

ORIGINAL

A comprehensive approach to the impact of job stress on women in the teaching profession

Un enfoque integral del impacto del estrés laboral en mujeres que se dedican a la profesión docente

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ABSTRACT

Stress related to working conditions, or work-related stress, is the way in which the body reacts to different situations, causing a physical or psychological imbalance. This article contextualizes the work of our female teachers, identifies the causes, conflicts, physical and emotional symptoms brought about by inadequate interaction with the work environment. The research presented here is quantitative and qualitative, assuming as a basic condition to face this study, its dynamic, participative and transforming character. Due to its essence, the research will be descriptive, explanatory and participatory. We worked with an intentional sample of 50 female teachers working in seventh, eighth and ninth grades in four basic secondary schools located in the municipality of San Miguel del Padrón. A survey was applied to teachers to obtain information about our object of study. The emotional state of the female teachers analyzed and their job dissatisfaction are variables that affect their health, motivation, personal fulfillment and performance, thus also affecting the effectiveness of our educational institutions. The improvement of teachers, starting from considering the need to prevent work stress for an adequate professional performance in the context of performance, presupposes the design of various strategies that are conceived from the theoretical references of the historical-cultural approach, with a structure and operation that considers potential levels in correspondence with individual educational needs and adjusted to current conditions.

Keywords: Work Stress; Teaching Profession; Quality Of Life; Integrated Approach.

RESUMEN

El estrés vinculado a las condiciones de trabajo, o estrés laboral, es la forma en que el cuerpo reacciona ante diferentes situaciones, causando un desequilibrio físico o psíquico. El presente artículo contextualiza la labor de nuestras docentes mujeres, identifica las causas, los conflictos, los síntomas físicos y emocionales que trae consigo la interacción inadecuada con el ámbito laboral. La investigación que se presenta es de corte cuantitativo y de corte cualitativo, asumiendo como condición básica para enfrentar este estudio, su carácter dinámico, participativo y transformador. Por su esencia, la investigación que se desarrollará será de carácter descriptivo, explicativo y participativo. Se trabajó con una muestra intencional de 50 docentes del sexo femenino que laboran en séptimo, octavo y noveno grados en cuatro secundarias básicas ubicadas en el municipio San Miguel del Padrón. Se aplicó una encuesta a docentes para obtener información acerca de nuestro objeto de estudio. El estado emocional de las docentes del sexo femenino analizadas y su insatisfacción laboral son variables que afectan su salud, su motivación, su realización personal y su rendimiento, de esta forma también afecta la efectividad de nuestras instituciones educativas. La superación de los docentes, a partir de considerar la necesidad de prevenir el estrés laboral para un desempeño profesional adecuado en el contexto de actuación, presupone el diseño de diversas estrategias que se conciben desde los referentes teóricos del enfoque histórico-cultural, con una estructura y funcionamiento que considere niveles potenciales

en correspondencia con las necesidades educativas individuales y atemperados a las actuales condiciones.

Palabras clave: Estrés Laboral; Profesión Docente; Calidad De Vida; Enfoque Integral.

INTRODUCTION

The term "stress," in the context of medicine, refers to a physiological, chemical, or emotional process that gives rise to tension and has the potential to precipitate physical illness. Canadian doctor Hans Selye delineated three distinct stages within the stress response:^(1,2,3)

- In the first stage: referred to as the "alarm" stage, the body recognizes the presence of stress and prepares for immediate action, whether it involves the fight-or-flight response. Endocrine glands release hormones that lead to an increase in heart and respiratory rates, elevated blood sugar levels, heightened perspiration, pupil dilation, and a slowdown in the digestive process.
- In the second stage: referred to as the "resistance" stage, the body's primary objective is to mend any damage resulting from the initial alarm reaction. Should the stress persist, the body remains in a state of heightened alertness, rendering it incapable of repairing adequately the incurred damage.
- The third stage, known as "exhaustion," has the potential to give rise to stress-related disorders. Prolonged exposure to stress depletes the body's reservoirs of energy and can lead to critical situations, with extreme consequences, even death.

