



Culture Shock: The Effect of School Culture on Teacher Burnout and Motivation during Polarizing Times

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Abstract

This research-based paper examines how school culture shapes teacher motivation and burnout during periods of heightened socio-political polarization. Schools increasingly function as microcosms of broader societal conflict, where debates surrounding race, gender, democracy, and public health enter classrooms and place new emotional and professional demands on teachers. Drawing on theories of motivation, burnout, and organizational culture, this qualitative study explores how teachers interpret and navigate these pressures through the lens of institutional alignment. Using critical incident methodology and semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers across three independent schools in the United States, the research identifies three distinct coping typologies: Insulators, who seek to shield themselves and students from external tensions; Activators, who engage societal conflicts as mission-aligned learning opportunities; and Gymnasts, who balance personal beliefs with institutional expectations. Findings reveal that perceived alignment between teachers' values and school leadership, policies, and mission significantly mediates experiences of burnout and motivation. When school culture functions as a coherent buffer—providing clarity, autonomy, and support—teachers report sustained engagement even during moments of societal rupture. Conversely, cultural misalignment amplifies isolation and emotional exhaustion. This study contributes to international conversations on teacher wellbeing, professional sustainability, and educational leadership by emphasizing the central role of school culture in navigating external pressures. Practical implications highlight the importance of mission-driven leadership, transparent communication, and professional autonomy in fostering resilient educational environments capable of supporting teachers in uncertain and contested times.

Keywords: Education, society, burnout, motivation, politics, polarization

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, U.S. citizens have endured a changing environmental climate, a pandemic, racial reckonings, insurrections, the overturn of Supreme Court rulings that were thought unassailable, financial bonanzas, and conversely, financial crises. Schools are microcosms of broader society and subject to any strife that the public feels. From natural disasters to political uprisings, schools field the concerns of their constituents. Rarely do outside concerns remain *outside*. Societal issues manifest in schools from the seemingly innocuous questions of children that ignite a culture war in the classroom to schools' policies on dress code that reify or accept gender and cultural norms. If there is a contested topic or major issue, that issue will find its way into classrooms and the daily dealings and interactions between teachers and students. While suicidal rates are on the rise domestically, they are also on the rise in individual schools [1]. While transgendered rights are debated, schools address antiquated bathroom systems with space for only two genders [2]. While the U.S. confronts racism, schools address student behaviors that mimic these racist tropes [3]. Teachers often are tasked with making sense of these crises to students. In this sense, the individual teacher faces the crushing weight of greater society if the school culture does not buttress and support the teacher's work. Additionally, a teacher who does not agree with a school's approach, mission, policies, and leadership will likely face frustration and greater levels of burnout. School leaders have no power to change society at a macro scale, but they do have the power to make the work of a teacher easier when confronting these challenges with students contributing to a mission-aligned culture.

The culture of the school is not divorced from the wider context of society, with phenomena from the national stage influencing a school's culture. This work examines the influences of all realms—the outer realm of society, the inner realm of a school's culture and context, and the most micro-realm focusing on the needs of individual teachers who face and make sense with students of these outer two realms [4]. This study argues that the school and its culture have the greatest impact on a teacher's sense of efficacy and motivation—the internal process that inspires a person to move toward a goal [5]. A teacher who feels supported and culturally aligned with the broader school



community will likely thrive despite any challenging influences from the broader realm of society. This study collects the narratives of teachers, all of whom have faced a challenging moment in their teaching, and records and analyzes their descriptions of these events, often commenting on the interplay between culture and motivation in the face of these events.

Increasingly, teachers are not contending with these issues in the abstract, but in concrete terms as these concerns manifest in schools directly. Ultimately, this is a study of what happens when a rupture that emanates from an outside fault line splits a school community affecting teacher motivation or conversely burnout levels. This work foregrounds the teachers who have borne the brunt of these challenges while examining the school culture that supported or hindered the teachers' efforts.

1.2 Research Questions

How do independent school teachers describe the ways which political tensions manifest in their work? What are the tensions, and how do they show up?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study applies theories of burnout, motivation, and organizational culture to examine teachers' experiences in the field of education during challenging societal times of extreme polarization. Drawing primarily from Herzberg's Motivation Theory [6], Maslach and Jackson's Burnout Theory [7], and Organizational Culture Theory [8], these frameworks situate teacher motivation and burnout not solely within individual psychology, but within the broader organizational and socio political contexts in which teachers work.

