



Lance Peng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1825-6146>

Falmouth University, United Kingdom

lance.peng@falmouth.ac.uk

Past tense, present stress: Mnemohistory of teacher burnout

Submitted: 13.03.2025

Accepted: 20.03.2026

Published: 30.06.2026



Abstract

Research objectives and problem: This viewpoint article aims to re-frame teacher burnout through a mnemohistorical lens and address the problem that contemporary discussions of burnout often overlook the influence of historical educational policies and cultural narratives.

Research methods: Adopting a conceptual and comparative approach, the article draws on mnemohistory (the study of collective memory across time) to explore how teachers' roles and expectations have been shaped across different national contexts, including the UK, Japan, Finland, the USA and Taiwan.

Process of argumentation: The argument develops by tracing how past reforms, policy decisions and cultural expectations continue to structure present-day teaching conditions. It positions burnout as an outcome of historically accumulated pressures and narratives.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The article centres that teacher burnout is bound to mnemohistorical processes and reveals how unresolved historical legacies shape current educational systems. This perspective contributes to educational sciences by introducing a temporally layered understanding of teacher well-being, expanding beyond immediate policy and psychological frameworks.

Conclusions and recommendations: The article concludes that addressing teacher burnout requires historically informed policy approaches that acknowledge these long-term influences. It recommends the development of more sustainable and inclusive educational structures that take into account the historical conditions shaping teachers' work.

Keywords:

mnemohistory,
teacher burnout,
cultural memory,
educational policies,
historical narratives,
stress

Burnout beyond the present

Teacher burnout is conceptualised as a contemporary crisis, driven by escalating workloads, bureaucratic constraints and evolving educational demands (Chang, 2009; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015). However, this phenomenon can be understood within a broader historical and sociocultural framework. The enduring legacies of past educational policies, institutional structures and cultural memory continue to shape present-day stressors within the teaching profession. This article adopts an interdisciplinary perspective and engages with mnemohistory, a concept introduced by Assmann (2010), to explore the ways in which historical narratives and collective memory inform contemporary experiences of teacher burnout across national contexts. This is a conceptual exploration where literature informs the argument but is not examined in an empirical or analytical sense.

Mnemohistory extends beyond traditional historiography by looking into past events and the ways in which societies remember, reinterpret and mobilise these histories in the present (Assmann, 2010; Tamm, 2024). In the context of education, this entails looking into how historical constructions of the teaching profession (such as the idealisation of the self-sacrificing educator or the perception of teaching as a moral vocation) persist in shaping contemporary professional expectations and the lived realities of teachers. Rather than being static, these historical discourses are continuously reactivated in policy frameworks, institutional cultures and public perceptions, contributing to the structural conditions that exacerbate teacher stress and burnout.

This article discusses how different educational systems engage with historical legacies in relation to teacher well-being. While some nations have implemented systemic reforms aimed at mitigating burnout, others continue to reinforce entrenched ideals that intensify professional stress (Rudow, 1999). This study underscores the necessity of situating teacher burnout within a historical and sociocultural continuum and recognises the enduring impact of collective memory on the evolving conditions of the teaching profession.

Bridging time: Mnemohistory as a lens for understanding teacher burnout

Drawing from memory studies, historical analysis and social theory, mnemohistory posits that individual and collective memories, shaped by past events, policies and cultural narratives, influence the present experiences of individuals within a given social structure (Assmann, 2010; Tamm, 2024). In the case of teachers, their professional lives are defined by contemporary conditions, and they are also entangled with the legacies of past educational systems, policies and societal expectations. Teachers' responses to stress, burnout and professional satisfaction can often be traced back to historical configurations of teaching norms and state-imposed expectations that have shaped their professional roles over time (Bodenheimer & Shuster, 2020; Chang, 2020). Thus, mnemohistory opens the door to a refined investigation of how educational systems' evolving philosophies and pedagogical approaches (underpinned by cultural memory) have contributed to shaping current stressors within the teaching profession.

