

Teaching Challenges: Portuguese Teachers' Levels and Sources of Professional Stress

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Abstract

The issue of professional stress is a global concern that also affects Portuguese teachers, and studies on this phenomenon have legitimised this concern. The goal of the present study was to analyse professional stress among teachers in Portugal. The sample consisted of 922 Portuguese teachers, ranging from primary to secondary school, predominantly women, married, and holding a pre-Bologna degree. The data collection protocol included a questionnaire on sociodemographic and professional characteristics, as well as the Teacher Stress Questionnaire: Primary and Secondary Education. The results of this study suggest that global professional stress is present at high or very high levels for the majority of teachers. The differences in stress levels between teachers who have been relocated from their usual places of residence for work and those who have not are statistically significant. The study also revealed that teachers with more years of service in the same school experience lower stress levels than those with less than five years of service in the same educational environment context. Female teachers who have been relocated from their residences, are over 45 years old, and have been relocated for a shorter time in their current school, experience higher stress levels. It is essential to prioritise improving procedures for the placement and stability of teaching staff, as persistent instability caused by teacher mobility in Portugal can create conditions that exacerbate dissatisfaction and stress levels, ultimately leading to negative consequences for the education system.

Keywords: Stress; Portuguese Teachers; Sources of stress.

1. Introduction

Schools, as organisations, are expected to provide a high-quality service that, in addition to ensuring universal access, guarantees all students an excellent education and offers opportunities for everyone to succeed [27]. Since teachers play a crucial role in schools and the teaching and learning process, it is essential that they feel satisfied, competent, and engaged in their work environment, and that their well-being, energy, and positive interpersonal relationships are fostered [8].

Teachers face new demands that require, in addition to the technical knowledge inherent to the profession, a wide range of social and human skills that shape a new way of practising their profession in line with the challenges of the 21st century [33]. The new paradigm and successive legislative changes imply the (re)construction of the reality in which teachers can be active agents, recreating and renewing the school, or more passive and conformist subjects, defeated and overwhelmed by challenges [28]. In this sense, teachers are invited to develop and lead a process of social transformation.

In recent decades, several studies have found a gradual decline in the well-being of the teaching profession, with negative repercussions for schools as organisations [20;29]. This deterioration is associated with teachers' feelings of discontent and professional dissatisfaction, as well as the growing number of teachers requesting early retirement or leaving the profession [29].

Teaching is regarded as a highly emotional profession that involves high stress levels and, in more severe cases, burnout [22]. Teachers face increasing responsibilities and must possess additional skills to navigate the current realities of the school environment. However, there is simultaneously a crisis in the profession alongside its devaluation.

2. Theoretical Perspectives about Teachers' Stress



Work-related stress among teachers is a recognised and studied issue that has increased exponentially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to a rise in burnout cases (i.e., physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, accompanied by reduced motivation, low performance, and negative attitudes towards oneself and others; APA, n.d.). [5] as well as sick leave, absenteeism, and poor professional performance [16]. Studies examining job dissatisfaction, turnover, stressors, and burnout among teachers are emerging globally [5;6;17;34]). According to Maslach and Schaufeli [26], prolonged exposure to stress can deplete resources, leading to irreversible bodily damage. Burnout can thus be described as the outcome of persistent occupational stress. Dunham defines stress as a behavioural, emotional, mental or physical reaction caused by prolonged, increasing, or new pressures that greatly exceed defence resources [10]. Teachers experience stress as unpleasant emotions stemming from various aspects related to their work [9].

The stress and coping paradigm, developed by Lazarus and colleagues [23], serves as a fundamental reference for studying stress and understanding this phenomenon. These authors conceptualize stress as a dynamic process that arises from the bidirectional and reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment. They argue that an event is only deemed stressful if it is perceived and interpreted as such by the individual. Thus, when confronted with the same potentially stressful events, individual responses vary depending on each person's assessment of the situation. This cognitive assessment process, which mediates the person's interaction with the environment and their response, involves evaluating external events in terms of their meaning, relevance, and implications for the individual (primary assessment) and evaluating their ability to cope with the situation (secondary assessment) [23]. Therefore, the stress experienced by a teacher is unique to that individual, depending on the interplay of several factors that influence their perception of stressful situations: their personality traits, values, skills, and circumstances [22]. Consequently, the stress response occurs only in reaction to events that the individual assesses as significant and negative, which they cannot fully manage. After this phase, choices are made to address the perceived stress, leading to the development of coping strategies (cognitive and behavioural strategies for managing the internal and external demands of the relationship between the individual and the environment) to control the stressful event [24]. According to the transactional perspective [13], these two processes are interdependent, resulting in successive re-evaluations. Therefore, the thoughts and behaviours that arise in response to specific problematic events are subject to continuous change, depending on the particularities of the situation and over time [14].

