

A Study on the Reasons and Potential Psychological Impacts of the Differences between the Primary School Teachers' Teaching Styles in Regular Class and Open Class in Chinese Mainland

—An Exploration Based on Interviews and Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

In Chinese Mainland, primary school teachers usually need to attend many types of open classes in addition to regular classes on weekdays. And these primary school teachers usually have very different teaching styles in regular classes and open classes. This research adopts qualitative research methods, through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 100 primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland, builds an analytical framework based on grounded theory, and systematically explains the differences and reasons of teaching styles in the context of regular classes and open classes. At the same time, this research further reveals the unique impacts on the growth and development of primary school students by combining educational psychology theory. This study not only constructs a teacher behavior explanation framework applicable to the context of primary education in theory, but also provides critical reflection and specific suggestions for teacher professional development and optimization of the primary education system in practice.

Keywords

Chinese Mainland, Primary School Teachers, Teaching Style, Psychological Development of Primary School Students, Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

In the primary education ecology of Chinese Mainland, a phenomenon worth thinking about is widespread: many primary school teachers present completely different teaching styles in regular classes and open classes. In regular classes, they may look tired, speak quickly, and even frequently criticize students; In open classes, the same teacher may be creative and often encourage students. This phenomenon is particularly noteworthy during the primary school stage, as primary school students are in a critical period of cognitive development and are highly sensitive to teachers' behavior. The words and actions of teachers directly affect children's learning motivation, self-concept, and emotional safety. The primary school stage (around 6 - 12 years old) is a critical period for children's cognitive, emotional, and social skills development. Piaget's theory of cognitive development states that primary school students are in the concrete operational stage, and their thinking needs the support of concrete things. Their understanding of abstract concepts relies on direct experience (Piaget, 1970).

This means that the teaching methods of primary school teachers must be concrete and contextualized, and simply "cramming" is difficult to promote true cognitive construction. At the level of emotional development, Erikson's psychosocial theory positions elementary school as a critical period of "Industry vs. inferiority" (Erikson, 1950). Children establish a sense of self-worth through academic achievement and social recognition at this stage, and the feedback from teachers directly affects the formation of their self-concept. Frequent criticism may lead to learned helplessness in children, while moderate encouragement can cultivate their sense of competence. At the level of moral development, Kohlberg pointed out that elementary school students are often in the transition stage from "pre-conventional level" to "conventional level", and their adherence to rules is mainly based on obedience to authority and avoidance of punishment (Kohlberg, 1981). Therefore, the disciplinary management style of primary school teachers not only affects classroom order, but also shapes children's initial understanding of the "rule and authority" relationship. It is precisely because of these features in the development of primary school students that the differences in teaching styles of primary school teachers may have a much more profound impact on them than in middle school or university. When teachers present completely different styles in two situations, primary school students may face cognitive dissonance—Which one is the "real teacher"? What kind of behavior is truly correct?

However, this phenomenon is not simply a matter of personal teaching style, but it has profound institutional roots behind it. The evaluation criteria for open classes highly emphasize the novelty of teaching forms and the harmony of teacher-student interaction, which is clearly disconnected from the complex reality of daily teaching; and teachers generally lack effective external support and professional feedback in their regular classes, which further exacerbates the behavioral differentiation in the two situations. What is more noteworthy is that the systematic empirical research on this phenomenon in academia is still relatively weak, espe-

cially the exploration of teachers' subjective experience and its impact on primary school students' psychology is extremely lacking. This research used the qualitative research path to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with 100 primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland, and based on this, built an analytical framework based on grounded theory to systematically explore the differences and reasons of teaching style differences between regular class and open class. At the same time, the study combines educational psychology theory to further reveal its unique impact on the growth and development of primary school students. In terms of theory, this study combines educational psychology theory to reveal the deep interaction between teacher behavior and child development. In terms of practice, this study provides empirical evidence for optimizing the evaluation system for primary school teachers and reforming the training mode for teacher trainees, ultimately serving the real development needs of primary school students. Based on the above analysis, this study raises these core questions: (1) What are the differences in the teaching styles of primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland in the two situations of regular classes and open classes? (2) What is the reason for this difference? What potential impact will these reasons have on the growth and development of primary school students?

2. Literature Review

In recent years, the research on primary education in Chinese Mainland has gradually enriched, covering classroom teaching, teacher development, student psychology and other dimensions. However, there is still a lack of systematic research on the differences in primary school teachers' teaching styles between regular and open classes. Although some progress has been made in teaching strategies for open and regular classes in existing research, many of them consider daily and open classes as relatively independent research objects, lacking comparative analysis of the differences in teaching styles between the two, especially the differences within the same teacher group and their potential impact on primary school students. There is still a clear research gap. Based on this, this literature review will systematically review existing research from the following three aspects: (1) research on open classes; (2) Research on regular classes; (3) Research on primary education. Through critical review, identify the shortcomings of current research and provide a basis for constructing the theoretical framework of this study.

