis is derived from this review:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *External accountability is positively related to teacher burnout.*

Emotional labour as a mediator

Labour process theory is typically concerned with the impacts of social structures on the technical dimension of teachers' work; that is, the power to exercise control over the definition and design of assigned tasks. But it ignores the emotional dimension. Hargreaves (2001) noted that teachers often engage in intensive emotion management for instructional purposes. For example, to maintain classroom order and ensure effective teaching, teachers may stop students' misbehaviours by displaying anger even if they do not genuinely feel it, or they may strive to be humorous with students in an effort to create a positive classroom climate that motivates them and engages them in learning, even if they are not naturally funny (Horner et al., 2020). Thus, researchers have integrated such emotion management performed for work goals into the theory, referring to it as emotional labour (e.g., Hu & Du, 2022; Wang & Bian, 2022).

From the perspective of Labour Process Theory, emotional labour involves forced emotion management because occupational or professional rules prescribe teachers' feelings and their display in teaching (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Hochschild (1983) states that numerous occupations, especially service-oriented professions, commodify employees' emotions, imposing rules and regulations on their emotional expressions to maximise profits in post-industrial societies. Although school education is a public enterprise, not driven by profit, teachers' working conditions are increasingly mirroring those of service-sector professions due to the imposition of external accountability measures in the education system (Whitty, 2002). In mainland China, for example, teachers increasingly feel under surveillance by students, parents, and the community in the context of external accountability (Lo et al., 2015). Stakeholders, including students, parents and the community, often make requests of teachers, intervene in their work, and criticise them, especially when they perceive that teachers fail to meet their needs or expectations (Guo & Kilderry, 2018). Under these conditions, teachers are positioned as frontline service workers and are expected to cater unconditionally to stakeholders, who are perceived as consumers, to maintain satisfaction, minimise discontent and pre-empt conflicts or complaints (Lo et al., 2015). As a result, teachers in mainland China are held responsible for expressing their emotions professionally in interactions with stakeholders, such as showing passion for teaching, avoiding negative emotions, maintaining positive emotions and using emotions instrumentally (Yin & Lee, 2012). In other words, external accountability can be a structural driver, compelling teachers to perform emotional labour (Tsang et al., 2023; Tsang & Wu, 2025; Hu & Du, 2022; Wang & Bian, 2022).

To respond to external accountability demands, teachers may manage their emotions via various emotional labour strategies, including surface acting, deep acting and the expression of naturally felt emotions. Surface acting involves simulating unfeared emotions or suppressing inappropriate emotions. Deep acting involves cognitive

reframing to align emotional displays with professional expectations. By contrast, the expression of naturally felt emotions is the spontaneous display of genuine emotions (Yin, 2012). Horner et al. (2020) noted that the expression of naturally felt emotions does not imply that teachers can display emotions spontaneously; however, it involves significant effort to modulate these genuine emotions in a controlled and professional manner. According to Labour Process Theory, efforts of forced emotion management can lead to emotive dissonance; that is, the separation of feelings and displays, which is positively associated with burnout (Na'ring et al., 2006).

Therefore, emotional labour may be affected by external accountability and can, in turn, influence teacher burnout. In this sense, emotional labour—including surface acting, deep acting, and the expression of naturally felt emotions—should mediate the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Surface acting plays a mediating role between external accountability and teacher burnout.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Deep acting plays a mediating role between external accountability and teacher burnout.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *The expression of naturally felt emotions plays a mediating role between external accountability and teacher burnout.*