Several studies [11] have identified psychosocial factors as the primary causes of health issues among teachers, particularly concerning stress and burnout. Psychosocial elements such as low societal recognition of their work, competitiveness, employee attrition, and conflicts within educational institutions can exacerbate these stress levels [12]. Consequently, when demands are high and resources are scarce, this situation can lead to increased stress and burnout [4;31]). The conceptualization of stress concerning job demands for teachers has prompted efforts to identify stressors or contextual factors associated with occupational stress. In this regard, numerous contextual factors have been identified in many empirical studies [34], including workload [36], time pressure [34], student indiscipline and demotivation [1;36] lack of rewards and recognition [12;19], student diversity [32] the necessity to adapt teaching to individual student needs [34], conflicts with colleagues, parents, and administrators [36], as well as low salaries and the profession's low social status [21]. According to Tsubono, professional stress is associated with low levels of job satisfaction, which can negatively impact students' educational goals. High-stress levels affect not only teachers' physical and mental health but also the well-being and academic performance of students [22]. Therefore, teachers' well-being is a crucial predictor of student learning [20].

The issue of professional stress is a global concern that also significantly affects Portuguese teachers, and studies on this phenomenon have substantiated this concern. According to the National Education Council's publication on the state of education, Portuguese teachers, when compared to educators in countries such as Denmark, Ireland, Poland, and Spain, perceive themselves as overworked, stating that they work, on average, more than 40 hours per week. While the average number of teaching hours stands at 18 per week, teachers devote additional time to lesson preparation, responding to requests, and monitoring students (an average of 14 hours per week), as well as to bureaucratic and administrative tasks (an average of five hours per week). Over recent decades, numerous studies conducted in Portugal [15] have consistently identified and highlighted elevated levels of stress and burnout among Portuguese teachers.

Research has demonstrated the impact of sociodemographic variables on teachers' stress levels. Carroll [22] concluded that teachers at the beginning of their careers report significantly higher

stress levels than their colleagues who are in mid-career or later stages. Some studies [18] indicate that women perceive stress and workload as significantly more influential on their intention to leave the teaching profession compared to their male counterparts. Santos [30] found that gender and place of residence influence exhaustion, with the effect being more pronounced among female teachers and those who have relocated away from their hometown. The same study found that mainstream education teachers reported higher stress levels and self-efficacy than special education teachers. Individual variables also affect teachers' stress and self-efficacy levels [2]. According to Tait's study [35], teachers most susceptible to burnout taught in secondary education, were younger, had less teaching experience, were married, and had more than two children. Stress in the workplace is a significant topic of discussion in the teaching field. Studies have shown differences in stress levels and various factors contributing to work-related stress experienced by teachers.

3. Methods

This study follows a cross-sectional, quantitative design. The sample was gathered using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method and comprises 922 teachers working in Portugal, mostly females, encompassing primary to secondary education. Among them, 190 teachers (20.6%) were relocated from their usual residences due to reassignment. The average length of service is 23.45 years ($SD = 9.61$, 0-47 years of experience). The largest group consists of teachers in the midpoint of their careers, with 7 to 25 years of service ($n = 474$, 51.4%), followed by those in the later stages of their careers, with 26 to 35 years of service ($n = 282$, 30.6%) and those who have more than 36 years of service ($n = 105$, 11.4%). Participants completed an online protocol that included a sociodemographic and professional questionnaire, along with the Teacher Stress Questionnaire: Primary and Secondary Education (QSPEBS; original version by Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978; Portuguese adaptation by Gomes et al., 2006, 2010).