2.1. Research on Open Classes

Open classes are classroom activities centered on teaching demonstrations and open to specific audiences (Duan & Xiong, 2023). In recent years, the research on open classes mainly includes: (1) Research on the problems of open classes. For example, open classes sometimes rely too much on rehearsals (Jin, 2022), open classes sometimes do not give every student equal opportunities to perform (Zhou, 2022), and some teachers may overlook some preparation work before open classes (Gao, 2022). (2) Research on methods for open classes. For example, teachers

participating in open classes should learn from each other (Kager, Jurczok, Bolli, & Vock, 2022), teachers should focus on interaction with students (Nguyen & Tran, 2023), and teachers can learn from the high-quality open classes (Xu, 2018). (3) Research on the significance of open classes. For example, open classes are beneficial for excellent educators to learn from each other (Sun & Zhu, 2026), some excellent educational concepts in open classes can be helpful for daily education (Inprasitha, 2022), and the experience of open classes can inspire educational practice (Liao & Chen, 2026).

Overall, existing research on open classes presents a distinct “instrumental rationality” orientation: academia sees them more as a “means” or “platform” to enhance teaching skills, promote peer communication, or achieve teacher professional growth, with research focusing on their organizational strategies, implementation methods, and functional benefits. However, behind this mainstream discourse lies a cautionary assumption that open classes are inherently positive and neutral, and therefore there is relatively little research that critically reflects on the “performative context” they construct. Specifically, existing literature has generally overlooked two key issues: firstly, how does the inherent evaluation logic of open classes, as a highly scrutinized institutionalized scenario, reshape teachers’ classroom behavior choices? Secondly, when teachers deliberately adjust their teaching style in this scenario, what implicit impact does this adjustment itself have on the cognitive experience and emotional safety of primary school students? The absence of these issues has led to a methodological bias towards operability in open course research, while the theoretical depth is relatively weak, failing to address the structural driving forces behind differences in teaching styles and the costs of children’s development.

2.2. Research on Regular Classes

Regular classes are daily classroom activities that systematically achieve semester teaching objectives within the classroom based on curriculum standards and a fixed schedule (Zhang, 2026). In recent years, the research on regular classes mainly includes: (1) Research on problems of regular classes. For example, teachers sometimes neglect interaction with students in regular classes (Zeng, 2022), and sometimes overlook inspiring elements in regular classes (Sun, 2025). (2) Research on the methods of regular classes. For example, teachers need to pay attention to managing emotions (Wang, 2025), teachers need to focus on classroom reflection skills (Miulescu & Tacea, 2023). (3) Research on the significance of regular classes. For example, effective guidance from teachers in regular classes can help stimulate students’ interest in learning (Wang, 2026), effective regular classes can cultivate students’ sentiments (Lv & Lu, 2026), and good regular classes can improve students’ communication skills (Su, 2025).

Based on the literature above, it can be seen that the research on regular courses complements the research on open courses in terms of themes: the former focuses on the difficulties, strategies, and values in daily teaching, while the latter focuses

on optimization and presentation in special contexts. However, this complementarity did not bring about a systematic comparison of the two classroom forms, but rather to some extent consolidated their academic assumptions as “two parallel worlds”. The majority of research on regular courses adopts a pragmatic approach of “problem countermeasure”, which diagnoses deficiencies in daily teaching and proposes improvement plans. Its logical premise is to regard regular courses as the “norm” that needs to be optimized. This premise precisely conceals a more fundamental fact: regular classes are not simply teaching practice fields, but also real work situations where teachers bear institutional pressure and compromise their survival. Therefore, existing research on teacher behavior in regular classes often stays at the normative discussion level of “should be”, and there is less exploration of why their teaching style tends to prioritize efficiency, emotional suppression, and control orientation from the teacher’s “actual” experience. The lack of this analytical perspective makes it difficult for regular course research to explain why teachers continue to adopt and rationalize certain teaching methods despite knowing they are not ideal enough.

2.3. Research on Primary Education

In recent years, research on primary education mainly includes: (1) Research on primary school teaching methods. For example, education should be based on students’ personality traits (Du, 2023), good teacher-student relationships should be cultivated (Zhang, 2025), and students’ interest in learning should be stimulated (Hendratno, Yermiandhoko, & Yasin, 2022). (2) Research on Primary School Classroom Management. For example, classroom management should be based on the psychological characteristics of primary school students (Du, 2026), and attention should be paid to humanistic care in the management process (Jiu, 2025). Teachers should develop reasonable classroom management rules (Zainuddin & Hardiansyah, 2023). (3) Research on Psychological Stress of Primary School Students. For example, various innovative ways should be adopted to alleviate the psychological pressure on primary school students (Geng, 2025), excessive learning tasks may cause psychological pressure on primary school students (Qin, 2025), and physical exercise can sometimes alleviate the psychological pressure on primary school students (Tan, 2024).

