European Proceedings of
Educational Sciences
EpES

www.europeanproceedings.com

e-ISSN: 2672-815X

DOI: 10.15405/epes.23045.58

EDU WORLD 2022
Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues

THE TEACHERS' BURNOUT AND STRESS EXPRIENCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

There is no single person that was't affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes that this situation entailed, but there were some professional categories that were tremendously stressed during that period, one of them being the teachers. In this paper, we wanted to assess the levels of burnout for the pre-university teachers as well as their perceived levels of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also wanted to see which were the factors that caused stress and burnout in this atypical situation. A total of 79 teachers were tested with The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory and The Perceived Stress Scale. We assessed the differences between participants depending on age, work environment (urban or rural), number of students in the class, or on the presence or absence of under aged children in care. We found significant differences only between teachers that work in rural versus urban areas, and between teachers that had or didn't have under aged children in care. No other significant results were found.

Keywords: Burnout, COVID-19 pandemic, perceived stress, teachers

https://doi.org/10.15405/epes.23045.58
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eISSN: 2672-815X

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed our lives, distressing us and determining us to find new ways to deal with our daily lives and activities. The lives of teachers have changed even more considering that their profession has transitioned to a new and relatively unfamiliar environment - the online teaching - all of this being imposed by the Romanian Government's measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19 disease. Undoubtedly, the teachers were not overwhelmed with joy when the Government decided to move all educational activities online, because online teaching entailed lots of difficulties (Pătroc, 2018). All schools were closed beginning with the 11th of March 2020, and all teaching activities had to be move online, even though most of the teachers and students have never experienced this situation. Schools and local authorities were given the difficult task to identify solutions for providing the necessary equipment for the online education. Obviously, things could not be fixed very quickly, and so many teachers had to find alternative solutions to reach their students, including creating video materials and sending them to their students (Răcășan, 2020), or even creating, printing and sending different worksheets for children that did not have internet access or the necessary devices. This online education continued until the end of the school year and even for the larger part of 2021. All this caused a lot of stress, frustration and even feelings of helplessness for many teachers (Kiss et al., 2021).

From our direct experience with the new changes and from many discussions with teachers from different levels of education, we found that this transition to the online teaching brought on a lot of difficulties generated by different problems, like the teachers' lack of skills for online education, the students' low digital skills, technical problems, the absence of devices for online education and much more. Thus, the teachers had to adapt fast to the new situation and to do their best in order for their students to continue to learn and to grow emotionally and socially (Laurian & Fitzgerald, 2021a; Laurian & Fitzgerald, 2021b). All of this has generated stress, exhaustion, feelings of worthlessness and job dissatisfaction, which represents the perfect cocktail for the burnout syndrome.

1.1. The burnout syndrome

Burnout is a syndrome that has gained popularity in recent decades and refers to the state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by working conditions. We are quite convinced that when one interacts with different people, a considerable percentage of them will complain about their jobs in terms of stress, exhaustion, work overload, dissatisfaction and so on. All of these can be viewed as typical signs of burnout. Burnout became known in psychology due to the work of Herbert Freudenberger, who proposed the term around the 1980s in his book called 'The High Cost of High Achievement', but the term was coined along with Maslach's research. According to this author, burnout is a syndrome that has 3 major dimensions: 1) emotional exhaustion; 2) depersonalization; 3) reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1996). This syndrome is more common in people who work with other people, and teachers obviously fall into this category. So, how does a burned-out teacher look and behave? Mainly, he or she shows emotional exhaustion and feelings of being emotionally drained by their students or colleagues, they have negative or cynical attitudes toward their students or colleagues, and they no longer experience satisfaction or accomplishment regarding their work. They might feel useless or unimportant.