Herzberg's theory of motivation [6] still forms the basis of most contemporary theories and studies on the subject. Motivation, according to Herzberg, may come in many forms—pay, benefits, workplace regulations, etc.. Motivation also broadly speaks to why a teacher chooses to join the profession or why a teacher selects a particular school. Some teachers in this study are motivated by the freedom to design a curriculum free of the state standards found in other schools. In Herzberg's terms, this is motivating because of the autonomy it brings to teaching. The opposite, Burnout Theory [7] juxtaposes Herzberg's Motivation Theory. When examined in tandem—motivation and burnout—educational practitioners may discover some alarming trends of the teaching workforce. By addressing these trends, school leadership may retain teachers in the profession [9] and create motivated teachers who are more likely to inspire higher levels of student achievement [10].

More contemporarily, Dinham and Scott continue this work in the field of education with what they call the "third realm" of teacher satisfaction—the broader and larger macrosystems in which schools exist, going beyond just the immediate motivation of the workplace [4]. Dinham and Scott write that the third domain is "grounded in the wider environment surrounding the school, a domain which has grown in importance and influence and which teachers and school executives find uniformly dissatisfying." While day-to-day work associated with teaching brings educators joy, Dinham and Scott identify that what most dissatisfies or demotivates teachers is "largely out of the control of teachers and schools and found within the wider domain of society, governments, and the employing body." These "extrinsic societal and employer-based factors" cause a lack of motivation in teachers. This third realm houses the many factors that erode a teacher's satisfaction and cause a teacher ultimately to leave the profession. Throughout this study, readers will find Dinham and Scott's term of "third realm" with reference to society at large, and second realm and inner realm to mean the school and the individual teacher respectively. This study seeks to understand the relationship between the third realm—the realm of society—and the realm of school organizations and teachers, taking note of what actions school leaders may take to increase motivation (and decrease burnout) among teachers who feel the pressures of greater society.

This study also relies on theories of school culture coupled with notions of an individual's sense of motivation. Broadly, organizational culture presupposes "that the social context for work had a marked effect on the ways people approached their work, social relationships at work, and productivity" [11]. A teacher's placement within the social context of the school organization may evoke discord or harmony for that teacher. Culture provides a construct for how employees create a "shared meaning" of their organization derived from their experiences, the stories they hear, and the socialization process in their work setting [8].

The preceding theories set the stage for this study with the current state of U.S. affairs as the backdrop and ask if these theories are sufficient for the contemporary moment. Most importantly, this



theoretical framework seeks to position schools as an institution within the broader socio-political landscape of the nation by first examining the individual teachers, and then the culture of the school before venturing to the broadest realm of society.

3. Methodology and Research Design

This study commenced in the fall of 2023 with data collection, analysis, and review extending into 2025—past the influential U.S. Presidential election. I employed a phenomenological approach utilizing an emic perspective of teachers. The specific phenomenon examined was the experience of teaching in varying independent school settings during fractious times. I interpreted the results through a social constructivist framework, believing that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and the sharing of beliefs and practices.

I conducted this research by interviewing teachers at three independent schools that serve compulsory school-aged students in the Philadelphia area. Studies examining school-based phenomena such as culture, social-emotional learning, school models, and teacher efficacy commonly use three schools as the basis for conducting studies, citing three schools as a large enough sample to represent concerns found within a particular region [12].

My study focused on the perspective of 12 currently practicing educators (four teachers from each school site) who have remained in the field for a minimum of four years. This number represents roughly 10% of the teachers at each participating school or campus and mirrors participant totals found in several similar phenomenological studies centered on teachers' experiences [13]. Four teachers identified as "junior" with fewer than five years teaching while eight were tenured with more than a decade of experience. Teachers who entered the profession at least four years ago worked through the pandemic, the 2020 election, January 6th, Uvalde, and a number of other formative socio-political events.

Following participant selection, I interviewed teachers individually using semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences and the support they received in response to challenging socio-political events. Prior to the interview, I reviewed public-facing school documentation (i.e., mission statements and other documents available on school websites) to better understand the school's culture and therefore the context of the classroom experiences described. As part of the first interview, I read the school's mission statement aloud and asked whether the values expressed within it were practiced among the school's constituents.