However, these studies lack a systematic analysis and summary of the psychological characteristics of primary school students while comparing open classes with regular classes in primary education. The prominent feature of existing research in the field of primary education is the explicitization of the “child centered” perspective: scholars generally agree that the primary school stage is a critical period for cognitive, emotional, and social development, and therefore emphasize that teaching methods should be in line with students’ psychological characteristics, classroom management should permeate humanistic care, and academic burden should be controlled within a reasonable range. This research orientation undoubtedly has progressive significance in terms of values, but it also implies a methodological narrowness, that is, the research attention is almost en-

tirely focused on the one-way relationship of “how teachers should treat children”, and there is less questioning of “how teachers’ own situations affect their way of treating children”. Specifically, when existing research discusses teacher behavior, it is often seen as an independent variable that can be intervened and optimized, but teachers are rarely examined in a larger institutional context to ask why a teacher who is accustomed to criticizing students in daily classes can show patience and encouragement in open classes? This contrast suggests that teachers’ “child centered” behavior may not stem from stable educational beliefs, but rather from situational pressures. Therefore, although existing research on primary education provides a rich knowledge foundation for understanding children’s development, there are still significant explanatory limitations in explaining the inconsistency of teacher behavior before and after and its complex impact on children. However, these studies lack a systematic analysis and summary of the psychological characteristics of primary school students while comparing open classes with regular classes in primary education.

In summary, existing research has accumulated some achievements in the organizational form of open classes, teaching strategies of regular classes, and classroom management of primary education, providing some theoretical basis and empirical reference for this study. However, there are still three research gaps: firstly, existing studies mostly focus on single contexts of open or regular classes, lacking a systematic comparison of the differences in teaching styles of the same teacher in two contexts; Secondly, although there have been studies mentioning the behavioral changes of teachers in different classrooms, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the institutional, psychological, and structural causes behind them; Thirdly, existing research has generally overlooked the potential impact of differences in teacher teaching styles on the psychological development of primary school students, such as self-concept, emotional safety, cognitive consistency, etc. Therefore, through qualitative interviews and grounded theory, this research intends to systematically explore the reason and the potential impact on primary school students’ development of the differences in teaching styles between regular lessons and public lessons of primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland, so as to fill the above research gaps, provide theoretical basis and practical enlightenment for building a teacher development and student support system that is more suitable for educational reality, and also provide unique theoretical supplement and practical guidance for research in similar fields in other countries in the world.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research method, and through in-depth semi-structured interviews, captures the real experience, specific behavior choices and internal psychological mechanism of primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland under the two teaching situations of regular classes and open classes. The study adopts grounded theory as the methodological framework for data analysis

and theoretical construction, aiming to extract systematic explanations about differences in teaching styles and their reasons from teachers' practical discourse.

3.2. Research Subject

The subjects were 100 in-service primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland. Participants came from different cities and schools in Chinese Mainland, striving for diversity and representativeness of the sample. Among them, there are 38 male teachers and 62 female teachers, 84 of whom have bachelor's degrees, 14 have master's degrees, and 2 have doctoral degrees. The teaching experience of teachers ranges from 1 year to 34 years, with an average of 12 years of teaching experience. And the participants come from different places (eastern/western/northern/southern) and different types of schools (urban schools/rural schools), ensuring the richness of the sample. The inclusion criteria are: teachers are in-service primary school teachers; The teacher has at least 1 year or more of teaching experience, with experience in both regular and open classes; Teachers are willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share their real teaching experiences (Table 1).

Table 1. The information of sampling subjects.

Investigation dimension	Specific categories	Number
Total sample size	Primary school in-service teachers in Chinese Mainland	100
Gender	Male	38
	Female	62
Education level	Bachelor's degree	84
	Master's degree	14
	Doctoral degree	2
Years of teaching experience	Maximum	34
	Minimum	1
	Average	12

3.3. Sampling Method

Adopting a strategy that combines purposive sampling with variational sampling. Firstly, according to the research objectives, core sampling criteria are set, requiring teachers to have dual teaching experience in both regular and open classes, and be able to compare their experiences in the two contexts; Secondly, pursuing maximum variation in dimensions such as area to capture the commonalities and differences in teacher experiences across different backgrounds, ensuring the richness of sample information.

3.4. Data Collection

Adopting a semi-structured in-depth interview outline. The core of the outline

focuses on asking teachers to provide detailed descriptions of typical teaching experiences in both regular and open classes, including teaching behaviors and student comments. Open question design encourages respondents to fully describe details and feelings, ensuring the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in a quiet and private environment (offline or online). The interview duration for each interviewee is about 45 to 60 minutes, with an average of about 50 minutes. All interviews were fully recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim into text. The transcript is verified and confirmed by the interviewee to ensure accuracy.