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Although burnout is a serious problem, it is not considered a medical condition, and The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) does not include this syndrome. One can find it in The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems – ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2019), but is conceptualized as an occupational phenomenon and not as a medical condition. According to ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2019), burnout is a syndrome that results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life. A number of critical voices believe that burnout cannot be considered a medical condition and cannot be diagnosed for several reasons: 1) the overlap between burnout and depression (Bianchi et al., 2014; 2015b); and 2) the construct does not have adequate validity, and its structure is inconsistent, burnout being just another form of depression. Hence, it should not be considered as a separate medical condition (Bianchi et al., 2015a). However, we cannot ignore the fact that specific burnout symptoms do exist, just as we cannot look at this worrying phenomenon without intervening.

Teachers are extremely prone to burnout since they work with people. They may show signs of burnout when they declare they are frustrated at work; when they no longer identify themselves with their job; when they exhibit indifference or seem hopeless about their working conditions; when they frequently complain of headaches or digestive problems; when they constantly feel tired, lacking in energy; when they do not finish their work tasks; or when they feel that their work is not important or satisfactory. In a very good meta-analytical study, Chang (2009) examines, among other things, the sources and factors that cause burnout in teachers. Among the socio-demographical variables that have been analyzed in relation to burnout, the age was one of the most relevant ones, and studies showed that teachers aged between 20 and 30 years are the most prone to burnout, followed by those aged between 30-40 years (Friedman & Farber, 1992; Gold, 1985 as cited in Chang, 2009). Thus, young teachers that are only at the starting point of their careers are the most vulnerable to burnout. Other demographic variables analyzed were gender and marital status, but no firm conclusions could be drawn from there, the data obtained by different researchers often being contradictory. In the category of working conditions, burnout was related to a number of factors, such as the size of the class they teach (Carson, 2006 as cited in Chang, 2009); the socio-economic environment; the degree of difficulty and the task overload (Kokkinos, 2007); the salary; the opportunity of professional training; the openness or organizational rigidity (Leung & Lee, 2006); the quality of the communication with the superiors; the degree of participation in institutional decision-making and others (Chang, 2009).

1.2. Stress

In our modern world, stress is a common thing and has become a defining feature of everyday life (Pătroc, 2011). In common terms, stress refers to that state of physical, mental, or emotional tension that occurs in situations where a person is faced with demands that exceed his or her ability to cope with. This

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kind of stress is known as distress or negative (bad) stress, as defined by Hans Selye (1976). On the other hand, there is also the positive stress known as eustress, which manifests itself during the pleasant, happy life events. From a psychological point of view, stress occurs in situations where stressors are too numerous, are unpredictable, last too long or exceed the person's ability to cope with them.

From a medical point of view, stress is a normal biological reaction that occurs in potentially dangerous situations. When we are faced with unexpected stressors, the brain generated the production of chemicals and hormones that have the role of triggering the fight-or-flight response. Regardless of the specific response that has been deployed, we know for certain that the body should recover afterwards, should relax and regain its balance. Too much stress or prolonged stress can affect one's long-term health.

When it comes to teachers, they are exposed to numerous stressful situations and there are many factors that can cause stress, factors that can be related to the educational environment (or the educational institution where the teachers work) and factors that come from outside the educational environment. Regarding the internal factors (factors belonging to the educational environment and institution), teachers may be stressed due to a large number of students in their classes, due to numerous and unpredictable occupational tasks, unsatisfying rewards, poor relationships with the superiors (Kahn et al., 2012). Among the external factors that can cause stress, we can mention fluctuating educational policies, unpredictability (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), unreasonable demands and parental pressure, personal strains and others (Goddard, 2000; Kahn et al., 2012; Kiss, 2020; Thorsen, 1996). Some of these variables will be analyzed in our study as well.

2. Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed drastically the lives of teachers as they had to learn and adapt extremely fast to a totally different type of teaching: the online teaching. This particular profession is prone to burnout and to high levels of stress as it is, but the newly developed public health conditions brought upon teachers even more strain and burdens. Thus, we wanted to analyze the burnout and perceived stress levels of teachers working in preschools, primary and secondary schools in our country during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Research Questions

As we stated before, we wanted to see how much stress did teachers perceive during the COVID-19 pandemic and if they felt burned out during this time.

i. Are there any differences between teachers that work in rural or urban schools when it comes to burnout and stress?
ii. Is there a correlation between teachers' age and burnout and perceived stress?
iii. Is there a correlation between the class size and burnout and perceived stress?
iv. Could it be that the level of class that one is teaching may influence how much burnout and stress one experiences?
v. Being a parent with under aged children in care was a factor of burnout and stress during the lockdown?

