



New working conditions and well-being of elementary teachers in Ecuador



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The imbalance between the effort made by teachers and the received rewards produces stress.
- The new working and social conditions produce new stressors in teachers.
- Excessive vocational implication and emotional intensity of teaching risk teachers' health.
- New technological and organizational demands are a source of psychosocial risk for teachers.
- Educational centers should foster organizational actions to create healthy organizations.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 February 2017

Received in revised form

9 October 2017

Accepted 17 October 2017

Keywords:

Stress
Teacher roles
Organizational changes
Psychosocial risks
Working conditions
Burnout

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to analyze the stressors and working conditions which affect elementary teachers according to the TP-M theory. For this purpose, a research study was performed with nine focus groups composed of 75 teachers, each working in a different elementary school in Guayaquil (Ecuador). The results showed that occupational risks could be classified in two categories: (1) risks stemming from the social environment in which the teachers carry out their work; (2) risks derived from the new organizational demands that affect the physical and psychological health of teachers as well as their social and family relationships.

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1. Introduction

There has been a great deal of research on the role of teachers in the intellectual and emotional development of their students. However, considerably less is known about the well-being of the teachers themselves despite the impact that they have on the socio-emotional development and academic performance of their pupils (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011).

Various authors have highlighted the fact that teaching is an

extremely stressful profession since it is characterized by a heavy workload, an unsuitable physical environment, low salaries, responsibilities that are not clearly defined, and problems with students (Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014; Bauer, Stamm, Virnich, & Wirsching, 2006; Peltzer, Shisana, Zuma, Wyk, & Zungu-Dirwayi, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). All of these factors are important psychosocial risks for teachers and have a direct impact on the quality of their work (Sammons et al., 2007).

There are several theories and models on the teachers' working conditions and their influence on their professional performance and burnout. One of the social-psychological theories is the Teacher-Performance Motivation Theory (TP-M Theory) developed by Blase (1982) which considers the teachers' perceptions of the students' needs as well as the socio-environmental conditions.

This author suggests that teachers' stress and burnout is the

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result of their perceptions of the students' needs and the coping resources and effort that they devote. So according to this theory, when teachers detect some (curricular and/or extracurricular) needs in their students, they will convert them into goals and will invest a great deal of effort in reaching them. According to Blase (1982), these needs will be determined by the cultural rules of their environment as well as the internal (primary) or external (secondary) rewards.

The interrelation between the perceived needs, the effort and the rewards will be affected by the different working conditions or stressors that will influence teachers' satisfaction, involvement and motivation. Blase (1982) refers to this cycle as the degenerative development of the teaching efficacy, which in the long term can lead to a decrease in the teachers' performance ("give less" in qualitative and quantitative terms) and to burnout processes.

Concerning the possible stressors, Blase (1982) makes two big groups or orders. First order stressors interfere directly with the teachers' performance in class by reducing their involvement and effort and generating tensions and negative emotions. Within this group the author cites as examples the student apathy and discipline, obstructive supervisors or non-supportive parents. The second group refers to the context and conditions in which teachers perform their activity. In this sense, if teachers perceive a lack of support in their environment, their involvement and efforts will decrease. Among these factors the author cites the role change of teachers, the support from the social context or the ambiguity in the educational objectives.

Several later studies have followed, from different perspectives, the model proposed by Blase (Betoret, 2006; Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016).

However, some decades later, these working conditions and stressors have changed. For this reason, it is necessary to study the wide range of working conditions which may become psychosocial risks at work in elementary teachers and negatively affect their well-being.

The concept *psychosocial hazards* is defined by the International Labor Organization in terms of the interaction between working conditions and job content and the needs of the workers which perform it (ILO, 1986). Cox and Griffiths (2005) characterized it as those aspects of work and organizational context that could potentially cause physical and/or psychological harm to their workers.

There is reasonable consensus in the literature about the nature of the psychosocial risks at work. One of the most referenced models has been the European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management: PRIMA-EF (Leka & Cox, 2008) which identifies 10 psychosocial risks at work: job content, workload, work schedule, control, environment & equipment, organizational culture, interpersonal relationship, role in organization, career development and home-work interface.