School type as a moderator

Teaching contexts in regular and vocational high schools can differ in mainland China. The public considers vocational education to be inferior to general education (Xiong, 2010). This is because they generally believe that vocational education is used to prepare students for low-skilled and manual labour, whereas general education aims to foster students' intellects for high-skilled and mental labour (Stewart, 2015). This lower social status has resulted in vocational high schools in mainland China enrolling a greater proportion of underperforming students who exhibit low learning motivation, confidence and self-efficacy (Chu et al., 2015; Hansen & Woronov, 2013). These students are also more likely to engage in disruptive, antisocial and other high-risk behaviours at schools (Yi et al., 2018). Teaching this population can be challenging for vocational high school teachers as most do not receive sufficient teacher training, leading to insufficient pedagogical knowledge, skills and competence (Gao & Yu, 2020). Owing to the lack of effective and efficient teaching strategies, they are more likely to rely more heavily on emotion management than teachers in regular high schools to maintain classroom order and student motivation in accordance with stakeholder expectations, such as by demonstrating passion and enthusiasm while carefully controlling expressions of anger and frustration (Yilmaz et al., 2015). According to Xue and Li (2022), student and teacher quality issues pose greater administrative challenges in vocational high schools in mainland China than in regular

high schools in achieving high-quality education. Therefore, there is a growing societal demand for enhanced supervision, regulation, evaluation and guidance in vocational high schools in mainland China (Li, 2004). For this reason, vocational high school teachers may also experience increasing demand for external accountability for their work.

This literature review suggests that school type (regular versus vocational high schools) may moderate the relationship between external accountability and teachers' emotional labour. In mainland China, due to the disadvantaged student population and inadequate teacher training, vocational high school teachers appear to rely more heavily on emotional labour to compensate for their pedagogical limitations while simultaneously confronting heightened external accountability demands than regular high school teachers do. Therefore, the relationship between external accountability and teachers' emotional labour is likely stronger in vocational high schools than in regular high schools. As a result, the following hypotheses are proposed:

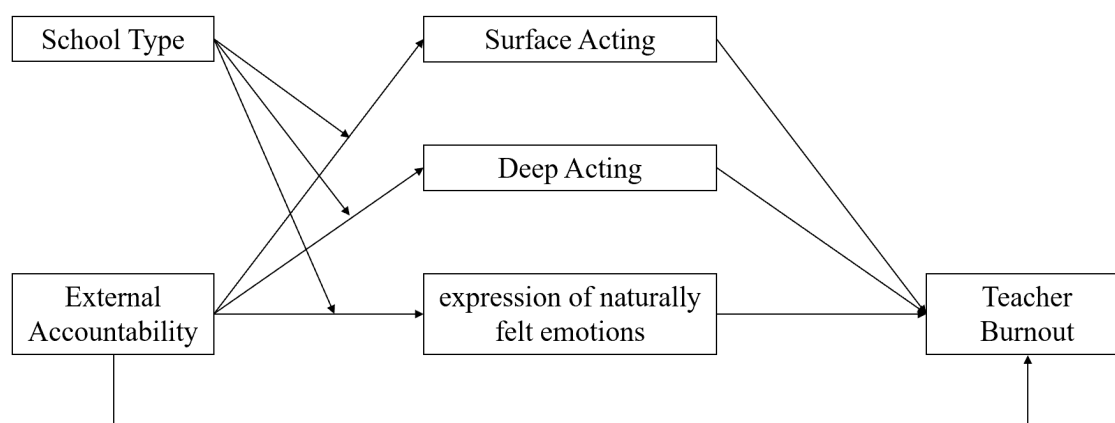
Hypothesis 5 (H5). *School type moderates the relationship between external accountability and surface acting, indicating a school type difference in that relationship.*

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *School type moderates the relationship between external accountability and deep acting, indicating a school type difference in that relationship.*

Hypothesis 7 (H7). *School type moderates the relationship between external accountability and the expression of naturally felt emotions, indicating a school type difference in that relationship.*

Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework of the hypotheses to be tested in this study.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework: proposed moderated mediation model.



MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The participants in this study were high school teachers recruited from the Chinese mainland via <http://wjx.com> and invited to complete a questionnaire. A total of 435 teachers participated in the study. After incomplete questionnaires and those that did not meet the necessary criteria were excluded, 395 valid responses were retained, resulting in a valid response rate of 90.80%.

