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Occupational burden and burnout – key barriers to supporting the professional well-being of teachers

Summary

This study, part of an international Erasmus+ project, investigated the occupational burdens and their relationship with professional burnout among 443 primary school teachers in Warsaw, Poland. Using a comprehensive questionnaire, the research assessed five burden domains (organisational, classroom, parental, staff, and systemic) and two burnout dimensions (exhaustion and disengagement). The results identified systemic conditions – primarily low pay, a lack of societal respect, and frequent legislative changes – as the most intensely perceived burdens. Challenging relationships with parents, marked by their disengagement and high expectations, also emerged as a significant source of strain. Conversely, interpersonal dynamics within schools, particularly with leadership, were reported as least problematic. As hypothesised, all burden domains were positively correlated with burnout. Critically, emotional exhaustion was most strongly linked not to the major systemic issues, but to the cumulative pressure of daily operational demands. These included organisational conditions (e.g., excessive paperwork, diverse student needs) and classroom management challenges. This highlights how routine stressors directly deplete teachers' energy. The study concludes that while systemic reforms are vital, mitigating teacher burnout requires immediate, school-level interventions to reduce administrative overload, enhance teacher influence on decision-making, and foster shared educational responsibility with parents.

Keywords: teacher well-being, occupational burden, professional burnout, job demands–resources model

Introduction

Contemporary education, subject as it is to intense public scrutiny, is frequently the target of criticism and societal evaluation (Hargreaves, 2009). The teaching profession faces mounting political and social expectations driven by ongoing systemic changes. Valuing the role of teachers remains closely tied to viewing education as a cornerstone of individual, social, and political development. Within this context, the concept of teachers' professional well-being gains particular importance, not only as a personal matter but as a key determinant of educational quality.

The World Health Organization defines well-being as a state of complete mental, social, and physical health. Two main perspectives dominate the literature: the hedonic (happiness, pleasure) and the eudaimonic (meaning, self-realisation) (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). Keyes and Waterman (2003) integrate these into emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. Given the nature of teaching, this study focuses on psychological well-being from a eudaimonic perspective.

Teachers' well-being is shaped by situational (school and classroom), professional (working conditions), and personal (individual and out-of-work) factors (Alves, Lopes & Precioso, 2021; Day et al., 2017; Pyzalski & Poleszak, 2022). It is also linked to work demands and relationships with students and parents (Collie et al., 2015). Amid increasing demands and shifting working conditions, teacher well-being has become a critical factor influencing instructional effectiveness and educational outcomes. Research shows that a higher level of teacher well-being is associated with greater instructional engagement, the use of innovative teaching strategies, improved student-teacher relationships (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Penttinen et al., 2020), and enhanced student well-being (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2014) offers a helpful framework for understanding teachers' professional well-being. It conceptualises the dynamic between job demands – physical, social, and organisational pressures – and job resources, defined as physical, psychological, social, or organisational assets that promote personal growth, autonomy, and goal attainment. Resources serve a compensatory function by mitigating the adverse effects of the excessive demands made of them (Bakker et al., 2023).

An imbalance between demands and resources leads to chronic stress, posing a significant risk to teachers' mental health. Managing professional burdens requires adequate support to maintain physical and psychological equilibrium (Skaal-

vik & Skaalvik, 2018). From this perspective, fostering teacher well-being entails both strengthening resources and reducing demands.

International studies confirm that excessive workload, low pay, and lack of support undermine teachers' well-being and professional engagement (Li & Yao, 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). By contrast, well-being is linked to a lower level of stress, stronger commitment (Burić et al., 2021; Heidari et al., 2022), and is positively predicted by motivation, hope, emotional regulation, and social support (Zhou et al., 2024).

Chronic stress can disrupt emotional balance, impair daily functioning, and increase the risk of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. Prolonged exposure may result in detachment and a weakened sense of internal coherence (Agyapong et al., 2022). Burnout is a core mechanism in this process, developing as a consequence of sustained psychophysical overload and characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced self-efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Organisational factors, such as excessive workload, unpaid overtime, low salaries, and limited autonomy, are among the most significant stressors for teachers. Social pressure and the declining status of the profession further erode motivation and job satisfaction, exacerbating the problem (Dobkowska, Zielińska, & Żytko, 2024; Martinek, 2019).

