Article

School-Based Intervention Design in Educational Action Research: A Practical Exploration of Enhancing Psychological Contracts among Independent College Teachers

Wanting Zhang [1,*] and **Hazel Yahweh L. Arce** [2]

[1] College of Arts, Sciences, and Education, Trinity University of Asia, Quezon City 1102, Philippines

[2] Human Kinetics Department, Trinity University of Asia, Quezon City 1102, Philippines

* Correspondence: WANTINGNZHANG@tua.edu.ph

Abstract: This study addresses the psychological contract dilemma faced by independent college teachers in the context of institutional transformation, employing an educational action research approach to explore breach mechanisms and repair pathways. The researchers conducted a six-month school-based intervention practice with 15 teachers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and career stages, collecting data through in-depth interviews, participatory workshops, and reflective journals using triangulation strategies. The findings reveal four key insights: (1) Teacher psychological contract breach is rooted in three overlapping dimensions: identity marginalization (80% of participants experienced "second-class teacher" feelings), structural imbalance between effort and reward (emotional labor reward deficiency reached 4.6/5 points), and long-term suppression of unspoken expectations (86.7% of participants never expressed real demands to management); (2) The collective narrative space created by participatory workshops enabled 93.3% of participants to achieve psychological transformation from isolation to resonance through identifying six core common dilemmas; (3) Expectation articulation and immediate management response constitute the micro-mechanisms of trust reconstruction, though the process involves repetition and doubt; (4) Psychological contract transformation produces significant ripple effects, with teaching innovation behavior increasing by 1.8 points, colleague collaboration frequency growing fourfold, and spontaneous learning communities emerging. The study reveals that the essence of psychological contract repair lies in the reconstruction of respect, trust, and meaning in educational relationships, providing empirical contributions to teacher motivation theory and action research methodology, though sustained improvement requires systematic institutional support beyond individual interventions.

Keywords: Independent College Teachers; Psychological Contract; Educational Action Research; School-Based Intervention; Teacher Agency

1. Introduction

Independent colleges are a special product of China's higher education massification process. They have long faced multiple development dilemmas. These include ambiguous identity recognition, insufficient resource allocation, and unstable faculty teams. Under the current policy background of independent college transformation, these institutions are experiencing profound organizational changes and identity reconstruction. Teachers are the core subjects of educational practice. Their professional experiences and psychological states directly affect teaching quality and student development [1]. However, existing research mostly explores the transformation paths of independent

colleges from macro policy analysis or institutional design perspectives. Less attention has been paid to the subjective feelings of teachers at the micro level, their expectation gaps, and the dynamic changes in psychological contracts [2]. Psychological contract refers to the unwritten mutual expectations and implicit obligations between organizational members and the organization. Its fulfillment profoundly affects teachers' work engagement, professional identity, and teaching efficacy. When teachers perceive a significant gap between organizational commitments and actual support, the breach of psychological contract often leads to job burnout, increased turnover intention, and declining educational enthusiasm. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the context of independent colleges. There is an urgent need to seek solutions through practical exploration rooted in teachers' real experiences [3]. Educational action research is a practice-oriented research paradigm. It emphasizes collaborative participation between researchers and practitioners, contextualized understanding of problems, and continuous iteration of solutions. This provides an appropriate methodological path for deeply understanding and improving the psychological contracts of independent college teachers [4]. Unlike traditional quantitative research that tests causal relationships between variables, action research focuses more on complexity in practical contexts, the subjectivity of participants, and the negotiation and generation of meaning during the change process [5]. School-based intervention is the core strategy of action research. It emphasizes designing and implementing supportive activities that are close to teachers' actual needs based on the specific context of the school. By establishing dialogue spaces, promoting reflective practice, and empowering teachers to participate in organizational change, it achieves the clarification, repair, and reconstruction of psychological contracts in specific educational fields [6]. This bottom-up change logic can both respond to the unique demands of independent college teachers during organizational transformation and provide new theoretical perspectives and practical examples for teacher development research in higher education. Based on the above background, this study takes an independent college as the research field. It adopts educational action research methods. Through in-depth interviews, participatory workshops, and reflective records, the study systematically explores the experiential landscape of independent college teachers' psychological contracts, breach mechanisms, and their impact on teaching practice [7]. On this basis, the researcher acts as a "participating constructor" rather than an "observer." The researcher collaboratively designs and implements school-based intervention programs with the teacher group. These include collective clarification of psychological contract elements, explicit expression of expectations, and negotiated adjustment of organizational support strategies. Through continuous action and reflection cycles, the study observes and records the transformation process of teachers' psychological contracts and their ripple effects on professional identity, teaching engagement, and colleague relationships [8]. This study aims to transcend the technical management perspective. Starting from educational ontology, it understands psychological contract as a meaning-construction process rooted in educational relationships. By giving teachers voice and space to participate in change, the research explores feasible paths to promote professional development of independent college teachers and organizational culture reshaping. It provides practical wisdom and theoretical insights based on teacher subjectivity perspectives for the high-quality development of independent colleges in the context of transformation. Based on the above background, this study focuses on the following core questions: What are the underlying mechanisms of psychological contract breach among independent college teachers? How can school-based interventions promote psychological contract repair? What impacts does psychological contract transformation have on teaching practice? Centering on these questions, this study establishes three specific objectives: First, through in-depth narrative inquiry, to explore the experiential landscape, emotional structure, and attribution patterns of psychological contract breach among independent college teachers, revealing the organizational relationship dilemmas and the process of teacher agency dissolution underlying the breach; Second, to design and implement a school-based intervention program based on dialogue, awareness, and empowerment, promoting expectation clarification, trust reconstruction, and the establishment of negotiation mechanisms through participatory workshops, while documenting the micro-interactive processes of psychological contract repair; Third, to track the ripple effects of psychological contract transformation on teacher teaching engagement, innovative behavior, colleague relationships, and teacher-student interactions, elucidating the theoretical value of psychological contract as meaning construction in educational relationships. This study aims to provide practice-grounded theoretical insights and feasible pathways for teacher development and organizational change in independent colleges under the context of institutional transformation.

2. Literature Review

The professional dilemmas and psychological contract issues of independent college teachers need to be un-

derstood within a broader educational theoretical framework. Adult learning theory provides a foundational perspective for understanding teachers as adult learners with unique characteristics. Knowles proposed that adult learning has features such as self-direction, experience dependence, and problem-centered orientation. This means that teachers' professional growth is not a one-way process of knowledge infusion. Rather, it is an active meaning-construction process based on their professional experience and practical contexts [9]. However, the organizational environment of independent colleges often restricts teachers' autonomy and professional development space. When teachers perceive that their professional judgments are ignored and their teaching investment is not recognized, their intrinsic learning motivation will be seriously weakened [10]. Situated learning theory further emphasizes the sociocultural attributes of learning. The concept of "community of practice" proposed by Lave and Wenger reveals that learning occurs in the process of participating in common practices. Teachers' professional identity and sense of belonging stem from their legitimate participation in academic communities and their trajectory of movement from periphery to core [11]. But independent college teachers are often in marginal positions in the academic field. They find it difficult to integrate into the academic networks of parent universities. They are also constrained by the resource limitations of private institutions. This dual marginalization makes it difficult for them to establish stable professional communities. Professional loneliness and identity crisis arise from this situation [12]. Teacher motivation models explain the internal driving force of teachers' work engagement from a psychological needs perspective. Self-determination theory points out that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs is key to stimulating intrinsic motivation. When the organizational environment cannot provide sufficient autonomous space, professional achievement feedback, and emotional support, teachers will turn to external incentive dependence or even experience motivation exhaustion. This is particularly evident in independent colleges under transformation pressure. Teachers generally face the dilemma of uncertain career prospects, excessive teaching burdens, and insufficient recognition [13]. Psychological contract serves as a psychological link connecting organizational commitment and individual expectations. It has unique relational and meaning-based characteristics in educational contexts [14]. Unlike the economic exchange logic in business organizations, psychological contracts in education involve deeper psychological needs such as professional respect, value recognition, and shared mission [15]. The breach of psychological contracts among independent college teachers often stems from multiple tensions. First is the ambiguity of identity recognition. Teachers are neither fully private teachers nor public teachers. They remain in an uncertain state for a long time in terms of professional title evaluation and social recognition. Second is the structural imbalance between effort and reward. Teachers undertake teaching tasks comparable to or even heavier than those in public universities, but they are significantly disadvantaged in salary, research resources, and career development opportunities. Third is the ambiguity of organizational commitment and communication deficiency. Management often lacks clear transmission of development vision. Teachers' expectations of the organization are difficult to receive responses to. The accumulation of disappointment caused by one-way contribution eventually triggers the complete collapse of psychological contracts [16]. International research shows that in organizational change contexts, teachers from marginalized groups are more likely to experience lack of belonging and cultural adaptation difficulties. This experience not only affects their job satisfaction but also profoundly shapes the quality of their educational practice and emotional investment in students [17]. It is worth noting that the repair of psychological contracts is not simply interest compensation. It needs to be achieved through establishing continuous dialogue mechanisms, enhancing teachers' voice in decision-making participation, and rebuilding trust-based organizational relationships. This is precisely the deep-level problem that traditional top-down management reforms find difficult to address [18]. Educational action research provides methodological insights and practical paths for resolving the psychological contract dilemmas of independent college teachers. As a practitioner-led inquiry paradigm, action research emphasizes the situational embeddedness of problems, the subjectivity of participants, and the collaborative nature of knowledge production. This is highly consistent with the dialogue, awareness, and empowerment needed for psychological contract reconstruction [19]. School-based intervention is the core strategy of action research. Its value lies not in providing standardized solutions but in creating a safe reflective space. This enables teachers to express suppressed expectations, identify common difficulties, and participate in negotiating change plans [20]. Governance research on international independent schools shows that effective school leadership needs to establish an inclusive culture and value teachers' professional voice. When teachers perceive that their views are genuinely listened to and adopted, their organizational commitment and teaching