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These are some of the research questions that we are trying to answer throughout our study.

4. Purpose of the Study

The main goal of this study was to investigate the teachers' levels of burnout and perceived stress during the COVID-19 pandemic when all educational activities moved online. We wanted to see whether teachers that worked in rural areas were experiencing more burnout and stress than teachers that worked in urban areas. Also, we wanted to determine if there are any differences in burnout and stress levels between teachers that worked in kindergartens, in primary schools or secondary schools. We wanted to investigate whether age and class size is correlated with burnout and perceived stress and finally, we finally we wanted to see the differences between teachers with under aged children in care and with those that were not parents.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

In this study we included 79 participants, all females aged between 23 and 64 (m=39.01), all of them being teachers in kindergartens, primary schools or secondary schools, and all of them working in both urban and rural areas.

Table 1. Participants' distribution according to their teaching level and teaching area

Teaching level	N	Working area	N
Preschool	18	Urban	46
Primary school	53	Rural	33
Secondary school	8		
Total	79	Total	79

As we can see in *Table 1*, 45 of our participants were parents or were having underaged children in their care, whereas 34 of them did not have children in their care.

5.2. Measurements

In order to assess the participants' levels of burnout we used The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). It is a simple and effective inventory that can easily be used by researchers and professionals. The scale comprises of 16 items, both positively and negatively framed, items that assess the burnout syndrome on two different dimensions: exhaustion and disengagement from work. The factorial validity of the OLBI has been confirmed in studies conducted in different countries (Demerouti et al., 2010).

We used The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) in order to assess the participants' levels of stress. The famous measurement tool contains 10 items that measure the degree to which a situation is considered by a person to be stressful or not.

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5.3. Procedure

Considering the pandemic context and restrictions, we used Google Forms in order to reach our participants. Both measurement tools and other socio-demographic questions were included in our online form and all the participants responded via Google Forms. Informed consent was obtained as the participants were notified about the purpose of our research and as they were assured of the confidentiality of the data collected.

6. Findings

First of all, we wanted to investigate the differences between rural and urban teachers, differences regarding burnout and stress. In *Table 2* you can see the descriptive measurements for these variables.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for burn-out and perceived stress variables for rural and urban teachers

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD
Exhaustion	rural	33	19.76	3.527
	urban	46	21.72	3.828
Disengagement	rural	33	16.15	3.355
	urban	46	17.96	4.179
OLBI total (burnout)	rural	33	35.91	6.227
	urban	46	39.67	7.236
Perceived stress	rural	33	18.03	6.696
	urban	46	20.43	6.682

Generally speaking, teachers from urban areas scored higher when it comes to both exhaustion and disengagement (the main components of the burnout inventory), and as well as for the perceived stress. In order to test these differences, we performed the independent samples *t* test. The results are presented in the *Table 3*, here below.

Table 3. Independent samples t-test for burnout (and its components) and perceived stress – differences between rural and urban teachers

Variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Exhaustion	-2.318	77	0.023	-0.529
Disengagement	-2.051	77	0.044	-0.468
OLBI total (burnout)	-2.415	77	0.018	-0.551
Perceived stress	-1.576	77	0.119	-0.360

According to our data, there is a significant difference between teachers that work in rural and urban areas when it comes to the burnout syndrome ($t = -2.415$; $p = 0.018$; $d = -0.551$). Apparently, teachers that work in cities are experiencing more exhaustion ($t = -2.318$; $p = 0.023$; $d = -0.529$) and more disengagement from their work activities ($t = -2.051$; $p = 0.044$; $d = -0.468$), but for the latter the effect size highlights just a moderate effect, meaning that there is just a tendency for urban teachers to become disengaged from their work. Why does this happen? Some explanations may reside in the fact that there