Among the respondents, 229 (57.97%) were female; the mean age and teaching years were 38.66 ($SD=9.71$) and 14.48 ($SD=10.67$), respectively; 156 (39.49%) teachers held a bachelor's degree; 152 (38.48%) held a master's degree; 84 (21.27%) held a doctorate; 66 (16.71%) teachers had no professional titles; 126 (31.90%) teachers had intermediate professional titles; 107 (27.09%) teachers had senior or higher professional titles; 185 (46.84%) teachers worked in regular high schools; and 210 teachers (53.16%) worked in vocational high schools, with 165 teachers serving as *banzhuren* (homeroom teachers).

Measures

External accountability

External accountability was measured using the Chinese version of the Personal Accountability Measure (PAM-Ch) (Tsang et al., 2023). Six items were used to measure teachers' perceptions of external accountability, for example, "Give school management a report on the extent to which you reached your goals at work". All the items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The external accountability scale showed good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.921$).

Teacher emotional labour

Teacher emotional labour was measured using the 13-item Teacher Emotional Labour Strategy Scale (TELSS) (Yin, 2012). This scale contains three subscales assessing different emotional labour strategies: surface acting (6 items), deep acting (4 items), and the expression of naturally felt emotions (3 items). Each item was answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Sample items included, "I put on an act in order to deal with students or their parents in an appropriate way" (surface acting), "I make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display towards students or their parents" (deep acting), and "the emotions I express to students or their parents are genuine" (expression of naturally felt emotions). In this study, the Cronbach's alphas for surface acting, deep acting, and expressing naturally felt emotions were 0.949, 0.880 and 0.917, respectively, indicating good reliability.

Teacher burnout

Teacher burnout was measured using the 15-item Chinese version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (Li & Wang, 2009). This scale had 15 items assessing three dimensions of teacher burnout: emotional exhaustion (5 items), depersonalisation (4 items), and reduced personal accomplishment (6 items). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Sample items for each dimension were “I feel emotionally drained from my work” (emotional exhaustion), “I doubt the significance of my work” (depersonalisation), and “I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job” (reduced personal accomplishment). In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.842, indicating good reliability.

Demographic variables

Previous research shows that several individual factors (such as teaching years, gender and teacher educational level) influence teachers’ emotional labour outcomes (e.g., Wang et al., 2023) and burnout (e.g., Lau et al., 2005). In addition, studies in the Chinese context examined the impact of being a homeroom teacher on teachers’ job burnout (e.g., Zhao & Bi, 2003). Therefore, in the present study, gender, educational level, teaching years and homeroom teachers were controlled for in the data analysis. School type (regular high schools vs. vocational high schools) was treated as a moderator variable.

Data analysis

In this study, SPSS 26.0 was used to analyse the data. First, Harman’s single-factor test and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined to ensure that there was no serious common method deviation or multicollinearity concern. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were subsequently conducted to provide a preliminary analysis. Moreover, three steps were performed to test our hypotheses: (1) linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of external accountability on teacher burnout; (2) PROCESS Model 4 was performed to test the mediating effect of emotional labour between external accountability and teacher burnout; and (3) PROCESS Model 7 was used to further examine the moderating effect of school type on the aforementioned indirect relationships.

RESULTS

First, Harman’s single-factor test was conducted to assess common method variance. The results suggested that six characteristic roots were greater than 1, and the first factor explained only 29%, which is below the common threshold of 40%, indicating no serious common-method bias (Harman, 1967). In addition, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for the study variables was below 4, indicating that collinearity was not a problem in this study.

Descriptions and correlations

The mean values, standard deviations, and correlation results among all study variables are shown in Table 1. The results revealed that external accountability was significantly and positively associated with deep acting, the expression of naturally felt emotions, and teacher burnout, but was not associated with surface acting ($p > 0.05$). Surface acting was significantly and positively correlated with deep acting, the expression of naturally felt emotions and teacher burnout. In addition, both deep acting and the expression of naturally felt emotions were significantly and positively related to teacher burnout (see Table 1).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	EA	SA	DA	NF	TB
EA	3.808	0.708	1				
SA	2.755	1.018	0.093	1			
DA	3.408	0.835	0.323***	0.581***	1		
NF	3.654	0.822	0.364***	0.108*	0.530***	1	
TB	4.420	0.716	0.130**	0.447***	0.286***	0.189***	1