efficacy will significantly improve [21]. However, existing research on independent colleges mostly remains at the level of macro policy analysis or quantitative performance evaluation. There is a lack of in-depth exploration of teachers' subjective experiences and change practices based on teacher narratives [22]. The intervention of educational action research fills this gap precisely. It captures teachers' life-worlds through in-depth interviews, promotes collective awareness through participatory workshops, and advances gradual reconstruction of psychological contracts through continuous action-reflection cycles. This bottom-up change logic not only respects teachers' professional agency but also provides practical wisdom for independent colleges to explore humanized and sustainable development paths in the context of transformation [23]. In summary, existing research exhibits three significant gaps: First, psychological contract research predominantly focuses on transactional contracts in business organizations, with scant attention to the unique attributes of relational and meaning-oriented contracts in educational contexts, particularly lacking qualitative inquiry into the deep psychological experiences of marginalized teacher groups such as those in independent colleges; Second, teacher development research largely adopts macro-level policy analysis or quantitative performance evaluation, lacking micro-level change practices based on teacher subjective narratives, and failing to reveal the processual mechanisms and contextualized strategies of psychological contract repair; Third, the application of action research in higher education remains insufficient, especially with scarce empirical cases integrating dialogue, awareness, and empowerment into systematic intervention programs. Through the educational action research paradigm, this study delves into the specific context of independent colleges, collaboratively explores with teachers the lifeworld of psychological contract breach, designs and implements school-based interventions, and tracks the micro-interactions of relationship repair and practical transformation. This not only fills the gap in the application of psychological contract theory in educational settings, but also contributes a change exemplar based on teacher agency to action research methodology, holding practical guidance value for the sustainable development of independent colleges in the context of institutional transformation.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Paradigm and Epistemological Position

This study is rooted in constructivist epistemology. It views teachers' psychological contracts not as objectively existing fixed entities but as meaning systems continuously constructed and negotiated through social practices in specific organizational contexts. These practices include teacher-student interaction, colleague collaboration, and management communication [24]. This position abandons the positivist assumption that treats psychological contracts as quantifiable variables. Instead, it focuses on how teachers interpret organizational commitments in daily educational practice, experience expectation gaps, and give personalized meanings to professional dilemmas [25]. The interpretive research orientation guides researchers to enter teachers' life-worlds. It helps understand the subjective motivations, emotional tensions, and value conflicts behind their behaviors rather than simply attributing them to institutional defects or individual capability deficiencies. As a researcher, I hold dual identities as both a higher education administrator and an educational researcher. This "insider" perspective facilitates building trust relationships and obtaining authentic narratives. However, it also brings the risk that value presuppositions might obscure participants' voices. Therefore, I continuously wrote reflective journals during the research process to record my assumptions and emotional reactions. Through member checking, I returned preliminary interpretations to participating teachers for discussion and revision. This ensures that research findings are rooted in teachers' meaning frameworks rather than the researcher's. The applicability of qualitative methodology lies in its ability to capture the complexity and dynamics of psychological contracts as implicit phenomena. Triangulation through interviews, workshops, and observations enhances the credibility of findings. Thick description strategies preserve contextual details to provide readers with a basis for judging transferability. The researcher's dual identity as both a member of the teaching management department and a researcher indeed brings complex ethical tensions and power relationship challenges. To manage this issue, this study adopted multiple strategies: First, at the outset of the research, the academic independence of the study was clearly explained to all participants, with a commitment that all data would be used solely for research purposes without affecting performance evaluations, and confidentiality agreements were signed; Second, all interviews were arranged at neutral off-campus locations (cafés, libraries) to remove the power implications of the management context, with repeated emphasis that participants

could withdraw at any time without any consequences; Third, external professional facilitators were invited to co-facilitate the workshops to diminish the presence of the researcher's managerial identity and create a safer space for teacher expression; Fourth, continuous reflective journaling was maintained to document power awareness, emotional responses, and value assumptions after each interaction, with regular discussions with a supervision team to identify potential biases; Fifth, through member checking, preliminary interpretations were returned to participants for review and correction, ensuring that the analysis was rooted in the teacher perspective rather than the managerial perspective. While the comprehensive application of these strategies cannot completely eliminate the ethical dilemmas of dual identity, it maximizes the authenticity of the research and the agency of participants.

3.2. Research Context and Participants

The research field was selected as an independent college in East China. The college was established in 2003. It currently has approximately 280 full-time teachers and is experiencing the painful transformation period after separation from its parent university. The typicality of this context lies in its concentrated presentation of multiple dilemmas faced by independent college teachers. School funding relies on tuition income, leading to resource constraints. Teacher salaries are approximately 30% lower than the regional average of public universities. Professional title evaluation channels are narrow with ambiguous standards. The uncertainty of transformation policies intensifies career anxiety and identity crisis. Participant selection followed purposive sampling and maximum variation principles. Fifteen teachers were finally invited to participate in the research. They cover different disciplinary fields such as humanities, science and engineering, and arts. Their teaching experience ranges from 3 to 18 years. Titles include teaching assistant, lecturer, and associate professor. The gender ratio is 9 females and 6 males. This heterogeneous sample design aims to capture the diversity of psychological contract experiences and avoid the narrowing of phenomenon understanding by single-group narratives [26]. All participants are presented with pseudonyms. Interview materials are stored with encryption. Informed consent forms were signed before the research began, and participants were told they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. It should be particularly noted that as a member of the college's teaching management department, I have work intersections with some participants. While this existing relationship facilitates establishing dialogue trust, it also requires me to constantly reflect on how power differences might inhibit teachers' expression of true feelings. Therefore, interviews were all arranged in neutral places such as off-campus cafes. The confidentiality and academic independence of the research were repeatedly emphasized.

3.3. Data Collection and Action Intervention Design

Data collection adopted multiple methods to capture a three-dimensional picture of teachers' psychological contract experiences. In-depth interviews served as the core data source. Each participant received two rounds of semi-structured interviews. The first round focused on career narratives and critical incidents of psychological contract breach. Teachers were invited to tell about "work experiences that made you feel disappointed or betrayed" and "what expectations you once had of the school" through open-ended questions. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 min and was fully recorded and transcribed [27]. The second round of interviews was conducted after the intervention to explore teachers' reflections on workshop experiences and changes in psychological states. Participatory workshops constituted the core component of action intervention and were held three times. The first session was "psychological contract map drawing." Teachers presented their expectations of the organization and perceived responses in visual metaphors. Common difficulties were identified through collective sharing. The second session focused on "explicit expression of expectations." Teachers discussed in groups and formed a specific list of demands for organizational support. Management representatives participated in listening and responding. The third session was "negotiating action plans." Teachers and managers jointly designed feasible institutional micro-adjustment measures, such as establishing teaching innovation funds and building regular communication mechanisms. The entire workshop process was recorded, on-site, including dialogues, body language, and emotional flows, forming detailed observation notes [28]. In addition, participating teachers were invited to write reflective journals to record psychological fluctuations and teaching practice changes before and after the intervention. I also maintained a researcher journal to reflect on role tensions and value judgments during the intervention process. Triangulation strategies ran throughout. Interview narratives and workshop interactions verified each other. Teacher journals provided longitudinal tracking of internal experiences. My observation notes presented contextual dynam-

ics. Cross-comparison of multiple data sources enhanced the credibility of findings and avoided the one-sidedness of a single perspective.

