

Lying Flat or Involution the Career Path Choices of Chinese Vocational Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 23 respondents to analyze the relationship between higher vocational teachers' needs and their career path choices. Thematic analysis of the interview data identified two key themes related to career paths: lying flat and involution. Faced with various incentive systems structurally present within the organization, individual teachers may become caught in involution due to needs such as "supporting their families" or "promotion". Conversely, some may choose "lying flat", opting for disengagement upon recognizing conflicts between work-life balance and the governance of institutional and relational dynamics.

Keywords: higher vocational teachers; career path; involution; lying flat; China

INTRODUCTION

Research on the career dynamics of teachers has typically focused on career stages interpreted as occurring parallel to adult development or life stages (De Vos et al., 2019). In this traditional perspective, teachers' career path choices are almost entirely linked to the preparatory phase of career development. In alignment with this development, academic literature has shifted its focus from choosing a single career (where a professional degree leads to one career) to adopting a broader and less fixed perspective on career choices, recognizing them as recurring issues throughout the life span. In the contemporary career context, it is widely acknowledged that there is no idealized career path characterized by a predictable series of transitions experienced by all teachers at specific stages of life.

The increasingly diverse nature of individuals demands a departure from fixed categories such as career peaks, career success, and retirement mindsets. Teachers may have entirely different thoughts and answers to career-related questions, such as: "What are my own standards for career success?" or "Faced with the same school environment, why do some teachers choose involution while others opt for lying flat?" (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015). Vocational teachers are the driving force behind the development of vocational education. Their responses to organizational career management not only reflect the reality of their self-management but also serve as a vital lens for examining institutional governance. Whether choosing "involution" or "lying flat", these behavioral choices fundamentally reveal their perceptions of the effectiveness of organizational management. To deeply explore issues such as management design, autonomy, and performance, it is necessary to study the stakeholders behind the systems, as in Li (2007). Therefore, objectively and accurately investigating the interaction between teachers and institutional mechanisms, as well as the underlying logic and reasons for their divergent choices, is essential for evaluating whether career management in vocational institutions has achieved its intended goals. This investigation is also critical for understanding the phenomena of "involution" and "lying flat" among teachers and is a practical necessity for comprehensively improving career management in vocational institutions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Need and Career Path

Maslow classified human needs into five levels, ranging from lower to higher: physiological needs, safety needs,

love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). Herzberg emphasized the dual nature of human needs: innate drives and individual characteristics (Brockman, 1971). The first type of need arises from human animal instincts, driven by the inherent motivation to overcome environmental challenges. The second type of need is unique to individuals, shaped by their distinct characteristics, and influences the stimuli for achievement and growth. This duality forms the foundation of the two-factor theory. In corporate or organizational contexts, career path typically refers to the progression of positions or roles an employee holds throughout their lifetime, as noted by Walker (1980). This concept encompasses two primary aspects: time and direction (Adamson et al., 1998; Inkson et al., 2007). It reflects the various changes in positions and locations throughout a teacher's professional career.

In recent years, research on the career path of higher education teachers has been increasing, with a greater focus on the career path choices of newly appointed higher education teachers and their early career adaptation. However, there has been limited research on the content and conceptual definition of vocational teachers' career path. Baldwin and Blackburn described the career development of higher education teachers as the professional growth of individuals in research, teaching, or administrative capacities within higher education institutions (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981). In summary, career path has largely been, and will continue to be, a personal phenomenon. However, they require interaction between individuals and employers, with employers playing a significant role in ensuring the sustainability of an individual's career. This study views career paths as a combination of one's professional life and career development.

Involution and Lying Flat

As a sociological term, involution originates from the academic concept of "involutional development", which itself is derived from the Latin term "involutum". The earliest scholarly exploration of involution can be traced back to 1780, when Immanuel Kant proposed the "involution theory" in his study of the evolutionary process of human society (Kant, 2024). Later, the term gained scholarly attention through the work of Weisen, who used it to examine issues related to rural and agricultural development (Weisen, 2006). In this context, it primarily referred to "intensive labor input per unit of land and diminishing marginal returns per unit of labor". However, based on the academic evolution of the term in various studies, it can be understood as characterizing "a phenomenon of stagnation, where there is quantitative growth without substantive development" (Zhao, 2021). Subsequently, the term "involution" was widely adopted in the study of politics, economics, culture, education, and other social domains to describe individual work investment. Its strong metaphorical resonance and emotional appeal have propelled it into popular usage, particularly among professionals across various industries, as a term to encapsulate their work conditions. It is used to describe a phenomenon where "competitors strive to put in more effort to vie for scarce resources, thereby leading to a decline in the 'effort-to-reward ratio' for individuals". It is also employed to depict "growth without development or states of meaningless consumption" (Zhang & Huang, 2022). The phenomenon of "involution" is pervasive across societal domains. Under the pressures induced by performance-based pay, professional title evaluations, and other incentive systems, teachers increasingly experience "involution", which has become a widely discussed topic. In this context, it refers to the process whereby teachers, either actively or passively, engage in an endless competitive struggle with others for scarce resources to achieve specific goals. This manifests in concrete mental or behavioral patterns.