4. Results and Discussion

According to the normative data from the QSPEBS [15], the mean values from 0 to 1 represent low stress levels, values greater than 1 and less than or equal to 3 signify moderate stress levels, and values between 3 and 4 denote high stress levels. Regarding the overall level of stress related to their professional activities, 52.9% ($n = 488$, with responses rated 3 and 4) of the participants report high to very high stress levels, and 34.6% ($n = 319$, with responses rated 2) indicate moderate stress levels. As shown in Table 1, the primary sources of professional stress are associated with Bureaucratic Work ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.92$), with 67.1% of teachers ($n = 712$) selecting the highest levels on the scale (3- Quite a lot and 4- High), making it the only area with an mean above 3. The second most reported source of stress is related to the Teaching Career ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.97$), with 72.7% of participants ($n = 669$) choosing the highest levels on the scale. The third significant source of stress is Excessive Workload ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.86$), with 61.2% ($n = 649$) of responses at the maximum levels. Student Motivation had the lowest reported stress level ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 0.89$). Despite a trend for women to report higher stress levels than men, the difference was statistically significant only on the Excessive Workload, $t(919) = 2.79$, $p = .006$, $d = .27$.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Perceived Stress Levels and Stressors

	min. – max.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Global Stress	0-4	2.54	0.91
Student Indiscipline	0-4	2.58	0.95
Excessive workload	0-4	2.82	0.86
Student Motivation	0-4	2.36	0.89
Teaching Career	0-4	2.95	0.97
Bureaucratic work	0-4	3.13	0.92
Disciplinary Policies	0-4	2.54	0.93

Concerning the age variable, teachers in the group aged up to 44 years report lower stress levels associated with Student Ability and Motivation ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.89$) compared to their counterparts aged 45 and older ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.89$), with a statistically significant difference, $t(920) = -2.28$, $p = .023$, $d = .16$. Likewise, in the Disciplinary Policies dimension, the difference between groups is significant, $t(920) = -2.38$, $p = .018$, $d = .17$, as younger teachers ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.93$)



reported lower stress levels than their older counterparts ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.93$). All effect size are small.

The level of general professional stress differs depending on the teachers' residence, with a statistically significant difference, $F(2, 918) = 25.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, between teachers living in mainland Portugal reporting significantly higher levels of general stress ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.92$) compared to those living in the Autonomous Region of Madeira ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 0.81$).

Teachers who reported relocation indicated higher stress levels across all QSPEBS subscales compared to those who had not been relocated. The effect sizes are small, ranging from 0.16 to 0.31 (cf. Table 2).

Table 2. Professional Stress: Change of Usual Residence due to Job Placement

	Relocated		Not relocated		t(920)	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Global Stress	2.65	0.95	2.51	0.90	1.94	.053	0.16
Indiscipline	2.75	0.94	2.54	0.95	2.67**	.008	0.22
Excessive Workload	2.95	0.88	2.79	0.86	2.19*	.029	0.18
Student Motivation	2.51	0.90	2.32	0.89	2.60**	.009	0.22
Carrer	3.19	0.93	2.89	0.97	3.76**	.000	0.31
Bureaucratic work	3.29	0.88	3.09	0.93	2.63**	.009	0.21
Disciplinary Policies	2.70	0.92	2.50	0.93	2.51*	.012	0.20

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Regarding the length of service at the educational establishment where they currently teach (cf. Table 3), there is a tendency for teachers with shorter tenure at the school (up to 5 years) to experience higher stress levels compared to those with longer service. Despite this trend, only one statistically significant difference was found in the Teaching Career dimension, $F(3,914) = 4.53$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with teachers who have been at the school for 0-5 years ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.92$) reporting higher stress than those with 6 to 15 years ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.11$) and those with 25 to 44 years at the same institution ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.06$).

Table 3. Professional Stress: Length of Service at Current School

	0-5		6-15		16-24		25-44		F (3,914)	p	Post-hoc
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Global Stress	2.57	0.88	2.55	0.92	2.49	0.94	2.41	0.96	0.82	.485	
Indiscipline	2.67	0.95	2.51	0.86	2.49	1.04	2.51	1.06	2.30	.076	
Excess Workload	2.86	0.84	2.80	0.80	2.80	0.95	2.65	0.99	1.44	.229	
Student Motivation	2.38	0.89	2.28	0.88	2.34	0.88	2.54	0.96	1.94	.122	
Career	3.07	0.92	2.85	1.11	2.89	0.96	2.75	1.06	4.53**	.004	1 > 2, 4
Bureaucratic work	3.15	0.91	3.15	0.86	3.10	0.95	2.99	1.12	0.72	.541	
Disciplinary Policies	2.62	0.91	2.49	0.93	2.47	0.95	2.42	1.01	2.03	.109	

1 = 0-5 years of service at current school; 2 = 6-15 years of service at current school; 3 = 16-24 years of service at current school; 4 = 25-44 years of service at current school. ** $p < .001$

A clear trend in stress levels is evident based on the number of years away from their usual residence, as shown in Table 4. Teachers who have been away for fewer years report lower stress levels. However, there is a change in the pattern between the third group (those displaced for 16 to 24 years) and the final group (those displaced for more than 24 years), with the former exhibiting lower stress levels.