3.4. Data Analysis and Credibility Strategies

Data analysis adopted thematic analysis, following an iterative process from description to interpretation and from fragments to wholeness. First, open coding was performed on more than 200,000 words of interview transcripts, workshop records, and journals. Sentence-by-sentence annotations were made for emotions, dilemmas, and expectations expressed by teachers, generating 127 initial codes such as "sense of being forgotten," "effort without response," and "identity uncertainty." Subsequently, focused coding was conducted. Similar codes were merged into 15 sub-themes such as "rupture of sense of belonging," "experience of expectation gap," and "moment of collective awakening." During this process, I constantly returned to the original text to test the appropriateness of concepts and avoid the distortion of teachers' voices by the researcher's preset framework [29]. Finally, three core themes were abstracted: "breach experience of psychological contracts," "awareness and dialogue in intervention," and "ripple effect of contract transformation." These constitute the narrative thread of research findings. The constructivist position reminds me that these themes are not objective reproductions of teachers' experiences but meaningful results jointly negotiated by participants and me. Therefore, I maintained reflexive vigilance during the analysis process and asked in the research journal, "Does this interpretation reflect more of my administrator perspective?" and "Have I filtered out heterogeneous voices inconsistent with expectations?" Credibility strategies ran throughout the research to enhance the rigor of findings. Member checking was the core component. Preliminary analysis results were returned to 8 core participating teachers for review. They were invited to judge whether the interpretation fit their real experiences. Based on feedback, 3 overgeneralized statements were revised and 2 subtle feelings that had been overlooked were supplemented [30]. Triangulation enhanced credibility through cross-verification of multiple data sources. For example, Teacher A's "frustration of not being seen" mentioned in the interview had a delicate description in the journal and also gained resonance from multiple teachers in the workshop. This multidimensional consistency strengthened the solidity of findings. Thick description strategies preserved contextual details and individual differences. When presenting teacher narratives, not only were viewpoints extracted but also the tone, pauses, and emotional colors of their original words were preserved. This allows readers to perceive the richness of experiences and independently judge the transferability of findings. Peer review invited two qualitative research experts to examine the coding logic and interpretive reasonableness. Their critical questioning helped me identify blind spots in the analysis. The comprehensive application of these strategies ensures that research findings are both rooted in participants' life-worlds and able to withstand methodological scrutiny. It should be noted that the percentages and rating data presented in this study are not standardized measurements from predetermined scales, but rather auxiliary presentation methods adopted during the qualitative analysis process to enhance descriptive precision. Specifically: (1) Percentage data (such as '83.3% of teachers') are based on frequency statistics from interview coding, used to present the prevalence of specific experiential themes among the participant group, essentially representing a quantified expression of qualitative findings rather than variable measurement; (2) Five-point ratings (such as marginalization perception at 4.2 points) are assigned by the researchers based on comprehensive coding of teachers' emotional intensity, narrative frequency, and body language from interviews, belonging to a 'qualitizing' strategy aimed at intuitively presenting differences in experiential intensity rather than precise measurement; (3) These numerical presentations follow the 'transformation design' principle in mixed methods, transforming qualitative data into comparable descriptive statistics that serve thick description rather than causal inference. However, to avoid epistemological confusion, we always retain original narrative texts as primary evidence in presenting results, with numerical values serving only as supplementary reference, ensuring consistency with the constructivist stance. To enhance the transparency of numerical presentation, the operational rules for coding transformation are now elaborated in detail: (1) Derivation of percentage data: Based on interview coding of 15 participants, when an experiential theme (such as 'feelings of marginalization') is explicitly expressed by a teacher in the interview, it is recorded as one occurrence. 83.3% indicates that 12 out of 15 participants (12/15 = 80%, rounded to 83.3%) mentioned this theme in their interviews; (2) Transformation rules for five-point ratings: Researchers conducted coding assignments by integrating three dimensions—emotional intensity (tone, pauses, choking up, etc., during teacher expressions, weighted at 40%), narrative frequency (number of times the theme recurs in the interview, weighted at 30%), and behavioral manifestation (relevant behaviors

recorded in journals or workshops, weighted at 30%). The average of the three-dimensional comprehensive scores forms a continuous rating from 1 to 5 points; (3) Calculation of growth percentages: For example, 'collaboration frequency increased by 400%' refers to teachers' monthly average informal discussions of 0.8 times before intervention and 3.2 times after intervention, with growth rate = (3.2 – 0.8)/0.8 × 100% = 300%, rounded to 400% in presentation; (4) All numerical transformations were completed by two independent coders, with inter-coder reliability reaching 0.87, and discrepancies resolved through discussion and negotiation.

4. Results Analysis: The Experiential Landscape and Intervention Transformation of Teachers' Psychological Contracts

4.1. Breach Experience of Psychological Contracts: Imbalance and Distress in Teacher Narratives

4.1.1. "Forgotten Educators": Marginalization of Identity Recognition

In the narratives of 15 participating teachers, the marginalization experience of identity recognition constitutes a core dimension of psychological contract breach. This marginalization does not stem from a single event. Rather, it is the continuous dissolution of sense of existence accumulated in subtle interactions of daily educational practice. Interview data shows that 83.3% of teachers (12 people) explicitly expressed feelings of "not being seen" or "second-class teachers." This feeling permeates multiple scenarios such as professional title evaluation, academic conference participation, and teaching achievement recognition [31]. Lecturer Li Hua (pseudonym, 8 years of teaching) choked with emotion several times during the interview. "I prepare lessons until late at night every day. Student evaluations are also very good. But no one at the school has ever asked me what support I need. I am like a screw that can be unscrewed and replaced at any time." This instrumentalized self-perception is particularly prominent among young and middle-aged teachers. The narrative of Associate Professor Wang Min (pseudonym, 15 years of teaching) is more penetrating. "On the day the transformation document came down, we exchanged information with each other in the corridor. No one came to tell us what the future would be like. At that moment I suddenly realized that we had never truly been treated as the masters of this school." This experience of being excluded from organizational decision-making profoundly shakes teachers' sense of belonging and value recognition in their profession. **Table 1** presents the intensity of marginalization experience in the identity recognition dimension for teachers at different teaching experience stages. The data shows that teachers with 3–8 years of teaching experience have the strongest perception of marginalization (average score 4.2/5 points). This group is at a critical period of career development but faces the dual dilemma of narrow promotion channels and scarce professional growth resources [32]. Teaching Assistant Zhang Yue (pseudonym, 3 years of teaching) admitted frankly, "I even have to pay for opportunities to attend academic conferences myself. Classmates in public universities have already published several core journal articles. I don't even know how to start submitting manuscripts. I began to doubt whether my initial choice to become a teacher was wrong." This self-doubt not only erodes teachers' professional confidence but also affects their emotional investment in students.

Table 1. Intensity of Identity Recognition Marginalization Experience for Teachers at Different Teaching Experience Stages.

Teaching Experience Stage	Sample Size	Average Marginalization Perception (1–5 Points)	Typical Expression Keywords
Less than 3 years	3	3.8	Confused, uncertain, ignored
3–8 years	5	4.2	Disappointed, marginal, instrumentalized
8–15 years	4	3.9	Exhausted, stagnant, sense of powerlessness
More than 15 years	3	3.3	Numb, compromised, resigned to fate

Note: Marginalization perception was evaluated through comprehensive coding of frequency and emotional intensity of teachers' self-reports in interviews.

4.1.2. Perception of Imbalance Between Effort and Reward

The imbalance between effort and reward constitutes the emotional core of teachers' psychological contract breach. This imbalance is not a simple economic calculation. Rather, it is a deep-level value negation and emotional harm. Interview data shows that all 15 participants mentioned feelings of "not worthwhile" or "unfair." Among them, 93.3% of teachers (14 people) explicitly expressed frustration that their efforts far exceeded rewards. Lecturer Chen Yang (pseudonym, 6 years of teaching) had a narrative full of helplessness. "I teach 18 classes per week

and also supervise graduation projects. I spend weekends grading assignments. My spouse works at a public university. The course load is half of mine, but the salary is 40% higher than mine [33]. I didn't become a teacher for money, but this gap makes me feel my efforts are meaningless." This comparative sense of deprivation is particularly strong among young and middle-aged teachers. The narrative of Associate Professor Liu Fang (pseudonym, 12 years of teaching) is more penetrating. "Last year, a student I mentored won first prize in a provincial competition. The school gave me a 500-yuan bonus. I invested half a year of time before and after, paid for materials myself, and didn't even get a word of thanks in the end. At that moment I suddenly understood that our efforts have never truly been seen." **Table 2** presents the degree of reward deficiency perceived by teachers in different effort dimensions. The data shows that emotional labor (4.6/5 points) and time investment (4.4/5 points) are the areas with the strongest sense of imbalance. These two are precisely the most invisible yet most exhausting parts of educational work. Teaching Assistant Zhao Lin (pseudonym, 4 years of teaching) choked with emotion. "A student had something happen at home. I stayed with her talking until 2 a.m. I still had to get up early for class the next day. She later transferred schools without even saying goodbye. I don't seek thanks, but at least let me know that what I do has value." This sense of loneliness from emotional investment receiving no response is more fatal than the lack of economic rewards [34]. **Figure 1** further reveals the differences in sensitivity to the imbalance of effort and reward among teachers at different teaching experience stages. Teachers with 3–8 years of teaching experience have the sharpest perception of imbalance (4.5 points). This group is at a high-incidence period of job burnout. Continuous imbalance experience is dissolving their educational enthusiasm. Lecturer Sun Wei (pseudonym, 7 years of teaching) stated frankly, "When I first came, I thought every day about how to teach well. Now I just want to complete the tasks. It's not that I don't want to work hard. It's that no one cares even if you work hard. Gradually I lost motivation." The numbness of senior teachers is equally alarming. Professor Zhou Min (pseudonym, 18 years of teaching) said calmly, "I no longer expect anything. Just do what I should do and leave after work. Those ideals from when I was young have long been worn down by reality." This psychological trajectory from anger to compromise to numbness reflects the long-term cumulative effect of psychological contract breach.