Given these risks, this study sought to examine the specific burdens faced by teachers in the Polish school system and to identify areas requiring targeted support.

Aim of the study and research hypothesis

This study addressed a gap in the literature by examining the frequency, perceived intensity, and impact of occupational burdens in the teaching profession. It aimed to identify the most common and most demanding challenges, as well as their links to professional burnout.

The research focused on four questions:

- Which burdens occur most and least frequently?
- Which are perceived as most and least demanding?
- Which category is viewed as most burdensome in terms of overall impact?
- Which burdens are most strongly associated with burnout?

It was hypothesised (H1) that greater occupational burden would be linked to higher levels of burnout, particularly exhaustion and disengagement, resulting from prolonged work-related stress.

Research methodology

Research context

The study was part of the international project *Teachers' well-being in the times of crisis* (Erasmus+), conducted in partnership with researchers from Austria, Turkey, and Greece. It focused on personal and occupational burdens among primary school staff in crisis-affected settings and aimed to inform the development of school- and community-based support models¹.

Sample

The study was conducted in primary schools run by the local government in Warsaw, excluding those admitting only grades 1–3, as well as special, hospital, and music schools. A stratified random sample of 40 schools was selected based on average exam results. All teachers and specialists working with grades 4–8 in these schools were invited to participate. The final sample included 443 teachers (87% female), most of whom were middle-aged (35% aged 41–50; 30% aged 51–60). Early-career teachers (under five years' experience) made up 12% of the sample, while 69% had over six years of experience. Subject teachers comprised 65% of participants, and the remaining 35% were other educational professionals.

Procedure

Data collection was conducted between 28 May and 21 June 2024. School heads received formal letters outlining the study's purpose and procedures. Upon consent, participating teachers received individual access codes to complete an online questionnaire at their convenience via LimeSurvey. If a school declined, a reserve school was invited. No personal data was collected, and all responses remained anonymous.

Measures

Occupational Burden Questionnaire. Teachers' burdens were assessed using an author-developed tool based on Pyżalski and Plichta (2007), adapted to the Polish school context. The questionnaire covers five domains: organisational conditions, classroom management, parent relations, staff relations, and systemic factors. Each

¹ Erasmus+ Project "Teachers' well-being in the times of crisis" 2023–2026, project number 2023-1-PL01-KA220-SCH-000159628.

item was rated on two 5-point scales – frequency and perceived burden. Subscale reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.761\text{--}0.923$).

Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI). Burnout was measured using the OLBI in its Polish adaptation (Chirkowska-Smolak, 2018), selected over the Maslach Burnout Inventory due to concerns about the latter's validity in the local context. The tool assesses exhaustion and disengagement. As the original two-factor model was not confirmed in this study, a shortened version was used: five items for Exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.794$) and four for Disengagement ($\alpha = 0.683$).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the frequency and perceived intensity of occupational burdens. Composite indices were calculated for each of the five domains by combining frequency and burden ratings. A score of 0 was assigned if a burden was absent or not perceived as demanding; otherwise, the reported value (1–5) was retained. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the indices, which were computed as mean scores. Parallel composite scores were calculated for the shortened burnout scales (exhaustion and disengagement). Spearman's rank correlations examined associations between burden indices and burnout dimensions.

Results

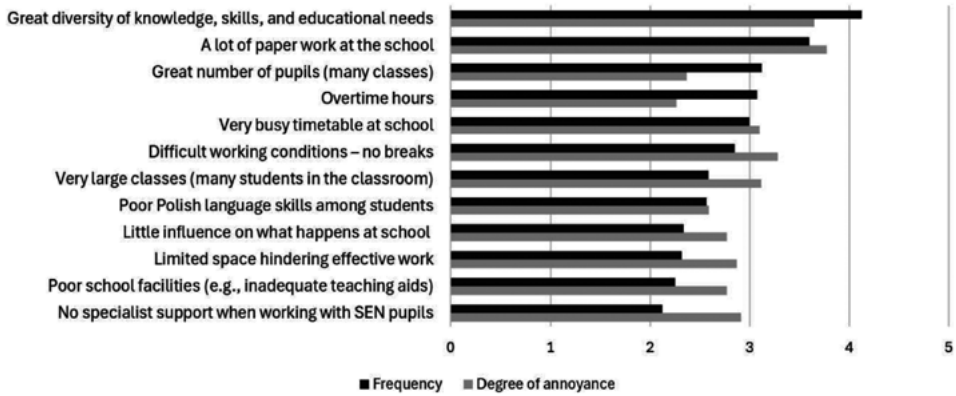
Frequency and perceived burden of occupational challenges

This section presents the frequency and perceived burden of selected work-related challenges across five domains.

