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Navigating the Storm: Teacher Agency and Defensive Practice in China's Educational Public Opinion Arena

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Abstract: This study investigates how educational public opinion (EPO) shapes teachers' professional practices in China. Through thematic analysis of interviews with nine junior high school teachers in Guangzhou, we identify two emergent typologies of practice under EPO pressure: Defensive Practice, characterized by risk aversion, emotional restraint, and the upward shifting of decision-making; and Informed Practice, marked by professional growth, strategic relationship-building, and systematic refinement of action. The formation of these divergent paths is explained by an interactive framework where external pressures are filtered through two critical mediators: institutional feedback (supportive vs. defensive) and teacher reflection depth (technical vs. critical). The findings reveal that EPO's impact is dialectical, capable of triggering either a constrictive defensive retreat or a transformative process leading to refined educational wisdom. Cultivating the latter requires supportive institutional structures, rational public discourse, and teacher education that fosters critical "public opinion literacy" and strategic agency.

Keywords: educational public opinion; teacher professional practice; defensive practice; informed practice; emotional labor; professional agency

1. Introduction

In the contemporary educational landscape, characterized by deep mediatization and social scrutiny, incidents of educational public opinion (EPO) have become a recurring and influential backdrop to teachers' work. Whether concerning student safety, teacher-student conflicts, or controversies over curriculum content, once amplified, these incidents exert a profound impact on the involved teachers and the broader teaching community. Existing scholarship has largely focused on the coping strategies for managing EPO or the stress it imposes on teachers, often framing them as passive recipients of pressure. However, a more fundamental question remains underexplored: How does EPO, as a structural force, participate in and reshape the underlying logic of teachers' everyday professional practices? This study aims to unveil this "black box", investigating how teachers adapt, reflect, and reconstruct their educational practices within the tension-filled field shaped by EPO.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Teachers' Professional Practice: A Multi-Dimensional Concept

Teachers' professional practice encompasses the totality of actions, interactions, and reflections undertaken by teachers in their workplaces to fulfill educational tasks and achieve pedagogical goals. It is an agentic, situated, and social activity (Kemmis et al., 2014; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), deeply informed by practical, often



tacit, knowledge (Checkoway, B., & Schön, D.A., 1985; Huang & Ma, 2022). This study deconstructs this complex practice into three interrelated dimensions:

- (a) **Cognition and Professional Identity:** This refers to teachers' understanding and construction of their professional roles, responsibilities, and educational philosophies—the “internal script” guiding their actions, which is central to the construction of their professional identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). It answers the question, “Who am I as a teacher?”
- (b) **Emotion and Relationships:** This dimension involves teachers' emotional experiences, management, and expression during interactions with students, parents, and colleagues. It constitutes a form of intensive “emotional labor” (Hochschild, 1983; Yin, 2011), requiring the management of personal feelings to establish and maintain professional relationships.
- (c) **Action and Decision-Making:** This pertains to the specific strategies, methods, and choices teachers make in instructional design, classroom management, and student assessment. It directly reflects teachers' “professional agency”—their capacity to make judgments and act within structural constraints (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

This three-dimensional framework provides an operational lens through which to examine how external forces like EPO influence teacher behavior.

2.2. Public Accountability and Teacher Resilience: Theoretical Lenses on EPO

While EPO is a practical concern, its theoretical significance for teacher development lies in its function as a high-risk, high-uncertainty context for practice.

