

Analysis of the factors that affect the emotional fatigue of university teachers in the public sector

Análisis de los factores que inciden en el cansancio emocional del docente universitario del sector público

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Abstract

Emotional exhaustion is a growing problem in the teaching profession, affecting their well-being and work performance, compromising the quality of student training. This can have negative consequences on the worker's physical and mental health, as well as their ability to teach and motivate their students. This study aims to analyze the factors that affect the emotional exhaustion of university teachers in the public sector, with the purpose of identifying strategies and recommendations that can contribute to improving the quality of work life and the emotional well-being of these professionals. This project was characterized by a descriptive level of research with a quantitative and qualitative approach. Therefore, for this article, the survey and interview will be selected as methods to further explore the problem raised. The results indicated that an important part of the teachers (42.46%) frequently present emotional fatigue, this is due to work overload and the pressure to fulfill their responsibilities in the educational field. In this sense, it was revealed that most educational institutions did not implement effective

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organizational policies or practices to prevent emotional fatigue in their university teachers. However, strategies will be identified to combat emotional exhaustion. Among them, the collection of data through surveys to monitor the morale of teachers stands out.

Keywords: Emotional exhaustion, university teachers, work well-being, mental health, work overload, burnout

Resumen

El cansancio emocional es un problema creciente en la profesión docente, afectando su bienestar y desempeño laboral, comprometiendo la calidad en la formación de los estudiantes. Esto puede tener consecuencias negativas en la salud física y mental del trabajador, así como su capacidad de enseñar y motivar a sus alumnos. Este estudio tiene el objetivo de analizar los factores que inciden en el cansancio emocional del docente universitario del sector público, con la finalidad de identificar estrategias y recomendaciones que puedan contribuir a mejorar la calidad de vida laboral y el bienestar emocional de estos profesionales. El presente proyecto se caracterizó por un nivel de investigación descriptivo con un enfoque cuantitativo y cualitativo. Por ello, para este artículo, se seleccionaron la encuesta y la entrevista como métodos para explorar más a fondo el problema planteado. Los resultados indicaron que una parte importante de los docentes (42,46%) presenta cansancio emocional frecuentemente, esto se debe a la sobrecarga laboral y la presión por cumplir con sus responsabilidades en el ámbito educativo. En este sentido, se dio a conocer que la mayoría de las instituciones educativas no implementaban políticas o prácticas organizacionales efectivas para prevenir el cansancio emocional en sus docentes universitarios. Sin embargo, se identificaron estrategias para combatir el cansancio emocional. Entre ellas, se destacan la recolección de datos a través de encuestas para monitorear el estado de ánimo de los docentes.

Palabras clave: Cansancio emocional, docentes universitarios, bienestar laboral, salud mental, sobrecarga laboral, burnout

Introduction

Work occupies a central place in many people's lives; individuals work to survive, but employment is much more than just earning an income; work is a human necessity (Seijas et al., 2019). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), all workers have the right

to a healthy and safe work environment that is characterized by its ability to adapt to individual skills and resources, offer autonomy in decision-making, and provide emotional support. (WHO, 2024)

In this context, the mental and emotional health of employees is essential for both their performance and the productivity of the organization, since this is where people spend most of their lives, develop relationships, set goals, and achieve objectives. However, this space can also be a source of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, presenting as a psychological disorder that affects workers who live in a state of constant tension. (Montero Yaya et al., 2020)

Some cross-sectional studies show that work-related stress is one of the causes of psychological distress or professional burnout and other mental illnesses. These factors are particularly relevant in the workplace in developed countries, but it is now also important to analyze them in developing countries. (Lozada et al., 2021).

In this regard, it is mentioned that burnout syndrome (BS) is a term that was first coined in 1974 by psychoanalyst Herbert Freudenberger and officially recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a disease in 2019. (Alvarado et al., 2023). From this perspective, people who work under an institutional regime must adapt and face the conditions and situations demanded by the context in order to meet both institutional and personal objectives. (Gálvez et al., 2020).

However, teachers at any level or stage of education who suffer from this disease tend to provide poor service to students, act indifferently, and fail to offer adequate support in the tasks assigned to them. (Araoz et al., 2020) Studies have clearly shown that the teaching profession is one of the most affected by exhaustion, since (Leite et al., 2019) the accumulation of activities generates excessive stress, which makes teachers more prone to developing occupational diseases such as burnout syndrome (BS). (Silva et al., 2021).

Burnout syndrome is understood as a chronic and prolonged reaction to interpersonal stressors in the university workplace. (Alqassim et al., 2022), this condition manifests itself through a series of indicators, including behaviors and organizational conditions that affect university teachers and can trigger a variety of symptoms, such as physical discomfort, mood swings, emotional and physical exhaustion, lack of motivation, poor performance, and increased irritability. (Fuster et al., 2019).