"Lying Flat" has emerged as a new buzzword that resonates with the concept of "involution". In lexicographical terms, "lying" denotes reclining, while "flat" signifies "calmness or non-agitation". Literally, "lying flat" describes the act of lying down calmly. However, its popularity stems from its vivid portrayal of an individual mindset and behavioral strategy in response to external pressures. It is used to describe a low-desire mindset or behavioral choice, where individuals or groups reduce their efforts, stop striving, and adopt a resigned attitude when faced with overwhelming life pressures and a lack of avenues for resistance (Chen & Cao, 2021). In this sense, "lying flat" among teachers refers to a work attitude or behavioral choice, either voluntary or involuntary, characterized by indifference and acceptance in the face of intense competitive environments or organizational constraints. This article employs the cross-disciplinary buzzwords "involution" and "lying flat" not to verify whether teachers' use of these terms exceeds their original scope of definition but to explore what these terms, as they gain traction among vocational teachers, reveal about the value systems and institutional factors influencing their behavioral choices.

Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Motivation-hygiene Theory

There are numerous theoretical schools in academia regarding the analysis of organizational systems and individual behavior, each with its distinct theoretical framework, analytical approaches, and perspectives. This study primarily employs Hierarchy of Needs Theory and Motivation-hygiene Theory to analyze the deeper causes behind the phenomena of “involution” or “lying flat” among teachers. The Hierarchy of Needs Theory, introduced by Abraham Maslow in 1943, posits that human motivation is driven by the desire to achieve or maintain various conditions essential for basic satisfaction, as well as more intellectual desires (Maslow, 1943). The theory outlines five types of needs arranged in a hierarchy from low to high: Physiological Needs, Safety Needs, Belongingness and Love Needs, Esteem Needs, and Self-actualization Needs (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). The Motivation-Hygiene Theory, also known as the Two-Factor Theory, was developed by Frederick Herzberg in 1959 (Herzberg, 1966). The foundation of the Motivation-Hygiene (M-H) theory lies in the categorization of factors into motivators (satisfiers) and hygiene (dissatisfiers) factors. According to Herzberg, motivators are linked to the content of the job, focusing on factors such as performance, job status, responsibility, recognition, and growth that contribute to the intrinsic fulfillment of work. On the other hand, hygiene factors are associated with the job’s context, encompassing aspects like salary, working conditions, and relationships with management and colleagues that affect the extrinsic aspects of the job and may lead to dissatisfaction. The reviewed theories share foundational assumptions about human Behaviour. Vocational teachers, as multidimensional individuals with diverse needs, tend to weigh the pros and cons when faced with the institutional pressures of organizational management, ultimately making career path choices that reflect either “intensification” or “passive disengagement”. Teachers in vocational colleges, being individuals with diversified needs, respond to the institutional pull of organizational management by weighing costs and benefits and rationally choosing either to engage in “involution” or to “lie flat”.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using vocational

Participants

The target population of this study consists of teachers from public higher vocational colleges in Hebei Province, China. According to statistical data provided by the Ministry of Education of China in 2023, there are 23,185 full-time teachers working in 48 schools in Hebei Province. To ensure the representativeness of the research findings among similar institutions, this study employed purposive sampling. Based on a comprehensive consideration of background variables such as gender, age, professional title, and position, a total of 23 teachers, deemed representative of the group, were selected from the 23,185 higher vocational teachers in Hebei Province, as shown in Table 1.