I then used scenarios following the critical incident technique to illustrate examples of moments demonstrating how socio-political events test a school's ability to cope with such concerns. Definitionally, critical incidents are moments in one's career that test an individual's ability to cope with a situation using the skills, protocols, and knowledge available to that person [14]. These scenarios, based on race, socio-political events, gender, or identity politics, normalized discussion of challenging experiences and primed participants to consider similar incidents from their own schools. I concluded the first interview by asking participants to reflect on situations from their school to share during the next session. I allowed participants time between sessions to consider events and moments that may take time to remember or process. During the second meeting, we explored examples of similar situations from the participant's school.

The teachers also performed member checks, acting as a form of validity testing by bringing together educators from different schools to discuss their perceptions and review early findings. These group meetings created triangulation by allowing teachers from different organizations to share and compare their classroom experiences surrounding tense sociopolitical moments. The conversations were not intended to generate new data but rather to confirm or challenge my interpretations from earlier interviews.

Lastly, I continued validity testing by conducting a document review of mission statements and other school artifacts. For instance, a Friends school may process world events in accordance with egalitarian views found within its mission statement, whereas a Catholic school may approach such matters through different guiding beliefs. By contextualizing teachers' responses alongside the documents shaping their school environments, I added credibility to descriptions of the institutional culture surrounding these experiences.

I used an inductive method to code participant interviews, allowing themes and patterns to emerge from the data. Coding began with a provisional list of categories informed by my professional experience and by recurring themes in the literature surrounding motivation, burnout, and school culture. However, these early codes served only as an orienting framework rather than a predetermined structure imposed upon participants' experiences. Following the first round of



interviews, I revised the coding list to reflect what actually appeared in the data. Codes that did not emerge in participants' narratives were removed, while new codes were added to capture recurring but unanticipated ideas. For example, during the second round of coding, I found that explicit references to specific political parties or the 2024 election—topics I initially expected to surface—rarely appeared. Instead, teachers discussed broader concerns regarding polarization, identity, and institutional response without naming individual candidates or partisan positions. Likewise, while gender emerged as a significant topic, it primarily appeared through discussions of students' daily interactions rather than direct commentary on national political debates.

Similarly, I initially included several sub-codes related to compensation—salary, benefits, pay equity, and financial recognition—drawing from Herzberg's conception of "hygiene" factors [6]. However, compensation appeared only briefly in most interviews. This absence became a finding itself, suggesting that the sources of teacher burnout and motivation may have shifted since foundational studies on workplace motivation. Conversely, new categories emerged that I had not anticipated, particularly those related to mental health, counseling, and social media. Teachers described these themes as interconnected forces shaping both student experiences and their own professional motivation. Social media conflicts among students, for instance, frequently led to counseling interventions and classroom spillover that teachers were expected to manage.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the coding process, I engaged in several practices consistent with qualitative rigor. First, coding was iterative. After each interview cycle, I revisited both the raw data and the developing code list to confirm that the analytic categories accurately reflected participants' words. Second, I worked with a data partner who acted as a peer debriefer, helping identify blind spots and test whether coding decisions were grounded in the evidence rather than personal interpretation. We independently reviewed coded transcripts, compared patterns, and refined category definitions until agreement was reached. Third, I conducted member checks by sharing emerging typologies and code summaries with participants. These steps helped safeguard against researcher bias and reinforced the integrity of the analytic process.

It is important to note that the typologies presented in the following section were not predetermined or imposed upon the data. Rather, they emerged through iterative comparison of participants' narratives, recurring patterns, and points of contrast regarding how teachers navigated political tensions in their work. Initially, I observed distinctions between teachers who leaned toward open engagement with contentious topics and those who preferred preserving established norms or avoiding divisive issues. As analysis continued, however, additional responses surfaced that did not fit neatly within these emerging categories. The recognition of these outliers prompted deeper analytic reflection and eventually led to the identification of a third pattern that bridged aspects of the first two while introducing distinct behaviors and rationales of its own.

Once these patterns appeared stable and sufficiently distinct, I synthesized them into the typologies described in the findings. These typologies were treated as interpretive tools rather than definitive labels. They were intended to illustrate the range of teacher responses observed in the data rather than constrain them. Their formation was guided by the evidence and refined through peer review and participant validation. In this way, the coding process reflected the iterative, inductive, and reflexive nature of qualitative inquiry, privileging participant voice and allowing theoretical insight to emerge organically from their descriptions.

4. Findings

The following section shares findings from the study, analyzing the responses of 12 participants from three schools in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The participants describe socio-political tensions they witnessed in the classroom, noting major themes of race, gender, identity, and global events such as the conflict in Israel and Gaza and the murder of George Floyd. In each case, a precipitating world event sparks a reaction at the local school level among students, faculty, and staff. Every participant's reaction could be categorized resembling elements of one of three themes, typologies, or coping patterns. Two participants exhibited characteristics spanning multiple typologies, suggesting that these categories function as interpretive tendencies rather than rigid classifications.