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are higher educational demands in the urban areas, demands that put a strain on these teachers especially in the unusual pandemic conditions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had to switch fast from the classical teaching environment to the online educational system and most of these teachers were not prepared to do this. They did not have neither the necessary skills, nor the knowledge to make a smooth transition. In all the urban areas the COVID-19 incidence was high and thus children and teachers had to move online, whereas in many rural areas the educational environment did not change for some time. Even after all the schools moved online due to the high rate of COVID-19 incidence and due to the Government's decision to close down all the schools throughout the country to limit the spread of the virus, in the urban areas the educational demands remained as high as usual and teachers had to work twice as much in order to cope with the online system in an effective way. Unfortunately for the children in the rural areas, due to the lack of logistics, they did not benefit from an effective online education. In many cases, school reached a full stop when it had to go online in the rural areas. Of course, we encountered some extraordinary examples of teachers that went literally from door to door in order to assure education for the less fortunate children (by bringing different educational materials), but these examples were quite rare.

Another direction of our research was to test the differences between teachers that work in different educational levels in regards with perceived stress and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our participants were teaching in three different levels: kindergarten (N=18), primary schools (N=53) and secondary schools (N=8). After conducting the one-way between subject ANOVA, we found no significant differences for either of our variables of interest; burnout [$F(2,35) = 0.472$; $p=0.628$] and perceived stress [$F(2,35) = 0.075$; $p=0.928$]. Thus, we cannot state that one category of teachers is more affected by the burnout syndrome then the other during that difficult time. Our results highlight the fact that all of our teachers experience roughly the same amount of burnout and stress, regardless of their level of teaching as you can see in Table 4.

Table 4. Pearson correlations between age, number of students (class size) and burnout and perceived stress

Measure	Exhaustion	Disengagement	OLBI total (burnout)	Perceived stress
Age	-0.068	0.151	0.048	-0.117
Number of students	0.175	0.175	0.192	0.132

Even though we were expecting some significant correlations between the age of our participants and the burnout and perceived stress levels, our data showed us the contrary. There was no negative significant correlation between the teachers' age and burnout and stress. Also, we couldn't find any association between the class size and burnout or stress levels.

Finally, we wanted to investigate whether being a parent could affect the levels of burnout and perceived stress in the case of our participants. In *Table 5,* you can find the means and standard deviations for the specified variables.

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Table 5. Means and standard deviations for burn-out and perceived stress variables for teachers that with and without underaged children in their care

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD
Exhaustion	without underaged children in care	34	19.76	3.725
	with underaged children in care	45	21.72	3.749
Disengagement	without underaged children in care	34	16.38	4.120
	with underaged children in care	45	17.82	3.719
OLBI total (burnout)	without underaged children in care	34	36.32	7.235
	with underaged children in care	45	39.44	6.662
Perceived stress	without underaged children in care	34	17.74	6.570
	with underaged children in care	45	20.71	6.673

We can see that the teachers that have underaged children in their care, the levels of burnout and perceived stress are higher than for the parents that do not have the share parental responsibilities. When it comes to exhaustion, the teachers who were also parents scored higher that their colleagues that were not parents (mwith children in care = 21.72; mwithout children in care = 19.76). The same goes for disengagement (mwith children in care = 17.82; mwithout children in care = 16.38) and for the total burnout scale (mwith children in care = 39.44; mwithout children in care = 36.32). When it comes to perceived stress, the teachers with children in care scored higher again (mwith children in care = 20.71; mwithout children in care = 17.74). We performed an independent samples t-test to assess the significance of these differences.

