

ORIGINAL

Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Impact of Job Stress on Teachers' Lives

Exploración Interdisciplinaria sobre el Impacto del Estrés Laboral en la Vida de los Docentes

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ABSTRACT

Work stress is an increasingly frequent and growing phenomenon in today's society, where speed and impatience to constantly face new challenges and challenges in professional, family and social life prevail. In the world of work, responsibilities, constant transformations, making difficult decisions and the demands of technological development can be sources of stress for education professionals, which is why learning to identify work stressors, identifying the signs of stress, managing to prevent them and developing the right strategies for their management is becoming an increasingly important priority for both teachers and educational institutions due to the costs they entail. This article contextualizes the Cuban scenario where our teachers work, identifies the main causes of stress at work, the conflicts, the physical and emotional symptoms it brings with it and highlights the importance of self-care to maintain the quality of life of education workers and make the educational institution a healthy space. The research is based on the dialectical-materialistic approach, theoretical, empirical and mathematical statistical methods were used in the different stages of the study, and the bibliographic file technique was used for the critical study of the documents.

Keywords: Work Stress; Prevention; Quality Of Life; Integrated Approach.

RESUMEN

El estrés laboral es un fenómeno cada vez más frecuente y en ascenso en la sociedad actual, donde prima la rapidez y la impaciencia por enfrentarnos constantemente a nuevos retos y desafíos en la vida profesional, familiar y social. En el mundo laboral, las responsabilidades, las transformaciones constantes, la toma de decisiones difíciles y las exigencias propias del desarrollo tecnológico, pueden constituir fuentes de estrés para los profesionales de la educación, es por ello que aprender a identificar los estresores laborales, identificar los signos de estrés, conseguir prevenirlos y desarrollar estrategias correctas para su gestión se convierte hoy en una prioridad cada vez más importante, tanto para los docentes como las instituciones educativas por los costes que trae consigo. El presente artículo contextualiza el escenario cubano donde ejercen su labor nuestros docentes, identifica las principales causas de estrés en el trabajo, los conflictos, los síntomas físicos y emocionales que trae consigo y resalta la importancia del autocuidado para mantener la calidad de vida de los trabajadores de la educación y lograr que la institución educativa sea un espacio

saludable. La investigación se sustenta en el enfoque dialéctico-materialista se emplearon en los diferentes momentos del estudio métodos de nivel teórico, de nivel empírico, estadísticos matemáticos y se empleó la técnica del fichado bibliográfico para el estudio crítico de los documentos.

Palabras clave: Estrés Laboral; Prevención; Calidad De Vida; Enfoque Interdisciplinario.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace-related stress has been a persistent issue among researchers globally, and it has been escalating in recent years, this escalation can be attributed to the distinctive shifts of the 21st century, marked by accelerated lifestyles, increased competitiveness, specialized roles, economic crises, health crises, and various other factors. In reaction to these challenges, educators have been compelled to adjust to modern circumstances which demand heightened adaptability and responsiveness in their daily routines, consequently subjecting themselves to stress and its negative outcomes.^(1,2)

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is not merely the absence of disease but rather a multifaceted state of well-being that encompasses physical, mental, and social dimensions.^(3,4,5)

Work holds significance for humans not only from an economic perspective but also from a social standpoint. It facilitates physical and mental engagement, nurtures social bonds, and contributes to the overall well-being of individuals. Nevertheless, work can also pose risks to health, stemming from workplace accidents, the onset of occupational diseases, or other factors that can result in well-documented conditions such as burnout or occupational stress.^(5,6)

It is common for individuals to hold a negative view of work-related stress, undoubtedly attributed to the various health implications it presents for workers. However, stress is not always inherently negative. Occupational stress encompasses both positive and negative dimensions, each characterized by specialized terminology: eustress and distress.⁽⁸⁾ The former pertains to experiences and situations that yield positive outcomes, while the latter refers to unpleasant or distressing experiences that result in negative individual outcomes.

Moreno and Baez (2010) regard stress as "the outcome of the emergence of psychosocial risk factors or as a psychosocial risk factor in and of itself, with a high likelihood of significantly impacting the health of workers and the sustained performance of organizations in the medium and long term".⁽⁹⁾

Other scholars consider stress as a pattern of responses exhibited by the organism in response to external demands.^(10,11)

The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that work-related stress affects 30 % of the global working-age population, with a more pronounced incidence in developing countries. According to Maslach C, Schaufeli WB, Leiter MP (2001), stress is defined as: "...a consequence of the interaction between individuals and their environment when they encounter a situation that surpasses their capacity to respond, resulting in adverse effects that can detrimentally affect their well-being".⁽¹²⁾

Lazarus and Folkman (1986) define stress as: "...a specific relationship between the individual and the environment that is evaluated by the individual as demanding or surpassing their resources and jeopardizing well-being".⁽¹³⁾

Hence, occupational stress can be viewed as an excessive demand that an individual is incapable of bearing, either due to a shortage of resources or an inability to manage or effectively address the situation. Individuals perceive the situation as "challenging" or "unattainable", resulting in emotional overflow and triggering a stress response within the body. This circumstance has given rise to adverse outcomes for businesses, institutions at large, employees, and educators in this particular case.