The differences are statistically significant for all stress dimensions, except in Student Ability and Motivation.

Table 4. Professional Stress: Number of Years Away from Home

	0-5	6-15	16-24	+24	F(3,881)	p	Post-hoc
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	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Gobal Stress	2.46	0.91	2.75	0.82	2.78	0.98	2.45	1.00	6.40**	.000	2, 3 > 1
Indiscipline	2.53	0.97	2.68	0.90	2.79	0.95	2.72	0.94	2.78*	.040	
Excessive workload	2.77	0.88	2.88	0.81	3.18	0.73	2.77	0.95	5.99**	.000	3 > 1
Student Motivation	2.33	0.91	2.37	0.85	2.59	0.87	2.48	0.94	2.12	.096	
Career	2.85	0.97	3.10	0.96	3.40	0.89	3.21	0.98	10.11**	.000	2, 3 > 1
Bureaucratic work	3.07	0.95	3.22	0.89	3.52	0.66	3.09	1.04	6.16**	.000	3 > 1
Disciplinary Policies	2.48	0.93	2.62	0.94	2.93	0.86	2.75	0.93	6.73**	.000	3 > 1

1 = 0-5 years displaced from residence; 2 = 6 to 15 years displaced from residence; 3 = 16-24 years displaced from residence; 4 = over 24 years displaced from residence. ** $p < .001$

The findings of this study corroborate previous research [7], emphasizing the stressful nature of the teaching profession. Nearly 53% of teachers view their profession as very stressful, aligning with findings from various studies conducted in Portugal. Marques-Pinto [25] reported that 54% of participants considered their activity very or extremely stressful. Additionally, in other countries, 1 in 3 teachers regarded their profession as stressful, with Carroll[7] reporting that 55% of participants described their work as highly stressful. Such consistency may arise from the nature and intricacies of the teaching profession, which is widely noted in literature as one of the most stressful, akin to health professions.

Research shows that teacher stressors include bureaucratic and administrative tasks, the nature of the teaching profession, heavy workloads, and time constraints. This differs from earlier studies that used the same assessment tool [15], which highlighted student-related stressors—specifically indiscipline, diversity, and ineffective disciplinary policies—as the main contributors to teacher stress. In contrast, the current study links stress more closely to organisational problems, aligning with recent global research that identifies similar stressors, such as overwork [36] and time pressure [34]. A Portuguese study [3] with 3,000 teachers found that 98% reported an increase in bureaucratic and administrative tasks, which may explain these results. Furthermore, significant shifts in teachers' careers, such as frequent changes in role definitions and issues related to the placement system and employment contracts [25] may also contribute to this problem.

In terms of professional factors, relocated teachers experience higher stress levels across all QSPEBS subscales compared to their non-relocated counterparts, as highlighted in Santos's study [30]. Although these findings are not widely corroborated in the existing literature due to the limited research on this variable, they may have an impact on both personal and professional dimensions. Teachers frequently must leave their homes, often being distanced from their families, to fulfil their responsibilities. Moreover, there may be concerns regarding the effective management of household expenses, as teachers face increased costs for renting additional accommodation and for weekend trips to reconnect with their families. The outcomes can be further evaluated considering the years spent relocating. With each additional year in a new location stemming from job placements, stress levels often increase while job satisfaction tends to decline. However, a significant transition is observed between the third group (those who relocated between the ages of 16 and 24) and the last group (those who moved after the age of 24), with a notable decrease in stress levels. This change could be attributed to a more permanent restructuring of personal and family dynamics, as roots become more firmly established in the new location and the household's residence potentially shifts closer to the teacher's workplace.

5. Conclusion

In line with the global education sector, teachers in Portugal face significant stress, primarily due to excessive bureaucratic workloads, long working hours, and uncertain career prospects. Reducing the bureaucratic and administrative workload, which can often be redundant, and offering better career conditions, especially attention and incentives for teachers who are separated from their families, are aspects that could reduce teachers' professional stress. It is also essential to build, strengthen, and sustainably develop organisational cultures and environments that foster collaborative working relationships and nurture positive interpersonal connections among teachers, school leaders, students, and the wider school community. Investing in improving procedures for the placement, retention, and stability of teaching staff is crucial, as ongoing instability caused by teacher mobility can

lead to increased dissatisfaction and heightened stress levels, alongside all the adverse consequences this may entail for the education system.

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