



A Pathology of Professional Passivity Among Secondary School Teachers in Kurdistan Province: A Three-Level Model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: “Professional passivity among teachers undermines teaching and learning processes in many classrooms worldwide, hindering effective instruction. This research aims to investigate the pathology of, and present a model for, professional passivity among secondary school teachers in Kurdistan Province.”

Method: In terms of purpose, the research is developmental and, based on approach, qualitative. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview. The research field included all first and second secondary school teachers in Kurdistan Province, from whom 41 individuals were selected using purposive sampling. Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the interview data.

Results: The results indicated that the model has three levels: contexts, consequences, and solutions. At the organizational level, themes included weaknesses in recruitment and hiring, an inefficient educational system, and inappropriate curriculum and content. At the managerial level, themes included weaknesses in human resource management and socio-cultural problems. At the individual level, themes included a decline in academic motivation and motivational problems, as well as economic problems.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that addressing this issue therefore requires an integrated model that simultaneously targets systemic reforms, strengthens managerial practices, and supports teachers’ individual needs. Implementing such a comprehensive approach can enhance teacher effectiveness and promote higher-quality teaching and learning across schools.

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Introduction

Teachers play a fundamental role in ensuring the quality of education, and numerous studies have shown that the quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (Sheron & Kaur, 2022; Datnow, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2010). Because teacher performance is closely linked to motivation, job satisfaction, and professional engagement, understanding the factors influencing these dimensions is essential. Job dissatisfaction has been widely investigated in the literature (Gottfried et al., 2025; Lampert et al., 2025; Mo & Morris, 2024; Sahito & Vaisanen, 2020) and can significantly undermine instructional practices, professional development, and overall school effectiveness (Velmurugan et al., 2025).

A lack of motivated, satisfied, and competent teachers weakens teaching–learning processes and reduces the system’s ability to develop creative and problem-solving individuals. Therefore, identifying and analyzing the factors that influence teacher motivation is crucial for educational systems and school administrators. When teachers’ needs remain unmet, motivation decreases and passive professional behavior becomes more likely, which can negatively affect teaching performance and school functioning. In the area of professional motivation, studies indicate that dissatisfaction can influence teachers’ willingness to pursue professional learning and engage in developmental activities. In some cases, the pressure arising from the gap between the “ideal teacher image” and actual performance motivates teachers to pursue professional development. However, when such programs emphasize quantity instead of quality or when adequate support is not available, motivation to engage in meaningful professional learning declines (Appova & Arbaugh, 2018). These findings further clarify the causal link connecting dissatisfaction, reduced motivation, and the emergence of passive professional behaviors.

Passivity, as a psychological construct, is an internal process manifested through behaviors such as doing nothing, over-adaptation, agitation, disorganization, or helplessness and aggression (Schiff & Schiff, 1971; Pierzchała et al., 2021). In educational settings, such behaviors contribute to avoidance of problem-solving, decreased responsibility, and the development of dysfunctional interaction patterns between teachers and students. Despite extensive theoretical work on psychological passivity, its application to teachers’ professional behavior has not been sufficiently addressed. Moreover, only limited studies in Iran—and especially in Kurdistan Province—have examined teacher passivity using a multilevel approach. The phenomenon must be analyzed at the individual level (teacher characteristics and motivations), managerial level (school leadership and school climate), and organizational level (educational policies and structural conditions). This research gap highlights the need for a comprehensive study capable of identifying the underlying factors of professional passivity and modeling their interrelationships.

Accordingly, the main innovation of the present study is the development of a three-level model (individual, managerial, and organizational) to explain the pathology of professional passivity among secondary school teachers in Kurdistan Province. By integrating psychological

theories with the realities of the local educational context, this model offers a more precise and applicable explanation of the mechanisms that produce professional passivity.

Therefore, the central aim of this study is to identify, analyze, and model the factors influencing professional passivity among secondary school teachers in Kurdistan Province. Due to the significance of this issue for educational quality and the relative lack of local research, investigating this topic is both necessary and timely.