3.5. Data Analysis

This study conducted a three-level coding analysis on 100 interview transcripts based on the systematical analysis of grounded theory. Three-level coding is one of the common methods in qualitative research, which usually requires following these rules: in the open coding stage, researchers need to identify and extract initial code phrases from the original interview contents; In the axial coding stage, researchers need to gradually categorize topics; In the selective coding stage, researchers need to identify the hidden storylines behind the code (Lin, 2021). The specific steps are as follows:

3.5.1. Open Coding

The main function of this stage is to extract rich initial code for this article. At this stage, the researcher carefully read each transcript of the interview word for word, and decomposed, compared, and conceptualized the raw data. The researcher marked all the original information points related to “regular class teaching behavior” “open class teaching behavior” “situational difference perception” “student reaction observation” “institutional pressure perception” and so on. For example, labeling phenomena such as “being able to complete a large number of teaching tasks during regular classes is already good”, “having to pretend to be gentle in open classes”, and “leaders hardly care about my performance in regular classes” as initial concepts.

3.5.2. Axial Coding

At this stage, the initial code is classified, compared, and correlated to identify higher-level categories and themes, and to determine the overall framework of the article’s core findings. For example, aggregating codes such as “speaking too fast”, “ignoring student questions”, and “skipping non key content” into the category of “prioritizing knowledge transfer efficiency”. Through the axial coding, several main categories have gradually been formed, including “survival logic in regular classes”, “evaluation logic in open classes”, “emotional labor and emotional isolation”, “institutional pressure and self-regulation”, etc.

3.5.3. Selective Coding

At this stage, determine the specific content and storyline between each major

theme category, and conduct integrated analysis and specific description. Based on the results of axial coding, this study systematically integrates core phenomena and constructs core categories with inherent consistency and explanatory power. Through continuous comparison and thinking, the core category of this study was ultimately extracted: “Dual track teaching style differentiation driven by evaluation system”. On this basis, forming a main storyline that runs through the data: teachers follow the survival logic of efficiency first in regular classes and the evaluation logic of impression first in open classes. The tension between the two is triggered by the evaluation system, accompanied by significant emotional labor and child development costs.

3.6. Reliability and Validity Guarantee

3.6.1. Peer Debriefing

During the analysis process, another researcher with qualitative research experience was invited to independently code the transcribed text, compare the coding results, and discuss consensus to ensure the reliability of the study.

3.6.2. Member Checking

Provide preliminary analysis results or key interpretations to some participants to confirm whether they accurately reflect their experiences and intentions, ensuring consistency between the analysis results and the respondents’ real experiences, and ensuring the validity of the results.

3.6.3. Rich Citation of Raw Data

When presenting research results, many quotes from interviews are used as evidence to make the analysis process traceable.

3.6.4. Saturation

The addition of further data revealed no new theoretical constructs, confirming good saturation.

4. Key Findings

4.1. Differences and Potential Psychological Impacts of Teachers’ Teaching Styles in Different Contexts

Teaching style refers to the unique classroom behavior patterns and individual expression methods of teachers (Xu & Li, 2022). This study finds that teachers’ teaching styles in open classes and regular classes mainly differ in three aspects.

4.1.1. The Teaching Style and Potential Impacts in Regular Classes

(1) The transmission of knowledge: tradition and indoctrination

In the regular class, which lacks the pressure of external observation and evaluation, teachers generally tend to adopt the traditional teaching mode with the core feature of one-way transmission of knowledge. The choice of this mode does not originate from teachers’ active belief in a certain teaching concept, but its “efficiency first” strategy formed under the realistic constraints of heavy teaching

tasks and limited classroom time—teachers need to complete the established goal of knowledge coverage within the specified semester, so they have to simplify teaching to the rapid transmission of knowledge points and mechanical training, and sacrifice more constructive teaching links such as interaction, exploration and experience. For example:

“It is already good to be able to complete a large number of teaching tasks during class. If interesting teaching methods such as games are used, it will consume more time and easily lead to students being distracted. Traditional indoctrination teaching is still more efficient. Some students complained that this teaching method was boring and unappealing, but I think it saves the most time”. (F07, 8 years of teaching experience)

From Piaget’s theoretical perspective, this indoctrination style of teaching conflicts with the cognitive characteristics of primary school students in specific operational stages (Piaget, 1970). Primary school students need to construct knowledge through experience and interaction, and simply listening to lectures is difficult to promote deep understanding. When teachers adopt rote learning for a long time, students may develop passive learning habits and lose interest in exploration. A more profound impact is that this teaching model subtly conveys to students a misconception about “learning” itself—learning is narrowed down to passive acceptance and mechanical memory, rather than active exploration and meaning construction. Once this cognitive schema is solidified, it will affect students’ understanding of complex knowledge and their choice of learning strategies in higher education.