Note: EA represents external accountability; SA represents surface acting; DA represents deep acting; NF represents the expression of naturally felt emotions; and TB represents teacher burnout. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Mediating effect of emotional labour

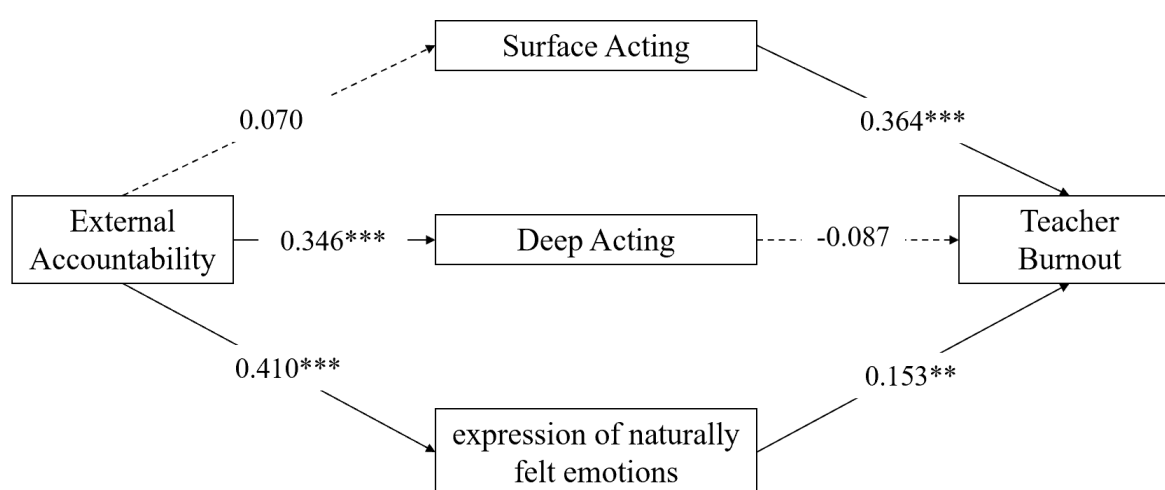
First, taking demographic information as a control variable, external accountability as an independent variable and teacher burnout as the dependent variable, a linear regression analysis was conducted. The results showed that the overall model fit was adequate ($F = 2.17$, $R^2 = 0.03$). External accountability had a significant effect on teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.120$, $t = 2.347$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H1.

The mediating effect of emotional labour was subsequently examined using SPSS. After controlling for demographic variables, the mediating effects of surface acting, deep acting, and the expression of naturally felt emotions on the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout were examined. Specifically, as shown in Table 2, the expression of naturally felt emotions mediated the effect of external accountability on teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.063$, 95% CI = [0.020, 0.114] range did not include 0). However, surface acting and deep acting did not mediate the effect of external accountability on teacher burnout ($\beta = 0.025$, -0.030, 95% CI = [-0.033, 0.082] and [-0.072, 0.002] range included 0). In addition, the mediation model revealed that the direct effect of external accountability on teacher burnout was not significant ($\beta = 0.062$, $t = 1.255$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, H4 was supported, whereas H2 and H3 were not supported (see Figure 2).

Table 2. The mediating effect of emotional labour.

	Effect	SE	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Total Effect	0.120	0.051	0.019	0.220
Direct Effect	0.062	0.049	-0.035	0.159
Indirect Effect				
EA-SA-TB	0.025	0.029	-0.033	0.082
EA-DA-TB	-0.030	0.019	-0.072	0.002
EA-NF-TB	0.063	0.024	0.020	0.114