Method

Research Design

In terms of purpose, the research is developmental and, based on its methodological orientation, is qualitative. A semi-structured interview protocol was employed in accordance with the objective, type, and nature of the research questions. The interview guide was developed based on a review of existing literature on teacher burnout and professional stagnation, focusing on four main areas: (1) individual manifestations of passivity, (2) organizational barriers to professional growth, (3) the role of school leadership, and (4) sociocultural influences in the Kurdistan region. The reliability of the interview protocol was established using the test–retest method through revisiting interviewees and reviewing the instrument by technical experts and specialists. Its validity was supported through document review involving an examination of relevant literature and the theoretical foundations of the study.

Participants and Sampling

The research field consisted of all teachers in the first and second secondary schools of Kurdistan Province. The experts included 41 teachers from these levels who were serving in one of the educational districts of the province. To ensure a comprehensive geographic representation, participants were selected from various districts, including Sanandaj (n=14), Saqqez (n=10), Marivan (n=9), and Kamyaran (n=8). Out of 52 teachers initially invited to participate, 41 agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a response rate of 78.8%.

They were selected using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least 15 years of continuous teaching experience. This 15-year threshold was established as a criterion because, according to career stage theories (e.g., Huberman, 1989), teachers at this stage have typically moved past the initial “survival” and “discovery” phases and are more likely to experience “mid-career conservatism” or “disengagement,” making them the most information-rich cases for studying professional passivity. Other criteria included being currently engaged in instructional responsibilities, possessing familiarity with pedagogical issues, and voluntary consent. In accordance with qualitative research standards, data saturation was used as the main criterion for determining sample size. Interviews continued until no new themes emerged, which occurred at approximately the 37th interview, with four additional interviews conducted to confirm saturation.

Data Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the interview data. The coding process followed a three-stage progression: (1) Open coding, where 184 initial codes were extracted; (2) Axial coding, where codes were categorized into 14 sub-themes; and (3) Selective coding, resulting in the final 3-level model. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and repeated readings were carried out for deep familiarization. Coding was performed using MAXQDA (Version 2020), which helped organize codes, track theme development, and visually map relationships among themes.

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the coding process was conducted by two independent coders (the lead researcher and an external expert in educational pathology). Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Holsti's coefficient, resulting in an agreement rate of 0.86, which indicates high consistency in the coding process. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the analysis to monitor subjectivity and analytical decisions.

The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. For member checking, the extracted themes and the final conceptual model were shared with 12 of the participants. They were asked to verify if the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences. The results showed a 92% agreement rate, with only minor terminological adjustments suggested by the participants. Dependability was ensured through audit trails and external peer review, while transferability was addressed through detailed contextual and participant descriptions.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were briefed on the purpose, procedure, and voluntary nature of the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the secure storage of audio files and transcripts. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequence.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic profile and key characteristics of the participants involved in this study.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Row	Gender	Degree	Level of workplace	Year Experience	Decipline
1	Female	PhD	High School	21	Educational Management
2	Female	BA	High School	15	Fashion Design
3	Male	BA	High School	20	Mechanical Engineering
4	Female	BA	High School	24	Persian Language

5	Female	BA	High School	15	Persian Literature
6	Male	MA	High School	20	Linguistics
7	Female	PhD	High School	15	Fashion Design
8	Female	BA	High School	15	Physical Chemistry
9	Female	MA	High School	16	English Language
10	Female	BA	High School	18	Mathematics
11	Female	MA	High School	25	Theology
12	Female	BA	High School	24	Entrepreneurship
13	Male	PhD	High School	23	Mathematics
14	Female	BA	High School	26	Chemistry
15	Female	MA	High School	20	Mathematics
16	Female	BA	High School	20	Psychology
17	Male	MA	High School	20	Biology
18	Female	MA	High School	27	History
19	Male	MA	High School	31	Theology
20	Male	MA	High School	28	Sociology
21	Male	MA	High School	22	Educational Management
22	Female	MA	High School	30	Educational Psychology
23	Female	MA	High School	23	Social Sciences
24	Female	BA	High School	27	Biology
25	Male	PhD	High School	16	Mathematics
26	Female	MA	High School	25	Chemistry
27	Male	MA	High School	17	Mathematics
28	Male	PhD	High School	25	Psychology
29	Male	MA	High School	31	English Language
30	Male	BA	High School	26	Mathematics
31	Male	PhD	High School	33	Physics
32	Male	MA	High School	24	Social Planning and Welfare
33	Male	PhD	High School	27	Electrical Engineering