Organisational and teaching conditions

Figure 1 shows mean scores for the frequency and burden of 12 items (0 = does not occur / not burdensome; 5 = occurs very frequently / highly burdensome). The most common and burdensome challenges included the diversity of student needs and excessive paperwork. While high teaching loads and overtime were reported frequently, they were rated as relatively manageable.

Other issues – such as lack of breaks, oversized classes, and tight timetables – were moderately common but perceived as quite burdensome when present. Inadequate facilities and poor Polish language skills among students were rarely mentioned. The least frequent issue, lack of specialist support for pupils with special needs, was nonetheless rated as moderately burdensome when it occurred.

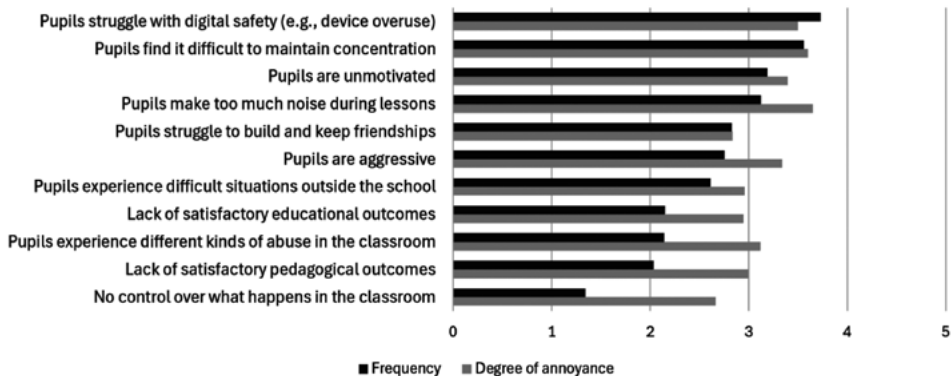


Note: 0 = does not occur/not burdensome, 5 = occurs very frequently/very burdensome

Figure 1. Frequency and degree of annoyance of burdens related to organisational and teaching conditions – averages of the teachers’ responses.

Teaching and classroom management

Figure 2 presents challenges related to classroom dynamics. The most frequent and burdensome issues were students’ excessive use of digital devices and difficulties with concentration. Low motivation and high noise levels were also commonly reported. Concerns about poor academic or behavioural outcomes appeared less often, while incidents of student aggression were rare. The least frequent and least burdensome issue was a lack of classroom control.

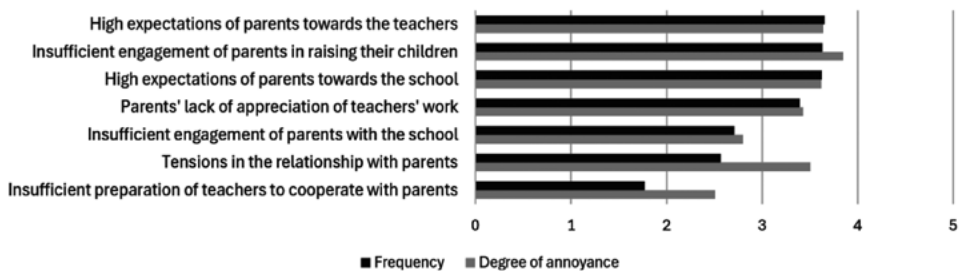


Note: 0 = does not occur/not burdensome, 5 = occurs very frequently/very burdensome

Figure 2. Frequency and degree of annoyance of burdens related to teaching and class management – averages of the teachers’ responses.

Relationships with parents

Among the seven challenges related to parent–teacher relations, the most pressing was parents’ limited involvement in their children’s upbringing, which also received the highest overall burden rating (see Figure 3). High expectations and a lack of appreciation for teachers’ work were also frequently reported and perceived as demanding. Less common were weak parental engagement with the school and occasional conflicts, though the latter were considered burdensome when they occurred. The rarest concern was teachers’ insufficient preparation for working with parents.