Figure 2. The mediation model



Moderating effect of school type

Model 7 of PROCESS was further used to test the moderation effect of school type. The results revealed that the interaction effect of external accountability and school type was significantly related to surface acting ($\beta=0.413$, $SE=0.133$, $p=0.002<0.01$) and the expression of naturally felt emotions ($\beta=0.264$, $SE=0.110$, $p=0.017<0.05$) but was not significantly related to deep acting ($\beta=0.119$, $SE=0.111$, $p>0.05$). The difference between the two regression coefficients derived from two separate samples (teachers from regular high schools and those from vocational high schools) was subsequently examined. As shown in Figure 3, in the regular high school group, the effect of external accountability on surface acting was -0.145 , $SE=0.092$, $p=0.118>0.05$, 95% CI = $[-0.327, 0.037]$. In the vocational school group, the effect of external accountability on surface acting was 0.269 , $SE = 0.095$, $p<0.01$, 95% CI = $[0.081, 0.456]$. For the expression of naturally felt emotions, as shown in Figure 4, in the regular high school group, the effect was 0.285 , $SE=0.076$, $p<0.001$, 95% CI = $[0.135, 0.435]$. In the

vocational school group, the effect was 0.549, $SE = 0.079$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.394, 0.703]. Overall, the results indicated a significant difference between the two samples.

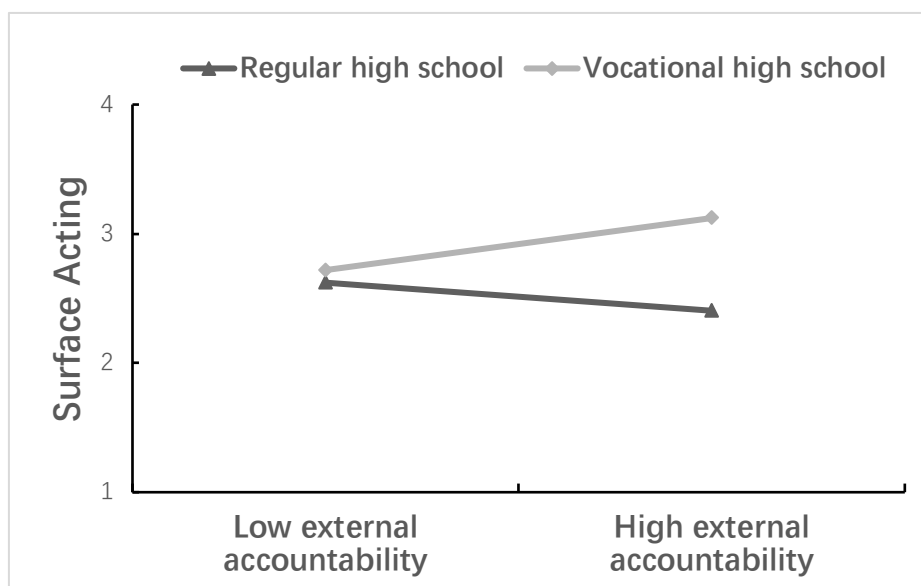


Figure 3. Moderating effect of school type on the relationship between external accountability and surface acting.

