

## ELDERLY TEACHERS: WORK RELATED ASPECTS

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**Abstract:** Teachers occupy a vital place in any country's education system, and the success of the educational process rests on their shoulders. This great responsibility of teachers extends throughout their teaching career and entails several aspects, which should not be neglected. The performance of senior teachers in the classroom depends not only on the teaching strategies implemented, but also on a number of work and individual factors that contribute to the quality of teaching. In this paper, our focus will be on the work of elderly teachers, highlighting both individual aspects such as the well-being of older teachers, their work ability, burnout, as well as aspects related to the organization of the teaching act, such as the integration of technology into teaching. We will then present possible openings for future research, drawing the attention of educational institutions to the need to understand and support older teachers in carrying out the educational act, taking into account the challenges they face.

**Keywords:** elderly teachers, well-being, work ability, burnout.

### **Introduction**

Teachers play an essential role in the educational journey of students. They are 'at the front line' of educational work, with a responsibility to engage students and promote learning. Research has shown that teachers are the most important factor in schools in terms of student success, satisfaction and achievement, note Viac and Fraser (2020, p. 7). Given this critical importance of teachers in student development and progress, both educational communities and school systems have high expectations for their work. They are not only transmitters of information, but are also responsible for ensuring that all students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to become competent citizens able to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Today, teachers are increasingly called upon to perform new tasks, such as facilitating the development of students' social and emotional skills, adapting to students' individual differences, and collaborating with other colleagues and parents to ensure students' holistic development, argue Viac and Fraser (2020, p. 7). Teachers are also expected to adapt to the technological and digital demands of our

times and use information and communication technologies in their teaching process to develop advanced skills in students.

As these expectations rise, teachers' working conditions and classroom processes change. In many education systems, teachers work with students from diverse backgrounds, with different ability levels and socio-economic contexts. In addition, many systems are facing constraints and budget cuts, which limit the resources available to teachers to meet new challenges and demands.

Very often, when it comes to increased expectations of teachers, one cannot help but wonder how teachers who have already reached an advanced age cope with these expectations. The work of older teachers is an important point of interest, as this category of teachers is at increased risk of illnesses associated with high levels of stress. The diseases to which teachers are exposed are either psychosomatic in nature, diseases of the musculoskeletal system, but also vocal cord problems (Vangelova et al., 2018).

### **Work ability**

Work ability refers to the ability to perform work, which encompasses necessary health status, occupational virtues and competence to manage work tasks (Tengland, 2011). According to Van den Berg et al. (2008), work ability has largely been investigated from perspectives related to ageing or age differences in relation to socio-demographic or lifestyle factors, resources and work demands. Previous research has highlighted how the physical and mental demands of work, as well as autonomy, supervisor support and development opportunities, are important factors influencing work ability.

It is well known that high work ability is accompanied by a longer period of work activity, while low work ability is associated with early retirement and prolonged and frequent absences due to sick leave (Vangelova et al., 2018). It appears that the work ability of older teachers is somewhat lower than that of their younger colleagues. However, the majority of older teachers demonstrated good work ability (44.8%), followed by moderate (34.1%) and excellent (15.8%), notes Vangelova et al., (2018). The low percentage of older teachers with low work ability (5.3%) suggests that they may continue to perform their job duties. It is known that health is one of the most important determinants of work ability. About 80% of both older teachers and non-teaching professionals reported physician-diagnosed conditions, the most common being cardiovascular disease and diseases of the muscular and bone systems, the same authors say.

Regarding the relationship between work ability and job requirements, the study "Work ability of ageing teachers in Bulgaria" indicated that mental resources, estimated number of diagnosed illnesses and neurological and sensory organ disorders influenced teachers' work ability. It was also found that deterioration of work ability due to illness was associated with diseases of the muscular and bone systems, digestive, mental and cardiovascular systems. The study data also revealed significantly higher rates of psychosomatic illnesses in older teachers, such as high blood pressure, mild mental disorders and problems such as mild depression,

tension, anxiety, insomnia and diabetes, compared to older non-teaching professionals. This could be related to long-term exposure to workplace stress, points out Vangelova et al, (2018).

In addition, the results of the same study showed higher rates of recurrent respiratory tract infections in both age groups of teachers, with a higher incidence in older teachers, especially compared to older non-teaching professionals. This difference may be attributed to indoor air quality and contact with sick children. In the study, more than 45% of teachers complained about indoor air quality, and with advancing age, an increase in the rate of chronic bronchitis and chronic sinusitis was observed in teachers.

