

A Literature Review on Organizational Behavior in Education

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of China's educational sector transitioning toward high-quality development and undergoing digital transformation, this paper focuses on existing research and conducts a systematic synthesis of the literature on organizational behavior in education from a "micro-meso-macro" perspective. At the micro level, it summarizes the development of teacher incentive mechanisms, as well as the digital leadership and educational ethos of managers in the new era; At the meso level, the study examines the transformation of group conflict toward "functional" conflict and the effectiveness of communication in school governance; at the macro level, it summarizes the "material exemption" effect of organizational culture and identifies the construction of "learning organizations" as a key strategy for responding to environmental changes. Future research should focus on the reshaping of organizational behavior in a digital and AI-driven environment, while re-emphasizing humanistic care to provide support for the creation of an educational management theoretical system with Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Educational Organizational Behavior; Digital Leadership; Teacher Motivation; Organizational Culture; Learning Organization

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Currently, China's education sector is entering a strategic development phase centered on "high-quality development," and the operational logic of school organizations is undergoing a fundamental restructuring—shifting from "extensive scale expansion" to "intensive quality enhancement." This not only poses a challenge to management efficiency but also represents a reshaping of the underlying logic of organizational behavior.

At the same time, with the deep integration of digital transformation and artificial intelligence, schools are no longer merely physical spaces composed of bricks and mortar but have evolved into complex hybrid spaces where "people, machines, and objects" are highly integrated. Amid this evolution, traditional incentive methods and communication mechanisms—under the influence of algorithms and data—are forcing educational organizations to reexamine their internal structures and interaction dynamics.

Faced with this complex ecosystem—shaped by the interplay of policy shifts and technological innovation—we cannot help but ask: Where exactly do the boundaries of applicability lie for classical theories rooted in Western corporate management contexts or industrial psychology when applied to the unique context of Chinese education? Based on this premise, this study conducts a systematic review of the literature to reveal the theoretical logic of school organizational behavior in the Chinese context. It aims to clarify the evolutionary path of Western theories' localization and lay a solid foundational groundwork for constructing an educational management theoretical system with Chinese characteristics.

1.2 Definition of Concepts

1.2.1 Definition of Organizational Behavior

Organizational behavior is an interdisciplinary applied field that originated from industrial psychology and evolved through business and management psychology and organizational psychology ^[1]. It focuses on individuals, groups, and the organization as a whole, integrating theories from psychology, sociology, and other disciplines to uncover the patterns of behavioral interactions. Fundamentally, organizational behavior focuses on exploring the behavioral manifestations of individuals and groups in organizational contexts and their causal impact on organizational outcomes, with the goal of maximizing organizational effectiveness ^[2].

1.2.2 Educational Organizational Behavior

Educational organizational behavior represents the extension and localization of organizational behavior theory within the field of education. Educational organizations, such as schools, are open social systems; educational organizational behavior aims to study the interactive relationships among structure, individuals, culture, and political dynamics within school systems. Unlike business organizations, educational organizational behavior possesses a distinct “educational” character. Its research scope encompasses not only teachers’ instructional behaviors and administrators’ managerial behaviors but also how these behaviors ultimately transmit to and influence student development.

1.3 Purpose of the Review

This paper aims to systematically trace the research trajectory of educational organizational behavior both domestically and internationally, based on a “micro-meso-macro” analytical framework. It summarizes the interactive mechanisms among teacher motivation, leadership, and school efficacy; analyzes the limitations of existing research in terms of methodology and the construction of localized theories; and provides literature support and guidance for the subsequent development of an educational management theoretical system with Chinese characteristics.

2.Theoretical Foundations and Evolution

2.1 The Foundations of Classical Organizational Behavior Theory

First, classical management theory laid a solid foundation for the study of organizational behavior. Taylor’s theory of scientific management proposed using standardized work processes to achieve maximum efficiency [3]; Fayol’s general management theory established the five major functions of planning, organizing, directing, coordinating, and controlling, thereby clarifying management processes; Weber’s theory of bureaucracy defined the hierarchical structure and system of rules within organizations. These theories formed the institutional foundation of modern school management and provided a structural framework for the operational mechanisms of school organizations [4].

As these theories are based on the “economic man” assumption, they have certain limitations. During the Hawthorne experiments, Mayo and his colleagues discovered that organizations are not merely aggregates of technology and structure, but rather social systems characterized by emotional interaction. This discovery signaled a shift in management research from focusing on overt institutional design to exploring deeper psychological mechanisms.