Within this theoretical framework, burnout can be understood as a contemporary phenomenon and as a process that has been influenced by longstanding historical and sociocultural determinants. Teachers' roles have been shaped by societal expectations, which often intersect with changing educational policies and the perceived value of education (Bodenheimer & Shuster, 2020). For instance, over the years, educational reforms and curricula shifts have framed the teaching profession as a dynamic one, constantly evolving to meet the demands of society, including "the extensive efforts needed to meet parents' or administrators' expectations due to reform" (Chang, 2009, p. 204).

However, the demands placed on teachers (particularly in contexts of increased accountability, standardised testing and demands for inclusive education) have gradually eroded their sense of professional autonomy, well-being and job satisfaction (Pishghadam et al., 2014). These shifting dynamics can be understood through the lens of mnemohistory, where past educational structures and political imperatives have set

the stage for the stress and burnout teachers face today. Moreover, societal values regarding the importance of education and the status of teachers have shifted, often leading to conflicting pressures: on one hand, there is an expectation for teachers to provide high-quality education with limited resources, while on the other, teachers are seen as expendable in the face of policy shifts or public criticism (Hamm et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2024).

Burnout is a response to individual workloads or challenges and is also linked with the sociopolitical forces within educational systems. Studies consistently show that factors such as excessive workload, lack of autonomy, societal undervaluation of teaching and lack of support all contribute to teachers' experiences of burnout (Cao et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). From a mnemohistorical perspective, these findings can be interpreted as manifestations of broader historical and cultural forces that have shaped the teaching profession. The notion of teachers as "saviours" or "role models", often glorified in educational discourse, stands in tension with the increasing pressures placed on them, leading to a form of cognitive dissonance and emotional strain (Jiménez Raya et al., 2024). Further, global comparisons of teacher burnout reflect the varying ways in which educational systems across different nations have approached the issue, pointing to the importance of understanding the historical and sociocultural context in which burnout manifests.

For example, the United States' emphasis on standardised testing in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in heightened stress for educators (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Rubin, 2011), while in countries like Finland, where teachers are accorded a higher level of trust and autonomy, burnout rates have historically been lower (Pyhältö et al., 2021). That said, Finland is not without its challenges in preventing teacher burnout. Mnemohistory offers the possibility to explore these patterns through a contemporary lens, including by linking them to past educational policies, cultural narratives and social movements, which have all contributed to shaping the conditions under which teachers operate today.

Mnemohistory lays the groundwork for looking into teacher burnout as a multidimensional issue influenced by historical, sociocultural, and

policy-related factors. By understanding how past experiences, narratives and policies have shaped contemporary teaching environments, this approach allows for a more holistic understanding of “the challenges expressed by teachers as they faced instability and additional professional demands” (Robinson et al., 2023, p. 78). Moreover, it opens up possibilities for a subtler interpretation of the factors contributing to burnout and how these might differ across different global contexts. Through the lens of mnemohistory, burnout can be seen not only as a personal crisis but also as a reflection of larger societal and historical dynamics and suggests pathways for both preventive and corrective interventions in educational systems worldwide.

Detention in history: The long shadow of teacher exhaustion

In exploring the historical narratives surrounding teaching and stress across various countries, it is critical to utilise a mnemohistorical framework, which emphasises how collective memory and past experiences inform contemporary practices and cultural norms. By going into the educational histories of the UK, Japan, Finland and Taiwan, we can trace the mutually shaping role of societal transformations, educational reforms and collective memory and their enduring impact on the profession of teaching. Through this approach, this article explores how the reverberations of past educational crises and cultural expectations continue to influence the lived experiences of teachers in the present day.

The UK, with its longstanding history of formal education and teacher unions, provides an illustrative example of how educational reforms, societal changes and economic crises have shaped the role of teachers and their stress levels (Various, 2021). The Industrial Revolution and the rapid urbanisation of the 19th century altered the landscape of education in Britain. Teachers (often seen as mere conduits of knowledge) faced mounting pressures as they were tasked with meeting the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student body. The implementation of standardised tests and national curricula in the 20th century further increased teachers’ workload, consolidating the role of the educator as one bound