- (a) **EPO as Social Accountability:** EPO can be viewed as an intense, yet ambiguous, form of social accountability, distinct from professional or performance-based accountability within the education system. It is a media-and-public-driven, often emotionally charged, “court of public opinion”. This phenomenon is embedded within a broader culture of anxiety and performative accountability in contemporary educational governance (Wilkins, 2015), which intensifies the perceived stakes of public scrutiny. Research on formal accountability systems shows that high-stakes pressure can lead to conservative teaching practices, such as “teaching to the test” (Booher-Jennings, 2005). In the context of EPO, this logic morphs into “teaching for safety”, where teachers avoid innovative activities (e.g., a physical education teacher canceling a soccer tackling drill) to mitigate perceived risks (Yan et al., 2023). This study addresses the gap in understanding how this diffuse, unpredictable social accountability shapes teacher practice in more nuanced ways.
- (b) **Teacher Resilience in the EPO Context:** Teacher resilience theory explores how teachers maintain well-being and sustain their practice amidst adversity (Mansfield et al., 2012). Traditionally focused on individual traits or school-based support, this study applies the lens of resilience to the external, societal shock of EPO. It moves beyond mere “survival” strategies (defensive practice) to explore “thriving” strategies (informed practice), aligning with the shift towards conceptualizing resilience as positive adaptation and growth (Li et al., 2017). Thus, “informed practice” represents a form of high-level professional resilience specific to the pressures of public opinion.

2.3. Positioning and Theoretical Contribution of This Study

In summary, existing literature, from perspectives such as accountability pressure, risk management, and social media scrutiny, has enhanced our understanding of the constraints on teacher practice. However, these perspectives often treat public opinion as an external, homogenized pressure source, focusing on analyzing its inhibitory consequences (e.g., self-censorship, de-skilling), while relatively neglecting the differentiated agentic responses of teachers and the internal mechanisms through which public opinion operates as a diffuse form of ‘social accountability’.

This study aims to integrate and advance these discussions. We argue that in China's highly mediated society, educational public opinion has evolved into a unique and powerful situational force. It continuously and deeply intervenes in teachers' daily professional lives through a composite mechanism of “risk alertness-public scrutiny-institutional feedback.” This study not only seeks to reveal how this mechanism operates but, more crucially, it specifically focuses on the divergent pathways of teacher agency within this mechanism—that is, why and how, under similar pressures, two distinctly different adaptive strategies, “Defensive Practice” and “Informed Practice”, emerge. By focusing on the complete chain of teachers' meaning-making, emotional adjustment, and strategic action in response to public opinion pressure, this study aims to move beyond the simplified “pressure-

response” model, offering a more dynamic and explanatory analytical framework for understanding the transformation of teacher professional practice in the digital age.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of how educational public opinion in China shapes teachers’ daily professional practices. Specifically, we utilized thematic analysis to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data, thereby understanding teachers’ shared experiences, behaviors, and values (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.1. Participants and Purposeful Sampling

To deeply explore teachers’ agentic practices under the pressure of public opinion, this study adopted a purposeful sampling strategy, selecting nine junior high school teachers in Guangzhou, a first-tier city in China, as participants. The sampling decisions were based on three key considerations: regional representativeness, educational stage focus, and sample heterogeneity.

First, for regional representativeness, Guangzhou was chosen because as a Chinese megacity and a frontier of educational reform, its highly developed digital media ecosystem and active public opinion arena make the pressures faced by teachers and their responses more typical and cutting-edge.

Second, focusing on the junior high school stage is crucial because it is a critical period in compulsory education where students are in adolescence. Incidents such as home-school conflicts and teacher-student disputes are more likely to attract social attention, making it a “sensitive field” for observing the impact of educational public opinion.

Third, to ensure sample heterogeneity, we intentionally included variations in subject background (Chinese, Mathematics, English, Physical Education, Psychology), years of teaching experience (ranging from 3 to over 20 years), and school type (public and private). This maximum variation sampling strategy aimed to ensure that the findings reflect the complex experiences of teachers in different contexts, rather than being specific to a single group. Basic information of the participants is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Information of Research Participants (Pseudonyms).

