



Two sides of the same coin? The role of rumination and reflection in elementary school teachers' classroom stress and burnout



Katja Košir ^{a, b, *, 1}, Sara Tement ^{c, 2}, Marta Licardo ^{a, 3}, Katarina Habe ^{a, 3}

^a Faculty of Education, University of Maribor, Koroška cesta 160, 2000 Maribor, Slovenia

^b Faculty of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Information Technologies, University of Primorska, Glagoljaska 8, 6000 Koper, Slovenia

^c Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, Koroška cesta 160, 2000 Maribor, Slovenia

HIGHLIGHTS

- The role of rumination and reflection in predicting teachers' stress and burnout was examined.
- Rumination was a direct positive predictor of stress and burnout.
- Reflection worked as a moderator in the relation between job characteristics and classroom stress.
- Workload and autonomy predicted stress and burnout after controlling for dispositional factors.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of rumination and reflection in teachers' classroom stress and burnout, thereby assessing their predictive value per se and their role as moderators between teacher reported job characteristics and stress and burnout. 439 elementary school teachers participated in the study. Dispositional characteristics explained additional variance in teachers' stress and burnout beyond job characteristics. Rumination was a significant predictor of both stress and burnout, whereas reflection was not. However, reflection moderated the relation between job characteristics and stress. These results highlight the importance of simultaneously investigating environmental and dispositional characteristics of teachers' strain.

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1. Introduction

Although teachers perceive their work as mainly satisfying and fulfilling, teaching is recognized as a stressful occupation (Borg & Riding, 1991; Kyriacou, 2001) also when compared to other professional groups (Johnson et al., 2005; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Higher levels of stress are more common among female teachers (Chaplain, 2008) and in inexperienced teachers (Yagil, 1998).

Experiencing high levels of chronic stress at work can lead to burnout defined as a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Although teachers' stress and burnout are detrimental in their own right, they are also related to teachers' capacity to establish supportive relationships with students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005; Yoon, 2002) further corroborating their practical value.

Experiencing stress and burnout at work can be partly predicted by job characteristics (Borg & Riding, 1991; Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009, 2011) as well as by factors within the individual (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Cropley, Dijk, & Stanley, 2006). In their model that links personality to the stress process, Bolger and Zuckerman (1995) proposed that personality affects both exposure and reactivity to stressors; in the presence of stressors, personality can affect coping choice, coping effectiveness,

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, University of Maribor, Koroška cesta 160, 2000 Maribor, Slovenia.

E-mail addresses: katja.kosir@um.si (K. Košir), sara.tement@um.si (S. Tement), marta.licardo@um.si (M. Licardo), katarina.habe@um.si (K. Habe).

¹ web site of institution: <http://www.pef.um.si>, <http://www.famnit.upr.si>.

² web site of institution: <http://www.ff.uni-mb.si>.

³ web site of institution: <http://www.pef.um.si>.

or both. In the present study, two modes of responding to stressors were examined: reflection was hypothesized to be an adaptive (Arditte & Joormann, 2011) and rumination a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy (Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Michl, McLaughlin, Shepherd, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Both strategies were extensively studied in relation to different positive and negative well-being and health outcomes (e.g., Harrington & Loffredo, 2011; Mor & Winquist, 2002) with rumination consistently related to negative outcomes (mostly to depression), whereas the relation between reflection and psychological outcomes is less clear (Harrington & Loffredo, 2011; Takano & Tanno, 2009; Watkins, 2008). Reflection as a professional development skill is often conceptualized as a very important tool for teachers' professional engagement (e.g., Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010) and is regarded as being crucial for burnout prevention; however, the beneficial function of reflection as a trait in teachers has not been sufficiently empirically studied. Additionally, the interaction between environmental and dispositional characteristics in predicting stress and burnout has not been satisfactorily explored and documented. Therefore, in the present research, we aimed to investigate three job characteristics (i.e., teacher reported workload as a job demand and teacher reported autonomy and co-worker support as job resources) and two dispositional characteristics (i.e., reflection and rumination) as predictors of classroom stress and burnout in a large sample of Slovenian elementary school teachers. The purpose of our study was twofold. First, we strived to explore the role of reflection and rumination in predicting teachers' classroom stress and burnout beyond job characteristics. Second, we aimed to explore an interactive effect between teacher reported job characteristics and dispositional characteristics. Since the comparative analyses show that the working conditions of Slovenian teachers are comparable to those of teachers in other European countries (Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe, 2013),⁴ the results of our study could – with a certain degree of caution – be generalized across other countries, especially to teachers in other European countries.