34	Male	MA	High School	25	Educational Management
35	Male	BA	High School	30	Psychology
36	Male	BA	High School	28	Career Education
37	Male	MA	High School	25	Educational Sciences
38	Female	MA	High School	23	Clinical Psychology
39	Male	MA	High School	15	Psychology
40	Male	BA	High School	25	Educational Sciences
41	Female	BA	High School	24	Educational Sciences

Based on the table above, it can be said that 54% were men and 46% were women. Regarding the education level, 49% of the participants had a master's degree and 17% had a doctoral degree or were doctoral students. 17% of the participants taught in middle school (first level of secondary education) and 83% taught in high school (second level of secondary education).

Question 1 - What are the contexts of teachers' professional passivity?

Based on the coding of the interview texts, the basic, organizing, and comprehensive themes of the contexts of teachers' professional passivity are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 . Themes of the contexts of professional passivity

Core Themes	Organizing Themes	Global Themes
• Lack of intrinsic motivation in teachers • Decline in students' academic motivation	Decline in academic motivation	Individual Level
• Economic and livelihood problems • low salaries	Economic problems	
• Weak professional autonomy of teachers • amotivation syndrome • stressors on teachers • low professional identity of teachers)	Motivational problems	
• Structural inefficiency of the education system • Inefficiency of the evaluation and supervision system • Communication problems in the education system	Inefficient Education System	Management Level
• Weakness in curriculum and educational content • Lack of up-to-date educational technologies • Unattractive school environment	Inappropriate Curriculum and Content	
• Inefficient school management; appointment of principals based on non-merit criteria • low teacher participation in decision-making • discrimination and lack of meritocracy; weakness in establishing a systematic system for responding to teacher complaints • waste of human capital • weakness in teacher empowerment programs	Weaknesses in human resource management:	
		Organizational

• lack of coaching • insufficient opportunities for teacher collaboration	Level
• Insufficient support and appreciation for teachers • low family support for teachers • decline in the social status of teachers	Cultural and social problems
• Inefficient recruitment and employment system • Weakness in the teacher selection process • Lack of interest and motivation towards the teaching profession	Weakness in Recruitment and Employment

The analysis of interview data indicates that the contexts of teachers' professional passivity emerge across three interconnected levels—organizational, management, and individual. At the organizational level, global themes such as inefficiencies in recruitment and hiring, structural weaknesses within the educational system, inadequacies in curriculum and educational content, ineffective human resource management, cultural pressures, and widespread economic difficulties collectively shape an environment that gradually undermines teachers' motivation and professional engagement. The organizing themes within this level—including weaknesses in teacher selection, flawed evaluation and supervision systems, lack of modern educational technologies, unattractive school environments, discrimination, absence of a systematic complaint-response mechanism, insufficient teacher empowerment programs, and poor communication structures—interact synergistically to create a system in which teachers experience declining autonomy, diminished professional value, and limited opportunities for growth. These structural and systemic deficiencies provide fertile ground for the emergence of passive professional behaviors, as the broader educational setting fails to support creativity, initiative-taking, and a sustained sense of purpose among teachers.

At the management and individual levels, the global themes of declining student academic motivation, economic and livelihood pressures, motivational depletion, and erosion of professional identity demonstrate that teachers' day-to-day experiences are shaped by a combination of administrative shortcomings and personal stressors. Organizing themes such as the appointment of school leaders based on non-meritocratic criteria, limited teacher participation in decision-making, lack of family and institutional support, inappropriate managerial practices, and the absence of professional independence contribute to a perception of unfairness, instability, and professional neglect. These managerial weaknesses, combined with individual-level challenges such as stress, loss of focus, and insufficient psychological resources, lead to behavioral patterns associated with professional passivity, including emotional withdrawal, reduced classroom initiative, and weakened commitment to instructional responsibilities. Ultimately, the findings suggest that professional passivity is not the result of isolated factors but emerges from the dynamic interplay of structural constraints, managerial inefficiencies, and personal challenges, which together shape a complex web of influences that suppress teachers' motivation and active engagement.