(2) Discipline Management: criticism and punishment

In the relatively closed and lack of external supervision and immediate feedback teaching field of regular classes, teachers usually tend to use direct and intimidating management methods when facing classroom discipline issues. This strict management style is rooted in teachers’ practical assessment of “efficiency”—although gentle persuasion or positive incentives conform to educational ideals, in situations where time is tight and there are many students, direct and strong criticism can quickly quell classroom chaos, restore teaching order, and minimize the interference of discipline issues on teaching progress. For example:

“Although many books in educational psychology tell us to be patient with students, in daily teaching, directly and severely criticizing students is the most efficient way of management, and some of my colleagues even physically punish students. Indeed, some mischievous students became less outgoing after being criticized frequently, but I think criticism is also to help students grow into good people”. (M10, 15 years of teaching experience)

According to Erikson’s theory, the primary school stage is a critical period for the formation of “industry vs. inferiority” (Erikson, 1950). Frequent criticism may lead children to attribute failure to their own abilities, resulting in learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Moreover, children who are exposed to harsh criticism for a long time may gradually internalize teachers’ negative evaluations into neg-

ative self-awareness. Once this core belief of “I am not good enough” and “I am not accepted” is formed, it will transcend specific classroom contexts, extend to peer interaction, extracurricular activities, and even broader social participation, posing a potential threat to children’s overall social development.

(3) Emotional investment: fatigue and isolation

In the long-term face of repetitive teaching tasks and continuous disciplinary pressure in regular classes, teachers’ emotional resources are constantly consumed, gradually showing a psychological state of emotional exhaustion and emotional detachment. They begin to develop a psychological self-protection mechanism, that is, actively reducing emotional investment in classroom details, consciously “separating” teaching activities from personal emotional domains, in order to cope with the accumulated fatigue and powerlessness in daily work. For example:

“I sometimes subconsciously isolate myself from the classroom in my regular classes, telling myself ‘this is just a job’, not to care too much about details, and not to perform so well. Some students have expressed their fear of my indifference, but I think they just need to learn the knowledge well”. (F14, 6 years of teaching experience)

The potential impact of emotional isolation on primary school students cannot be ignored. From the perspective of child psychology, primary school students are in a sensitive period towards the emotions of their main guardians such as teachers (Zhang, 2011). When teachers show indifference and alienation, children may interpret it as “teachers do not like me”, which affects their sense of belonging to the school. What is more noteworthy is that the primary school stage is a critical period for children to construct their sense of self-worth through emotional feedback from important others. As the most important emotional reference object in the school environment, teachers’ indifferent attitude not only weakens the emotional security of the classroom, but also may interrupt the establishment process of children’s basic belief that “school is a trustworthy growth space”, thus having a subtle but lasting negative impact on their long-term learning motivation and mental health.

4.1.2. The Teaching Style and Potential Impacts in Open Classes

(1) Knowledge transmission: novelty and creativity

In the highly scrutinized teaching scene of open classes, teachers are directly guided by evaluation criteria such as “innovative teaching methods”, “highlights of classroom design”, and “student participation”. Therefore, they will deliberately break through the conventional mode of daily classes, invest a lot of energy in designing novel, vivid, visually impactful, and participatory special teaching activities, and strive to present a creative atmosphere that is completely different from daily life, in order to meet the evaluators’ imagination and expectations of the “ideal classroom”. For example:

“I think open classes require an idealized classroom, but in reality we face many complex situations. The evaluation system of open classes usually places great em-

phasis on creativity, and I have to think about arranging interesting teaching activities, such as increasing creative interaction with students. Some students told me that every open class is like a drama, but in order to achieve promotion and other goals, I can only do so". (F32, 11 years of teaching experience)

From Vygotsky's theory, teachers should make good use of the "zone of proximal development" to interact and teach with students (Vygotsky et al., 1962). However, the "interaction" in demonstration classes is often a pre-set "pseudo interaction", whose purpose is not to solve students' real confusion, but to satisfy evaluators' imagination of the "ideal classroom". Elementary school students may feel this falsehood, but they cannot express it and can only cooperate with the performance. On a deeper level, when children repeatedly experience the huge contrast between the liveliness of open classes and the dullness of daily classes, their basic understanding of what the classroom should look like is constantly disrupted—this cognitive instability may make them doubt the significance of teaching activities, believing that the "excitement" in the classroom is just temporary performance rather than real learning, and thus hold a reserved attitude towards any teaching innovation of teachers, which undoubtedly goes against the original intention of "demonstration and guidance" in open classes.

(2) Discipline management: encouragement and patience

In the context of evaluating open classes, "respecting students", "positive motivation", and "creating a harmonious classroom atmosphere" are considered important observation indicators for measuring teacher competence. Therefore, when teachers face students' mistakes or minor chaos in the classroom, they consciously restrain their instinctive reactions at the emotional level and instead show extraordinary gentleness, tolerance, and patience, in order to shape a good teacher-student interaction image that meets the expectations of the evaluators. For example:

"Once in an open class, there was a student who didn't answer a very simple math question correctly. If it were in a regular class, I would definitely criticize him seriously, but the evaluation section of the open class emphasized patience and had to pretend to be gentle to comfort the students. Many of my students felt that my performance in the open class was like that of an actor, not real enough". (M21, 5 years of teaching experience)

From the perspective of developmental psychology, primary school students' cognition is in a critical developmental stage (Shaffer, 1988), and if teachers exhibit such significant differences, it may indirectly lead to cognitive dissonance in children. It is particularly alarming that when students communicate their confusion about teacher behavior with peers, public classes may become a topic material for them to privately discuss "which face of the teacher is real"—once this discussion is formed, the authoritative image and emotional connection established by the teacher in daily classes will be questioned, and students will no longer see the teacher as a stable educator, but as a "performer" whose role changes with the situation, which constitutes a hidden but persistent erosion of the deep trust in

the teacher-student relationship.