### **Well-being**

Well-being is an intensely studied subject that enjoys a multitude of definitions. All definitions of well-being emphasise the multidimensional aspects of the concept and the need to encompass a number of components such as self-compassion (a positive evaluation of oneself and one's past life), environmental mastery (the ability to manage one's life and the world around one effectively), autonomy (a sense of self-determination and the ability to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways), positive relationships with others (expressed, for example, through genuine concern for the well-being of others), personal growth (a sense of ongoing growth and development as a person, and openness to new experiences), and purpose in life (a belief that life has purpose and meaning and that you have something to live for), Viac and Fraser (2020, p. 16).

For the professional setting, older teachers' job satisfaction is an important component when it comes to well-being. The level of job satisfaction can vary depending on teachers' perceptions of recognition for their efforts, the rewards they receive for their work, the working conditions available to them, and the professional opportunities offered to them. At the same time, the social relationships that older teachers have, both inside and outside the educational institution, play a crucial role in the stability of well-being. It is well known that social support can relieve stress and provide a sense of belonging and worth, notes Chang (2009).

Benjamin Dreer (2021) pointed out that teacher well-being is a multidimensional concept conceptualised by applying the PERMA model, proposed by Seligman in 2011, which distinguishes five dimensions: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M) and achievement (A). Thus, beyond the challenges encountered, there are many positive emotional rewards in the teaching profession, such as the joy and pride of playing a crucial role in achieving the desired success, both individually and organizationally. Positive emotions improve cognitive processing, openness to innovative teaching, creativity, flexibility, and building relationships with students, highlights Dreer (2021).

Teaching involves a high level of social engagement, and teachers who achieve this will experience greater job satisfaction and a higher sense of well-being. The lower teacher engagement and the higher emotional exhaustion, the lower student achievement and the lower teacher job satisfaction (Dreer, 2021). Perceiving

teaching as meaningful is crucial to teachers' well-being. This meaning is found with the feeling that they contribute to the growth of students by enriching their knowledge. Meaningful teaching leads to an increased level of engagement, but also to resilience, which without it would increase the risk of leaving the profession. Important achievements of teachers include building relationships with students, which improve teaching effectiveness and well-being. At the same time, job satisfaction improves high-quality goals and value alignment between teachers and students, and among colleagues (Dreer, 2021)

### **Burn out**

Being a teacher is a profession characterised by high levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Teachers are often focused on daily events, separated from other adults and have limited time for self-reflection. This 'culture of isolation' can lead to frustration, monotony and burnout as teachers privately manage their anxieties without social support. Moreover, confronting students' problem behaviours can exhaust them intellectually and emotionally. Teacher burnout affects the workforce both externally and internally. Externally, it manifests itself in increased teacher attrition and teacher shortages. Internally, for teachers who remain in the profession, burnout can cause inefficiency and burnout, negatively affecting the educational process, notes Chang (2009).

In the academic literature, it is noted in multiple sources that teacher burnout has two major types of determinants, individual and organizational factors. Individual factors include age, gender or years of teaching. Organisational factors include additional workloads, administrative elements of the school, salary, role ambiguity or class size.

When talking about individual factors that predispose teachers to burnout, some researchers argue that younger teachers are more at risk of experiencing burnout caused by emotional exhaustion (Friedman and Farber, 1992). Also, for similar reasons, it appears that women are more likely to experience burnout than men (Sari, 2004). Looking at demographic variables, it appears that these are not necessarily the determining variables for teacher burnout, as Chang (2009) points out.

On the other hand, organisational factors that facilitate burnout among teachers include social support from co-workers and school administration, poor school facilities, organisational rigidity, excessive workloads, inadequate pay or resources, absence of teachers from decision-making, overcrowded classrooms and harsh working conditions, Chang (2009) notes.

As for older teachers, burnout may be one of the main causes leading to retirement, which becomes quite problematic as the ageing teaching workforce observed in countries such as Belgium creates significant challenges. Policymakers are trying to motivate teachers, especially older ones, to work longer. Understanding what contributes to burnout among older teachers is crucial to addressing this issue (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). Thus, the aforementioned authors observed that teachers are facing a significant increase in work demands and responsibilities,

administrative tasks and standardisation, leading to increased stress and feelings of depersonalisation.