Globally, burnout syndrome has been widely recognized as a problem that affects mental health and can trigger other psychological pathologies. In Ecuador, this condition is no exception, and deficiencies in the prevention and management of work-related stress have been identified. This has created a series of challenges for teachers' mental health and well-being. (Rodríguez et al., 2023). From this perspective, teacher job satisfaction is essential for productive and healthy performance. Educators face various challenges and institutional changes, making them a key pillar for the education and training of future generations. (Álvarez et al., 2019).

This disorder develops as a result of the individual's need to cope with work-related stress accumulated over time, even if ineffectively. As stress becomes persistent and constant, it can evolve into a chronic condition (Alvarado et al., 2023). Universities have taken on a fundamental role in promoting health by becoming spaces that foster the well-being and quality of life of the academic community.

To address the problem of burnout syndrome, it is necessary to deepen our understanding of the external and internal factors that can affect the health and well-being of teachers and administrators, and thus develop effective strategies to mitigate its effects (Cassaretto et al., 2024), (Avilés et al., 2020). In the context of Ecuadorian university teachers, a high incidence of painful symptoms has been observed, particularly headaches, neck pain, and back pain. This situation is largely due to a decline in mental health, which in turn leads to problems such as absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, and early retirement. (Vidotti et al., 2019)

Teachers highlight the daily severity they face due to constant exposure to stress in their work activities in institutions (Romero-Fernández, 2024). Therefore, in teaching and learning processes (Nuñez et al., 2024), it is essential to consider that the quality of life of teaching professionals is directly affected by this stress. That is why strategies become even more important in addressing the onset of burnout syndrome. (Aguirre et al., 2020)

From an institutional perspective, organizational justice is a key aspect in the study of burnout syndrome, as it reflects workers' perceptions of fairness in treatment and rewards in the workplace. (Vasquez et al., 2019). University teachers' perceptions of their work and their relationship with the institution may be influenced by the

level of support they receive. In fact, teachers who enjoy a positive work environment and receive significant support from their institution tend to be more productive and collaborative compared to those who receive limited support. (Khan et al., 2020)

The university education sector is a dynamic and demanding environment where organizational performance is intrinsically linked to the emotional well-being and ability of individuals to manage stress and mental fatigue. Psychological exhaustion, understood as chronic wear and tear resulting from work demands, can have a significant impact on the functioning of academic institutions, affecting the quality of teaching, job satisfaction, and ultimately the achievement of organizational goals. From an organizational development perspective, it is important to understand and address the factors that contribute to emotional exhaustion within the university context. Previous research has shown that organizational support, job autonomy, positive interpersonal relationships, and effective coping strategies are key elements in mitigating the impact of mental fatigue and promoting optimal organizational performance. (Puga, 2020)

This study aims to explore in depth the impact of emotional exhaustion on organizational performance within the university education sector, identifying the specific factors that contribute to this phenomenon and proposing intervention strategies based on organizational development. By better understanding the causes and consequences of emotional exhaustion, educational institutions can implement wellness policies and programs that foster a healthy work environment and promote both individual and organizational success. Through this approach, it is hoped not only to generate relevant academic knowledge, but also to provide practical tools for improving the quality of working life and performance in the university education sector, thus contributing to the advancement of organizational development in a context as vital as higher education.

With all of the above in mind, this study aims to analyze the factors that influence the emotional exhaustion of public sector university faculty, with the goal of identifying strategies and recommendations that can contribute to improving the quality of working life and emotional well-being of these professionals.

Stress has become a common experience for many people, negatively affecting their mental health and overall well-being. Due to changes in the environment and living conditions, human beings face a new set of challenges, such as noise, crowds, and constant

pressure, which generate a state of permanent alertness and tension. This is identified by psychosocial factors at work, such as stressful working conditions and poor organization, which have a negative impact on workers' health. (Guerrero et al., 2019)

In the search for strategies to mitigate emotional exhaustion, educational institutions must pay attention to a key aspect: organizational culture, which has gained recognition as a fundamental factor in an educational environment undergoing constant social, economic, and technological change. This suggests that institutions should prioritize cultural management to promote a healthy and productive environment. (Fajardo et al., 2020)

Burnout syndrome in the educational environment is the result of a combination of factors, including work overload, lack of job satisfaction, exclusion from decision-making, scarcity of resources, and excessive bureaucracy. (Toala Ponce et al., 2023) A healthy and productive educational environment is fundamental to the success of institutions. Fostering positive environments and well-being is essential to enhancing the growth and effectiveness of their members. This generates a cycle of success and continuous development.