Afterwards, the World Health Organization developed the WHO Healthy Workplace Framework (WHO, 2010) which considered four dimensions of workers' health. One of the sub-dimensions (Psychosocial Work Environment) included work organization as well as attitudes and daily practices in the organizations which affect the mental and physical well-being of employees. The WHO included within this sub-dimension: workload, harassment, bullying, or discrimination; work–family imbalance, or job insecurity, among others.

One of those psychosocial risks that has received most attention in recent years is job insecurity and its harmful effects (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002). According to Staufenbiel and König (2010), job insecurity is both an obstacle and a challenge. Firstly, job insecurity is an obstacle because of the discrepancy between what employees expect from their employers and what employers

actually offer. Secondly, it is also a challenge because it increases employee effort as a safeguard against redundancy. Nonetheless, in both cases, the effects of job insecurity are predominantly negative. In the teaching profession, job insecurity is a clear source of stress (Chudgar, Chandra, & Razzaque, 2014; Maphalala, 2014) because of constant changes, fear of unsolicited relocation, lack of promotional opportunities, insufficient legal protection, low salaries, and limited teaching support (Richter, Näswall, Lindfors, & Sverke, 2015).

Another emerging psychosocial risk is work overload or intensification. The increase of external pressures from policy-makers, supervisors, parents, and experts, generally accompanied by a reduction of autonomy and creativity in the classroom, often leads to disqualification and deprofessionalization (Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014). Among other demands, schools are expected to have a high performance. This increases the strain on teachers because of the mediating impact of role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict (Somech, 2015). Moreover, teachers are increasingly expected to perform a greater number of administrative tasks. In addition, pressures stemming from continuous external assessments and constant competitive evaluations detract from and even devalue the educational role of the elementary teacher (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014).

The work of elementary teachers is emotionally intense because of the close relation that teachers have with their pupils and because of the strategies that they must implement to maintain a positive climate in the classroom (Akin, Aydin, Erdogan, & Demirkasimoglu, 2014; Geving, 2007).

A significant cause of concern in educational systems in developing countries is also the implementation of new technologies. Al-fudail and Mellar (2008) demonstrated the presence of technostress when elementary teachers were obliged to use information technologies in the classroom. According to Joo, Lim, and Kim (2015), lack of training, inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of technical support can cause these teachers to suffer from anxiety and emotional strain. Not surprisingly, this increases the levels of stress associated with the use of new technologies.

Still another psychosocial risk at the workplace is violence in its different manifestations. This has been widely observed in other contexts where workers have been the object of verbal and/or physical aggression, and as a result, have suffered severe post-traumatic stress symptoms (Gómez-Gutiérrez, Bernaldo-de-Quirós, Piccini, & Cerdeira, 2016). Wilson, Douglas, and Lyon (2011) affirm that violence against elementary teachers is also a frequent problem, which has a negative impact on their physical and psychological health. Kovess-Masféty, Rios-Seidel, and Sevilla-Dedieu (2007) also highlight that the main occupational risk factors for teachers are not only individualization processes and lack of support from colleagues, but also fear of physical and verbal aggression. In many cases, this violence is directly related to the social context of the school and community, which is often characterized by high levels of violence, stemming from conflictive social relations between peers, drug use, and risky sexual behaviors. Evidently, this type of conflictive environment not only has a detrimental effect on students, but also has direct repercussions on the well-being of teachers (Voisin & Berringer, 2015).

So, these working conditions of teachers not only affect the quality of the work they do, but also they impact on their well-being and mental health. Thus, it has been proved their relation with the appearance of somatic symptoms, anxiety, insomnia, moderate to severe depressive symptoms (Kidger et al., 2016; Nagai, Tsuchiya, Touloupoulou, & Takei, 2007). In addition, negative emotions at work may have adverse consequences for well-being, attitudes towards the organization and performance (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012).

All of these psychosocial risks have a wide range of negative

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