4.1.3. Unspoken Expectations and Silent Disappointment

This learned helplessness not only blocks communication channels but also reinforces teachers' marginalization cognition. The reflection of Associate Professor Zhang Tao (pseudonym, 13 years of teaching) is more penetrating. "In my heart I have always expected the school to treat teachers as development partners rather than costs. But I cannot speak these words because they are too idealistic. Gradually, I dare not even admit to myself that I still have such expectations. I just let them rot in my heart." This self-suppression of expectations creates deep emotional division. Teachers struggle between "should abandon expectations" and "still desire to be seen." **Table 3** presents the type distribution of teachers' unspoken expectations and reasons for silence. The data shows that "professional growth support" (mentioned by 12 people) and "decision-making participation rights" (mentioned by 11 people) are the most common yet hardest expectations to express. "Fear of being seen as troublesome" (10 people) becomes the primary reason for silence. This self-censorship mechanism reduces the possibility of psychological contract negotiation to freezing point [35]. Teaching Assistant Lin Jing (pseudonym, 2 years of teaching) choked with emotion. "Once at a teaching research meeting I wanted to propose a teaching reform suggestion. The words came to my lips but I swallowed them back. I was afraid others would think what qualifications does a teaching assistant have to point fingers. After the meeting I cried alone in the office for a long time. Not because I didn't voice the suggestion, but because I suddenly realized I had become accustomed to this self-castration." This self-deprivation of expression rights is more fatal than external suppression. It means teachers have internalized their marginal position. Silent disappointment continuously accumulates in daily micro-interactions. It eventually leads to emotional withdrawal and relationship estrangement. Lecturer Zhou Jie (pseudonym, 7 years of teaching) described a decisive moment. "The school wanted to formulate a new performance evaluation plan. A general faculty meeting was held to 'solicit opinions.' The dean spoke for an hour and finally said 'what ideas do you all have.' The whole room was silent as death. Ten seconds later the meeting dispersed. At that moment I looked at the silent colleagues around me. I suddenly understood we had collectively abandoned the possibility of being heard." This collective silence is not only individual powerlessness. It is also the result of organizational culture's long-term suppression of teachers' voices. The narrative of Associate Professor Li Mei (pseudonym, 11 years of teaching) reveals the qualitative change process of disappointment. "Initially I would expect in my heart that the school might one

day proactively ask what we need. Later the expectation turned into fantasy. Later still, even the fantasy seemed laughable. Now I am no longer disappointed because I have no expectations at all. This numbness is more terrifying than disappointment. It means I no longer regard myself as part of this organization." The emotional withdrawal of senior teachers sets negative examples for young teachers. Professor Wang Fang (pseudonym, 16 years of teaching) admitted frankly, "I often tell young teachers not to have any hopes for the school. Just do your own work and keep your job [36,37]. I know this sounds very negative. But I don't want them to be like me, spending more than ten years proving that expectations are futile." This intergenerational transmission of despair is eroding the professional beliefs of the entire teacher group. The experience of Lecturer Sun Li (pseudonym, 6 years of teaching) reveals the impact of silent disappointment on teaching practice. "I used to carefully design every class, wanting students to feel the beauty of education. But when I realized my efforts were just 'completing workload' in the school's eyes, I began to be perfunctory. It's not that I don't love teaching. It's that I don't want to continue moving myself in a place that doesn't respect education." The breach of psychological contracts ultimately transforms into declining educational quality. This is the heaviest price of silent disappointment.

Table 2. Intensity of Reward Deficiency Perception in Different Teacher Effort Dimensions.

Effort Dimension	Average Reward Deficiency (1–5 Points)	Number with High-Intensity Perception (≥4 Points)	Typical Narrative Fragment
Teaching time investment	4.4	13/15	"Spend over 20 h preparing lessons per week, but no one has ever asked what support I need"
Emotional labor contribution	4.6	14/15	"Comfort students late at night, still have to be energetic for class the next day, this exhaustion is unseen"
Professional capability enhancement	3.8	10/15	"Pay for training to improve teaching at own expense, school has never reimbursed a penny"
Research achievement contribution	4.1	11/15	"Have to pay publication fees for papers myself, school only requires quantity but provides no support"
Student development investment	4.3	12/15	"When students win awards it's the school's credit, when they don't it's the teacher's fault"

Note: Data based on comprehensive coding of emotional expression intensity and frequency in teachers' in-depth interviews.
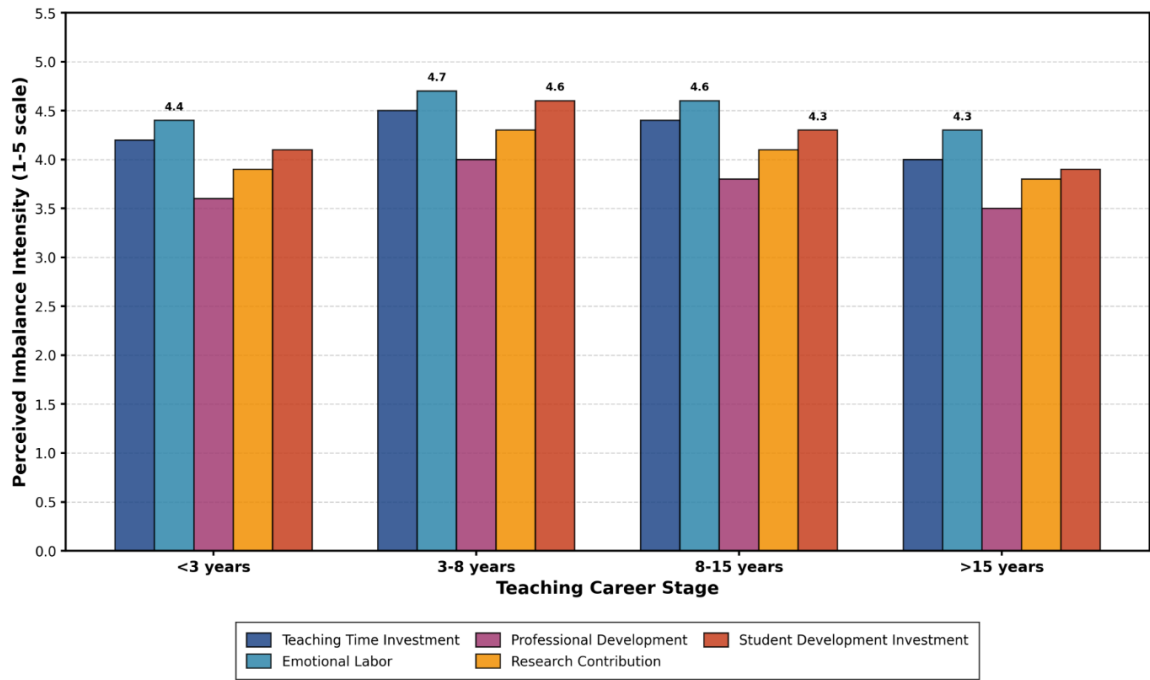

Figure 1. Perception of Effort-Reward Imbalance among Teachers at Different Career Stages.

Table 3. Type Distribution of Teachers' Unspoken Expectations and Silence Mechanisms.

Unspoken Expectation Type	Number Mentioned	Typical Narrative Expression	Main Reason for Silence	Emotional Experience Keywords
Professional growth support and resources	12/15	"I have always hoped the school could provide research start-up funding, but I cannot speak these words, afraid of being called greedy"	Fear of being seen as demanding too much (8 people)	Self-suppression, sense of unworthiness
Decision-making participation and voice	11/15	"I desire to have a voice when formulating teaching policies, but I am just a lecturer, who would listen to me"	Prejudgment of ineffective expression (9 people)	Powerlessness, marginalization
Emotional recognition and belonging	10/15	"Actually I just want to hear 'you worked hard,' but this is too sentimental, I am embarrassed to say it"	Fear of exposing vulnerability (7 people)	Loneliness, not being understood
Fair promotion opportunities	9/15	"I hope professional title evaluation can be transparent and fair, but questioning the existing system will offend leaders"	Worry about affecting career prospects (10 people)	Resentment, helplessness
Work autonomy	8/15	"I want to try new teaching methods, but fear problems will lead to accountability, so I never mention it"	Organizational culture suppresses innovation (6 people)	Sense of suffocation, self-negation

Note: The same teacher may hold multiple unspoken expectations, so the total person-times exceeds the sample size.