Recently, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sponsored a research spinning five countries: Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile. This research determined the impact of work-related stress on the performance of educators, manifesting as mental health deterioration, distress, insomnia, difficulty concentrating, gastritis, varicose veins, and spinal conditions.^(13,14,15)

An educator that grapples with work-related stress may experience fatigue, depression, difficulty concentrating, impaired decision-making, insomnia, an inability to relax, increased irritability, anxiety, mood swings, and heightened sensitivity to criticism. Ultimately, these symptoms lead to a diminished sense of satisfaction in their work and subsequently a reduction in their commitment to it, negatively impacting their job performance. The prolonged activation of the nervous system under constant tension leads to the continued release of hormones over an extended period, depleting the body's reserves. This can result in a sense of being overwhelmed, weakened immunity, and an elevated risk of medical conditions, including gastrointestinal problems, hypertension, heart diseases, headaches, dermatitis, among others.

Crucial factors to take into account within our context encompass the excessive workload arising from

understaffing in educational institutions, the dedication of uncompensated time to other profession-related responsibilities such as lesson preparation, the development of educational materials, and engagement with students and parents.^(16,17,18)

Work-related demands, such as prolonged standing, continuous voice strain, noisy environments, an overwhelming number of students to supervise, and challenges related to learning and behavior, including issues with attention, motivation, and engagement in learning activities, undeniably create stressful situations for educators. When coupled with social and personal pressures, including rigid administrative hierarchies, inadequate support from superiors, limited cooperation from parents, a dearth of pedagogical assistance from colleagues, and a lack of societal acknowledgment and appreciation for their profession, among other factors represent common sources of work-related stress among educators.

This condition manifests in diverse ways for each individual. Some individuals become irritable and exhibit inappropriate behavior, directing their frustration towards their fellow educators, while others internalize their stress, fearing a loss of respect from their peers. It is essential to acknowledge that stress is not always a response to immediate or momentary events; there are instances where the cumulative impact of ongoing events within educational institutions can lead to stress. Scholars from different countries have investigated this matter, primarily through the lens of mental health psychologists and psychiatrists. However, there is a dearth of evidence from the perspective of educators actively engaged in the field.^(19,20,21,22,23)

Cuba is not exempt from grappling with this issue, numerous researchers have undertaken studies related to stress in general and work-related stress, including its most severe manifestation, Burnout syndrome. Nonetheless, the problem persists without a resolution, underscoring the urgency of studying it in the present context. This is especially critical due to the significance of the teaching profession and its vulnerability to stress, with far-reaching consequences on the personal, familial, and social aspects of educators' lives. Consequently, we propose this research, recognizing that the subject carries significant societal implications and warrants investigation guided by scientific principles.^(24,25,26,27)

This study, which is a component of a larger research project and is aligned with doctoral training, has the objective of examining the influence of work-related stress on the physical and mental well-being of educators employed in basic secondary educational centers located in the municipality of San Miguel del Padrón, Havana, Cuba. In particular, our objective is to offer a comprehensive understanding of work-related stress, its ramifications on their professional, familial, and social spheres, as well as its effects on their interpersonal relationships within the educational institution.

METHODS

The research presented in this study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It underscores a core dedication to a dynamic, participatory, and transformative framework. Inherent to its nature, the research to be undertaken will adopt a descriptive, explanatory, and participatory approach.

We collaborated with an intentional sample comprising 90 teachers who are engaged in teaching seventh, eighth, and ninth grades at three secondary schools situated within the San Miguel del Padrón municipality. To collect data on our research subject, we administered a questionnaire to these teachers.

For that, a preliminary test was previously conducted, with a particular focus on teacher preparedness as an integral component of the preventive measures implemented by the Specialized Center for Educational Services.

The research project was introduced to the group of teachers, and their cooperation was solicited for the purpose of responding to a questionnaire. Initially, copies of the survey were distributed to the teachers; some reviewed it, while others completed and returned it to the researcher. This circumstance prompted a shift in the sampling approach: rather than conducting the survey in an open population, we opted for intentional sampling due to the researcher's familiarity with the unique characteristics of the teachers.

The decision to narrow the research focus to the selected teachers inherently introduces bias into the study. This bias becomes apparent when examining the age distribution of the teachers, which falls within the range of 28 to 40 years old. With the exception of five teachers aged 28 and three aged 32, the remainder of the teachers had experienced at least one school change during their professional journey, driven by several reasons linked to work-related stress.

Moreover, within the intentional sample, it was reported that only 15 % of respondents were actively pursuing a master's degree or engaged in professional development courses at the time of the survey, while all participants held a Bachelor's degree in Education. The variations in age, years of service, and educational qualifications among the respondents render this research a multiple-case study, which incorporates diversity.