4.1 Description of Participants and Schools

Three schools participated in this study, representing three types or models of schools commonly found in eastern Pennsylvania independent schools— a Catholic girls' school serving grades 6-12, a Montessori school serving infants through grade 6, and a Friends' school associated



with Quaker values serving early childhood through grade 12. All three schools are geographically near one another, spanning from Philadelphia to the Main Line, an affluent suburb outside of Philadelphia. All three schools draw students both from within Philadelphia city limits as well as from the Main Line and other suburban areas. Additionally, all three independent schools enroll a predominantly white population of students. Nine of the 12 teacher participants identify as White female, matching national averages of teachers [15]. In this study, four teacher participants from each school shared their experiences, noting how various socio-political tensions have shaped their recent work.

Every teacher who participated in the study reported supporting their school's mission statement and what it represents. In each case, the mission statement contained key words to the organization or philosophy of the school (i.e. Catholic, Montessori, or a reference to Quaker values). In each case, a teacher shared that other members of the community may not be equally mission-aligned or might emphasize a different aspect of the mission statement. All participants viewed the mission statement as a guiding principle or a "differentiator" from other schools in the area. Furthermore, they felt the tension of when their school embodied the tenets of the mission statement or when they perceived that the basic principles of the mission statement were ignored.

4.2 Reaction to Critical Incident and Personal Critical Incidents

Critical incidents served the purpose to aid in research centered on "people's subjective impressions of organizational life, and the stories they construct in order to make sense of the environment in which they work" [14], by responding to a scenario and then sharing their own. These represented real events that the teachers had confronted during their teaching practice. Teachers often shared more than one critical incident. The topics included race, gender, and global events (with specific mention to conflict in the Middle East or the murder of George Floyd) as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Topics of Personal Critical Incidents

Topic	Times Shared
Race	11
Gender	3
Specific Socio-Political Event	9
Conflict in Middle East	3
Murder of George Floyd	6

Each of the participants' reaction to their experience can broadly be categorized in one of three thematic ways, creating typologies for the teachers: the Insulators, the Activators, and the Gymnasts.

4.3 The Insulators

Insulators represent teachers who strive to protect the established social order of their respective school and often have worked there for decades. They are not necessarily opposed to social or cultural changes within their school; however, they struggle with some aspect of socio-political tensions appearing in the classroom. Often during the interviews, the Insulators expressed yearning for the past, how the school used to be, while also recognizing that some change is good or necessary. They feel that conversations about socio-political or identity-based concerns is at best a distraction from the learning in the classroom or inappropriate or irrelevant at worst. Teachers that embody the Insulator theme often believe that it is not the work of the school to address issues as they arise in the world or contemporary society. They see these conversations as something inappropriate to discuss among children, something for parents to discuss with their own children at home, or altogether irrelevant to the lives of children. These teachers take umbrage with professional development that focuses on introspection or anything that evokes shame in them.

The teachers who belong to this category believe that schools are not porous, but rather that they have strong buffers protecting the students and school culture from the influences of outside culture. Contrarily, participants from the later sections (Activators and Gymnasts) believe the opposite that schools are porous to the influences of the outside world.

4.4 The Activators



Activators think schools are porous to outside events and accept that the tensions of the world will be felt within schools; however, these teachers hope that they can guide students through the lens of whatever mission the school holds (a Quaker, Catholic, or progressive lens). Activators see teaching as a means of igniting change and raising the next generation with progressive values. Ultimately, they want their students to be aware, just, and progressive; leaders who are ready to bring about positive and liberal change for the world.

Activators are firmly anchored to their faith or school's philosophy, which is also deeply entrenched in their schools' mission statements. Their commitment to the school's mission, almost to a zealous manner, guides them through any crisis. School mission keeps them from drifting in their values and in some ways more committed to the institutional goals than even the school leadership who may have to appease a broader swath of the constituency. Activators mentioned elements of burnout, the challenges of the work and the frustrations of facing these tensions so regularly, as well as motivation, the desire to effect real change and serve a community in crisis. They have high hopes for their schools to serve the students in the manner presented by the schools' mission statements, and they are there to implement progressive teaching techniques, protect students' identities, and challenge authority when needed to make this happen.