| Pseudonym | Gender | Years of Teaching | Subject | School Type | Code |
|---------------|--------|-------------------|-------------|---------------------|---------|
| Teacher Hu | Male | 15 years | P.E. | Public Junior High | jsyq001 |
| Teacher Wang | Female | 8 years | English | Public Junior High | jsyq002 |
| Teacher Chen | Female | 3 years | Chinese | Private Junior High | jsyq003 |
| Teacher Shen | Female | 10 years | Psychology | Public Junior High | jsyq004 |
| Teacher Zou | Female | 20 years | Mathematics | Public Junior High | jsyq005 |
| Teacher Lin | Female | 12 years | English | Public Junior High | jsyq006 |
| Teacher Zhang | Male | 7 years | Chinese | Private Junior High | jsyq007 |
| Teacher Liu | Female | 5 years | Mathematics | Public Junior High | jsyq008 |
| Teacher Zhao | Female | 18 years | Chinese | Public Junior High | jsyq009 |

3.2. Data Collection and Interview Process

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview protocol was designed around the three core dimensions of cognition, emotion, and action when teachers face or anticipate facing pressure from educational public opinion, aiming to guide teachers to elaborate on specific incidents, internal experiences, and coping strategies.

All interviews were conducted between September and November 2023, using a combination of online and offline formats for participants’ convenience. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 min. After obtaining explicit informed consent from the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded in full and subsequently transcribed verbatim into Chinese text, forming a raw database of over 120,000 words for subsequent analysis. The correspondence between interview questions and the core analytical dimensions is shown in the Table 2 below:

Table 2. Correspondence between Interview Questions and Core Analytical Dimensions.

| Analytical Dimension | Exemplary Core Interview Questions | Design Purpose |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Cognition & Attribution | “When you think of ‘public opinion pressure,’ what comes to mind first?” “How do you view the respective responsibilities of teachers, parents, and schools in public opinion incidents?” | To probe teachers’ perception of public opinion risks, their attribution styles, and their understanding of professional roles. |
| Emotion & Experience | “What were your main emotional feelings when experiencing (or worrying about) such an incident?” “How has this pressure affected your daily work state?” | To capture teachers’ immediate emotional reactions and long-term affective experiences under pressure. |
| Action & Strategy | “What specific actions did you take at that time?” “What changes have you made in your daily teaching to prevent or deal with similar situations?” | To collect teachers’ specific coping behaviors, strategic adjustments, and decision-making logic. |

3.3. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis Procedures

We followed the six-phase framework for thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to systematically analyze the transcribed texts:

Phase 1: Familiarizing with the data: Repeatedly reading all interview transcripts and listening to recordings, noting initial ideas during immersion.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes: Using NVivo 12 software, conducting line-by-line coding of meaningful content in the text to generate a large number of initial codes (e.g., “avoiding risky vocabulary”, “emotional isolation”, “establishing an evidence trail”).

Phase 3: Searching for themes: Clustering related codes to attempt to form potential themes. For example, clustering codes like “abandoning risky teaching content”, “simplifying classroom interaction”, and “avoiding in-depth communication with parents” preliminarily formed the candidate theme “Self-limitation in Teaching Practice”.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes: Checking the fit between candidate themes, codes, and the entire dataset, merging, splitting, or adjusting them. This phase established the two core themes of “Defensive Practice” and “Informed Practice” and clarified their respective sub-themes across the dimensions of cognition, emotion, and action.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes: Precisely defining the connotation and boundaries of each theme, assigning analytically meaningful names (e.g., “Strategic Documentation: From Responsibility Evasion to Systematic Management”), and writing detailed analytical summaries.

Phase 6: Producing the report: Selecting the most compelling and representative raw excerpts, integrating the analysis results into the Results and Discussion sections of this paper, ensuring the analytical narrative closely revolves around the research questions.

3.4. Research Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To enhance the rigor of the study, we adopted the following strategies:

- (a) Peer debriefing: Regularly discussing codes and themes with another colleague familiar with qualitative research during the research process to challenge and reflect on analytical thinking.
- (b) Member checking: Providing preliminary analysis results to some participants to verify whether the interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings.