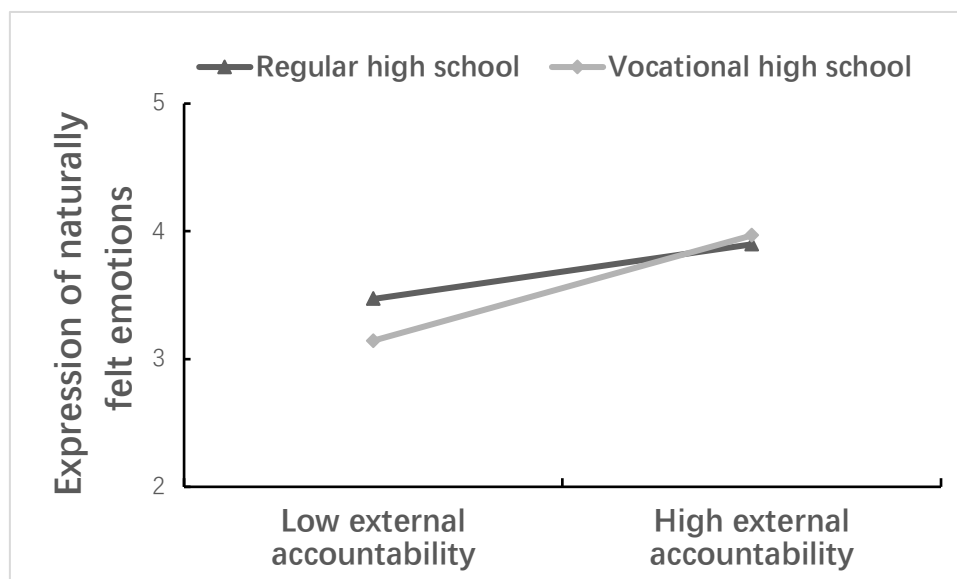


Figure 4. Moderating effect of school type on the relationship between external accountability and the expression of naturally felt emotions.

The moderated mediation effect was tested, showing that the mediating effect of surface acting was moderated by school type, suggesting a significant difference in the indirect effect from external accountability to teacher burnout via surface acting in the regular high school and vocational high school groups. Specifically, in regular high schools,

surface acting did not mediate the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout ($\beta=-0.053$, 95% CI = [-0.133, 0.021]). In contrast, the indirect effect was significant in the vocational high school group ($\beta=0.098$, 95% CI = [0.006, 0.184]).

In addition, the results also suggested that school type did not moderate the mediating effect of the expression of naturally felt emotions; that is, there was no significant difference in the indirect effect from external accountability to teacher burnout via surface acting in the regular high school ($\beta=0.044$) and vocational high school groups ($\beta=0.084$), 95% CI = [-0.004, 0.097]. Therefore, H5 was supported, whereas H6 and H7 were not supported.

DISCUSSION

Teaching is considered one of the most stressful occupations in the world, making teachers prone to burnout (Agyapong et al., 2023). Labour Process Theory proposed that external accountability can lead to teacher burnout because of its deskilling effects (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014), which not only disempower teachers to do their work (Wright, 2020) but also restricts their autonomy to feel and display emotions spontaneously (Tsang et al., 2025). While extended to the emotional dimension of teaching, this logic would suggest that external accountability forces teachers into inauthentic emotional displays by performing surface and/or deep acting, generating emotive dissonance and, in turn, burnout (Hu & Du, 2022; Wang & Bian, 2022).

The research findings confirm, to a certain extent, the overall positive relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout, providing support for the premise of Labour Process Theory and refining its application to emotional labour. Contrary to what a straightforward extension of the theory might predict, the study indicates that when both regular and vocational high school teachers are considered as a whole, external accountability can contribute to teacher burnout by encouraging the expression of naturally felt emotions rather than surface acting and deep acting.

These findings are similar to those of the study conducted by Tsang et al. (2025), which showed that surface acting and deep acting do not significantly mediate the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout, but the expression of naturally felt emotions does. However, the previous studies found that external accountability can reduce teacher burnout by encouraging the expression of naturally felt emotions. Indeed, numerous studies suggest that the expression of naturally felt emotions should be negatively associated with teacher burnout (Yin et al., 2019). Therefore, the positive effects of expressing naturally felt emotions on teacher burnout may remain an open question. As Kariou et al.'s (2021) systematic review suggests, some studies have reported a positive association between the expression of naturally felt emotions and teacher burnout. According to these studies, the expression of naturally felt emotions does not mean displaying genuine emotions spontaneously; rather, it is about the modulated expression of authentic emotions (Horner et al., 2020). In other words,

teachers still intentionally regulate and adjust their emotional displays in a controllable and professional manner rather than allowing their emotions to flow freely. Therefore, as Zhang et al.'s (2020) study implies, this emotional labour strategy may also create emotive dissonance that can significantly lead to burnout (Naring et al., 2006). Accordingly, when teachers feel the demands of external accountability, they may become more aware of modulating their genuine emotional displays to demonstrate their professionalism as prescribed by stakeholders (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Yin & Lee, 2012), thereby increasing their level of burnout.