Table I Interviewee’s Background Information

No.	Code	Gender	Age	Professional Title
1	T1	Male	38	Lecture
2	T2	Female	37	Lecture
3	T3	Female	40	Lecture
4	T4	Male	54	Professor
5	T5	Female	38	Associate Professor
6	T6	Male	45	Lecture
7	T7	Male	31	Assistant Instructor

8	T8	Female	42	Associate Professor
9	T9	Male	36	Lecture
10	T10	Male	51	Professor
11	T11	Female	48	Lecture
12	T12	Male	45	Professor
13	T13	Female	46	Associate Professor
14	T14	Female	29	Assistant Instructor
15	T15	Male	42	Associate Professor
16	T16	Male	46	Associate Professor
17	T17	Female	37	Lecture
18	T18	Male	56	Associate Professor
19	T19	Male	48	Associate Professor
20	T20	Female	32	Lecture
21	T21	Male	45	Assistant Instructor
22	T22	Female	38	Associate Professor
23	T23	Male	32	Lecture

These teachers participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data saturation was deemed to occur when no new insights or understanding emerged from additional data collection. Once saturation was achieved, the interview data were coded, refined, summarized, and analyzed.

Instrument and Procedures

The researchers developed an interview guide for the semi-structured interviews, focusing on the interaction between teachers’ needs and their career path choices. The interview guide was divided into two parts: the first part aimed to explore the composition of teachers’ needs, while the second part sought to examine the relationship between teachers’ needs and their career paths. Each interview lasted a minimum of 30 minutes to 1 hour. The audio information provided by participants was analyzed and interpreted thematically. This qualitative study was conducted over a period of more than a month, from March 1 to April 10, 2024. The entire process proceeded smoothly, yielding highly valuable firsthand data and achieving excellent results.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

As a structural entity, vocational college organizational management provides teachers with clear and well-defined “goals to strive for” and behavioral rules for achieving those goals. However, whether teachers choose their career path according to the prescribed behavioral rules of organizational management is influenced by their individual “self-need”. Natural differences among teachers in terms of needs result in varied “behavioral tendency” of the same organizational field and management framework. Consequently, these differences lead to diverse behavioral choices in their actual career paths.

Involution Driven by Teacher's Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory posits that physiological needs form the foundation, encompassing basic survival necessities. Once these are met, the focus shifts to safety needs, such as a secure work environment, income stability, and welfare benefits. Following this are social needs, which include a sense of belonging, teamwork, and friendship. Next come esteem needs, involving self-respect, achievement, recognition, and independence. Ultimately, self-actualization represents the desire for personal growth and the pursuit of one's potential (Maslow, 1943). Essentially, the various organizational management systems in higher vocational colleges are forms of content-based motivation. These systems primarily use institutionalized approaches to cleverly transform "organizational goals" into tangible elements such as honors, awards, project topics, positions, and professional titles, which then serve as key criteria for the allocation of organizational resources. Individual teachers must engage in the competitive arenas aligned with these goals to meet their own needs for survival and development within the organization and obtain the corresponding organizational resources.

Involution for the Sake of Remuneration: T23 lamented helplessly:

It's incredibly difficult to get a promotion. If I don't work overtime and take on extra projects or publish a few more papers, and I still fail to be promoted to associate professor next year, I'll lose the benefits I currently enjoy as an associate professor. My salary is already low, and if it drops further, how will I make ends meet? Constantly busy with research. Some teachers know they won't secure high-level projects or publish top-tier papers, but they still push themselves to apply for projects and write papers. Why? Because as long as they have papers and projects, they can earn corresponding research rewards at the end of the year. In fact, teachers are very concerned about the material incentives in the reward system that force them into 'workplace competition' just to 'support their families'.

- T8, a director in a functional department, shared his perspective:
- Material incentives are a significant driver for teachers to engage in research.
- Similarly, Guorui Fan pointed out in his study on teachers' living conditions:

During societal transformation, people's worship of material wealth and money will always surpass their reverence for knowledge exploration and the dignity of the teaching profession (Li & Fan, 2016). This indicates that although the teaching profession has been glorified and sanctified by societal acclaim, teachers are not abstract beings detached from worldly concerns. They are individuals who need food, clothing, shelter, and transportation ordinary people grounded in practical realities. Addressing livelihood issues and improving quality of life are not only the primary priorities of teachers' professional lives but also the foundational assumptions underlying vocational education administrators' belief that material incentives can influence teachers' commitment to their work. To solidify the material foundation necessary for "supporting a family", teachers who cannot access sufficient resources through their families or external opportunities must rely on the specific resource allocation rules established by incentive systems within vocational education institutions. This often forces them, either actively or passively, to engage in internal competition for organizational recognition. Even those teachers who are not compelled by livelihood pressures to participate in such competition often weigh the material rewards hidden behind symbolic achievements as key factors in deciding whether to engage. As a result, it is evident in practice that teachers tend to focus far more on material incentives such as salaries and bonuses than on spiritual incentives like honors and commendations.