Question 2: What are the consequences of teachers' professional passivity?

Based on the coding of interview texts, the organizing and overarching themes of the consequences of teachers' professional passivity are presented in Table 2.

Table 3. Individual, Organizational, and Social Consequences

Organizing Theme	Overarching Themes
Sense of emptiness and aimlessness	Individual
Lack of professional identity Attrition of motivation	
Lack of self-confidence and motivation for advancement in teachers	
Weak job attachment Weakening of educational values	Social
Decline in the quality of education	
Poor performance	Organizational
Decline in social status (informal education) of a passive and inefficient generation	
Inefficient talent management	School-related
Low organizational commitment	

The analysis of interview data reveals that the consequences of teachers' professional passivity unfold across interconnected individual, organizational, and social domains, forming a systemic pattern of decline. At the individual level, the organizing themes of emptiness, loss of purpose, diminished professional identity, and motivational attrition converge into overarching themes such as weakened job attachment, reduced self-confidence, and the erosion of core educational values, which collectively diminish teachers' willingness to engage meaningfully in instructional activities. At the organizational level, themes such as declining educational quality, poor job performance, weak organizational commitment, and inefficient talent management indicate that passive professional behavior extends beyond personal disposition and directly affects school functioning, instructional coherence, and long-term human capital development. At the social level, consequences such as the informal decline of teachers' social status and the risk of nurturing a passive and inefficient student generation illustrate how teachers' professional withdrawal can reverberate beyond the school environment, contributing to weakened societal expectations of schooling and reduced trust in the educational system. Together, these organizing and overarching themes demonstrate that professional passivity is not merely an individual challenge but a multi-layered phenomenon that undermines teacher effectiveness, organizational vitality, and broader social outcomes.

Question 3: What are the strategies for teachers' professional disengagement?

Based on the coding of interview texts, the organizer and comprehensive strategies for teachers' professional disengagement are presented in Table No. (4).