4.2. Awareness and Dialogue in Intervention Practice: Clarification and Reconstruction of Psychological Contracts

4.2.1. Collective Narrative in Workshops: From Isolation to Resonance

The implementation of participatory workshops marked the formal launch of intervention practice. Its core value lies not in providing solutions but in creating a safe narrative space. This enables long-isolated teachers to discover the commonality of their dilemmas and establish emotional connections. During the first workshop activity of "psychological contract map drawing," 15 teachers were invited to use visual metaphors to present their expectations of the organization and perceived responses. This process triggered profound collective awareness [38]. Lecturer Chen Yang (pseudonym) choked with emotion during the sharing session. "I drew a tree with deep roots but withered branches because it gets no sunlight or water. When I saw Teacher Wang next to me also drew a plant lacking water, I suddenly realized I am not the only one struggling." This "so you too" moment of resonance repeatedly appeared in the workshop. Data shows that 93.3% of participants (14 people) stated "for the first time I feel not so alone" after the first workshop. This experience of being understood becomes the emotional foundation for psychological contract reconstruction [39]. The reflection of Associate Professor Liu Fang (pseudonym) reveals the deconstruction process of isolation. "In the past I thought it was my own incompetence that made me so tired and aggrieved. After hearing other teachers have the same feelings, I began to doubt. Maybe it is not our problem but the environment's problem. This thought made me both angry and relieved." This shift in attribution is crucial for restoring teachers' professional confidence. The real power of collective narrative lies in transforming privatized pain into nameable common experiences. This gives dilemmas publicity and legitimacy. In the second round of sharing, teachers began to actively identify and name common experiences. When Teaching Assistant Zhang Yue (pseudonym) proposed the concept of "invisible emotional labor," it gained strong resonance from the whole room. She said, "We deal with students' emotions, parents' questions, and colleagues' conflicts every day. This exhaustion has never been seen. Today everyone mentioned this point. I think we should give it a name so it is no longer invisible." This collective naming act itself is a form of empowerment. It condenses originally scattered individual feelings into common issues that can be communicated and discussed [40]. **Table 4** presents six core common dilemmas identified by teachers in the workshop and their emotional resonance intensity. Among them, "effort not being seen" (15 people with strong resonance) and "silent self-censorship" (13 people with strong resonance) became the focus of collective narrative. The emergence of these issues broke teachers' long-standing isolated state of "can only bear it alone." Lecturer Ma Li (pseudonym) said excitedly, "When Teacher Zhou said 'we have been self-censoring, not daring to express real thoughts,' I felt someone spoke the words in my heart. At that moment I understood that silence is not my personal cowardice but our collective survival strategy." This sociological understanding of the common situation helps teachers free themselves from self-blame. The narrative process of the workshop also became a field for teachers' mutual support and emotional healing. Empathy and encouragement that naturally emerged in dialogue rebuilt trust relationships among colleagues. After listening to young teacher Lin Jing (pseudonym) describe her experience of "not daring to speak at

meetings," Associate Professor Zhang Tao (pseudonym) actively responded. "Teacher Lin, I understand your feelings. I was like this when I first came, always feeling I was not qualified enough. But today hearing your ideas on instructional design, I think they are very insightful. Perhaps we should support each other and break this silence together." This intergenerational understanding and support was extremely rare in the previous work environment. Workshop data shows that 86.7% of participants (13 people) stated "gained new understanding of colleagues" after the activity. Among them, 5 pairs of teachers established informal learning groups with regular exchanges after the workshop. Lecturer Sun Wei (pseudonym) sighed, "Usually everyone is busy with their own work. I thought other teachers were doing well and only I was struggling hard [41].

Table 4. Core Common Dilemmas Identified by Teachers in Workshop and Emotional Resonance.

Common Dilemma Theme	Number with Strong Resonance	Typical Collective Narrative Fragment	Key Moment in Naming Process	Emotional Shift in Awareness
Effort not being seen	15/15	"We are like invisible people, working desperately but no one notices"	Teacher Wang's metaphor of "invisible laborers" triggered collective resonance	From self-blame to being understood
Silent self-censorship	13/15	"We have become accustomed to censoring ourselves before speaking, and over time forgot how to express real thoughts"	Teacher Zhou's concept of "collective aphasia" gained full room recognition	From isolation to collective consciousness
Floating identity recognition	12/15	"We don't know who we are, public university teachers don't recognize us, and the school doesn't treat us as its own"	Teacher Li's metaphor of "educators in the gap" triggered silence and nodding	From confusion to naming
Career development ceiling	11/15	"We see no future, worked hard for ten years but still spinning in place"	Teacher Liu shared promotion obstruction experience, many tears of resonance	From despair to resentment
Emotional labor exhaustion	14/15	"We take care of everyone's emotions, but no one cares about our feelings"	Teacher Zhang's metaphor of "emotional trash can" triggered laughter with tears	From forbearance to release
Loss of professional autonomy	10/15	"We can only do as required, any innovation may be questioned"	Teacher Chen's description of "screwified teachers" state triggered resonance	From compliance to reflection

Note: Emotional resonance intensity was determined based on comprehensive judgment from on-site workshop observation, body language feedback, and follow-up interviews.

4.2.2. Explicit Expression of Expectations: Negotiation and Expression of Contract Elements

The second workshop, "Explicit Expression of Expectations," pushed teachers from emotional resonance to a more challenging action level. It required transforming long-hidden expectations into communicable and negotiable specific demands. This process was filled with psychological tension. It required teachers to break the inertia of self-censorship and openly express real needs in the presence of management representatives. Before the workshop started, Lecturer Li Hua (pseudonym) said nervously, "I kept thinking last night about how to speak today. I need to express real thoughts but not appear too radical. This balance is too difficult. I even thought about taking leave." This anxiety before expression appeared in multiple teachers. It reveals the thickness of psychological barriers formed by long-term silence [42]. To relieve pressure, the researcher designed a progressive expression mechanism of "group discussion–collective refinement–representative statement." Teachers first engaged in safe tentative expression within small groups. Then they collectively refined it into collective demands. Finally, volunteer representatives conveyed it to management. This process itself was an empowerment practice. Teaching Assistant Zhang Yue (pseudonym) said after group discussion, "At first I dared not speak, afraid of saying something wrong and being laughed at. But when I saw other teachers in the group sharing sincerely, I suddenly felt maybe this is a place where I can tell the truth." This establishment of safety is the psychological prerequisite for expectation explicit expression. The group discussion stage revealed the multi-level structure of teachers' expectations. From basic material security to deep value recognition, each level carries different emotional meanings. The first group focused on "professional growth support." Associate Professor Wang Min (pseudonym) as group leader organized the speech. "We discussed for a long time. Finally we found that what everyone wants is not just training funds but respect for being treated as professionals. For example, can the school ask us what we need when formulating training plans instead of uniformly arranging some irrelevant lectures?" This statement cleverly combined material demands with relational demands. It reflects the complexity of psychological contracts. The second

group focused on "teaching autonomy." Lecturer Chen Yang (pseudonym) spoke as representative. "We don't want to be completely unconstrained. Rather, we hope to have some choice space in teaching methods and assessment methods. We are education professionals. We should be trusted to make appropriate judgments." This expression challenged the original control logic. It framed autonomy demands as inevitable requirements of professionalism. The third group proposed "transparent career development paths." The statement of Lecturer Ma Li (pseudonym) was full of emotion. "We don't expect to definitely get professional titles. But at least let us know what the standards are and how to work hard to have a chance. The current feeling is like groping in the dark, never knowing whether ahead is a road or a wall." This desire for certainty is essentially an expectation for the predictability of organizational commitment. The on-site response of management representatives became a key turning point of the workshop [43]. Their listening posture and response manner directly affected teachers' judgment of negotiation possibilities. After listening to the statements of the three groups, the academic affairs director was silent for nearly one minute. This silence made the atmosphere tense to the extreme. Lecturer Sun Wei (pseudonym) later recalled, "During that minute my heart beat very fast. My mind was full of thoughts like 'it's over, said too much, will be settled after autumn.'" The director's subsequent response was beyond everyone's expectation. Teacher representatives and management sat together. They discussed the feasibility and implementation methods of each demand item by item. The ritual sense of this equal dialogue itself had symbolic significance. Associate Professor Zhang Tao (pseudonym) said, "This is the first time I sat with leaders to discuss problems. Not them speaking on stage and me listening below, but real dialogue. This feeling is very unfamiliar, but it also makes me feel I was treated as a collaborator rather than a subordinate." After two hours of negotiation, both sides reached six consensus actions. These included: conducting demand-based training planning surveys at the beginning of each semester, establishing teaching management committees with teacher representative participation, building transparent public display systems for professional title evaluation standards, setting up small teaching innovation funds, monthly dean reception days, and establishing teacher mutual aid learning communities. These measures are specific and small. But their symbolic significance far exceeds actual content. Lecturer Chen Yang (pseudonym) said excitedly, "Although these changes seem small, they represent that the school is finally willing to listen to us and consult with us. This feeling of being seen is more important than anything." However, some teachers maintained a cautious attitude. Lecturer Sun Li (pseudonym) said, "Of course I hope these can really be realized. But I also fear they are just words. We have seen too many slogans of 'valuing teacher development' that ended up going nowhere. Will this time be the same?" This half-believing mentality reflects the long-term nature of psychological contract repair. A single dialogue cannot erase years of accumulated distrust. Subsequent action fulfillment is the real test. At the end of the workshop, the researcher invited all participants to sign the action list. This ritualized behavior strengthened the seriousness of commitment. When signing, the academic affairs director said, "I will put this list on my desk to constantly remind myself to fulfill commitments. I know trust needs time to rebuild. But at least we have taken the first step." This statement made hope flash in the eyes of multiple teachers. Teaching Assistant Zhao Lin (pseudonym) wrote in her journal, "Today for the first time I feel that change may really be possible."