Table 6. Independent samples t-test for burnout (and its components) and perceived stress – differences between teachers with and without under aged children in care

Variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Exhaustion	1.979	77	0.051	0.450
Disengagement	1.627	77	0.108	0.370
OLBI total (burnout)	1.987	77	0.051	0.451
Perceived stress	1.976	77	0.052	0.449

As one can see in Table 6, we did not find significant differences between teachers that had underaged children in care and teachers that do not have parental responsibilities. When it comes to exhaustion, we can say that there is a tendency for the teachers with children to experience more exhaustion than teachers that do not have children (t=1.979; p=0.051, d = 0.450), but we cannot assert that these differences are of value. We couldn't find any kind of differences referring to disengagement, and so we can assume that teachers remain as engaged in their jobs as usual no matter their parental responsibilities. We obtained the same kind of results for the perceived stress as well, and we can only highlight a tendency for the teachers with children to feel slightly more stressed than those who do not have children (t=1.976; p=0.052; d=0.449). It seems that somehow being a parent (with underaged children) has little or no influence at all on the teachers' burnout or perceived stress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our participants that had children handled themselves as well as their colleagues. Usually,

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being a parent can be exhausting and can affect work performance, but at the same time, it can catalyze new resources and new abilities that transforms a person in a more effective professional. Maybe this can explain how our participants that are parents experienced similar levels of burnout and stress as the others.

7. Conclusions

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused high levels of stress, as well as physical and emotional exhaustion. Through this study, we aimed to investigate whether the lockdown affected teachers in terms of burnout and perceived stress, analyzing these variables according to some socio-demographic data. What conclusions can we draw from our results?

First of all, it seems that teachers working in urban areas have experienced higher levels of burnout than their colleagues working in rural areas. According to our data, burnout was significantly different in terms of exhaustion and less so in terms of disengagement. We can explain these results by the fact that the pressure on teachers in urban schools has been constantly higher along with the transition to the online system. Teachers had to learn in a very short time how to use the necessary equipment and softs for the online education and, at the same time, they had to find new ways to achieve their educational goals. Expectations from parents and superiors remained the same after the school transitioned to the online system, while in rural areas things may have relaxed more than they should have. We know from actual examples that in some rural areas, once online, children no longer participated in any kind educational activities. In most cases, this was due to the lack of technical means to carry out the online activities: the schools could not provide the necessary equipment in time for teachers or students with limited material resources (which are quite numerous in some rural areas) and, in some specific situation, the internet connection was missing. From this point of view, rural teachers did not experience additional pressures, which could explain these differences between the two categories of teachers.

Second, we tested the differences in burnout and stress depending on the level of teaching. We compared the teachers who worked in kindergartens with those who worked in primary schools and in secondary schools, but we did not find significant differences for any of our variables of interest. These results were contrary to our expectations and different from other similar studies, where teachers working at secondary schools or high-schools had experienced more stress or burnout symptoms (Klapproth et al., 2020). Our results showed that all our participants were similar when it came to stress and burnout regardless of the level at which they teach, but we must admit that the number of participants is quite small and these results cannot be generalized.

Although we expected some significant correlations between age, number of students and burnout and perceived stress, our data did not highlight the expected results. However, we were not that surprised given the fact that there are other studies that have shown contrasting results regarding the association between age and burnout or stress (Osei et al., 2021; Sánchez-Pujalte et al., 2021).

In the last part of the study, we wanted to see whether teachers who were also parents felt more stressed and burned out than those who did not have under aged children in care. Our data showed only a tendency for teachers with children in care to be more exhausted and stressed than the others, but the effect size was only moderate. However, we can assume that teachers who had young children at home

during the lockdown had a more difficult professional life than the others. It must be quite difficult to manage a child at home while teaching online, too. Thus, we can understand why these teachers might have felt overwhelmed at times.

The present study is limited by the small number of participants and the lack of sample representativeness. Participation in the study was done on a voluntary basis, via social networks and many of our participants were teachers with whom we crossed paths due to our professional network. Certainly, more consistent results would have required a larger number of participants and more appropriate representation. However, our results can be used in creating more efficient educational conditions or policies in order to prevent or eliminate the factors that can cause burnout or stress in the case of online teaching..

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