Table 4. Strategies for Teachers' Professional Disengagement

Core Themes	Organizing Themes	Global Themes
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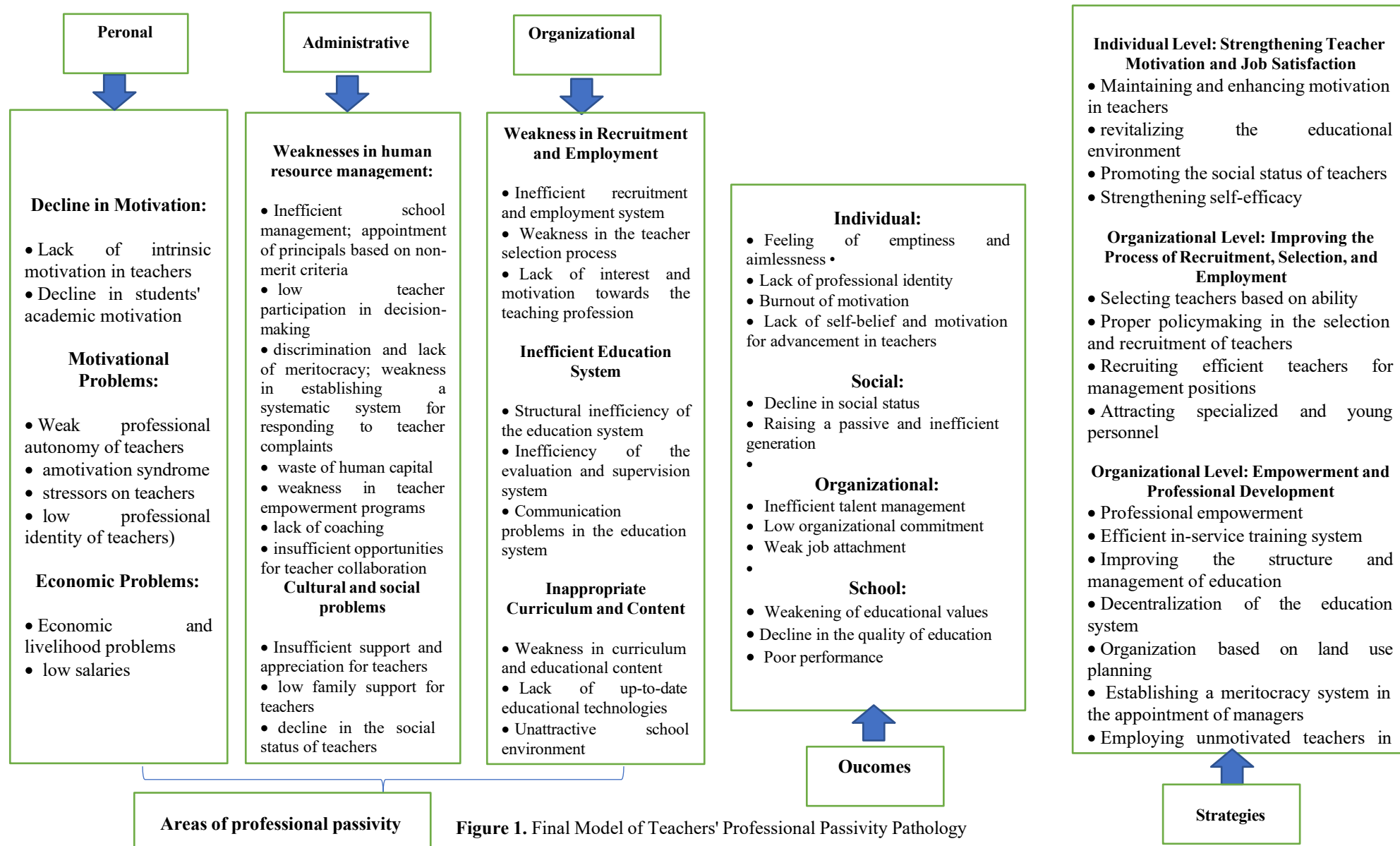
• Maintaining and enhancing motivation in teachers • revitalizing the educational environment • Promoting the social status of teachers • Strengthening self-efficacy	Strengthening teacher motivation and job satisfaction	Personal
• Selecting teachers based on ability • Proper policymaking in the selection and recruitment of teachers • Recruiting efficient teachers for management positions • Attracting specialized and young personnel	Improving the recruitment, selection, and hiring process	Organizational
• Professional empowerment • Efficient in-service training system • Improving the structure and management of education • Decentralization of the education system • Organization based on land use planning • Establishing a meritocracy system in the appointment of managers • Employing unmotivated teachers in non-teaching departments • Improving the quality of welfare services	Empowerment and professional development	

The findings indicate that effective strategies for reducing teachers' professional disengagement operate across personal and organizational domains, forming an integrated framework for revitalizing the teaching profession. At the personal level, the global theme of strengthening teacher motivation and job satisfaction is shaped by organizing strategies such as addressing teachers' material and spiritual needs, enhancing their social status, revitalizing the educational environment, and implementing targeted measures to boost morale and professional purpose. These strategies collectively aim to restore teachers' sense of value, meaning, and direction in their careers.

On the organizational side, the global themes of improving recruitment and selection processes and enhancing empowerment and professional development reveal that disengagement is closely tied to structural and managerial factors. Organizing strategies—including ability-based teacher selection, evidence-based policymaking in recruitment, appointing competent teachers to managerial roles, hiring specialized young personnel, and creating a meritocratic system in school leadership—highlight the need for systematic reforms in human resources. Furthermore, strategies such as decentralizing the educational system, optimizing organizational structures based on land-use planning, implementing efficient in-service training programs, and reallocating unmotivated teachers to non-instructional roles emphasize the necessity of aligning management practices with professional growth pathways. Together, these organizing and overarching strategies demonstrate that mitigating teacher disengagement requires both strengthening individual motivation and implementing structural reforms that ensure fairness, competence, and sustained professional development within the educational system.