This study strictly adhered to academic ethical norms. Before the interviews began, we provided all participants with detailed explanations of the research purpose, data use, confidentiality clauses, and the principle of voluntary participation, and obtained their written informed consent. All participants’ personal information was anonymized, and pseudonyms are used throughout the report. The interview recordings and transcripts, after de-identification, were used solely for this academic research and stored on encrypted devices. The researchers declare no conflicts of interest.

4. Findings: The Dual Trajectories of Teacher Practice and Evidence Matrix

Data analysis reveals that Educational Public Opinion (EPO), as a powerful situational factor, profoundly intervenes in and reshapes teachers’ professional practice. This influence is not monolithic but triggers significantly divergent, even oppositional, adaptive strategies across the three core dimensions of cognition, emotion, and action, systematically leading to a bifurcation into “Defensive Practice” and “Informed Practice.” To clearly present the concrete manifestations and rich evidence of these two typologies, this study constructs the

following evidence matrices (Tables 3 and 4). The tables integrate the dimensional characteristics extracted from the interview data, representative raw statements, and brief interpretations, aiming to provide a multidimensional display of the divergent pathways of teacher agency.

Table 3. Evidence Matrix for Defensive Practice: Characteristics, Excerpts, and Interpretation.

| Practice Dimension | Core Characteristics | Representative Raw Excerpts (Teacher/Source) | Interpretation |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|
| Cognition & Identity | Responsibility Aversion & Role Contraction | “In the long run, everyone just seeks a peaceful coexistence... the real losers are the students. But there’s no other way. In the current environment, self-preservation is the top priority for teachers.” (Mr. Zou, jsyq005) | Redefines the professional identity from an “educator” to a “blame-avoider.” Professional ideals are superseded by a survival logic of “avoiding trouble.” |
| | Lowered Standards for a “Good Teacher” | “I [used to think] a good teacher should dare to discipline... Now I feel that successfully guiding a cohort through without major incidents and without parents complaining is an achievement.” (Ms. Wang, jsyq002) | The benchmark for a “good teacher” shifts from positive educational construction to a negative assessment based on risk avoidance. |
| Emotion & Relationships | Emotional Restraint & Relational Distancing | “[Now] I feel there’s a barrier between me and the students... I don’t dare to joke around like before, afraid that my casual remarks might be misinterpreted. I always wear a stern face, emphasizing safety first.” (Mr. Hu, jsyq001) | Strategic emotional restraint for self-protection leads to instrumental and distant teacher-student relationships, sacrificing emotional connection. |
| | Active Closure of Communication Channels | “After that incident [parent complaint], I muted the parent chat group notifications... I don’t ignore it completely, but I check it selectively, only when I’m mentally prepared. I avoid private communication if possible.” (Ms. Lin, jsyq006) | Views home-school communication as a source of stress rather than a channel for collaboration, adopting an “emotional isolation” strategy for self-preservation. |
| Action & Decision-Making | Cancellation & Simplification of Teaching Activities | “Our school offers soccer. I originally wanted to teach the proper ‘sliding tackle’ technique... I ended up canceling it. Because the term ‘sliding tackle’ alone can easily make parents associate it with ‘danger’ and ‘violence’.” (Mr. Hu, jsyq001) | Proactively abandons educationally valuable but perceived “sensitive” content due to fear of potential public opinion risks, representing typical “self-censorship.” |
| | Upward Shifting & Dependence on Decision-Making | “When encountering potentially controversial matters, like organizing off-campus activities or adjusting homework load, even if I have my own ideas, I must file a report and wait for the leadership’s final decision. This way, the responsibility doesn’t fall entirely on me.” (Mr. Zhang, jsyq007) | Voluntarily relinquishes professional autonomy, transferring decision-making responsibility upward, manifesting a process of “disempowerment” in defensive practice. |

Table 4. Evidence Matrix for Informed Practice: Characteristics, Excerpts, and Interpretation.