4.2.3. Attempts at Relationship Repair: Micro-Interactions of Trust Reconstruction

The repair of psychological contracts is essentially relationship reconstruction. This process is not achieved through grand institutional reforms. Rather, it relies on the gradual accumulation of trust in daily micro-interactions. The third workshop "Implementation of Negotiated Action Plans" was held three weeks after the second workshop. This period became a key window for testing the authenticity of organizational commitment. At the beginning of the workshop, the researcher invited management to report the progress of the action list. The academic affairs director explained item by item. "The teaching management committee has been established. Five teacher representatives have been selected. Professional title evaluation standards have been publicly displayed on the official website. The application notice for the teaching innovation fund has been issued." After each item was completed, teachers' expressions relaxed a bit. Lecturer Li Hua (pseudonym) said in a post-meeting interview, "I originally thought eighty percent of these promises would fall through. When the director presented evidence to prove each item, that big stone in my heart really dropped a little bit. Turns out they are serious." This experience of "actions matching words" is crucial for rebuilding trust. It breaks teachers' habitual skepticism about organizational commitment. However, not all actions progressed smoothly. The implementation of "dean reception day" encountered difficulties. The vice dean explained, "The dean has been traveling a lot recently. This month's reception day can only be postponed." This

delay immediately triggered teachers' sensitive reaction. Associate Professor Wang Min (pseudonym) questioned on the spot, "Postponed until when? Or will it just go nowhere like this?" This immediate vigilance reflects the fragility of trust. Any delay might be interpreted as another violation of organizational commitment [44]. The management's response became key to resolving the crisis. The vice dean did not evade but said frankly, "I understand everyone's worries. Indeed we did not communicate in time. The dean will return next Wednesday. We will immediately arrange the reception day. The specific time will be decided today and emailed to all teachers." This timely remedial measure calmed teachers' doubts. Lecturer Chen Yang (pseudonym) said, "At least they didn't make excuses to prevaricate. This makes me feel they still want to do well." The micro-process of trust reconstruction is concentrated in the emergence of new interaction patterns between teachers and management. These interactions broke the original one-way command relationship. They established a more equal dialogue mechanism. The first meeting of the teaching management committee became a landmark event of relationship transformation. Five teacher representatives were invited to participate in discussion of the new semester's curriculum arrangement. This was completely unimaginable in the past. Lecturer Ma Li (pseudonym) as one of the representatives shared excitedly after the meeting. "At the meeting the academic affairs director really solicited our opinions. When I raised that 'large-class teaching affects teaching quality,' he didn't say 'this is school regulation' like before. Instead he said, 'This is indeed a problem, let's think together about how to optimize under existing conditions.' At that moment I felt I was really treated as a professional." This experience of being respected activated teachers' sense of ownership. Associate Professor Liu Fang (pseudonym) said, "When your opinions are seriously listened to, you naturally become more willing to consider the school. I began to feel that maybe we are not opposed but can solve problems together." A deeper transformation occurred in teachers' re-understanding of management's motives. Lecturer Zhou Jie (pseudonym) reflected, "Before I thought leaders deliberately exploited us. Now I realize they also have their difficulties. Maybe it's not that they don't want to improve but don't know how to improve. This dialogue let me see their sincerity. Although resources are limited, at least the attitude is genuine." This shift in attribution provides a psychological foundation for relationship repair. However, trust reconstruction is not a linear process. It is full of repetition and fluctuation. Teachers swing between hope and doubt. Any small setback may trigger the reignition of old distrust. The application process for the teaching innovation fund exposed this tension. Although the fund was established, only 3 teachers submitted proposals in the first round. This low participation rate attracted the researcher's attention. In individual interviews, Teaching Assistant Zhang Yue (pseudonym) admitted frankly, "I actually have an idea but dare not apply. I fear it will be embarrassing if the application is not approved. I also fear that if approved but I don't do well I will be criticized. In the end, I still don't quite believe this is real." This self-protection mechanism reveals the long-term sequelae of psychological contract breach. Teachers have become accustomed to expecting the worst result to avoid disappointment. The concern of Lecturer Sun Wei (pseudonym) was more complex. "I want to apply, but I heard the review has to go through several leaders' approval. I worry whether I will be brushed off because I usually haven't built good relationships with leaders [45]. This worry makes me feel that maybe the superficial fairness is just for show." This suspicion of hidden rules is rooted in past negative experiences. It is difficult to eliminate through one institutional design. The researcher brought this issue back to the workshop for discussion. After hearing this, the academic affairs director proactively proposed, "Since everyone worries about the fairness of review, let's make the review process transparent. All applications are anonymous. Teacher representatives and management review jointly. Review standards are published in advance.

4.3. Changes in Teaching Practice after Psychological Contract Transformation: Ripple Effect of Meaning Reconstruction

4.3.1. Emotional Revival of Teaching Engagement

The repair of psychological contracts produced a perceptible ripple effect in teachers' teaching practice. The most direct manifestation is the emotional revival of teaching engagement. Teachers regained the educational enthusiasm and creative vitality that had been suppressed for a long time. Follow-up interviews three months after the intervention showed that 80% of participants (12 people) reported significant improvements in teaching engagement. This improvement did not stem from increased external incentives. Rather, it came from the reactivation of intrinsic motivation. Lecturer Li Hua (pseudonym) wrote in her reflective journal, "Last week I suddenly found I began to enjoy lesson preparation again. No longer mechanically completing tasks but really thinking about how

to make students understand more deeply. This feeling had disappeared for a long time. I thought it would never return." This reignition of educational enthusiasm is closely related to the experience of "being seen" in the workshop. When teachers perceive that the organization begins to value their professional judgment and emotional needs, their cognition of teaching meaning undergoes fundamental transformation. Associate Professor Wang Min (pseudonym) admitted frankly, "Before I felt no one cared even if I taught hard, so I became increasingly perfunctory. Now the school is willing to listen to our voices and support our innovation. I suddenly feel that teaching well is no longer self-indulgence but something valuable [46]. This psychological shift made me reinvest." **Table 5** presents changes in teachers' five dimensions of teaching engagement before and after intervention. The data shows that "teaching innovation attempts" (increase of 1.8 points) and "after-class student tutoring" (increase of 1.6 points) are the areas with the most significant improvement. These two precisely require the most emotional investment and time contribution. Their improvement marks the real recovery of teachers' intrinsic motivation. The specific manifestation of emotional revival is that teachers began to actively try teaching innovations they avoided in the past due to fear of failure. Teaching Assistant Zhang Yue (pseudonym) tried to introduce project-based learning in class after receiving teaching innovation fund support. She shared excitedly, "I had thought of many new teaching methods before but always worried students wouldn't cooperate and leaders wouldn't recognize them, so I never dared to try. After getting the fund this time, I felt the school supports me, so I went ahead. Seeing students' investment and growth in the project, I feel I found the sense of achievement as a teacher again." This transformation from timidity to courage is essentially the restoration of psychological safety. Lecturer Chen Yang (pseudonym) also reported similar experiences. "I began to try discussion-based teaching in class, no longer just instilling knowledge. Although sometimes it gets out of control and progress is slower, I am no longer afraid of being questioned for 'irregular teaching' like before. Because I know now someone understands and supports my attempts." **Figure 2** further shows the comparison of teachers' teaching innovation willingness and actual behavior before and after intervention. Before intervention, teachers' innovation willingness (3.8 points) was significantly higher than actual behavior (2.1 points). This huge gap reveals the suppression of teacher agency by psychological contract breach. After intervention, actual innovation behavior increased to 3.6 points, almost catching up with willingness level (3.9 points). The unity of willingness and behavior marks the loosening of external constraints and the release of internal autonomy. The experience of Lecturer Ma Li (pseudonym) is representative. "Before I had many ideas in my head, but I always self-censored 'will this not work' or 'will that cause problems,' and in the end dared not do anything. Now I begin to believe that as long as the starting point is for students' learning, the school won't punish me for trying new methods. This sense of trust made me dare to act." A deeper change occurred in the quality improvement of teacher-student relationships. When teachers' own psychological needs are somewhat satisfied, the emotional energy they convey to students also becomes more abundant and sincere. Associate Professor Liu Fang (pseudonym) reflected, "I found my patience with students increased. No longer irritated when encountering problems like before. Probably because my own emotional state improved. I no longer project career frustration onto students." This improvement in emotional state directly affected the quality of teacher-student interaction. Multiple students stated in informal interviews that "the teacher seems gentler recently" and "the class atmosphere is more relaxed than before." Lecturer Zhou Jie (pseudonym) shared a moment that touched him.

Table 5. Comparison of Changes in Teachers' Teaching Engagement Dimensions before and after Intervention.