Final Model of Teachers' Professional Passivity Pathology

Based on this model, teachers' professional passivity is the result of the interaction of multiple individual, structural, and systemic factors. These factors operate as a vicious cycle, each influencing the other. For example, weaknesses in the teacher recruitment and employment system lead to the entry of unmotivated individuals into the profession, which ultimately leads to a decline in the quality of education and a decrease in student motivation.



Analysis and Interpretation of the Overarching and Central Themes of the Organizational Level of Professional Passivity

Analysis and interpretation of the contexts of teachers' professional passivity indicate that this phenomenon depends on several factors, including weaknesses in recruitment and employment, inefficiency in the educational system, and problems in the curriculum and educational content. Regarding recruitment and employment, one of the main problems is the inefficiency of the teacher recruitment and employment system. One participant stated that "Many of the reasons for professional passivity are rooted in the personal and personality factors of individuals, and this stems from the fact that there is no systematic, codified, and planned screening and selection process for people who enter the teaching profession." Also, the weakness in the teacher selection process points to a lack of attention to their psychological and personality characteristics. One participant said: "Some people choose teaching from the beginning because teaching has a salary during their student years and job security, but later when they enter the teaching stage, they have neither interest nor skill." This disinterest and lack of motivation towards the teaching profession also points to the lack of motivation of teachers in performing their duties; as one participant stated: "They are not interested in further study on educational topics, they do not study the night before teaching, the school is more of a workplace, and they do not attend class with enthusiasm."

Regarding the inefficiency of the educational system, structural and managerial weaknesses in this system are clearly evident. One participant stated: "The main reason for the structural and managerial weakness in education is that education is not a priority in the country and that adequate funding is not allocated to equip schools with modern facilities." Also, the lack of efficient evaluation mechanisms and sufficient supervision of teachers' performance leads to demotivation and lack of effort in work. One participant said: "The lack of an efficient teacher performance evaluation mechanism and the lack of sufficient supervision of teachers leads to demotivation and lack of effort in work." Communication problems between teachers and students also contribute to professional passivity; as one participant stated: "The lack of enthusiasm in students and teachers, and an unattractive environment, can lead to disinterest and lack of motivation."

Analysis and interpretation of overarching and central themes at the management level regarding areas of professional disengagement:

Analysis and interpretation of overarching and central themes indicate that weaknesses in human resource management and socio-cultural problems are among the key factors in teachers' professional disengagement. Regarding weaknesses in human resource management, one of the fundamental problems is the lack of appropriate and efficient structures in the education system. One participant stated: "The main reason for structural and managerial weaknesses in education is the lack of prioritization of education in the country and the failure to allocate sufficient budget to equip schools with modern facilities." Moreover, inefficiency in educational management and the inability to guide teachers and students exacerbate this problem. One participant said: "Instead of creating opportunities for creativity, unqualified

managers are more focused on gaining the satisfaction of their superiors and the existing authority." The selection of managers based on non-meritocratic criteria also leads to teacher dissatisfaction. One participant stated: "The selection of incompetent individuals for management positions based on the opinion and interference of security institutions is very effective in creating dissatisfaction among teachers." The lack of teacher participation in decision-making processes also reduces their motivation, as one participant pointed out: "It is clear that a teacher who cannot participate in student curriculum planning undoubtedly lacks the motivation to teach and explain the taught lessons to students."

Discrimination and a lack of meritocracy in the workplace are other problems that teachers face. One participant stated: "Many teachers face injustice and unkindness from education administrators." Furthermore, the lack of an efficient system for addressing teachers' complaints and the inability to resolve their concerns contribute to greater dissatisfaction. One participant stated: "The inability to address teachers' concerns and disregard for their demands create dissatisfaction." The waste of human capital also refers to the inefficient use of teachers' abilities; as one participant stated: "The lack of proper encouragement and rewards for teachers leads to the waste of human capital."