| Practice Dimension | Core Characteristics | Representative Raw Excerpts (Teacher/Source) | Interpretation |
|--------------------------|--|---|--|
| Cognition & Identity | Integrative Cognitive Reframing & Role Expansion | “Now I think a good teacher not only teaches students but sometimes also needs to ‘teach’ parents... to teach them how to understand their adolescent children and how to communicate effectively.” (Ms. Chen, jsyq003) | Transforms external pressure into an opportunity for deepening professional understanding, actively incorporating parents into the educational community, thereby expanding the boundaries of the professional role. |
| | Critical Reflection & Identity Evolution | “I used to be a ‘preachy’ persuader... Now I believe professionalism lies in ‘listening’ and ‘facilitation’, not ‘indoctrination’.” (Ms. Shen, jsyq004) | Engages in profound critique of one’s traditional authoritative role, achieving an identity reconstruction from a “knowledge authority” to a “growth facilitator.” |
| Emotion & Relationships | Strategic Emotion Regulation | “[When anxious] I use the ‘three-breath’ rule: inhale deeply thinking ‘this will pass,’ hold the breath thinking ‘I am in the present,’ exhale slowly thinking ‘I can let it go for now.’ This is scientific emotion management.” (Ms. Shen, jsyq004) | Employs professional psychological methods (e.g., mindfulness) to manage stressful emotions, transforming them into objects to be regulated rather than burdens to be passively endured. |
| | Constructive Relationship Management | “When communicating with parents, I consciously adjust my tone and facial expressions to avoid appearing condescending or cold. Before sending a message, I think one extra step: how would the parent feel receiving this expression?” (Ms. Chen, jsyq003) | Performs precise emotional labor aimed at relationship-building, seeking to repair and solidify home-school partnerships based on empathy and respect. |
| Action & Decision-Making | Systematic Procedure Construction | “Now, for any activity with potential risks, the process must be closed-loop: pre-class checklist photos, signed safety acknowledgments, documented procedures. This isn’t about distrust; it’s a professional risk management system.” (Mr. Hu, jsyq001) | Instead of simply avoiding risk, designs institutionalized, traceable operational procedures, transforming external pressure into a driving force for enhancing systematic work practices. |
| | Creative Curricular Adaptation | “For controversial social topics (e.g., gender equality), I don’t discuss them openly in class. Instead, I compile them into an ‘optional reading list’ for interested students to study and discuss privately. This conveys the ideas while avoiding the risk of being quoted out of context.” (Ms. Wang, jsyq002) | Demonstrates professional creativity within constraints. Through instructional design wisdom (e.g., personalized learning paths), preserves core educational values, achieving the effect of “dancing in chains.” |

4.1. Dimension of Cognition and Professional Identity: From Responsibility Aversion to Professional Awareness

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, EPO first triggers a profound re-evaluation of professional identity, responsibility boundaries, and the standards of a “good teacher.” One path leads to risk-averse cognitive reframing and role contraction. Here, “safety” and “avoiding blame” become meta-rules overriding “innovation” and “effectiveness”, culminating in a negative, “trouble-free” professional identity (See Table 3, Cognition & Identity). Teachers like Mr. Zou lament the systemic shift towards “peaceful coexistence” at the ultimate expense of student learning. Conversely, the other path involves integrative cognitive reframing and role expansion. Practitioners of Informed Practice engage in constructive sense-making, integrating external pressure into a more complex and profound understanding of their role. For instance, Ms. Shen critically reflects on power dynamics, evolving from a “persuader” to a “listener.” Ms. Chen strategically expands her role to include guiding parents, viewing them as part of the educational ecosystem to be engaged rather than a source of pressure to be managed. This cognitive divergence sets the stage for subsequent differences in emotional and behavioral trajectories.

