

# CULTURE SHOCK: THE EFFECT OF SCHOOL CULTURE ON TEACHER BURNOUT AND MOTIVATION DURING POLARIZING TIMES



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# The Backdrop to the Classroom



# Research Question

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How do independent school teachers describe the ways political tensions manifest in their work?

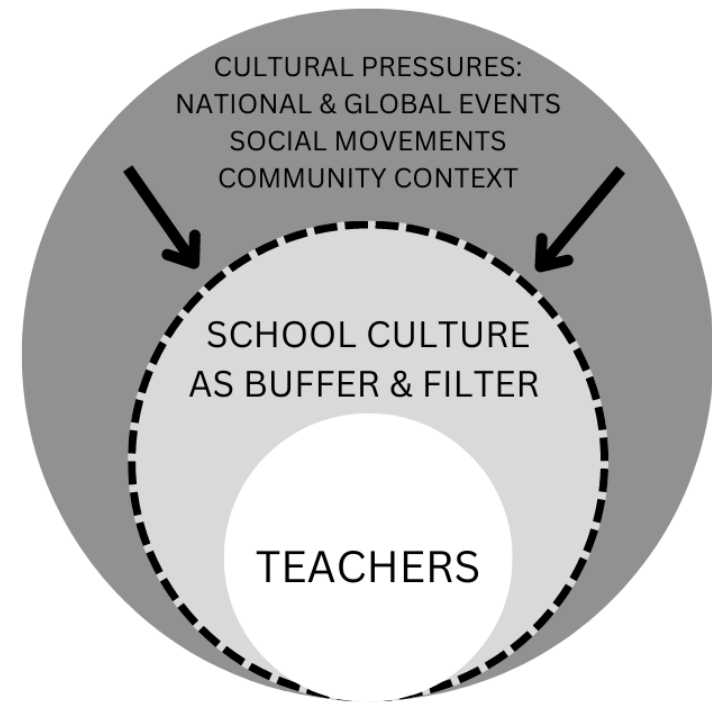
- What are the tensions?
- How do they show up?



# My Interest in the Question

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- Interplay between realms (Dinham & Scott, 2000)
- Need to update language like “burnout” for this historical moment. Concepts from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century
- Identifying tensions elicits helpful descriptions for practitioners



# Importance of Mission in Independent Schools

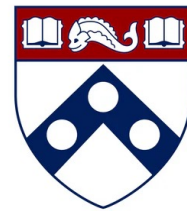
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- Each school had a distinct mission: Girls' Catholic, Quaker Friends', Montessori.
- PAIS accreditation requires mission alignment.
- Mission reasons vary by school type.
- Mission links individual & school culture.



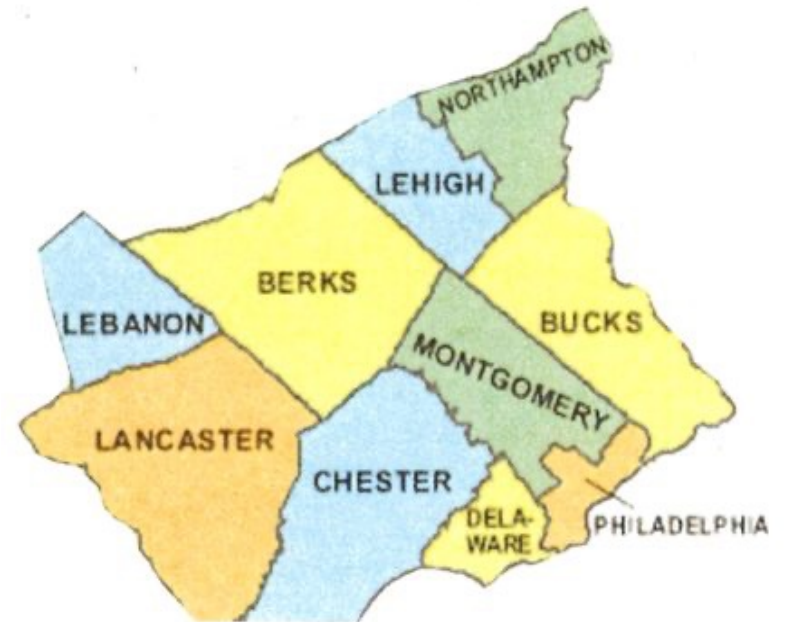
# Methodology

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- 12 participants from 3 Philadelphia-area schools
- 1<sup>st</sup> interview-- Semi-structured interview
- 2<sup>nd</sup> interview-- Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954)
  - Hypothetical scenarios used to elicit “thick description”
- Member Checks
- Document Review