In the area of cultural and social problems, a lack of support and appreciation for teachers' efforts severely impacts their motivation. One participant stated: "An organization's disregard for its employees can take away the motivation of subordinates and turn them into indifferent individuals in their work and profession." Also, the lack of family support for teachers and their humiliation due to low salaries negatively affect teachers' morale. One participant noted: "Being humiliated by family due to low salaries can negatively affect a teacher's morale."

The decline in teachers' social status also relates to the decrease in their credibility and standing in society. One participant stated: "The status and position of instructors and teachers have declined in society, given the issues mentioned, and this disregard has, in a way, influenced the view of society and the community towards teachers." Overall, this analysis shows that teachers' professional passivity depends on several factors that require serious attention and reform.

Analysis and Interpretation of Pervasive and Central Themes at the Individual Level Regarding Professional Passivity

The analysis and interpretation of pervasive and central themes reveal that declining student motivation and teachers' motivational problems are key factors in teachers' professional passivity. Declining student motivation refers to students' lack of motivation towards certain subjects. One participant stated: "Students' lack of motivation towards certain subjects causes them to have difficulty in learning and academic progress." This situation not only affects students' performance but can also lead to a decline in the quality of education.

In the context of teachers' motivational problems, the lack of professional autonomy is a significant issue. One participant noted: "Lack of autonomy in the teaching process makes teachers feel frustrated and lose their motivation." Additionally, teacher burnout also leads to

a decrease in their motivation. One participant stated: "Teachers' burnout makes it difficult for them to perform their duties and lose their motivation."

Stressful factors on teachers also exacerbate these problems. One participant said: "Stressful factors on teachers make it difficult for them to perform their duties and lose their motivation." Lack of teacher focus in the classroom and a lack of professional identity are other problems that affect their motivation. One participant stated: "The lack of professional identity of teachers makes it difficult for them to perform their duties and lose their motivation."

In addition, economic and livelihood problems also affect teachers' professional passivity. One participant pointed out: "Unfavorable economic conditions and low salaries and material benefits relative to the level of education and activity make teachers feel dissatisfied and lose their motivation."

Analysis and Interpretation of the Consequences of Professional Passivity

Analysis and interpretation of overarching and central themes reveal that teachers' professional passivity has profound effects on their individual, social, organizational, and school-related aspects. At the individual level, a feeling of emptiness and aimlessness is one of the main problems teachers face. One participant stated: "The feeling of the futility of teaching and disappointment in the ineffectiveness of efforts causes teachers to feel empty." Also, the lack of professional identity of teachers indicates the lack of realization of their independent identity. One participant said: "Teachers who suffer from a lack of professional identity usually look for second and third jobs and do not enjoy their work environment." Burnout and reduced energy in teachers performing job duties are other problems that affect the quality of education. One participant pointed out: "Burnout causes teachers to become indifferent to the interests and feelings of students, and as a result, the quality of education decreases."

At the social level, the decline in the social status of teachers is related to the decrease in their credibility and status in society. One participant stated: "The decline in the social status of teachers causes them not to be properly accepted by students and society." This situation can lead to the training of a passive and inefficient generation. One participant pointed out: "Training a passive and inefficient generation due to the lack of motivation of teachers can lead to illiteracy and the inability of students."

At the organizational level, inefficient talent management and low organizational commitment are other problems that affect teachers' professional passivity. One participant stated: "Inefficient talent management causes students to become illiterate and unmotivated, and this problem continues into the next generation." Also, the weak job attachment of teachers indicates their lack of ownership and belonging to education. One participant said: "Weak job attachment causes teachers not to feel responsible, and as a result, their efficiency decreases."

At the school level, the erosion of educational values and the decline in the quality of education are other consequences of teachers' professional passivity. One participant stated: "The weakening of educational values causes students to become uninterested in learning

lessons, and as a result, the quality of education decreases." Also, poor performance of teachers in their jobs and professions is related to their inattention to their work. One participant noted: "Poor performance causes teachers to become inattentive to their jobs, and as a result, their efficiency decreases."