4.5 The Gymnasts

Gymnasts exemplify teachers who acculturate to the organization, metaphorically bending over backwards to fit in. These participants find themselves at odds with their institutional culture or goals, while also performing acts that do not align with their personal beliefs. In each case, the independent school was a predominantly White institution that culturally or in some manner upheld the values associated with White, heterosexual, abelist, patriarchal culture. These teachers seem to perform mental gymnastics, overcoming what, as an outsider, appears to be cognitive dissonance to support their school and its implicit values. This type of acculturation requires a level of cognitive gymnastics to make two seemingly contrary principles coherent. In the case of all the participants, there was something redeeming about their organization that drew them. Whether they described their independent school as "like home," "comfortable," or "a place where [they wanted their] children to be," there was something about the institution that pulled them in and felt comfortable. They may believe they are part of "the fight to bring about change," or their actions may be deeply culturally or personally ingrained, and they are acting in the manner they believe is expected of them. Equally, there was something that felt like these teachers must reconcile—something with which they were at odds and had to remedy through logic and a compromise of their beliefs. These are the individuals that face the greatest possible harm or trauma because their identity is regularly not acknowledged. These practitioners exercise great perseverance in a system not rewarding of their work or always certain or supportive of their identity.

5. In Conclusion

Traditional frameworks for understanding burnout and motivation have largely focused on compensation, autonomy, and management. While these factors are undeniably important, they do not fully capture the complexities of teaching in today's highly politicized and socially charged environment. Current models of motivation and burnout fail to account for the emotional and psychological toll of navigating sociopolitical tensions in the classroom. Today's educators require a framework that acknowledges not just institutional factors, but also the broader cultural, political, and ideological landscape that shapes their daily work. As schools continue to navigate contentious political climates, rethinking how burnout and motivation are defined is essential to ensuring that teachers feel both supported and empowered in their roles. As schools become increasingly politicized spaces, the need for empirical studies exploring how institutional culture, community expectations, and national discourse impact teachers has only grown more urgent. Expanding the scope of research to include a more diverse sample of schools, geographic regions, and disciplinary fields would provide greater insight into whether the three identified typologies are universal or if additional typologies emerge in larger-scale studies.

These categories—the Insulators, Activators, and Gymnasts—offer a useful framework for understanding the ways teachers navigate political and cultural tensions in their professional lives. These typologies should not be seen as rigid or reductive classifications. Rather, they serve as a heuristic tool, a way to conceptualize the different approaches, challenges, and coping mechanisms teachers employ when faced with politically sensitive issues. Each individual teacher brings a unique



perspective, but the presence of these typologies across all participating schools suggests that they may be applicable beyond this specific study, across different educational contexts.

For school administrators and policymakers, these themes hold significant practical implications, particularly when considering how to support faculty in politically complex times. Recognizing the presence of Insulators, Activators, and Gymnasts within a school community can inform strategies for professional development, teacher engagement, institutional messaging, and school culture initiatives. Additionally, understanding these typologies can help administrators identify sources of burnout and create targeted retention strategies, particularly for Gymnasts, who often experience the greatest emotional strain as they attempt to reconcile personal values with institutional expectations.

Ultimately, teachers in this study described moments when external political events entered their daily practice of educating students. Questions of race, gender, religion, and national identity surfaced in lessons, in hallway exchanges, and in conversations with parents. In this sense, schools functioned as microcosms of the national dialogue, reproducing the same divisions and anxieties that characterize the public at large. These moments required teachers to draw upon their personal values while simultaneously navigating the expectations of their school's mission and leadership. The tension that emerged was not simply between individual and institution, but between the broader social climate and the educational environment charged with interpreting it. Teachers who perceived alignment between their personal commitments and their school's mission reported stronger motivation and purpose, while misalignment contributed to uncertainty, isolation, and burnout. When alignment exists, teachers experience affirmation and clarity of purpose. When it falters, teachers face moral and emotional dissonance that can erode their sense of vocation and purpose, demonstrating that motivation is not a fixed personal trait but a dynamic condition shaped by the relationship between the teacher and the institution.

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.

The findings of this study suggest that motivation in teaching cannot be understood apart from the socio-political context in which teachers work. While traditional theories of motivation and burnout capture the internal dynamics of satisfaction and exhaustion, they do not fully account for the external pressures that now define the teacher's role. Future research must therefore continue to revisit these theories in light of evolving political realities, recognizing that what sustains teachers today may differ from what sustained them in earlier eras.

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