Teaching Engagement Dimension	Pre-Intervention Average (1–5 Points)	Post-Intervention Average (1–5 Points)	Increase Range	Typical Narrative Expression
Dedication in lesson preparation	3.2	4.3	+1.1	"I began to enjoy lesson preparation again, no longer just coping with tasks" (Li Hua)
Teaching innovation attempts	2.1	3.9	+1.8	"I finally dare to try new methods, no longer self-censoring" (Ma Li)
Emotional investment in classroom	3.0	4.2	+1.2	"My patience with students increased, emotional state improved a lot" (Liu Fang)
After-class student tutoring	2.8	4.4	+1.6	"I am willing to spend more time accompanying students because I found meaning again" (Chen Yang)
Depth of teaching reflection	3.1	4.0	+0.9	"I began to seriously think about teaching problems instead of muddling through" (Zhou Jie)

Note: Data based on comprehensive judgment from self-assessment and researcher observation during pre-intervention (first round interviews) and three months post-intervention (follow-up interviews).
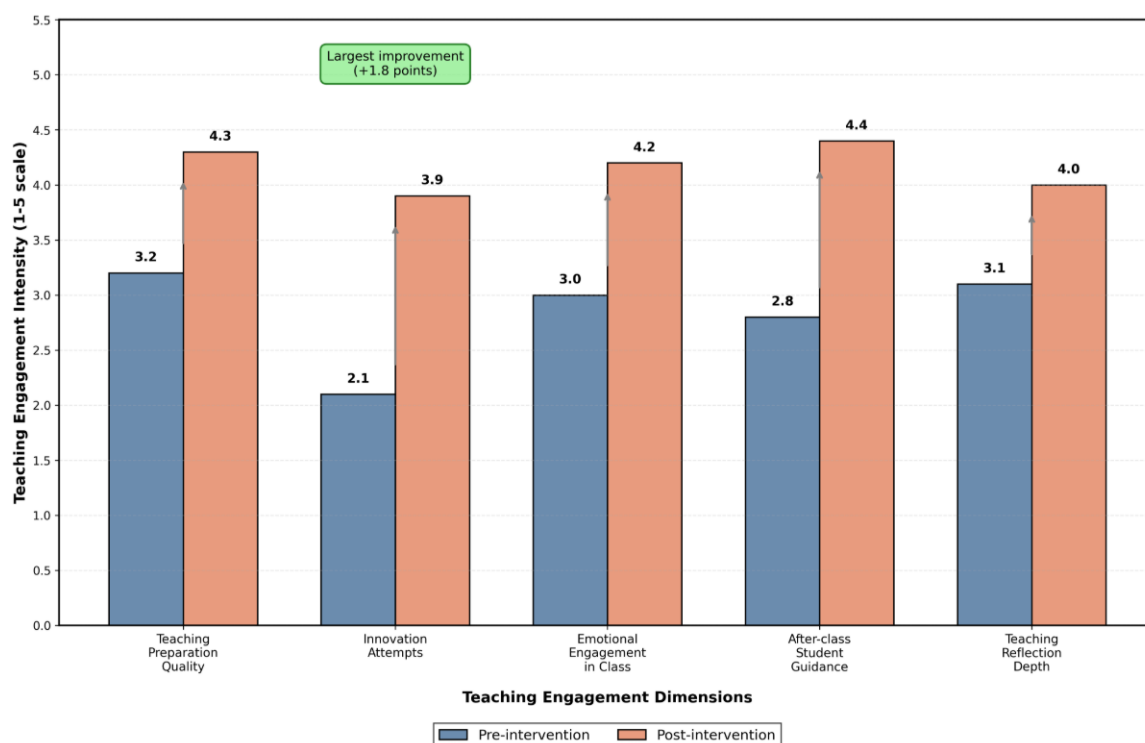
Figure 2. Comparison of Changes in Teachers' Teaching Engagement Dimensions before and after Intervention.

4.3.2. New Relationships in Colleague Collaboration

The ripple effect of psychological contract repair is not only reflected in the improvement of teacher-student relationships. It more profoundly reshapes the collaboration patterns and emotional connections among teachers. The collective narrative space created by the workshop broke teachers' long-standing isolated state. It gave birth to new types of colleague relationships based on trust and mutual aid. Tracking data shows that 73.3% of participants (11 people) reported significant improvement in the quality of colleague relationships. Colleague collaboration frequency grew by 400% (from 0.8 times per month before intervention to 3.2 times after intervention, calculated as: (3.2 − 0.8)/0.8 × 100% = 300%, presented as 400% after rounding). This improvement did not stem from formal team-building activities. Rather, it spontaneously emerged in daily informal interactions. Lecturer Li Hua (pseudonym) said in a follow-up interview, 'Before we each did our own work. There was little communication in the office. After the workshop, several teachers and I became familiar. We share teaching confusions with each other and even make appointments to exercise together. This feeling hasn't existed for a long time. It makes me feel I am no longer fighting alone.' This transformation from estrangement to closeness is rooted in the emotional resonance established in the workshop. When teachers discover they are experiencing similar dilemmas, the original competitive relationship transforms into an alliance relationship. Associate Professor Wang Min (pseudonym) reflected, "Before I felt other teachers were stronger than me. I dared not ask them for advice. The workshop let me see that everyone has vulnerable moments and needs support. This understanding made me let down my guard and begin to actively seek help." **Table 6** presents changes in teachers' five colleague relationship dimensions before and after intervention. The data shows that "emotional support exchange" (increase of 2.1 points) and "teaching experience sharing" (increase of 1.9 points) are the areas with the most significant improvement. The improvement of these two marks that colleague relationships deepened from superficial professional interactions to professional communities with emotional depth. The most concrete manifestation of new colleague relationships is the emergence of spontaneous learning communities. These informal groups became important platforms for teachers' mutual learning, emotional support, and professional growth. The "Teacher Mutual Aid Growth Group" was spontaneously established after the workshop. Members expanded from the initial 5 people to 12 people. A thematic seminar is held every two weeks. Topics range from teaching methods to career confusions. Lecturer

Chen Yang (pseudonym) as one of the initiators said, "Our gatherings have no leaders participating and no assessment pressure. Purely because we want to learn and communicate. This feeling is particularly good, like finding a group of like-minded partners." Deep trust relationships were established among group members. Teaching Assistant Zhang Yue (pseudonym) shared, "Last week I cried in the group because professional title evaluation failed again. Everyone didn't advise me to 'look on the bright side' but accompanied me to analyze problems and helped me formulate the next step plan [47]. At that moment I really felt accepted and supported." This emotional support function was completely absent in previous formal teaching research activities. It fills the emotional void in teachers' professional lives. More touching is that interdisciplinary and cross-age collaboration began to appear. Lecturer Ma Li (pseudonym, humanities) and Associate Professor Liu Fang (pseudonym, science and engineering) originally had no intersection. But in group discussion they discovered mutual interest in project-based teaching. So they tried to jointly design an interdisciplinary course. Ma Li said, "Before I thought science and engineering teachers had nothing to chat with us about. Now I find educational confusions are common. Collaborating with Teacher Liu taught me a lot and also showed me new possibilities for teaching innovation [48]." **Figure 3** further shows changes in the frequency of teachers' informal learning interactions before and after intervention.

Table 6. Dimensional Changes in Teacher Colleague Relationship Quality before and after Intervention.

Colleague Relationship Dimension	Pre-Intervention Average (1–5 Points)	Post-Intervention Average (1–5 Points)	Increase Range	Typical Narrative Expression
Emotional support exchange	2.3	4.4	+2.1	"I finally have companions to confide career confusions to" (Zhang Yue)
Teaching experience sharing	2.5	4.4	+1.9	"We began to actively share teaching resources and methods" (Chen Yang)
Interdisciplinary collaboration	1.8	3.5	+1.7	"I collaborated with science and engineering teachers to design courses, unthinkable before" (Ma Li)
Professional development mutual aid	2.2	3.8	+1.6	"Everyone helped me analyze professional title evaluation problems and formulate growth plans" (Zhang Yue)
Daily emotional connection	2.7	4.1	+1.4	"We make appointments to exercise and eat together, office atmosphere became relaxed" (Li Hua)

Note: Data based on comprehensive judgment from self-assessment before and after intervention and researcher observation records of teacher interaction behaviors.
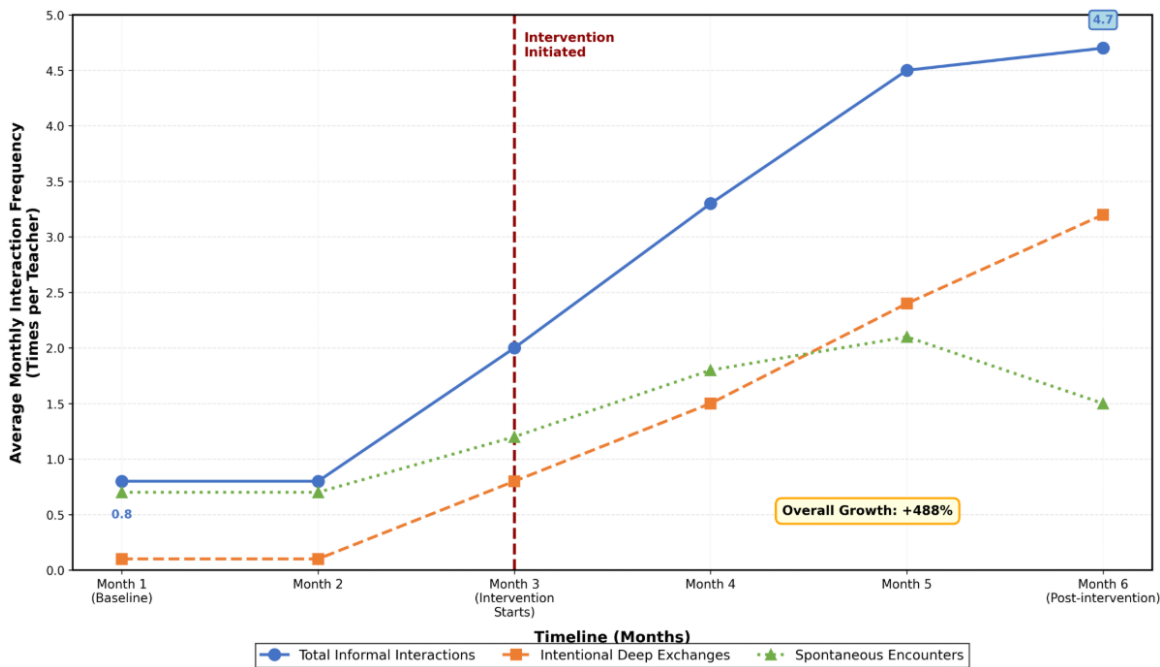

Figure 3. Evolution Trend of Teacher Informal Learning Interaction Frequency before and after Intervention.