Occupational stress is a progression that initiates as a result of a diminishing professional enthusiasm.⁽⁴⁾ This decline prompts an escalation of effort, ultimately resulting in an amplification of stress levels. Observable manifestations include irritation, tension, or apprehension in the classroom, and sometimes even towards colleagues and students.^(5,6,7)

Educators often find themselves excessively overthinking about their limitations and feeling concern about how their peers perceive them.^(6,8) The sense of being poorly paid and overwhelmed by their workload, struggling in the management of student discipline issues, experiencing post-workday depression, and frequently taking sick days for minor health concerns are concrete manifestations of this condition, which is a prevalent concern within our educational institutions. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of female educators are affected by this phenomenon, and this prevalence tends to rise in conjunction with additional family and social responsibilities placed upon them. These responsibilities encompass roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives, in addition to managing housework, organization, and daily caregiving responsibilities for their families, often without assistance from other family members.^(9,10,11,12,13)

In women, discomfort frequently commences as a feeling of disorientation arising from the contrast between their expectations and actual circumstances. Many individuals initially employ adaptive and motivational mechanisms to address this dissonance. Nevertheless, in instances where the issue persists, the discomfort intensifies, leading to inhibition and a sense of dissatisfaction.^(7,8,14,15,16,17)

Among the afflictions that are arised, depression stands out as the most prevalent. Muscular pain and voice disorders are also commonly observed. When stress erodes self-esteem, it exerts a detrimental influence on individuals' personal lives.^(2,14,18,19,20)

Female educators often experience a range of primary consequences, including back pain, headaches, episodes of vomiting, diarrhea, and a diminished interest in fulfilling their responsibilities within educational institutions.^(21,22,23,24)

The hierarchical organizational structure of school, societal expectations related to the teaching profession, and the design of the education system itself have collectively burdened teachers with an overwhelming set of responsibilities. Insights obtained from diagnostic data have underscored the importance of this phenomenon, which becomes evident as endeavors are undertaken to reform, rejuvenate, and reshape the education system with the aim of enhancing the quality of life for educators.^(15,17,25,26,27,28)

The teaching profession is highly susceptible to job-related stress due to the unique role teachers play as role models for their students. They not only transmit knowledge but also share their own personalities, life philosophies, values, attitudes, and emotions. When a teacher experiences stress, it becomes challenging for them to convey information effectively, and their emotional state directly impacts the quality of their teaching.^(10,11,12)

This profession embodies one of the noblest callings, as students' minds serve as the fundamental material for teachers, a task that is anything but simple and demands immense dedication. Being a teacher is synonymous with qualities such as patience, respect, and wisdom.^(2,3,29)

The current study, constituting a segment of a more extensive research project undertaken as part of doctoral studies, seeks to delve into the repercussions of occupational stress on the physical and mental well-being of female educators employed in secondary schools situated within the municipality of San Miguel del

Padrón, Havana, Cuba. In particular, our objective is to offer a comprehensive exploration of job-related stress, elucidating its ramifications on the professional, familial, and social spheres of women's lives, and the influence on interpersonal relationships within the educational institution, which frequently exhibit inadequacy.

METHODS

The research presented here incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, underpinned by a core commitment to dynamism, participation, and transformative analysis. By its inherent nature, the forthcoming research will adopt a descriptive, explanatory, and participatory approach.

We employed a purposive sampling method to select 50 female teachers currently teaching in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades within four secondary schools situated in the municipality of San Miguel del Padrón. Subsequently, a survey was administered to these educators to collect data relevant to our research objectives.

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. Given the prior experience in this doctoral research endeavor, participants were intentionally selected.

It's important to acknowledge that the decision to concentrate the research on the chosen group of teachers introduced a bias into the study. This bias becomes apparent when examining the age distribution of the teachers, which falls within the range of 25 to 35 years. With the exception of five teachers aged 25 and three aged 28, the remaining educators had relocated to different schools at least once during their careers due to various reasons, all associated with occupational stress.

Furthermore, the purposive sample analysis revealed that at the time of the survey, only 10 % of the respondents were actively pursuing a master's degree or engaging in continuing education courses, while all of them possessed a Bachelor's degree in Education. The variations in age, years of service, and educational qualifications among the respondents characterize this research as a multiple-case study, ensuring diversity and enriching the scope of the study.

Taking into account that motivation serves as a mediator of stress, we presume that the levels of occupational stress in the chosen sample for this research are lower than those experienced by 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 upon in the author's final doctoral research so the results provided in this article represent an initial set of data obtained in the course of the research.