Involution for the Sake of Promotion: T9 pointed:

If you don't hold a senior title, there are some projects and awards you can't even qualify to apply for—so what's the point of talking about development? As long as I keep working hard and make myself more qualified than the other teachers in the department, I'll eventually be promoted to full professor. No matter how tough or exhausting it is, it's worth it for this goal. Teachers like T9, who represent professional educators, often set "academic promotion" as their career goal. To achieve this, they become deeply involved in activities such as pursuing prestigious titles, research projects, academic publications, and research awards. Faced with the scarcity and competitiveness of resources, they devote more time and energy than their peers, adhering to the standards established by various incentive systems. Over time, this cumulative effort creates a comparative competitive

advantage in “promotion”, making such rational choices a natural strategy for individual teachers to minimize risks.

T7 said:

The school’s various benefits are directly tied to job ranks. I chose an administrative role, so if I want to become a section chief or department director as soon as possible, I have to work harder and contribute more than others. Otherwise, how can I have any chance for development?

T7’s statement highlights that, unlike professional teachers, administrative staff primarily engaged in management and services often set “administrative promotion” as their career development goal. They participate in activities such as job assignments, promotions, and performance evaluations within the hierarchical structure of bureaucracy.

As noted,

The internal power structure of universities is divided vertically into several levels, while each level is further subdivided into multiple functional departments horizontally, forming an interwoven network of power relations (Zhan & Yan, 2011). Each node within this network represents a distinct achievement in “promotion”. Therefore, for teachers pursuing administrative promotion as their career goal, they must adhere to the incentive systems and evaluation standards established for cadre selection and administrative promotions. Only by dedicating more time, effort, and intellect within this organizational framework can they achieve their desired career objectives in the competitive arena with their peers.

T12 remarked:

Whether you’re a professional teacher or an administrative staff member, everyone needs to have some career aspirations. If you have no goals and drift through life aimlessly, it’s not only meaningless but also invites contempt from others.”

Elton Mayo similarly stated:

Money can only satisfy part of an employee’s needs; it cannot fulfill their strong desires for social interaction, recognition, and belonging to a social group (Mayo, 2004). Human life is a dynamic process of both maintaining existence and continually renewing, enriching, and expanding its meaning. As a profession, teaching not only fulfills the basic need of “making a living” but also addresses an individual’s desire to achieve “value ideals”. However, the scarcity of resources in the field and the competitive nature of their distribution fundamentally determines that satisfying any of these needs requires vocational teachers to make rational choices. These choices must align with the resource constraints of the field, the management systems of vocational education organizations, and their personal circumstances.

Passive lying flat after gaining insight into reality

For individual teachers, when the time, effort, and other costs they invest in work to meet self-driven needs, such as “supporting a family” or “promotion”, fail to achieve their expected goals, they begin to assess and evaluate the reasons behind the imbalance between “effort and reward”. Based on this evaluation, they rationally adjust or optimize their behavioral strategies. If workplace competition represents a rational choice by vocational education teachers to cope with the scarcity and competitive allocation of resources within the field, then workplace disengagement (or “lying flat”) is another rational decision they make after gaining insight into the realistic dynamics of field activities.

Lying flat after gaining insight into the work-life conflict: T3 stated:

I really enjoy my field and want to do meaningful academic work, but my child is about to transition from elementary to middle school. At this critical stage, I have to spend more time with her, so non-essential work will have to take a back seat for now.

T15 remarked:

Previously, I worked as a secretary, often working overtime and staying up late to draft documents. I had no time to exercise. Although I was promoted to deputy director, I ended up with a host of health problems. Looking back, I realize that overworking isn't worth it; I must prioritize my health. The statements from T3 and T15 illustrate that work and life constitute the entirety of human activities. However, the differing demands they place on individual roles, time, energy, and behavior often generate varying levels of stress for teachers. These conflicting demands can create tension or conflict between "work" and "life" as the stress is transmitted. Deciding how to address these conflicts becomes a rational choice for teachers within the given context. Although the management of vocational education organizations has become increasingly refined, technical, and metric-driven, these measures largely operate under a "do this to achieve that" logic, encouraging or discouraging teacher behaviors through incentives or sanctions. Yet, between the lower limit of sanctions and the upper limit of incentives lies a broad institutional space. Within this space, teachers facing pressures from "work-life" conflicts have the autonomy and agency to make rational choices. In this new era, where the pursuit of a better life has become a shared aspiration among educators, some teachers have begun to adopt a perspective of "enlightened understanding". They prioritize "life-oriented goals", such as child companionship, physical and mental health, and personal comfort and happiness, over "career-oriented goals", such as promotions, leadership positions, or awards. As a result, "lying flat" has seemingly become a routine approach to their roles, reflecting a shift in their behavioral priorities and decision-making.