# Why Critical Incident Technique?

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- Critical Incidents are moments that test how individuals cope with challenging situations.
- Insights for practitioners and school leadership as patterns emerge



# What Are the Tensions?

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- Climate Anxiety—0 mentions
- Race – 11 mentions
- Gender – 3 mentions
- Socio-Political Events— 9 total mentions
  - Conflict in Middle East – 3 mentions
  - Murder of George Floyd – 6 mentions



# The Three Typologies

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- Three common coping mechanisms to these polarizing events
- **Insulator (plus 1 cusp):** “protect” students, but overlook identity aspects
- **Activator:** beliefs align with mission, tackles social issues
- **Gymnast:** adjusts identity to fit school culture
- All show alignment with school mission



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# The Insulators

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**Core Belief:** Schools should protect students from outside political conflict

- Preserve Stability
- Avoid divisive topics
- Focus on academics
- Believe schools can buffer society

## Risks

- Avoidant
- Resistant to change
- Disconnected from student realities

A photograph of a stone archway over a stream in a forest with autumn foliage. The archway is made of grey stones and is reflected in the water below. The trees in the background have yellow and orange leaves, suggesting fall. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

# The Activators

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**Core Belief:** Schools should actively help students understand and navigate societal tensions.

- Mission-driven
- Social justice orientation
- See schools as porous
- View teaching as transformative

## Risks

- Emotional exhaustion
- Unrealistic expectations
- Constant engagement with conflict



# The Gymnasts

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**Core Belief:** “I don’t fully align with my institution, but I stay.”

- Constant balancing
- Identity tensions
- Cognitive dissonance
- Cultural adaptation

## Risks

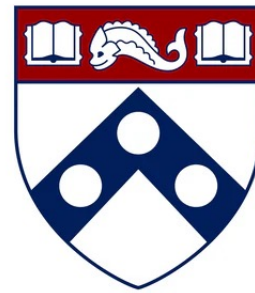
- Isolation
- Burnout
- Identity strain

# Notes on the Data

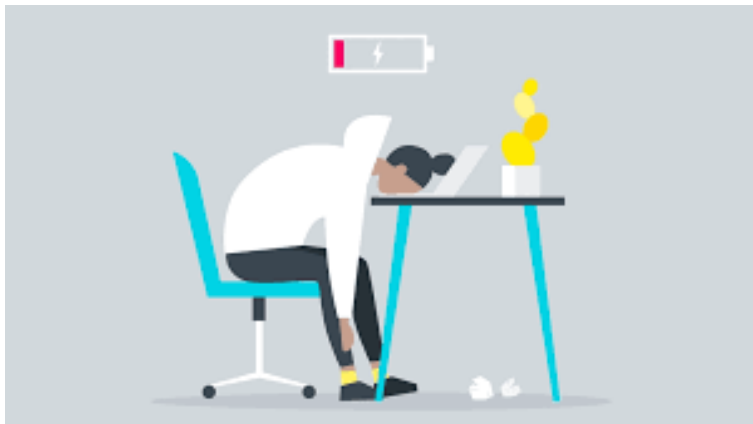


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- Each typology presented itself at each school.
  - Further research needed to make broad claims about occurrences of the typologies based on quantity of occurrence by school type or age band.
  - In the K-2 category, **Insulator** is the only typology among this group of participants.
  - **Gymnasts** occur once per school and once per age segment.