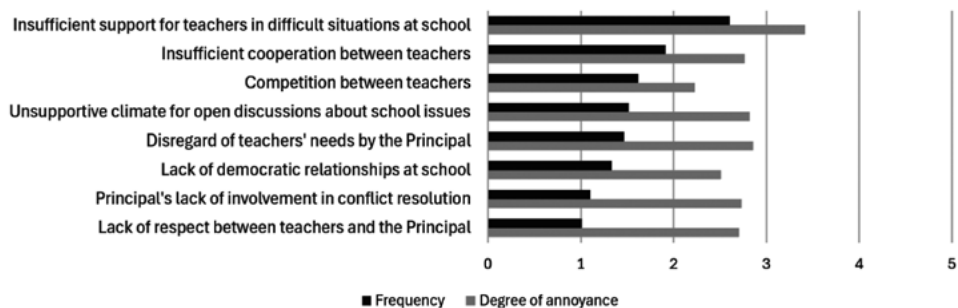


Note: 0 = does not occur/not burdensome, 5 = occurs very frequently/very burdensome

Figure 3. Frequency and annoyance of burdens related to relations with parents – averages of the teachers’ responses.

Relationships at school

Interpersonal challenges within schools were less frequent compared to other areas (see Figure 4). Among the eight issues examined – five of which related to school



Note: 0 = does not occur/not burdensome, 5 = occurs very frequently/very burdensome

Figure 4. Frequency and degree of annoyance of burdens related to relationships at school – averages of the teachers’ responses.

leadership – most concerns were reported only occasionally. Lack of respect from principals, limited support in conflict resolution, and disregard for teachers' needs were among the least common, suggesting generally stable administrative relationships.

In contrast, problems among teaching staff, such as insufficient collaboration or professional rivalry, appeared slightly more often. The most significant concern in this domain was the lack of support in difficult situations, which emerged as both the most frequent and most burdensome issue, indicating a perceived sense of isolation. Teacher rivalry, while present, was rated as the least burdensome, with other challenges assessed at comparable levels.

The macro-social level of the education system

At the broader systemic level, the most significant burdens were inadequate salaries and a lack of societal respect for the teaching profession – both ranked highest in frequency and perceived burden. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported these issues as very frequent, with 62% rating low pay and 54% the undervaluation of teaching as highly burdensome.



Note: 0 = does not occur/not burdensome, 5 = occurs very frequently/very burdensome

Figure 5. Frequency and degree of annoyance of burdens related to the educational system – averages of the teachers' responses.

Other significant concerns included frequent changes in educational legislation and demotivating professional advancement rules, both of which contributed to teachers' overall strain. Many also highlighted the perception of teaching as a vocation rather than a profession and an overloaded national curriculum, with the latter seen as more burdensome. The least frequent and burdensome issue was limited access to training, suggesting most teachers do not view professional development opportunities as a significant concern.

Overall occupational burden across domains

Composite indices were calculated for each of the five burden areas, integrating frequency and perceived intensity (range: 0 = stressors do not occur or are not perceived as burdensome; 5 = all stressors present and highly burdensome). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of composite indicators of teachers' occupational burdens

Indicator of occupational burden related to...	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
organisational and teaching conditions	443	0	5	2.64	1.04
teaching and class management	443	0	5	2.90	1.03
relations with parents	443	0	5	3.27	1.30
relationships with the school administration	443	0	5	1.41	1.52
educational system	442	0	5	3.58	1.04

Systemic conditions emerged as the most burdensome, with a substantial proportion of teachers reporting high or very high levels of strain in this domain. Relationships with parents also ranked relatively high, though slightly less so. In contrast, challenges related to school leadership were perceived as least problematic, with many teachers reporting no major issues concerning respect, involvement, or decision-making. Between the remaining two areas, classroom and teaching management were associated with a greater burden than organisational conditions, though both indicated a moderate overall strain. Considerable individual variation was observed: while some teachers experienced high burden across all domains, others reported minimal strain.