Based on this, organizational behavior does not negate the achievements of classical theories but rather focuses more on human factors within an organization. It shifts the research perspective from “institutional control” at the macro level to “psychology and behavior” at the micro level, placing greater emphasis on how individual motivation, group norms, and organizational culture ultimately impact organizational effectiveness [5].

2.2 Applications of Organizational Behavior in the Field of Education

While classical management theory establishes standardized “hard constraints” for school governance through institutional development, educational organizational behavior provides theoretical support at the psychological and behavioral levels for the effective implementation of these institutions by analyzing individual motivation, group interactions, and organizational culture.

3.Micro Level—Individual Behavior in Educational Organizations

3.1 Teacher Motivation and Incentives

As the core human capital of school organizations, teachers’ work motivation is a decisive variable in educational outcomes. Based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature, scholars have primarily drawn upon Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory, and Expectancy Theory to construct a localized

analytical framework for teacher incentives across three dimensions: the content of needs, motivational structures, and process mechanisms.

First, the fulfillment of hierarchical needs serves as the logical starting point for motivation. Building upon Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Dongfang (2021) developed a five-level framework for university faculty needs, effectively concretizing these five levels into physiological needs—such as food, clothing, shelter, and transportation; safety-related needs—such as job security and social security; social—emotional needs and a sense of belonging in one's career; respect—earning students' admiration and colleagues' respect; and self-actualization—achieving professional success. A teacher incentive system must be hierarchical to align with the primary needs of teachers at different stages of development.

Addressing the issue of the effectiveness of current incentive systems, Zhang Le (2024), drawing on the Two-Factor Theory, issued a warning: the performance-based systems in many schools are falling into a “hygiene trap.” Merely increasing compensation can only eliminate teachers' “dissatisfaction,” but it does not automatically translate into the “satisfaction” needed to pursue excellence.

Finally, the core mechanism for implementing incentives lies in optimizing the “effort–performance–reward” conversion chain. Even with an understanding of needs and motivational factors, whether teachers take action remains influenced by subjective factors. Lin Yanfang (2019), drawing on Expectancy-Value Theory, concluded that the evaluation guidelines prevalent in today's universities—which “prioritize research over teaching”—have lowered teachers' expectations regarding the returns on their teaching efforts. Most teachers feel that effort does not necessarily lead to teaching outcomes, and that teaching a course well does not necessarily yield corresponding rewards. This greatly undermines teachers' sense of teaching efficacy. To stimulate teachers' enthusiasm for teaching, one cannot rely solely on incentives; instead, the entire decision-making chain—from input to output to reward—must be simultaneously addressed.

3.2 Traits of Educational Administrators

3.2.1 Cognitive and Professional Competence

As the educational environment evolves, the professional competence of educational administrators has become a multi-layered, comprehensive structure. Zhao Ying (2022) summarizes that in teaching-related fields, educational administrators have moved beyond the scope of traditional instruction to encompass “smart teaching organizational skills” that integrate digital technology and “teaching innovation capabilities” that drive teaching reform; at the academic and resource development levels, this manifests as “research leadership” in guiding scientific research and “industry-education integration promotion” in bridging theory and practice. This indicates that strong professional competence requires administrators to simultaneously serve as educational innovators, academic leaders, resource integrators, and active participants in change.

3.2.2 Digital Leadership

With the advent of digital transformation in education, digital leadership has become a critical future-oriented competency for educational administrators. It requires them to transcend the framework of technological tool rationality and shoulder the responsibility of using smart education to foster students' character and build a community that integrates teaching and promotes efficient, collaborative education.

Yuan Zhenguo (2022) emphasizes at the strategic level that leadership in a digital context requires administrators to possess a forward-looking vision that transcends the rationality of technological tools, enabling them to lead organizations in making the leap from data-driven and networked stages to the intelligent stage. Qu Jiaojiao and Gao Chunmei (2022), on the other hand, break down this competency into actionable indicators from a practical perspective. Its core dimensions include data-driven decision-making, cross-disciplinary resource integration, the ability to build a digital culture, and innovation through human-machine collaboration. However, educational administrators currently tend to exhibit a cognitive bias that “prioritizes technological application over

the essence of education.”

A synthesis of these studies reveals that the core of digital leadership lies not in technology itself, but in a model that integrates “education and digitalization” to ultimately serve the comprehensive and personalized development of individuals and facilitate the construction of a collaborative educational community.