1.1. Job characteristics, classroom stress and burnout

Job characteristics are related to teachers' well-being and can largely determine both their burnout and engagement at work. The relationship between job characteristics and employees' psychological health outcomes is currently best explained by the job demands–resources (J-DR) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti, De Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). The model was influenced by dominant work psychological models, like Karasek's (1979) demand-control model, and originated from the transactional paradigm of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that defined stress as a disruption of the equilibrium between the cognitive–emotional–environmental system and external factors. These external factors can also contribute to equilibrium of the cognitive and emotional system depending on performance capacities (e.g., coping resources) within an individual at a given time (Demerouti et al., 2001). Based on this distinction, the J-DR model

proposes two categories of job characteristics, job demands and job resources that predict different stress-related outcomes. Job demands refer “to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). These factors are not stressors per se; they can become stressors in situations that require high effort in order to maintain the expected level of performance and can lead to burnout. On the other side, job resources are health-protective factors that refer to those physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that (a) are functional in achieving work goals, (b) help to offset job demands and the related psychological and physiological costs or (c) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Empirical evidence supports the J-DR model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Tement & Korunka, 2013) also among the professional group of teachers (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Jepson & Forrest, 2006).

Hakanen et al. (2006) tested the J-DR model on a large sample of Finnish teachers. Congruent with the model assumptions, they found job demands were predictive of burnout while job resources were predictors of work engagement. More specifically, they found that workload predicts stress whereas teachers' perceived control over his/her job negatively predicts burnout and positively predicts teachers' work engagement. The model was supported also by a large sample of Dutch employees in higher education (Bakker et al., 2005) and by a sample of Spanish secondary school teachers (Lorente Prieto, Salanova Soria, Martínez Martínez, & Schaufeli, 2008). In the present study, some of the elementary teachers' job characteristics that have been previously recognized as important demands and resources at teachers' work have been examined. As a job demand, workload has been identified as a predictor of teachers' burnout (Bakker et al., 2005; Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Hakanen et al., 2006; Lorente Prieto et al., 2008); teachers that report higher levels of workload were more prone to experience burnout. As job resources, autonomy and coworker support were included. In previous studies, teachers' autonomy was a positive predictor of job satisfaction and negative predictor of burnout (Bakker et al., 2005; Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009, 2010). Coworker support was predictive of teachers' stress (Kyriacou, 2001) and teachers' feelings of belonging that further predicted job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Similarly Friedman (1991) reported a negative relation between school social climate and teachers' burnout.

1.2. The interactive effect of environmental and dispositional characteristics

As noted by Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2007), studies on the JD-R model have been mainly restricted to job characteristics thus neglecting the role of employees' personal characteristics, which can be important determinants of their adaptation to work environments. Therefore, they expanded the JD-R model by specifying the various functions of personal resources that were hypothesized to buffer the effect of job demands and/or further enhance the effect of job resources within its framework. They assumed that personal resources (self-efficacy, organizational-based self-esteem, and optimism) (1) moderate the relation between job demands and exhaustion and between job resources and work engagement and (2) mediate the relation between job resources and work engagement. They were not able to confirm the moderation effects; however, they found that personal resources mediated the relationship between job resources and engagement/exhaustion and influenced the perception of job

⁴ According to the Eurydice report (Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe, 2013) the professional development and working conditions of teachers in Slovenia are similar to other European countries with regard to the characteristics that could be relevant for this research, including initial teacher education, specific requirements for admission, proportion of male teachers, working hours, provision of support measures (i.e. mentoring), employment status, salaries, continuing professional development, the pupil/teacher ratio, the criteria for the evaluation of teachers work and levels of autonomy and responsibilities.

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