(3) Emotional investment: care and warmth

In open classes, teachers deliberately strengthen their attention and positive feedback on students' individual states, actively creating an emotional atmosphere full of care, warmth, and support. This is in stark contrast to the emotional isolation in daily classes—teachers not only pay more attention to students' subtle expressions, but also convey signals of “being valued” and “being cared for” to students through words and actions, in order to meet the implicit expectation of “teacher-student emotional connection” in open class evaluations. For example:

“When I found a student sleeping in an open class, I gently asked if that student was feeling unwell. But if I find a student sleeping in a regular class, I am likely to ignore that student, and I think it's usually just that the student is lazy. But actually, paying attention to details is really tiring, and my emotions are also very tired. My students seem to think that my performance in open class is more exciting and meticulous, and some students are also not accustomed to the obvious contrast in my emotions. But this is also because my promotion is more clearly related to open class, and my leaders hardly care about my performance in regular class”. (F58, 15 years of teaching experience)

From the perspective of child psychology, primary school children are in an important period of cultivating and developing self-esteem and confidence (Rahmawati, Muhimmah, & Puspita, 2025). If teachers show obvious emotional contrasts, it may lead to a lack of confidence and security in primary school students. A more complex impact is that when teachers show extra care and warmth in public classes, some students may not feel valued for it, but instead develop a sense of vigilance and suspicion that the teacher is pretending today, not sincere. This psychological defense interprets the teacher's positive emotions as a “strategic performance” rather than sincere care. Once it takes root in the hearts of children, it will weaken the credibility of all subsequent emotional expressions of the teacher, making it more difficult for children to obtain the emotional support and psychological security they should have from the teacher-student relationship.

4.2. Reasons of Differences

4.2.1. Institutionalized Regulation of Social Expectations

According to Foucault's psychological concept of discipline, discipline shapes a compliant body through hierarchical monitoring, standardized judgment, and examination (Foucault, 1977). Open classes are precisely like such a mechanism, where teachers are in a state of being “scrutinized” during the open class, especially in the open parity stage of the open class, which constitutes a standardized judgment. Teachers will internalize external standards as self-regulation. Moreover, from the perspective of social expectation, teachers often play the role of teachers who meet social expectations in open classes. However, when they leave the public eye and supervision in regular classes, they often unconsciously show their more authentic side.

4.2.2. The Survival Compromise of Self Goals

There is a tension between the ideal teaching goals of teachers (inspiring interest, cultivating personality) and their realistic survival goals (completing progress, coping with exams) (Lin, 2026). For example:

“I used to want to make every class as interesting as an open class, but it caused students to lose focus and increased the difficulty of discipline management. Later, I stopped doing that and had to survive in the face of reality”. (M46, 4 years of teaching experience)

4.2.3. The Contradiction between Evaluation System and Real Needs

The current evaluation standards for open classes are based on the imagination of the “ideal class” (Feng, 2026), which has a obvious gap with the reality of daily teaching. For example, there are usually more students in the classroom and some unpredictable special situations in regular class (Abu-Gweder, 2025). Under this gap, some teachers tend to use two ways to survive: to be fake in open classes to meet the standards, and to be real in regular classes to cope with reality.

5. Discussion

Through in-depth interviews and grounded theoretical analysis of 100 primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland, this research systematically reveals a phenomenon that is widely known in educational practice but rarely explored in depth: primary school teachers show a systematic differentiation of teaching style between daily classes and open classes. In this chapter, it will examine the research from a broader theoretical perspective and educational reality. On the one hand, it will analyze the deeper implications of the research findings, and on the other hand, it will reflect on the limitations and boundaries of the research itself.

5.1. The Logic of Teacher Behavior in the Context of Institutions

The findings of this study should first be understood in the context of the unique educational system in Chinese Mainland. The open class system plays multiple roles in China’s basic education system: it is not only a platform for teachers to communicate professionally, but also an important means of teaching evaluation (Cheng & Xi, 2026), and a key basis for professional title promotion. This ‘high stakes’ attribute has transformed open classes from a teaching and discussion activity into a highly ceremonial performance scene. In this scenario, the behavior choices of teachers are not based on their professional judgment of “what is good teaching”, but on their strategic judgment of “what evaluators expect to see”. It is worth noting that the disciplinary effect of this institutional logic on teachers does not stop at open classes themselves (Cheng & Qin, 2025). When teachers repeatedly practice an “ideal teaching” that meets external standards in open classes, they do not internalize this behavior pattern as a stable teaching belief or habit. On the contrary, most of the interviewed teachers explicitly stated that the behavior in public classes is “done for others to see” and is “completely different” from