4.2. Dimension of Emotion and Relationships: From Emotional Restraint to Strategic Engagement

The emotional impact of EPO significantly intensifies teachers’ emotional labor, leading to divergent management and relational strategies. Defensive Practice is characterized by defensive emotion management and relational distancing. To ensure self-protection, strategic emotional restraint and maintaining distance become common. Mr. Hu describes sacrificing previous camaraderie with students, feeling compelled to “always wear a stern face”. Ms. Lin’s tactic of muting parent group notifications is a classic form of emotional isolation (See Table 3, Emotion & Relationships). This form of emotional labor aims to minimize risk at the cost of diminishing the warmth and authenticity of interactions. In contrast, Informed Practice involves strategic emotional adjustment and relational deepening. Teachers like Ms. Shen employ scientific methods (mindfulness, the “three-breath rule”) to manage anxiety, transforming personal stress into a resource for building more egalitarian relationships. Ms. Chen consciously modulates her “facial expressions and tone” in parent communication, performing proactive emotional labor aimed at fostering partnership rather than retreating from it. This strategic engagement seeks to transform potentially adversarial dynamics into collaborative ones.

4.3. Dimension of Action and Decision-Making: From Strategic Contraction to Systemic Evolution

Concrete teaching actions most directly reflect teachers’ responses, showcasing starkly different manifestations of professional agency. Defensive Practice often materializes as a contraction of action and an upward shift of decision-making. The sentiment of “wanting to teach but not daring to” is prevalent. Mr. Hu’s cancellation of the “sliding tackle” instruction and Ms. Wang’s abandonment of a planned discussion on gender stereotypes are direct manifestations of curricular self-censorship (See Table 3, Action & Decision-Making). Accompanying this is a reliance on leadership for final decisions, indicating a partial relinquishment of individual agency for shared (or shifted) responsibility. Facing the same constraints, Informed Practice demonstrates refinement of practice and systemic construction. Here, teachers exhibit professional creativity—“dancing in chains.” Their actions become more meticulous and systematic. Mr. Hu’s establishment of a full-cycle risk management protocol (checklists, signed acknowledgments, records) transcends mere self-protection, reflecting a systematizing capability. He also creatively replaced competitive games with a “Basketball Fun Fair”, retaining educational value through design. Ms. Wang’s shift of sensitive content to an “optional reading list” demonstrates instructional design wisdom that creates space for learning within boundaries. These actions represent not a retreat from professionalism but its evolution into a more sophisticated, context-aware form.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: The Interactive Mechanism and Its Implications

This study reveals that Educational Public Opinion (EPO) does not homogenize teacher practice but rather catalyzes a bifurcation into two distinct trajectories: Defensive Practice and Informed Practice. This divergence cannot be explained by the pressure itself but emerges from the complex interplay between external pressures and internal teacher agency, mediated by two critical, interlocking factors: the nature of institutional feedback and the depth of teacher reflection.

5.1. Institutional Feedback: The Pivotal Moderator Between Pressure and Practice

A central finding of this study is the pivotal moderating role played by institutional feedback. We define institutional feedback as the official responses and handling methods by schools or educational administrative

departments following the EPO incident. Our data distinctly reveal that the type of feedback—whether supportive or defensive—critically shapes the trajectory of teacher adaptation.

Supportive feedback is characterized by actions that uphold professional authority, provide procedural backing, and seek fair mediation. For example, when a student was injured, Mr. Hu’s school leadership promptly intervened, reviewed surveillance footage, and communicated with parents. This made him feel that “the school was on our side” (jsyq001). This institutional backing did not eliminate pressure but transformed it. It provided the psychological safety and procedural resources for Mr. Hu to engage in constructive problem-solving, ultimately leading to the development of systematic safety protocols—a hallmark of Informed Practice. Here, institutional support acted as a scaffold, enabling the translation of risk awareness into professional systematization.

Conversely, defensive feedback from institutions involves appeasement, shifting blame onto teachers, or offering simplistic accountability to quickly quell the EPO incident.