3.2.3 The Spirit of the Educator and Ethical Leadership

In educational management practice, the role of an administrator extends beyond that of a coordinator of administrative and operational matters; they are also a champion of educational values, a supporter of teacher development, and a shaper of school culture. The “spirit of the educator” currently being advocated emphasizes that educators should possess lofty educational ideals, a deep commitment to nurturing students, solid professional competence, and a continuous spirit of innovation.

The spirit of the educator constitutes the source of organizational cohesion and the highest value ideals for administrators. Liu Zhi (2024) identifies it as a concrete expression of professional ethics and a noble value system, analyzing it as key elements such as “having a sense of the greater good,” “setting an example through one’s words,” “enlightening minds and nurturing hearts,” and “finding joy in teaching and loving students.” From the perspective of organizational behavior, managers possessing these characteristics are not merely issuers of administrative directives but also experts in shaping organizational values. Zhou Fei et al. (2015), drawing on social learning theory, conducted empirical research and found that moral leadership—characterized by normative behavior and two-way communication—can significantly promote organizational management innovation. These findings all reflect the spirit of the educator in the field of educational organizational behavior.

4.The Middle Level—Research on Groups and Leadership Behavior

4.1 Conflict Management

In the field of educational organizational behavior, as academic team collaboration deepens and organizational structures undergo transformation, conflict management has become a key variable influencing organizational effectiveness.

The emergence of internal conflicts in universities stems from complex underlying factors. Liang Xiaoyu (2021) notes that conflicts within research teams primarily stem from communication barriers, differences among individuals, and competition for scarce resources. She further emphasized that conflict is not a static event but a dynamic process that evolves from a “latent phase” to an “active phase.” If managers can keenly detect signals during the latent phase and identify issues such as miscommunication within the team, they can intervene before the conflict escalates.

Conflict also serves as a “double-edged sword.” Based on classification theory, Zhou Kunshun (2021) categorizes conflict in university teams into task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict focuses on differences in academic perspectives and work content; it is considered “functional conflict” that can drive innovation. Relationship conflict, on the other hand, involves interpersonal emotional friction and is classified as “dysfunctional conflict.” In practice, both types can be resolved through transformation strategies. Research has also found that trust serves as a key moderating variable; a high level of mutual trust can keep conflict in a healthy state where the focus is on “the issue, not the person.”

Conflict management in educational organizations no longer treats “eliminating conflict” as the sole objective but rather aims to transform “destructive conflict” into “functional conflict,” thereby enhancing the school’s ability to adapt to change and foster innovation.

4.2 Communication Mechanisms

Within the relatively unique system of educational organizations, communication is a core measure for maintaining organizational morale, inspiring teacher engagement, and improving institutional performance. Most

existing research focuses on aspects such as the mechanisms of communication effectiveness and practical barriers.

Communication serves as a form of “soft governance.” Based on empirical research, Mei Hong et al. (2008) developed a model of “organizational communication effectiveness—motivation methods—institutional performance,” breaking down communication effectiveness into two dimensions: “communication satisfaction” and “communication openness.” High-quality communication shows a significant positive correlation with spiritual and emotional motivation, but a negative correlation with monetary incentives.

Zhang Yuxin (2025) pointed out that university leaders face the challenge of “diverse communication partners”: faculty members are concerned with academic freedom and resource allocation; administrative staff focus on whether policies are being implemented; and students are more concerned with their own growth and development. In addressing these issues, the key to improving communication quality lies in the leader’s communication skills. Based on leadership theory, leaders should focus on precise expression and context adaptation, active listening and constructive feedback, and the creation of an open organizational atmosphere.

5.Organizational Level—Organizational Systems and Organizational Environment

5.1 Organizational Culture

In the field of educational organizational management, organizational culture has long been regarded as a key implicit factor influencing the overall operational effectiveness of schools. Regarding the essence of organizational culture, Li Chengyan (2006), after reviewing relevant literature, proposed that organizational culture is not merely the outwardly visible values and behavioral norms; rather, its core consists of a series of “basic assumptions” formed by organizational members through long-term practice and tacitly accepted by them. Influenced by this theory, many scholars in China tend to understand school organizational culture through a binary framework, dividing it into explicit culture—embodied in material and institutional aspects—and implicit culture—centered on values, beliefs, and spiritual pursuits.

Drawing on Denison’s organizational culture model, Xu Zhiyong (2011) employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to conduct a systematic empirical analysis of the mechanisms by which culture operates in school settings. The findings revealed that school cultural identity and a people-centered cultural atmosphere exert a direct and significant positive effect on school efficacy; this influence does not need to be mediated through teacher satisfaction. The study also identified a phenomenon of “material exemption”: when teachers have a high level of identification with school culture, their intrinsic job satisfaction increases significantly, while their demands for external material benefits decrease.