daily teaching. This discovery reveals a fundamental paradox in institutional design: public textbooks should serve as a model and guide, but in reality, their highly ritualistic and evaluative orientation actually reinforces teachers' understanding of the "irreconcilable" relationship between daily teaching and public teaching (Lin, 2025), leading to a growing disconnect between the two sets of behavioral systems. From the perspective of social psychology, this phenomenon can be explained by the "theory of self differentiation". When teachers maintain inconsistent self presentation in two situations for a long time, there will be a sustained psychological tension between their "true self" (fatigue, strictness, emotional retention in daily classes) and their "ideal self" (creativity, patience, emotional abundance in public classes). This tension may manifest as anxiety and fatigue in the short term, but in the long run, it may lead to a crisis of teachers' identification with their professional identity.

This finding contrasts with the optimistic assertion that the experience of open classes is a source of inspiration for educational practice (Liao & Chen, 2026)—this study suggests that the "ideal teaching" behavior in open classes has not been internalized and transferred to daily classrooms by teachers, but rather clearly distinguished as a situational "performance" by teachers, suggesting that the demonstrative and leading function of open classes may be undermined by their evaluative function in practical operation. At the same time, this study addresses concerns about unequal opportunities for student participation in open classes (Zhou, 2022), expanding the analytical perspective from "whether students are treated fairly" to "why teachers selectively treat students in specific ways in open classes", revealing the structural reshaping effect of evaluation criteria on teacher behavior choices.

5.2. Theoretical Connotation of the "Dual-Track System" Model

This study can summarize and generalize a unique "dual-track teaching style differentiation" model, which follows the survival logic (efficiency first) for daily tracks and the evaluation logic (impression first) for presentation tracks. The theoretical significance lies in revealing that teacher behavior is not solely determined by personal traits or teaching philosophy, but is largely "induced" and "shaped" by institutional contexts. This discovery challenges the traditional assumption in educational psychology about the consistency between teacher beliefs and behavior. A large amount of research assumes that teachers' beliefs should guide their behavior (Li & Ma, 2025), and if the two are inconsistent, it is attributed to teachers' personal abilities or attitudes. The findings of this study suggest that in certain institutional contexts, "inconsistency between knowledge and action" is precisely a rational adaptation strategy for teachers when facing conflicting external environments. Furthermore, the explanatory power of this model is not limited to China's open class system. On a global scale, teachers generally face similar "dual pressures": on the one hand, they are expected to implement student-centered and creative teaching; On the other hand, work must be carried out under practical

constraints such as standardized exams, course schedules, and management efficiency (Yu, 2025). The differentiation mechanism revealed in this study—the guiding role of the evaluation system, the immediate impact of situational pressure, and the strategic management of emotional labor, has universal theoretical value beyond local contexts. Therefore, the “dual-track system” model can provide an analytical tool for understanding the complexity of teacher behavior in teacher education research in other countries.

Compared to some studies that have pointed out the lack of “enlightening elements” (Sun, 2025) and “insufficient teacher-student interaction” (Zeng, 2022) in regular classes and attributed them to the path of teachers’ personal teaching abilities, this study reveals the survival logic of “efficiency first” in daily classes, indicating that these phenomena are not due to teachers’ ability deficiencies, but rather a rational compromise under institutional pressure. In addition, this study further theorizes the issue of teacher classroom emotion management (Wang, 2025)—this study focuses on exploring how teachers “should manage emotions”, while this study reveals that the emotional differences among teachers in two situations are essentially strategic emotional labor induced by situational evaluation logic, rather than simple personal emotion regulation ability issues, thus elevating the discussion from the technical level of “should be” to the structural analysis level of “reality”.

5.3. Absence of Children’s Perspective

One of the most alarming findings of this study is that teachers almost entirely use adults—evaluators, colleagues, school leaders—as reference points in their narratives of teaching style differences, while the existence and feelings of elementary school students are systematically marginalized. Teachers focus on “how to satisfy the judges” when describing open class hours; When describing daily class hours, the focus is on “how to efficiently complete tasks”. When asked about students’ reactions, although teachers’ responses have been mentioned, most consider them as “variables” in teaching management rather than educational subjects that deserve serious attention. This discovery is in stark contrast to the “child perspective” methodology advocated in the field of children’s studies. If the fundamental purpose of education is to serve the growth of children, then what exactly primary school students experience, feel, and understand in the differences in teacher teaching styles should be the core concern of research, rather than marginal additional issues. The indirect evidence of this study suggests that primary school students’ perception of teacher behavior far exceeds the predictions of the teacher community—“acting like” or “not realistic enough”—these evaluations from students indicate that children are not only keen observers, but also direct recipients of changes in teacher behavior (Xu, 2026). It is necessary for future research to place students’ voices at the center and conduct empirical research based on children’s perspectives to form a more complete understanding of the “dual track system” phenomenon.