Analysis and Interpretation of Strategies to Reduce Professional Passivity

The proposed strategies to reduce teachers' professional passivity are divided into several key areas, each of which can help improve the situation of teachers and the quality of education. Strengthening teachers' motivation and job satisfaction by maintaining and promoting motivation, meeting material and spiritual needs, enhancing the social status of teachers, and revitalizing the educational environment can lead to a positive and motivating environment for teachers. Improving the process of attracting, selecting, and hiring teachers by choosing them based on competence and sound policymaking in this area helps to attract efficient and specialized teachers, ultimately leading to improved quality of education. Empowering and developing teachers professionally through effective in-service training courses and decentralizing the education system allows teachers to update their skills and participate in decision-making processes. Also, organization based on land use planning and the establishment of a meritocracy system in the appointment of managers can help improve educational management and increase teacher efficiency. Finally, improving the working and welfare conditions of teachers by improving the quality of welfare services can lead to increased job satisfaction and reduced professional passivity. Overall, these solutions act synergistically and can help create an efficient and dynamic education system.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that teachers' professional passivity is not a simple individual trait but a multi-layered phenomenon emerging from the dynamic interaction of organizational, managerial, and individual factors. This aligns with the theoretical foundation where it was emphasized that the overall quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers (Sheron & Kaur, 2022; Datnow, 2020). Specifically, the emergence of passivity as a coping mechanism in this study resonates with the findings of Pierzchała et al. (2021), who argued that teacher passivity is often a cross-cultural response to perceived educational stagnation. By identifying the "Three-Level Model," this research extends the work of Schiff and Schiff (1971) regarding the psychological roots of passivity into the broader organizational context of the Kurdistan educational system.

At the organizational level, the findings indicate that weaknesses in teacher recruitment and the absence of effective performance evaluation systems create structural conditions that diminish teachers' agency. These results are consistent with Mo and Morris (2024) and Sahito and Vaisanen (2020), who highlighted that inadequate policy design in developing contexts gradually undermines professional commitment. Furthermore, the lack of structured professional development identified in our study aligns with Appova and Arbaugh's (2018) assertion that when teachers perceive a lack of support for growth, their motivation to remain professionally active significantly declines.

At the managerial level, the data show that school leadership functions as a critical mediator. Our finding that non-meritocratic appointments and lack of teacher participation lead to passivity directly supports the arguments of Harris and Jones (2010) regarding the necessity of professional learning communities and participatory leadership. When school administrators fail to create an inclusive environment, teachers retreat into “professional isolation,” a key component of the passivity model identified in this research.

At the individual level, declining student motivation and teacher burnout emerged as key factors. These findings correspond with established literature on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and job performance (Gottfried et al., 2025; Lampert et al., 2025). The results suggest that in Kurdistan, economic pressures and limited autonomy have transformed professional identity into a “survivalist” identity, mirroring the “mid-career disengagement” stage described in vocational development theories.

Conclusions

In response to the primary research question regarding the pathology of professional passivity, this study concludes that passivity is a systemic outcome rather than an individual failure. The “Three-Level Model” provides a clear answer: passivity is triggered at the (1) Organizational level through structural inefficiencies, amplified at the (2) Managerial level through leadership failures, and finally manifested at the (3) Individual level through psychological withdrawal and reduced instructional quality. This hierarchy suggests that any intervention focusing solely on individual teacher motivation without addressing the administrative and structural layers will likely fail.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, the geographic focus on Kurdistan Province may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sociocultural contexts in Iran. Second, the qualitative nature of the study prevents the establishment of causal relationships between the identified factors. Future researchers are encouraged to develop a quantitative instrument based on this three-level model to test its validity across a larger, national sample. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how the transition from active to passive professional behavior occurs over a teacher’s career span. Finally, investigating the role of digital transformation and ICT integration in either alleviating or exacerbating teacher passivity remains a vital area for future inquiry.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, and any form of misconduct.

Data availability statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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