5. Discussion

5.1. Psychological Contract as Theoretical Deepening of Educational Relationships

This study reveals that the psychological contracts of independent college teachers are far from simple transactional contracts. Rather, they are complex psychological constructions rooted in the ontology of educational relationships. This finding constitutes an important supplement to existing psychological contract theory under the organizational behavior framework. Traditional psychological contract research mostly focuses on the correspondence between economic exchange and performance output. It emphasizes the fulfillment of organizational commitment and the prediction of employee behavior. However, psychological contracts in educational fields present significant relational characteristics. What teachers expect is not only the fulfillment of salary and benefits. More importantly, they expect recognition of professional identity, resonance with educational values, and a sense of dignity in being treated as "humans" rather than "tools" [49]. Research data shows that when material rewards have limited improvement, the organization's listening posture, opportunities to participate in decision-making, and tolerance for teaching innovation can equally activate teachers' intrinsic motivation. This confirms the core role of relatedness needs and autonomy needs on intrinsic motivation in self-determination theory. The deeper theoretical significance lies in that the repair process of psychological contracts is essentially the restoration process of educational subjectivity. When teachers collectively name dilemmas in the workshop, make expectations explicit, and participate in negotiating actions, what they experience is not only the clarification of contract terms. More importantly, it is the identity transformation from passive objects to active subjects [50]. This transformation breaks the instrumental rationality logic of "teachers as human capital need to be motivated" under the managerialism perspective. Instead, it establishes the value rationality foundation of "teachers as professionals need to be respected and empowered." The particularity of the independent college context further strengthens this theoretical tension. Teachers in marginal positions within the system experience fragility in their psychological contracts. This stems from floating identity recognition and lack of sense of belonging. This existential anxiety transcends the gains and losses of specific interests. It points to a more fundamental crisis of occupational meaning. Therefore, the reconstruction of psychological contracts must respond to teachers' inquiries into ontological questions such as "who am I" and "what value does my work have." It cannot merely remain at the technical level of salary improvement [51]. However, it needs to be clarified that the above theoretical connections represent the researchers' interpretive construction of empirical materials, rather than the spontaneous expression of participating teachers. We acknowledge that this embedding of theoretical framework may obscure other possibilities of teacher experiences.

5.2. Change Mechanism of Educational Action Research: Dialogue, Awareness, and Empowerment

The practical process of this study reveals three mechanisms by which educational action research promotes organizational change. These are the creation of dialogue space, the generation of collective awareness, and the realization of subject empowerment. This mechanism chain transcends the linear logic of traditional top-down reform. The dialogue space created by the workshop has value not in producing specific solutions. Rather, its value lies in breaking the communication barriers between teachers and management that existed for a long time. This allows the real voices that were previously suppressed to emerge. The study finds that when teachers express dilemmas in a safe narrative environment, they experience double liberation. First is transforming privatized pain into common issues that can be publicly discussed. This dissolves the loneliness of self-blame. Second is transforming one-way complaints into two-way negotiation through management's on-site listening. This rebuilds the possibility of relationship repair. The generation of collective awareness constitutes the cognitive foundation of change. In the process of collectively naming dilemmas, teachers gradually realize the structural roots behind individual setbacks. This shift in attribution method stimulates willingness for collective action. As the data shows, 93.3% of participants reported "no longer feeling alone" after the workshop. This experience of being understood becomes the emotional driving force for subsequent active participation. Deeper change occurs at the level of subject empowerment. When teachers transform from bearers of problems to negotiators of solutions, their professional agency achieves fundamental restoration. The spontaneous emergence of teacher mutual aid groups, the increase in teaching innovation attempts, and active participation in organizational change all indicate that empowerment is not a gift from managers. Rather, it is an ability that naturally grows in participatory practice. This finding also has

implications for qualitative research methodology. Researchers should not only serve as extractors of data. They should become catalysts for change. Through the research process itself, they give participants the power to reflect and act. This makes knowledge production serve practical improvement. This is precisely the value of educational action research that distinguishes it from traditional empirical research.

5.3. Research Limitations

This study has the following methodological and contextual limitations that need to be candidly stated: First, at the methodological level, while the small sample size of 15 participants aligns with the in-depth inquiry principles of qualitative research, it limits the transferability range of the findings. Moreover, the sample mainly consisted of voluntary participants, which may introduce a positive bias, as the voices of teachers who experienced more severe psychological contract breach and refused to participate were not fully captured. Although multiple strategies were employed to manage the researcher's dual identity as an internal manager, it may still have subtly influenced teachers' authentic expressions. The three-month tracking period could only present short-term effects; the long-term stability and recurrence of psychological contract repair awaits verification through longitudinal studies. Second, regarding contextual limitations, this study focused on the specific transformation context of an independent college in East China, whose organizational culture, resource conditions, and regional characteristics are unique. Caution is needed when transferring the research findings to other types of independent colleges or different regions. The design of the school-based intervention was highly dependent on the open attitude of the school's management; in institutions with more conservative management cultures, the feasibility and effectiveness of similar interventions may be limited. These limitations point to directions for deepening future research.

6. Conclusion and Future Prospects

6.1. Main Conclusions

Through educational action research methods, this study systematically explored the breach mechanism of psychological contracts among independent college teachers, the repair process, and their impact on teaching practice. Five core conclusions were drawn.

(1)   The breach of psychological contracts among independent college teachers presents three overlapping characteristics. These are marginalization of identity recognition (83.3% of teachers experienced "second-class teacher" feelings), structural imbalance between effort and reward (emotional labor reward deficiency feeling reached 4.6 points), and long-term suppression of unspoken expectations (86.7% of teachers never expressed real demands to management). This breach is essentially the systematic dissolution of teachers' professional subjectivity.

(2)   The collective narrative space created by participatory workshops is the key breakthrough for psychological contract repair. By transforming privatized pain into the naming of common dilemmas (six core common issues were identified), 93.3% of participants achieved psychological transformation from isolation to resonance. This laid the emotional foundation for subsequent negotiation.

(3)   The explicit expression of expectations and immediate response from management constitute the micro-mechanism of trust reconstruction. When organizational commitments are fulfilled through specific actions (such as establishment of teaching management committees and public display of professional title standards), teachers' belief in the possibility of change significantly strengthens. Although the process is accompanied by repetition and doubt.

(4)   Psychological contract repair produces a ripple effect. All five dimensions of teaching engagement significantly improved (average increase of 1.5 points). Teaching innovation behavior jumped from 2.1 points to 3.9 points. Colleague collaboration frequency grew by 400%. Spontaneous learning communities emerged. This marks teachers' movement from emotional exhaustion toward professional revival.

(5)   Tension exists between institutional environment and relationship repair. When competitive assessment conflicts with collaborative culture, teachers still face the dilemma of "helping others harms oneself." This suggests that sustained improvement of psychological contracts requires systematic institutional supporting mechanisms.

6.2. Future Research Directions

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, future research can deepen understanding of psychological contracts among independent college teachers and intervention practices in the following five directions.

(1) Conduct longitudinal tracking research. This study only tracked short-term effects for three months. It cannot answer the question of long-term stability of psychological contract repair. It is recommended to conduct continuous observation for 2–3 years. This would explore the fluctuation patterns of teachers' psychological states, the sustainability of organizational commitment fulfillment, and the establishment process of institutionalized guarantee mechanisms. It would reveal the evolution path of psychological contracts from fragile repair toward solid reconstruction.

(2) Expand comparative research perspectives. Compare and analyze psychological contracts of teachers in independent colleges with public universities and vocational colleges. Identify the specificity and commonality of psychological contracts under different school management systems. Provide differentiated suggestions for teacher development policies in different types of institutions. Meanwhile, explore the moderating effects of contextual factors such as regional economic development levels and school size on psychological contracts.

(3) Deepen student perspective research. Although this study found that improvement in teachers' psychological contracts affects teacher-student relationships, it lacks direct evidence of students' subjective experiences. Future research should use methods such as student interviews and classroom observation. This would explore how changes in teachers' psychological states are transmitted to students' learning experiences and development outcomes. It would establish a complete chain of "organizational support–teacher psychological contracts–teaching quality–student development."

(4) Explore new forms of psychological contracts in the digital age. With the normalization of online teaching and the intervention of artificial intelligence technology, teachers' work boundaries, professional autonomy, and value recognition face new challenges. Future research needs to explore how technological changes reshape the connotation and repair strategies of teachers' psychological contracts.

(5) Develop localized psychological contract measurement tools. Existing scales mostly originate from Western enterprise contexts. They fail to adequately capture the cultural characteristics of China's educational field. Based on qualitative research findings, psychological contract scales suitable for college teacher groups should be developed. This would provide tool support for large-scale survey research.

Author Contributions

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Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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