## Typology & Motivation/ Burnout



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- **Insulator:** Motivated by legacy; burned-out by difficult topics and student challenges, compensation
- **Activator:** Motivated by equity, autonomy; burned-out by institutional barriers
- **Gymnast:** Motivated by personal growth; burned-out by “outsider” status
- School Leadership arose as both a motivating and burn out factor for each typology

# Reassessing Theory

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- Current theories stem from mid-20th century
- Outdated for today's context
- Kelly & Berthelsen (1995) called for renewed concepts
- Typologies help reassess for this generation



# Reassessing Burnout and Motivation

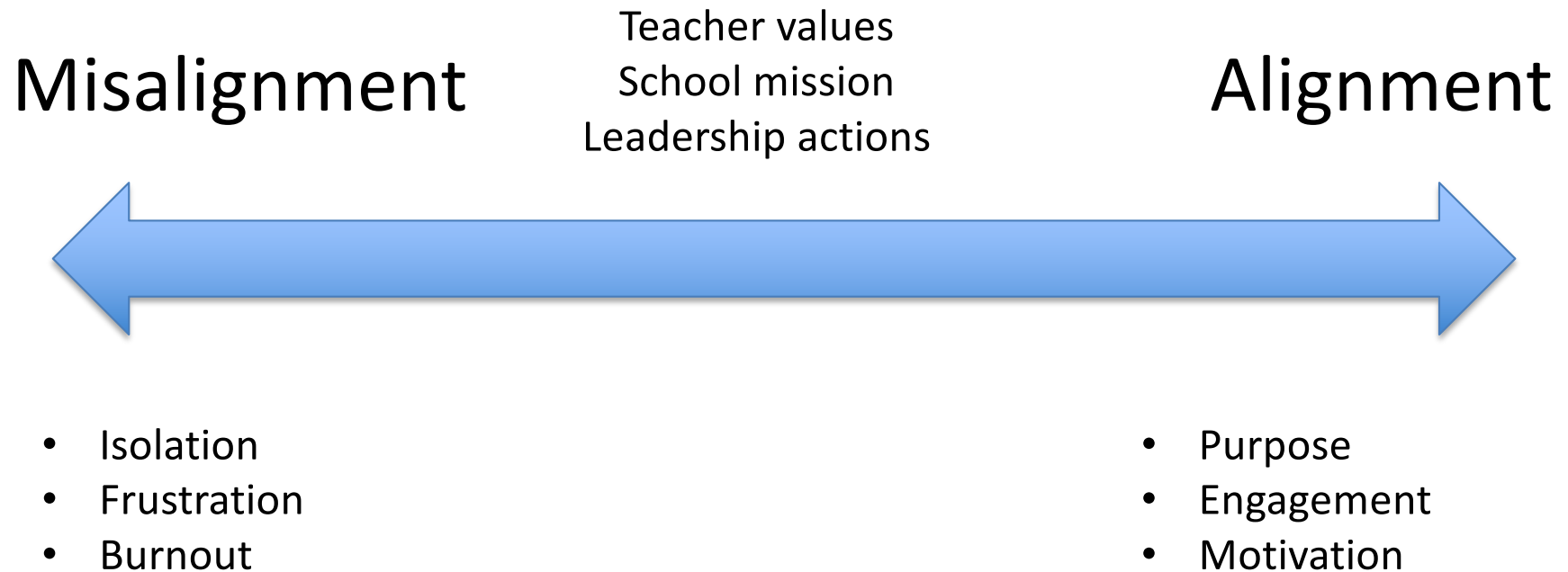
## Traditional Model

- Salary
- Benefits
- Management

## This Study Adds

- Culture
- Identity
- Mission alignment
- Political context

# What *actually* predicts burnout?



# A Revised Framework

Societal Pressure



School Culture



Teacher Interpretation

# Implications

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Misalignment  
accelerates  
burnout

Alignment  
sustains  
motivation

Professional  
development

Transparent  
communication

Mission clarity

# The Future of Education

*The events of recent years—pandemic recovery, political unrest, racial reckonings, and renewed debates over gender and identity—have intensified these dynamics. Teachers have become interlocutors of the national conscience, often expected to mediate conflicts that the larger society has failed to resolve. For school leaders, this reality underscores the importance of transparent communication, mission clarity, and professional development that equips educators to approach contested issues with confidence. A school culture grounded in trust allows teachers to interpret these moments not as threats to stability but as opportunities for meaningful dialogue and growth.*

# References

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Dinham, S., & Scott, C. (2000). Moving into the third, outer domain of teacher satisfaction. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(4), 379–396.  
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