A further analysis indicates that the mediating effect of surface acting is more significant in vocational high schools than in regular high schools. This suggests that teachers in vocational settings may face greater pressure to regulate their emotions while also encountering high external demands for accountability. Their reliance on surface acting, that is, pretending to have prescribed emotions, may stem from insufficient instructional skills and competence. As other studies suggest, vocational high school teachers receive sufficient teacher training (Gao & Yu, 2020), but they need to face a large proportion of low-performing students with behavioural problems (Chu et al., 2015; Hansen & Woronov, 2013) while also being held accountable for improving academic outcomes (Li, 2004). In this context, they might resort to surface acting, that is, superficially displaying prescribed emotions, in an attempt to motivate or engage students in learning, because they may lack sufficient pedagogical skills and knowledge to achieve these instructional goals. Teachers in regular high schools in mainland China face similar student populations but likely possess better pedagogical knowledge and the ability to employ diverse strategies (Ke et al., 2019), including different emotional labour strategies, to manage and guide students towards their instructional goals effectively (Yilmaz et al., 2015). These findings may explain why vocational high schools have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between external accountability and surface acting, whereas regular high schools do not.

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the use of nonprobability sampling may restrict the generalizability of the results, as the participant pool may not fully represent the broader population of regular and vocational high school teachers in mainland China. Future studies should adopt probability sampling methods to strengthen the external validity of the findings. Second, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences regarding the relationships among external accountability, emotional labour, teacher burnout, and school type. Longitudinal research could help clarify the temporal and directional dynamics, for instance, between external accountability, emotional labour, and teacher burnout across school contexts. Finally, the study focuses exclusively on mainland China's educational context, limiting the applicability of the findings to other sociocultural settings, where differing societal expectations, educational policies, and teacher–student dynamics could yield distinct emotional labour patterns and burnout

outcomes. Therefore, researchers can consider conducting comparative research to identify sociocultural differences in the relationships among these variables.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between external accountability and teacher burnout through the mechanism of emotional labour and tested whether this relationship differs between regular and vocational high schools in mainland China. The research findings show a complex picture. Although the study confirms a positive overall association between external accountability and teacher burnout, it indicates that expression of naturally felt emotions serves as a significant mediator rather than surface acting and deep acting. In addition, the findings indicate that the path through surface acting is significant only for vocational high school teachers, not for regular high school teachers, suggesting their distinct vulnerability under external accountability.

The results both align with and refine existing findings. On the one hand, they support the premise of Labour Process Theory that external accountability is a control mechanism negatively associated with teacher well-being (Benesch & Prior, 2023; Wright, 2020). On the other hand, the findings challenge a simplistic extension of Labour Process Theory to emotions by demonstrating that the primary emotional pathway to teacher burnout involves the managed performance of authenticity, rather than inauthenticity. These findings represent a significant contribution to the literature by suggesting that teacher burnout arises not from faking emotions but from the exhaustion of modulating genuine emotions in response to external accountability. Furthermore, by demonstrating the moderating role of school type (regular vs. vocational) in the relationship between external accountability and surface acting, the study challenges the notion of a homogeneous teaching force and identifies specific school contexts in which emotional labour processes are critical.

Therefore, the findings underscore several actionable steps to alleviate teacher burnout in mainland China. For vocational high schools, where teachers often rely on surface acting due to limited pedagogical skills, targeted professional development is critical. Training programs should focus on evidence-based classroom management strategies, differentiated instruction for low-performing students, and adaptive emotional regulation techniques. This would reduce dependence on superficial emotional displays while equipping teachers with tools to address behavioural and academic challenges effectively. For all teachers, emotional labour training should distinguish between harmful suppression and constructive emotional modulation. Schools may implement mentorship programs or peer support networks to help teachers navigate accountability pressures without resorting to emotive dissonance. At the policy level, accountability frameworks should be redesigned to avoid incentivising authentic emotional performance. Instead, evaluations could incorporate measures of pedagogical

adaptability and student engagement, allowing teachers greater autonomy in determining appropriate emotional responses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research is funded by General Research Fund of Research Grants Council of Hong Kong (project no.: 18608324").

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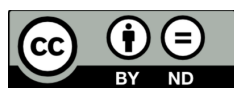
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