Ms. Zou’s statement that “sometimes the school sacrifices teachers’ interests to quell the EPO incident” (jsyq005), epitomizes this. Such feedback amplifies teachers’ sense of vulnerability and injustice, directly fueling cynicism and powerlessness. It signals that the institution prioritizes its own reputation over professional integrity or teacher welfare, thereby incentivizing risk-aversion, contractualism, and the retreat into Defensive Practice. Thus, institutional feedback is not a mere backdrop but an active force that either amplifies or mitigates the perceived threat of EPO, channeling teacher agency toward markedly different ends.

5.2. Reflection Depth: The Internal Engine of Practice Transformation

The second key mechanism is the depth of teacher reflection, which functions as the internal engine processing external pressures. Our analysis distinguishes between two levels, closely associated with the two practice types.

Technical reflection, often accompanying Defensive Practice, is concerned with the “how-to” of avoidance. It asks questions like, “How can I avoid this situation next time?” or “What is the safest step to take?” This reflection is procedural and instrumental, focused on modifying surface-level behaviors to minimize future risk, without fundamentally questioning the underlying premises of the situation or one’s own role within it.

In contrast, critical reflection is the cornerstone of Informed Practice. It involves questioning the “why” behind the dilemmas. As demonstrated by Ms. Shen, a psychology teacher, this goes beyond managing an incident to analyzing her own emotional responses in her supervisory notes, engaging in meta-cognitive analysis (jsyq004). It asks, “Why am I in this predicament? What assumptions about my authority are being challenged? What is the core purpose of education in this context?” This depth of reflection, as also seen in Ms. Chen’s re-conceptualization of her role to include guiding parents (jsyq003), enables a reframing of the problem. It allows teachers to move beyond seeing constraints as mere barriers to instead view them as contexts for strategic adaptation and professional identity re-negotiation.

5.3. An Interactive Framework: From Pressure to Practice

Integrating these insights, we propose an interactive framework to explain the formation of teacher practice under EPO. The process is not linear but cyclical and interactive.

First, an EPO incident (or its anticipation) triggers a state of risk alertness and subjects teachers to perceived or actual public scrutiny.

Subsequently, this pressure is filtered and interpreted through two concurrent mediators: the institutional feedback received (or anticipated), which sets the organizational tone of support or blame; and the teacher’s own depth of reflection (technical vs. critical), which shapes the personal meaning-making of the event.

Ultimately, the interaction between these mediators shapes the exercise of teacher agency, leading to divergent practices. The combination of defensive institutional feedback and a predominant technical reflection orientation significantly increases the likelihood of entrenching Defensive Practice, as the environment discourages professional risk and the reflective process does not seek alternative paths. Conversely, even in a generally constraining environment, the presence of supportive feedback in key instances (like Mr. Hu’s case) or a teacher’s propensity for critical reflection (like Ms. Shen’s) can create a space for agency that fosters Informed Practice, where constraints are navigated through professional creativity, systematicity, and relational investment.

This framework posits that teacher practice is not determined by EPO but emerges from the interaction between external pressures (mediated by institutional response) and internal processes (driven by reflection depth). It emphasizes pathways and likelihoods rather than direct causation.

5.4. Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study moves beyond a deficit narrative of teachers as passive victims of EPO. By delineating Defensive and Informed Practices, it highlights the spectrum of teacher agency under pressure. More importantly, by integrating the moderating roles of institutional feedback and reflection depth into the “risk-scrutiny-feedback” mechanism, it provides a more nuanced, interactive model for understanding how macro-social forces translate into micro-level professional actions.

Practically, the findings underscore that mitigating the negative impacts of EPO requires multi-level interventions. For policymakers and school leaders, the imperative is to cultivate supportive institutional feedback systems. This includes establishing clear, fair investigative protocols, providing legal and psychological support for teachers, and publicly upholding educational principles in the face of unjust public opinion.