The relationship between teachers' occupational burden and professional burnout

All indicators of burden were positively and significantly correlated, suggesting that teachers experiencing strain in one domain are likely to feel burdened in others. The strongest association was observed between classroom management and relations with parents ($r = 0.620$), followed by classroom management and organisational conditions ($r = 0.588$). The weakest correlation ($r = 0.193$) was found between school leadership and systemic factors (see Table 2).

Table 2. Spearman's correlation coefficients between teachers' occupational burden and burnout indicators

Indicator	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Burden related to organisational and teaching conditions	1	.588*	.459*	.566*	.393*	.513*	.333*
(2) Burden related to teaching and class management		1	.620*	.438*	.417*	.406*	.256*
(3) Burden related to relations with parents			1	.303*	.554*	.329*	.272*
(4) Burden related to relationships with the school administration				1	.193*	.305*	.269*
(5) Burden related to the educational system					1	.374*	.244*
(6) Burnout: Exhaustion						1	.348*
(7) Burnout: Disengagement							1

Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

As hypothesised (H1), both burnout dimensions, exhaustion and disengagement, were significantly related to occupational burden. Teachers perceiving a greater burden reported higher burnout levels. Exhaustion showed the strongest links with organisational and teaching conditions ($r = 0.513$) and classroom management ($r = 0.406$), highlighting the central role of day-to-day demands. Disengagement was most strongly associated with organisational conditions ($r = 0.333$).

At the item level, exhaustion was most closely related to demanding timetables, diverse student needs, difficult working conditions (e.g., lack of breaks), and limited influence over school decisions. Disengagement was primarily associated with student diversity in knowledge and a perceived lack of voice in school affairs. Additional exploratory analyses at the item level revealed that exhaustion was particularly associated with demanding timetables, diverse student needs, challenging working conditions (e.g., lack of breaks), and limited influence over school decision-making. Disengagement, in turn, was most strongly linked to student diversity and teachers' perceived lack of impact on school affairs.

Discussion

This study explored the intensity of occupational burdens among primary school teachers and their links to burnout. As hypothesised, a higher level of perceived burden was associated with greater burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion.

Systemic conditions – low pay, lack of respect, and policy instability – emerged as the most burdensome. Parental disengagement and unrealistic expectations also contributed significantly to the strain experienced by teachers. In contrast, relations within schools, especially with leadership, were generally less problematic. Among everyday work demands, classroom management and organisational conditions showed moderate levels of burden but were most strongly linked to burnout, highlighting the cumulative effect of routine pressures.

These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting systemic undervaluation and organisational overload as major drivers of teacher stress and burnout (Burić et al., 2021; Li & Yao, 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2020). The strong link between exhaustion and everyday demands such as managing student diversity, overloaded schedules, and insufficient recovery time echoes the core mechanisms of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2014). This connection suggests that while macro-level factors create a stressful professional environment, it is the chronic, day-to-day operational challenges that most directly deplete teachers' energy reserves, leading to exhaustion. The feeling of being undervalued systemically may erode motivation, but the tangible tasks of managing a diverse classroom with inadequate resources are what drain immediate psychological capacity.

However, the relatively limited burden reported in interpersonal relations within schools, especially concerning leadership, contrasts with studies emphasising school leadership as a critical stressor (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). This finding might reflect contextual differences in the Warsaw school system, where local governance practices or a specific organisational culture could foster more supportive leadership styles. Alternatively, it may indicate that in the face of overwhelming systemic and parental pressures, teachers perceive their immediate school environment as a relative sanctuary, or that their focus is so consumed by external stressors that internal conflicts seem less significant by comparison. This underscores the layered nature of occupational burden, where the perceived severity of one stressor is influenced by the weight of others.

From a practical perspective, the results point to the need for multi-level interventions. Systemic reforms aimed at stabilising professional conditions, improving remuneration, and restoring the societal status of the teaching profession are crucial for long-term well-being. At the school level, supporting teachers requires not only reducing administrative and instructional overload but also strengthening their influence on school-level decisions and increasing parental engagement in shared educational responsibility. The strong associations between perceived burden and burnout also highlight the importance of monitoring early signs of strain and tailoring support strategies accordingly.

Limitations of the study include the single-city sample, limiting generalisability, and the cross-sectional design, which precludes reaching conclusions regarding causality. Self-report data may also be subject to bias. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs and examine protective factors, such as collegial support and individual coping resources.

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