by increasingly rigid regulations (Grace, 2021). As Britain entered the 21st century, the era of teacher performance management and the push for measurable outcomes created a new wave of stress, underpinned by a pervasive culture of accountability (Kidger et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2021). However, the past also holds a crucial place in shaping teachers' experiences today. The collective memory of historical strikes, such as the 1980s teachers' strikes in response to government cuts and policy shifts, still resonates within the profession and contributes to an elaborate chronicle of teachers as both resilient and burdened by the state's expectations (Lyddon, 2015; Wiborg, 2017). The UK's education system, shaped by progressive and conservative reforms, has fostered a tension between the pursuit of educational equity and the stresses induced by bureaucratic structures. Mnemohistory, in this case, underscores how the educational reforms of the past continue to shape contemporary teacher stress and reveals an ongoing struggle between state demands and teachers' personal autonomy (Stevenson, 2013).

Turning to Japan, we encounter a very different yet comparably influential historical narrative of teaching and stress. Historically, Japan's education system has been rooted in Confucian values, emphasising discipline, collectivism and respect for authority (Collcutt, 1993; Tu, 1996). This cultural foundation has influenced teachers' roles and their relationship with students. Post-war Japan, particularly during the period of rapid economic growth in the 1950s and 60s, witnessed an intensification of educational demands (Morito, 1955). Teachers were viewed as both academic and moral guardians, a role that brought with it immense responsibility. The culture of *karoshi* (death by overwork), which became prevalent during the post-war economic boom, has heavily influenced teachers' stress levels, as they often work long hours beyond the classroom to meet the expectations of parents and administrators (Takagi, 2023; Tsuyuguchi, 2021). Educational reforms, such as the introduction of standardised tests and the emphasis on rote memorisation, created an environment in which students and teachers are subjected to tremendous pressure. Teachers in Japan, like their British counterparts, are also influenced by past educational policies and societal expectations, leading

to a singular mnemohistorical exploration of stress. The memory of the economic pressures that shaped Japan’s educational system continues to shape contemporary experiences of teacher burnout, with many educators still working long hours and under constant pressure to meet societal expectations. With “a lack of understanding about their emotionality by policymakers and school administrators” (Nagamine, 2018, p. 259), the continued prevalence of these historical pressures highlights how past societal values and cultural expectations of education continue to shape the present reality of teaching in Japan.

Finland, often heralded as a global model for education, offers a contrast to both the UK and Japan in terms of teacher autonomy and public perception. Historically, Finland’s education system has been shaped by the country’s commitment to egalitarian principles (Välilmaa, 2021). The development of its educational framework in the late 20th century, including the decentralisation of authority to local schools and the promotion of teacher professionalisation, led to a cultural shift where teaching was viewed as a respected and autonomous profession (Mandavkar, 2024). However, Finland’s historical trajectory is also marked by periods of political and social upheaval, particularly during the wars of the early 20th century, which required adaptations in the educational system. The Finnish education system’s emphasis on a balance between teacher responsibility and support, as well as its focus on student-centred learning, allowed it to develop a model of education that was less burdened by the stressors seen in more hierarchical systems (Sahlberg, 2007). However, the global success of its education system, especially its ranking in international assessments like the PISA tests, has also introduced new stressors for teachers (Rautalin, 2018; Sahlberg, 2018). The pressure to maintain this international reputation has introduced new tensions, as teachers may feel the burden of having to perform at an ever-higher standard. The historical memory of Finland’s commitment to educational equity, however, continues to underpin its approach to teaching and offers a counter-narrative to the stress-laden educational landscapes found in other countries. The Finnish example underscores the importance of teacher autonomy and professional support in mitigating stress, showing how

a historical focus on equity can shape a more sustainable teaching model in the present, supporting the understanding that “education authorities and political leaders believe that teachers, together with principals, parents and their communities, know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth” (Sahlberg, 2007, p. 157).