Lying flat after realizing the dynamics of institution-relationship governance: T16 pointed:

I work hard on research and believed that as long as my proposal was well-written, it would get approved. But I later realized that even if your proposal is excellent, you also need to understand the hidden rules. Take provincial-level teaching reform projects as an example. The province allocates quotas to schools, but when the school selects projects, they don't base it on quality. Instead, they weigh various relationships. What's worse is that sometimes, even before teachers submit their proposals, all the quotas have already been distributed. So why should ordinary teachers bother to put in so much effort?

T13 remarked:

Although many school activities are governed by institutional rules, 'unspoken agreements' like personal connections are very common. For example, in project evaluations, promotion decisions, and leadership appointments, it's easy to see the underlying intricacies at play. These phenomena highlight that while vocational education organizational management, as a contractual framework between administrators and teachers, is supposed to provide an open, fair, and impartial platform for teachers to access resources for "making a living" or "career promotion", the integration of factors like "connections" and "favoritism" undermines this intent. As a result, these incentive systems are often circumvented or distorted in practice, diminishing their functionality and value. The organizational management of vocational colleges is ultimately established and implemented by people. In Chinese society, which is characterized as a society of personal connections and a relationship-driven society, factors like relationships and personal favors often influence the effectiveness of organizational management in vocational education through subtle and invisible means within the compartmentalized institutional framework. This influence not only disrupts teachers' career path choices but also significantly undermines their trust in organizational management. Teachers who were once ambitious and worked tirelessly toward various professional goals may adopt a "disillusioned" mindset when addressing their career development. Particularly, when they feel powerless to participate in the rules of the game within the institution-relationship framework, lowering expectations and choosing to lie flat becomes the most practical and rational choice.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers are the core factor influencing, and even determining, the overall development of schools. Maximizing and sustaining teachers' work enthusiasm through targeted measures is the fundamental pursuit of vocational education organizational management. This study, using qualitative research, found that vocational college organizational management, which relies on the institutional attraction of allocating scarce resources, does play

a macro-level role in stimulating, sustaining, and mobilizing teachers' work enthusiasm. Most teachers, as professionals, are willing to achieve their "career goals" by following the career path provided by organizational management. However, the lack of transparency, fairness, and justice in the implementation of organizational management often forces some teachers to make the rational choice of "escaping the organizational field". Others, unwilling to abandon their professional aspirations or constrained by reality, can only strive for corresponding benefits within the defined organizational field by investing more effort in their work, adhering to or leveraging institutional rules as their rational choice.

At the micro-level, when faced with carefully designed management systems, teachers' choices between competition (referred to as "involution") and disengagement (referred to as "lying flat") stem not only from individual differences but also from organizational mismanagement that affects teachers' perception, trust, and adherence to institutional norms. When teachers feel powerless or hopeless within the incentive field, their rational responses to pressure lead them to make varied choices between involution and lying flat. In vocational colleges, teachers who opt for lying flat or involution may appear to act rationally as individuals. However, from the perspective of organizational management, those engaged in "constant competition" risk falling into a self-centered competitive environment, leading to inefficient repetition or counterproductive rivalry over scarce resources. On the other hand, lying flat represents a rejection of the management mechanisms, not as a means to adopt alternative strategies beneficial to the school but as an escape or inaction within the institutional space.

Teachers often navigate these choices based on their personal needs, treating organizational management as a discretionary framework. This discretionary space, while deviating from the intended purpose of vocational education organizational management, reduces its effectiveness but simultaneously provides teachers with broader opportunities to pursue their career paths, making the teaching profession attractive to some. When evaluating vocational education organizational management, the primary concern should not be whether teachers' choices of involution or lying flat are right or wrong but rather to listen to their genuine thoughts. By understanding which groups are involved in competition, what they are competing for, and why, schools can refine and modernize their organizational management systems to align better with institutional development needs. This ensures that every teacher finds motivation within the organizational field and creates a foundation for various teacher groups to engage meaningfully in their professional lives.

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