For teacher educators and professional development designers, the focus should be on fostering critical reflective capacities. Training must help teachers move beyond technical ‘risk management’ tips to engage in critical dialogue about their professional identity, ethical reasoning, and strategic agency within complex social ecosystems. This includes equipping them to leverage digital networks for strategic, self-initiated professional learning (Tour, 2016), thereby transforming potential spaces of public scrutiny into arenas for resource exchange and growth.

5.5. Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations. Its sample, while diverse, is from one metropolitan area, and the findings’ transferability to rural or other regional contexts needs exploration. The reliance on self-reported interview data, while rich, could be complemented by observational data on actual teaching practices. Future research could longitudinally track how specific institutional feedback events shape a teacher’s practice over time, or employ participatory action research to design and test interventions aimed at fostering supportive school cultures and critical reflection among teacher teams.

In conclusion, navigating the storm of educational public opinion is an increasingly definitive aspect of contemporary teaching in China. This study argues that the path teachers take—whether toward defensiveness or informed agency—is not predetermined. It is fundamentally shaped by the interplay between the support (or lack thereof) from their institutional bastion and the depth of their own professional reflection. Recognizing this interactive mechanism is the first step toward empowering teachers to not just weather the storm, but to learn to sail within it.

6. Conclusions and Implications

6.1. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the influence of Educational Public Opinion (EPO) on teacher practice is complex and dialectical. While it risks triggering a defensive retreat that curtails pedagogical vitality, it can also paradoxically serve as a catalyst for the development of a more refined and systematic “Informed Practice”. The critical finding is that the ultimate trajectory is not determined by the pressure itself but emerges from a dynamic interplay between external pressures and teachers’ professional agency. This interplay is fundamentally mediated by two core factors identified in our analysis: the quality of institutional feedback (supportive vs. defensive) and the depth of teacher reflection (technical vs. critical). It is the specific configuration of these mediators that channels the generalized pressures of risk alertness and public scrutiny toward either entrenched defensiveness or informed professional growth.

6.2. Implications

To mitigate the negative effects of Defensive Practice and promote Informed Practice, we propose the following multi-level implications, derived directly from our findings:

- (a) For School Leaders and Policymakers: The priority is to build supportive institutional feedback systems that move beyond simplistic accountability. This involves establishing clear, fair, and transparent protocols for handling incidents that protect teachers’ legitimate professional judgment and space. Crucially, institutions must provide tangible support—be it procedural, legal, or psychological—during crises, demonstrating that they serve as a reliable bastion for educators rather than amplifying their vulnerability. Furthermore, fostering professional learning communities where EPO incidents can be deconstructed through critical reflection (e.g., via structured case analysis) is essential for collective learning and resilience-building.

- (b) For the Public and Media: There is a pressing need to advocate for a more rational, empathetic, and educationally literate public discourse. Media should strive to represent the complexities of teaching, avoiding sensationalism and the wholesale stigmatization of the profession. Concurrently, efforts should be made to rebuild eroding trust and frame home-school relationships as partnerships based on shared educational goals rather than mutual suspicion.
- (c) For Teacher Educators and Professional Developers: Teacher preparation and ongoing training must systematically cultivate competencies for navigating the contemporary “storm.” This entails integrating training on strategic home-school communication, emotional labor management, professional ethics in digital contexts, and “public opinion literacy”—the ability to critically understand and strategically engage with media logic and public discourse. Equipping teachers with these capacities in advance, alongside fostering a habit of deep, critical reflection, is paramount for developing the professional resilience and wisdom necessary to practice agentially within complex constraints.

Author Contributions

Y.L.: conceptualization, methodology, thematic analysis of the text, writing—original draft preparation; D.Z.: investigation, reviewing and editing the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. The raw data, including the interview transcripts responses and analysis results, can be accessed upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, Ying Liu (283442435@qq.com), for a period of 10 years following publication. The data are anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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