An additional persuasive illustration is provided by Taiwan, where historical shifts in education (particularly in the post-martial law era) have influenced teachers’ roles and the stress they experience (Fang et al., 2015). The educational system has undergone significant transformations since the lifting of martial law in 1987, during which time educational reforms were aimed at modernising the curriculum and democratising access to education. The shift towards a more globalised education system, alongside Taiwan’s emphasis on technology and innovation, has created both opportunities and challenges for teachers (Law, 2002). The intense pressure to perform well in global assessments and the heightened competitiveness among students have significantly impacted teachers’ workloads (Huang & Asghar, 2018; Yu & Bairner, 2011). Moreover, Taiwan’s strong Confucian influence, with its focus on discipline and respect for authority, continues to shape teachers’ roles and their relationships with students (Fwu & Wang, 2002). Like Japan, teachers in Taiwan are often expected to take on a moralistic role and guide students both academically and in terms of character development. The legacy of Taiwan’s educational reforms and its relationship with societal expectations have created a system where teachers are constantly negotiating between fulfilling their pedagogical duties and meeting the expectations placed on them by both parents and the state (Fwu & Wang, 2002; Hung, 2015). Past crises, such as the political instability during the Cold War and the socio-political transformations post-martial law (Wang, 2011), continue to resonate within the Taiwanese educational system, creating a fragmented historical recollection that shapes contemporary experiences of teacher stress.

Applying a mnemohistorical perspective to the historical narratives of teaching and stress across different countries allows us to see how the echoes of the past continue to shape the present. Whether in the UK, Japan, Finland or Taiwan, pressures of educational reforms, societal

expectations and historical crises in the teaching profession exist and contribute to the ongoing stress faced by educators. By understanding how these historical experiences have been encoded into the collective memory, we can better appreciate teacher stress today and the ways in which past reforms and cultural expectations continue to influence contemporary educational practices (VanSledright, 2010). Mnemohistory provides a framework that helps us go into these layers of historical memory and offers a more expansive and detailed view of how the stresses of the past are perpetuated in the present.

Can we break the cycle of teacher stress by looking at history?

By reflecting on the persistent nature of these historical legacies, we can understand the way past policies and reforms continue to shape contemporary educational experiences. One way to appreciate this continuity is to understand how these historical forces linger in present-day teaching. For instance, the role of teachers has often been redefined by policy decisions, from being seen purely as instructors to becoming emotional caretakers, societal role models and even cultural architects, yet there is little recognition or support for these added responsibilities (Francisco et al., 2024; Javed & Akhter, 2024). These historical imprints are relics of the past but continue to define the present. A more critical understanding of how the past shapes the present can help us better support teachers today and avoid repeating past mistakes. This means that the issues of teacher burnout, which are so prevalent in education systems worldwide, are not isolated or temporary challenges but instead rooted in the ongoing effects of these past decisions: looking at history “establishes the required psychological distance that frames incidents as ‘benign’ and allows the event to be revisited without the original concerns of the time” (Mead, 2025, p. 1103).

With this in mind, the call for more historically informed policy decisions becomes imperative for alleviating teacher stress and preventing burnout, and policymakers must recognise that current issues in education

are shaped by past reforms and shifts. To reduce teacher stress, it is essential to design policies that consider these historical influences and address the structural causes of burnout rather than simply treating the symptoms. For example, policies could focus on reducing teacher workload, ensuring that teachers have more professional autonomy and providing adequate mental health support (Marshall et al., 2024; Pressley et al., 2024). In addition, it is important to recognise that teacher stress is a global issue, not limited to specific regions or countries. While educational systems differ, countries worldwide face similar struggles, such as excessive workloads, societal expectations and lack of support. Looking to examples that emphasise teacher autonomy, trust and well-being could offer lessons in addressing these issues (Dehne et al., 2025). By taking a cross-cultural approach, we can adapt strategies from different educational contexts and apply them globally and offer a more supportive environment for teachers worldwide.

Understanding teacher stress through the lens of historical narratives helps to uncover the deep-rooted causes of burnout and grants useful revelations for creating more effective and sustainable policies. Rather than focusing on short-term fixes, we must look to the long-term effects of past decisions and work to address the historical structures that have led to the current state of stress in education. Temporal continuity, as a concept within mnemohistory, underscores the enduring influence of past events, policies and cultural narratives on contemporary systems and experiences (Le Poidevin, 2000). Integrating this framework into policymaking will enable a history-conscious approach that prevents the recurrence of previous errors and facilitates the creation of educational environments that support teachers. By recognising the persistent impact of these historical legacies, we can foster a more enduring educational system that prioritises teacher well-being and enhances learning outcomes globally.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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