Taking into account that motivation plays a mediating role in the experience of stress, it is hypothesized that, within the sample chosen for this research, work-related stress levels may be lower compared to other educators without the mentioned degree. It is important to recognize that this assumption emphasizes the necessity of regarding the findings from this research as conservative estimates pertaining to mental health and

occupational stress matters among secondary school teachers. This study will be expanded to more extensive examination upon the conclusion of the author's doctoral study, so the results provided in this article represent an initial set of data obtained in the course of the research.

The research instrument comprised three distinct sections: a) a series of questions aimed at exploring the identification of work-related stressors. b) a series of statements designed to investigate the level of job satisfaction, communication dynamics within the educational environment, interpersonal relationships with other individuals within the school context, as well as attitudes, behaviors, and self-perceptions regarding their own teaching performance. c) the final section of the questionnaire contained inquiries about the presence of physical and emotional symptoms experienced by the participants.

RESULTS Y DISCUSSION

As a result of the instrument application, the following findings were observed:

Regarding the identification of work-related stressors, it was observed that 70 % of the teachers do not possess a clear understanding of what constitutes a stressor in the school environment. Their discussions on the topic often lack specificity, and they tend to attribute their difficulties to their superiors, perceive organizational deficiencies within the school, and experience a sense of institutional dissatisfaction. Additionally, they report a sense that their work has limited positive impact on others, and express inadequate self-assessments.

Concerning their level of satisfaction, communication dynamics, and attitudes toward their own performance, it is apparent that teachers are experiencing dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction has resulted in sporadic absences and the issuance of medical certificates, typically diagnosing anxiety-depressive disorder. This disorder manifests through symptoms such as alopecia and digestive and gastrointestinal disorders. Additionally, they express difficulties in effectively managing their time, dedicating numerous hours each day to lesson planning, reviewing assignments, and engaging in other activities outside their official working hours. This leaves them with insufficient time for rest and recreational activities. Teachers identify conflicts arising from demands that surpass their capabilities, such as excessive teaching hours and the responsibility of overseeing student groups due to the absence of other teachers or staffing deficiencies. This situation has led to emotional and physical exhaustion, as well as feelings of insecurity. Additionally, teachers have expressed disappointment regarding the lack of social recognition they perceive. Approximately 50 % of the teachers believe they do not engage in effective interactions with their colleagues due to a deficit in empathy, collaboration, and teamwork. Persistent disagreements and excessive criticism among teachers hinder communication.

Concerning physical and emotional symptoms associated with occupational stress, a striking 100 % of the teachers reported experiencing stress-related symptoms. The most prevalent symptoms include dysphonia, physical fatigue, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, headaches, gastritis, back pain, sleep disturbances, sadness, irritability, anxiety, hypertension, and a lack of self-care, characterized by persistent irregularities in food consumption.

Based on the obtained results, it became imperative to assess the variations in the physical and emotional repercussions of work-related stress among teachers. Consequently, another factorial analysis was conducted, leading to the identification of five factors that exhibit significant correlations with the health issues observed in teachers:

- 1) Identification of work-related stressors.
- 2) Lack of knowledge about the causes, consequences, and prevention of work-related stress.
- 3) Job dissatisfaction due to a lack of support, communication, and empathy from other teachers and administrators.
- 4) Physical exhaustion.
- 5) Self-care.

It is crucial to emphasize that job dissatisfaction holds significant implications for our educational settings. It is intricately linked to a decline in enthusiasm for teaching, the perception of inadequate social recognition, and the expressed desire of certain teachers to exit the profession.

Likewise, the physical exhaustion expressed by teachers serves as a comprehensive indicator that encompasses various elements, including fatigue, emotional exhaustion, despair, sadness, and a general decline in enthusiasm for the tasks they perform.

Conversely, emotional communication and integration with colleagues pertain to the interpersonal bonds among teachers and their co-workers. These connections are stronger when teachers perceive their colleagues as friends and allies, fostering feelings of affection and friendship. They maintain open and frequent communication, trust each other, and willingly share their concerns, worries, and needs. In contrast, emotional integration is weak or negative when teachers perceive their colleagues as distant, indifferent, hostile, or even adversarial. In such cases, there is a prevailing sense of distrust, fear of betrayal or abandonment, and a reluctance to engage in emotional interactions due to concerns about losing respect and, at times, experiencing professional devaluation.

This finding is notably interesting as it implies the potential for implementing support measures and preventive strategies to comprehend, avert, and effectively manage work-related stress among teachers. Nevertheless, additional more studies and proposals are required.

CONCLUSIONS

The psychophysical well-being of the teachers under scrutiny and their job dissatisfaction are variables that exert an influence on health, motivation, personal fulfillment, and the performance of educators. Consequently, they also have direct repercussions on the overall effectiveness of our educational institutions.

Teacher development, with an emphasis on proactively preventing occupational stress to ensure effective professional performance in their specific contexts, necessitates the formulation of diverse strategies grounded in the theoretical framework of the historical-cultural approach. These strategies should be structured and operated in a manner that considers potential levels aligned with individual educational requirements and adjusted to the prevailing conditions.

Stress is a close condition that affects us all, and its management and prevention have become fundamental professional skills that our teachers require, being as important as effective communication and teamwork.

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