Materials and methods

The research approach used in this study was the inductive method. A research question was formulated, data was collected through surveys, and a detailed analysis was conducted to identify specific patterns that would lead to general conclusions.

Due to its nature, this article was documentary and field-based. In addition, it was a non-experimental study, as the analysis was conducted in real-life situations rather than a controlled laboratory environment. Finally, it was a cross-sectional study because it involved data collection at a single point in time.

This project was characterized by a descriptive level of research with a quantitative and qualitative approach. Therefore, for this article, surveys and interviews were selected as methods to further explore the problem at hand.

According to data published by the CES (Higher Education Council) in its annual bulletin for 2022, the population of university educators in Ecuador was 34,341 professors (Ayala et al., 2022).

Results

This research presents the results obtained from the survey administered to the selected sample. The data collected was analyzed using

statistics and graphs in order to identify the most relevant trends in terms of emotional exhaustion. To this end, various factors that influence reported levels of exhaustion were analyzed, such as working conditions, emotional well-being, and personal decisions in the educational sphere.

This approach provides a deeper insight into the main causes and consequences of emotional exhaustion and proposes strategies to help mitigate its effects on teachers in higher education institutions.

According to the information collected, the data indicate that 60.27% of respondents sleep between 5 and 6 hours a day, suggesting that the majority do not meet the optimal sleep recommendations of 7 to 9 hours. Only 34.79% sleep within this considerable range, and 35.6% sleep less than 4 hours, which may indicate severe sleep deprivation. This may be due to factors such as workload, stress, excessive use of electronic devices, or poor habits, and it can have negative implications for overall health and productivity.

The perception of mental health in the last 4 weeks shows a divided distribution. 16.44% reported very poor mental health, indicating a significant group with severe difficulties, while 15.34% considered it very good, reflecting a segment that feels in optimal condition. The majority, 32.33%, fell into an intermediate category, suggesting a sense of relative stability. Overall, the data suggests a diversity of experiences, with a balance between those facing challenges and those feeling well.

The results show that 20.55% of respondents experience emotional exhaustion a few times a year, while 19.73% feel it a few times a week and 9.32% every day. This suggests that almost a third of respondents face frequent or constant emotional fatigue, which could indicate a risk of burnout. However, 10.41% say they never feel emotionally tired, which could reflect a high level of job satisfaction or effective stress management skills.

The data in this graph reveals that more than 40% of respondents suffer from constant fatigue at the end of the workday. This could indicate excessive workloads, long working hours, or a lack of

adequate rest. On the other hand, 18.08% report feeling tired a few times a year and 5.48% say they never experience it, suggesting a healthier work-life balance.

The data presented shows that 21.37% of respondents never feel fatigued at the start of their workday and 21.10% experience it a few times a year.

However, 17.53% feel fatigue a few times a week and 8.77% every day, which means that more than 25% of respondents could be facing severe exhaustion or lack of motivation. 27.40% of respondents never feel tired from working with people and 24.11% experience it a few times a year.

However, 12.60% experience this fatigue a few times a week and 8.77% every day, meaning that more than 20% of respondents could be suffering from emotional fatigue resulting from constant social interactions. This indicates that, although the majority handle working with their colleagues well, there is a significant percentage who feel an imbalance in their social relationships.

It is clear that 23.56% of respondents never feel worn out or burned out by their work, although 19.73% say they feel this way a few times a year. Therefore, a minority group of 15.07% and 11.78% states that more than 25% of individuals may be experiencing chronic exhaustion (burnout), which affects their mental and physical health and productivity in the workplace.

A detailed analysis reveals that 35.62% of respondents never feel frustrated at work, suggesting a high level of job satisfaction or the ability to cope well with difficulties in their work environment.

However, 16.60% report experiencing frustration several times a week and 6.30% every day, which could indicate constant work challenges, lack of support, or difficulties in managing conflicts that affect their well-being.

The perception of dedication to work is an important aspect of assessing job well-being. According to the data collected, 20.27% of the teachers surveyed never feel that they spend too much time at work, while a significant 30.43% experience recurring concerns about excessive dedication to work. Specifically, 17.26% feel this way several times a week, suggesting that workers are struggling to achieve a healthy balance between their personal and professional lives.

Social interaction at work can be a source of stress for some individuals. A significant percentage of respondents (55.37%) say they do not feel stress when working with people, suggesting that more than half handle social interactions well. On the other hand, 13.42% report stress a few times a month and 8.41% a few times a week, indicating that around 20% face recurring stress when working with other people. This could reflect the need to improve communication in the institution's work environment.