5.2 Organizational Change and Development

In educational organizations, organizational change and development are never merely structural adjustments; rather, they involve the organization’s ability to flexibly adapt its state and make appropriate judgments in the face of a constantly changing external environment. Zhang Zhaoquan (2004) argues that in the past, school development largely relied on external indicators to evaluate operational effectiveness, whereas current school reforms place greater emphasis on refining internal mechanisms and redesigning development pathways. This also requires school administrators to continually seek organizational development approaches better suited to real-world contexts in order to address an increasingly complex educational ecosystem.

In today’s rapidly evolving social environment, the theory of the learning organization provides an important direction for school organizational development and offers practical insights for the overall transformation of educational organizations. Peter Senge has argued that for an organization to achieve long-term development, the key lies in breaking through existing learning limitations by establishing shared goals and transforming ingrained ways of thinking, thereby continuously enhancing its ability to adapt to the external environment. Yang Tianping (2004) explicitly stated that building a “learning school” is the optimal strategy for organizational change and development in schools. He argued that, as a typical knowledge-intensive organization, the essence of a school’s transformation

lies in the renewal of knowledge and the shift in mental models. Introducing Peter Senge's "learning organization" theory into school management not only breaks through the rigidity of school organizations but also transforms schools into organic entities with sustained adaptability and the capacity for self-evolution by establishing a shared vision and promoting team learning.

In summary, the evolutionary path of school organizational change has gradually shifted from early structural and functional adjustments toward a profound cultural reshaping aimed at building a "learning school."

6. Methodological Review

Most current theories in the field of educational organizational behavior draw heavily from the fields of business management and industrial psychology, such as Taylor's scientific management theory and Herzberg's two-factor theory. While these theories provide a basic framework for research, they do not fully account for the "loosely coupled" nature of school organizations or the unique characteristics of their educational orientation. Many existing studies have methodologically overlooked the specific variables inherent in educational contexts and have failed to effectively distinguish between the behavioral logic of businesses—which aim for "profit maximization"—and that of schools—which center on "educational quality." Consequently, certain ethical issues have not been adequately addressed.

7. Conclusions and Outlook

7.1 Research Conclusions

This paper systematically reviews the relevant literature on educational organizational behavior from an integrated "micro-meso-macro" perspective. At the micro level, research on individual behavior has shifted from simple material incentives to a deeper exploration of intrinsic motivation. Teacher incentive mechanisms must align with a hierarchical structure of needs and repair the psychological contract of "effort-performance-reward." The profile of educational administrators in the new era is undergoing a transformation, with digital leadership and the spirit of an educator emerging as key competencies. At the meso level, research on group interaction emphasizes a dynamic, transformative perspective; conflict is no longer viewed as a pathological condition to be eliminated. Studies on communication mechanisms have revealed the effectiveness of "soft governance," highlighting the need to establish open and precise channels for dialogue amid diverse stakeholder interests. At the macro level, organizational culture serves as the hidden engine driving school effectiveness, while the ultimate goal of organizational change is clearly defined as building a "learning organization" to enable schools to achieve continuous adaptation and intrinsic development.

7.2 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

7.2.1 Focus on "Digital" Development and Expand Research by Integrating Organizational Behavior

With the deep penetration of artificial intelligence and big data, school organizations are gradually transforming into complex systems that integrate "people, machines, and objects." Future research should shift its focus toward changes in organizational behavior within a digital environment, focusing on topics such as the impact of algorithmic management on teachers' professional autonomy, trust-building mechanisms in virtual teaching and research rooms, and ethical dilemmas in human-machine collaborative decision-making. At the same time, when constructing models of digital leadership, future research must address the dynamic balance between technology adoption and teachers' professional autonomy.

7.2.2 A Return to the Spirit of Educators and Emotional Care in Educational Organizational Behavior

Under the dual influence of performance-oriented approaches and technological rationality, how to help educational organizations rediscover humanistic care and emotional warmth has become a critical issue that must be addressed in the future development of education. Future research could focus more on how the spirit of the educator can be genuinely implemented and disseminated within school organizations, analyze how principals' moral

leadership translates into organizational behaviors characterized by teachers' proactive responsibility and active dedication, and explore pathways for building a people-centered campus culture. This would help alleviate teachers' occupational stress and burnout, and drive schools to shift from traditional management and control models toward an educational approach that genuinely focuses on the growth of individual lives.

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