This discovery constitutes an important contextual supplement to the propositions of “educating based on students’ personality traits” (Du, 2023) and “cultivating good teacher-student relationships” (Zhang, 2025): the implicit assumption of these studies is that teachers have sufficient autonomy and stability to implement personalized educational care, and this study reveals that even if teachers have this willingness, the switching of institutional contexts will systematically change their behavior, making the “child centered” teaching philosophy overwhelmed by survival logic in regular classes. At the same time, this study addresses concerns about the psychological stress of primary school students (Geng, 2025), but expands the sources of stress from “heavy learning tasks” to the more subtle dimension of “inconsistent teacher behavior”—children not only have to bear academic burden, but also have to integrate cognition and emotional adaptation between the two completely different faces of teachers. This implicit psychological cost has not been fully addressed by existing research.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has the following limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting research findings, while also pointing the way for future research: (1) In terms of research methods, although this study adopts a qualitative path to deeply explore teachers’ subjective experiences, there are natural limitations in causal inference and generalizability of conclusions (Chen, 2025). In the future, quantitative research or mixed methods can be used to verify large samples; (2) In terms of information sources, research mainly relies on teachers’ self-reports. In the future, student perspectives (such as interviews, paintings, diaries, etc.) should be introduced and classroom observations based on video analysis should be conducted to make the conclusions more objective and complete; (3) In terms of research design, cross-sectional design cannot fully reveal the dynamic evolution of teaching style differences in teachers’ careers. In the future, longitudinal tracking research can be conducted to examine the formation trajectory of the “dual-track system”, and intervention experiments on evaluation system reform can be designed to test its actual effects on teacher behavior differentiation and student development.

6. Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews and grounded theoretical analysis of 100 primary school teachers in Chinese Mainland, this study systematically reveals the performance, psychological mechanism and structural causes of the differences in teaching styles between daily classes and open classes, and examines them in the context of primary school students’ psychological development. Research has found that teachers exhibit a behavioral combination of “indoctrination based teaching + control based management + emotional isolation” in daily classes, and a behavioral combination of “creative teaching + encouragement based management + emotional labor” in open classes. The core mechanism can be summarized as

“dual-track teaching style differentiation driven by evaluation system”—teachers follow the survival logic of efficiency first in daily classes and the evaluation logic of impression first in open classes. The deep root of this differentiation lies in the institutionalized regulation of social expectations, the compromise of survival theory of self goals, and the structural contradiction between the current evaluation system and the real development needs of children (Wei & Yang, 2025).

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in breaking through the analytical limitations of existing research that simply attributes teacher behavior to personal traits or teaching beliefs, and constructing a “dual track teaching style differentiation” model that introduces institutional context as the core variable for understanding differences in teacher behavior into the analytical framework. This model reveals that teachers’ “inconsistent knowledge and behavior” is not a simple professional lack or attitude problem, but a rational adaptation strategy under the contradictory external environment, thus providing an important situational correction for the traditional hypothesis of teachers’ beliefs and behavior consistency in educational psychology. At the same time, the differentiation mechanism revealed by the model—the interaction of evaluation orientation, situational stress and emotional labor, has universal theoretical value beyond the local context of Chinese Mainland, and can provide analytical tools for other countries and regions to understand the complexity of teacher behavior. The practical contribution of this study lies in providing direct empirical evidence for the reform of the teacher evaluation system, indicating that the current institutional arrangement of using public course performance as the core evaluation standard not only fails to effectively promote teachers’ professional development, but also systematically creates teachers’ performance anxiety and daily slackness (Dong Guili, 2022), at the cost of sacrificing children’s stable educational experience.

This research suggests shifting the focus of evaluation from “public performance” to “everyday reality”, from “judge satisfaction” to “children’s gains”, and providing psychological support and skill training for teachers to transfer effective elements from performance classes to daily classes. In addition, the “dual track system” framework constructed by this study can also serve as a self-examination tool for schools and teachers to reflect on “who is the center of the classroom”, thereby promoting educational practice to return from catering to external evaluations to responding to students’ real needs. Ultimately, the core judgment that this study attempts to convey is that when the evaluation system overly focuses on “public performance” and neglects “teacher well-being” and “child development”, teachers become the bearers of institutional contradictions, primary school students become forgotten bystanders, and education is transformed into a drama performed for judges. The cognitive confusion, emotional instability, and trust wavering experienced by elementary school students in the inconsistent behavior of teachers are the heaviest and most easily overlooked costs of this institutional dislocation. This study calls for a more child friendly educational ecosystem: when evaluating teachers, not only should “public performances” be considered, but

also “daily efforts” and “children’s growth” should be emphasized; When promoting education reform, we should not only introduce “advanced concepts”, but also respect the “real soil” and “development laws”. Only by anchoring the reform of the evaluation system to the practical development of children and shifting the focus of teacher professional support from “promotion performance” to “empowering daily life” can we help teachers truly bring the educational ideals in open classes back to daily classes, let education return from performance to reality, from the evaluation logic centered on adults to the development logic centered on children, and ultimately serve the real growth of every primary school student.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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