According to the data collected, the resilience and job satisfaction of respondents vary significantly. Forty-one point thirty-seven percent say they do not feel pushed to their limits at work, indicating a good work environment. However, 10.16% report feeling pushed to their limits a few times a week and 6.58% every day, indicating that almost 20% of individuals experience constant exhaustion at work.

Female teachers experience greater emotional exhaustion than men at all levels, with 26% at the low level, 9% at the medium level, and 21% at the high level. This could be due to factors such as a greater workload and family responsibilities, differences in how they cope with stress, or inequalities in the work environment. However, men also require attention, especially at high levels of emotional exhaustion (18%), so an organizational culture that prioritizes emotional well-being and provides psychological support to address professional burnout should be encouraged.

Emotional fatigue affects people of all ages, but with an uneven impact. Young adults aged 25 to 34 are the most affected, with 15% experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion. This is probably due to work and personal pressures. On the other hand, people over 55 seem to be more resistant to stress, as they are the group with the lowest level at only 2%. Finally, there are those under 25 who also report a considerable percentage (9%) of psychological exhaustion, which may be due to the academic or work pressure they constantly experience. To deepen our understanding of this phenomenon and obtain a more detailed perspective, interviews were conducted with the aim of better understanding the issue of emotional exhaustion affecting university teachers in the public sector. Interviews were conducted with teachers and psychologists who are experts in the field. These conversations allowed us to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to the factors that contribute to work exhaustion, as well as the strategies and measures that could help prevent or mitigate its impact.

Discussion

The findings of this study largely coincide with those of Tabares Días, as both highlight that burnout syndrome in university teachers is directly linked to work overload, poor workloads, and a lack of institutional support. However, it highlights a high incidence of burnout among elementary school teachers, although this study focuses on the public university sector, showing that administrative bureaucracy and the lack of professional recognition intensify work exhaustion. (Galiano et al., 2024)

(Skaalvik et al., 2020) indicated in their study that teaching staff experienced emotional exhaustion to the point of not caring about their students or recognizing the value of their work by the institution. Another study by (Alvites et al., 2019) suggests that poor working conditions for teachers in regions such as Latin America, North America, and Europe are closely related to stress in various forms, suggesting an urgent need to improve working conditions to reduce this condition. Although some teachers do not feel mentally or physically exhausted, another group highlights the pressure derived from work responsibilities and activities, which further contributes to emotional exhaustion.

According to (López et al., 2023), stress has a considerable impact on the performance of university teachers, so prolonged stress can reduce educational quality, impair interaction with students, and cause health problems such as burnout syndrome. This coincides with research on the relationship between teachers and their work environment.

Furthermore, in the work of (Cobos-Sanchiz et al., 2022), most teachers do not perceive working with students as a source of stress or as a task that causes them exhaustion or weariness. However, a significant proportion do feel that interacting with them requires additional effort, which can lead to a feeling of exhaustion.

In short, throughout the research, it was possible to understand the current state of the analysis of the factors that affect the emotional exhaustion of university teachers in the public sector. Addressing the most important findings in accordance with the objectives set.

The results reflect a worrying situation in terms of emotional exhaustion and the well-being of higher education teachers. Women report higher levels of psychological exhaustion than men. Another critical factor is insufficient sleep, with 60.27% of respondents sleeping between 5 and 6 hours a day.

Perceptions of mental health are also divided, with 16.44% considering their mental stability to be very poor and another group indicating that their health is good (15.34%). Thus, one-third of respondents reported suffering from frequent and constant fatigue. However, 2.55% rarely experienced stress and mental exhaustion, which could reflect a high level of job satisfaction in the educational field.

It should be noted that this study revealed that most educational institutions did not implement effective organizational policies or practices to prevent emotional exhaustion in their university teachers. Although they had a human resources department, their support was insufficient, resulting in a significant group of teachers experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion, especially after the pandemic and the energy crisis.

The research showed that remote work exacerbated emotional exhaustion, as faculty spent long hours in front of screens, preparing materials and tutoring students. This led to a deterioration in their emotional well-being and their ability to exercise their professionalism.

Fortunately, during interviews with psychologists, strategies were identified to combat emotional exhaustion and prevent burnout. These include collecting data through surveys to monitor teachers' moods and implementing restorative circle programs through listening, as well as self-care spaces to encourage the expression of feelings and needs in the educational workplace.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of educational institutions taking proactive measures to support the emotional well-being of individuals, especially in demanding remote or face-to-face work contexts. By implementing effective strategies, the risk of emotional exhaustion can be reduced, thereby improving the quality of education and the well-being of teachers.

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