The research instrument was structured into three distinct sections: a) A set of questions aimed at exploring the identification of work-related stressors. b) A series of statements designed to investigate levels of job satisfaction, the communication dynamics within the educational environment, social interactions with other peers in the school sphere, as well as attitudes, behavioral patterns, and self-perceptions concerning teaching performance, encompassing both family and social dimensions. c) The final section of the questionnaire contained questions inquiring about the presence of physical and emotional symptoms that impact the daily lives of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of applying the research instrument, it was determined that, in regard to the identification of work-related stressors, 75 % of the teachers exhibit a lack of clarity in identifying what constitutes a stressor within the educational institution's environment. Their discussions on the topic often lack specificity, and they tend to attribute their difficulties to their superiors, perceive organizational and teamwork planning within the school as inadequate, which contributes to their dissatisfaction with the institution. Also, they express a sense that their work has limited positive impact on others, display shortcomings in self-assessment, exhibit resistance to criticism, and perceive an exceptional burden due to their roles as women and the performance of various responsibilities in all aspects of their lives, feeling unsupported both at work and within their families.

Regarding their levels of satisfaction, communication dynamics, and attitudes toward their own performance, the findings indicate a prevailing sense of dissatisfaction among the teachers. This dissatisfaction has resulted in sporadic absences and the issuance of medical certificates, typically diagnosing anxiety-depressive disorder.

Teachers also express considerable difficulties in effectively managing their time, as they allocate a significant portion of their daily hours to tasks such as lesson planning and grading assignments, which extend beyond their regular working hours. This leaves them with insufficient time for rest and recreational activities. They identify demands that surpass their capacities, stemming from an excessive workload in terms of teaching hours and the responsibility of managing teaching groups in the absence of other teachers or gaps in staffing coverage. 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. A substantial 70 % of teachers believe they do not have positive relationships with their colleagues due to a deficit in empathy, collaboration, and teamwork. Constant disagreements and excessive criticism among colleagues have become persistent concerns and serve as communication barriers, contributing to feelings of anxiety and distress.

Concerning physical and emotional symptoms associated with occupational stress, a striking 100 % of the teachers reported experiencing stress-related symptoms. The most frequently reported symptoms are: dysphonia, physical fatigue, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, headaches, gastritis, back pain, sleep disturbances, sadness, irritability, anxiety, hypertension, and neglect of their own well-being. This neglect is characterized by persistent irregularities in food intake and a reluctance to eat properly, primarily due to insufficient time for meal preparation.

Based on the obtained results, it became imperative to assess the variations in the physical and emotional repercussions of occupational stress among teachers.^(5,6,7,30,31) Consequently, a factorial analysis was conducted, uncovering five significant factors that correlated with the health issues observed in teachers: Identification of work-related stressors; Lack of knowledge regarding the causes, consequences, and prevention of occupational stress; Job dissatisfaction attributed to inadequate support, communication, and empathy from other teachers and administrators; Physical exhaustion; Self-care practices for their health.

It's 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.⁽³²⁾

Likewise, the physical exhaustion expressed by teachers serves as a comprehensive indicator encompassing elements such as fatigue, emotional weariness, despair, sadness, and a general decline in enthusiasm for their work.^(5,9,11,33)

Furthermore, emotional communication and integration with colleagues refer to the relationship between teachers and their colleagues at work. This relationship is strong when colleagues are perceived as friends and allies with whom they share their concerns, worries, and needs.^(34,35)

This finding holds particular significance, as it implies the potential implementation of support measures and preventative strategies aimed at comprehending, mitigating, and effectively managing occupational stress among teachers. While further studies and proposals are still in progress, this research has proportionated six pieces of advice for teachers to enhance their quality of life and maintain their health while fulfilling their multifaceted roles as educators and women: Take control of conflicts; Enhance communication skills; Concentrate on activities that bring joy; Set clear goals; Approach challenges with a positive mindset, enthusiasm, patience, creativity, and empathy.

CONCLUSIONS

The emotional well-being of the analyzed female teachers as well as their job dissatisfaction are variables that exert a substantial influence on their overall health, motivation, personal fulfillment, and performance. These factors, in turn, 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 accommodates varying levels of intervention tailored to individual educational requirements and adjusted to the prevailing conditions of the moment.

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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