The intensification of the teaching profession stems from external pressures and demands imposed by politics, supervisors, parents and experts. The relationship with students seems to be fundamental and directly related to the dimensions of professional burnout. This is not surprising given that teachers are primarily motivated by intrinsic and altruistic desires such as teaching and assisting/supporting students. Although taken for granted, teachers often find themselves spending most of their time with non-teachers, and in such cases often only peer relationships, if qualitative, can act as a buffer zone in preventing burnout (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014).

### **Integrating technology into the act of teaching**

The field of education was one of the most affected ones during the pandemic. Not only did the participation of teaching staff and students move to the online environment, in addition, this move involved considerable efforts to adapt to new conditions for conducting instructional-educational processes, in a very short period of time. Fortunately, in education it was not necessary to implement personnel restructuring, thus eliminating a stress factor present in other fields of activity. On the other hand, teacher-student communication suffered a lot, feedback on online didactic activities being realized with great difficulty.

Within working relationships, an increase in solidarity between colleagues was noted, helping each other to discover new applications and means of online teaching, sharing examples of good practice with each other and maintaining open communication throughout the online school, both within the teaching staff and in hierarchical relationships.

As insights from our paper, we believe that future research should document students' experiences in this online learning context. As noted by Zorkić et al. (2021, p. 4), many studies highlight the consequences of unequal access to distance education, both from the perspective of students' well-being and from the perspective of gaps in countries economic development, but there are still few studies that present students' perspective and experiences in managing online learning processes in the context of moving education to online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Innovative learning, which is particularly understood as learning that integrates information and communication technology, improves understanding of basic concepts, develops collaborative skills and promotes problem solving and critical thinking through visual representations of real-life situations. Teachers play a crucial role in the modern education system, being involved in various activities such as facilitation, mentoring or planning. Recent changes in education have placed new demands on them, requiring high levels of professional knowledge and decision-making skills.

Contemporary teachers need to integrate technology into the teaching process, to provide practical learning experiences and to respond to the diverse needs of students. However, some teachers may be reluctant to change for a variety of

reasons, such as fear of job insecurity, becoming overwhelmed due to the generational gap and of the impact of electronic communication are present. Nostalgia for traditional practices also contributes to the reluctance. Cognitive resistance arises from the difficulty of assimilating new methods into existing mental structures, such as learning technology from scratch. Behavioural resistance is seen in those employees who resign rather than adapt, perceiving new methods as time-consuming and with minimal results. Change triggers stepping out of comfort zones and established routines (Tariq et al., 2019).

Teachers' perceptions of integrating technology into the classroom can be divided into two categories: those who see it positively, believing it improves teaching effectiveness and student motivation, and those who believe it distracts students from learning. Lack of successful experiences in integrating technology may discourage teachers from using it. Successful integration requires combining pedagogical knowledge, content and technology skills. Teachers who are less skilled in these areas tend to underuse technology. Research suggests that senior teachers, especially those without up-to-date pedagogical knowledge, may be reluctant to integrate technology. However, professional development programs that emphasize pedagogical knowledge alongside the use of technology in the classroom can help senior teachers effectively integrate technology into their teaching, thus establishing the foundation for a "TPACK" (T - Technology, P - Pedagogy, CK - Content Knowledge) framework, according to Tsai (2015).

In a study conducted by Quidas et al. in 2010, various institutional and personal barriers to technology use, including resistance to change, fear of technology, and workload concerns, were identified among older university professors. Interestingly, senior faculty professors exhibited a range of attitudes toward technology, from regular use to limited engagement. Attitudes were generally positive, with many expressing interests in learning more about methods involving technology. There were no significant differences in attitudes by gender, specialisation, experience, university or country of doctorate.

Another study, that proposed by Chang and Hsu (2017), suggests that the focus should be on changing teaching practices that demonstrate positive outcomes in student learning. This approach can help transform teachers' beliefs and attitudes. Teachers' direct experience of using technology leads not only to the development of their computer skills, but also to changes in their teaching beliefs and commitment to technology.

### **Conclusions and openings**

The well-being of older teachers is affected by high workload, administrative responsibilities and increased educational demands, which end up contributing significantly to professional stress and subsequently the risk of burnout arises. Older teachers may feel pressure to adapt to technological and curricular changes, which can amplify feelings of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Moreover, for older teachers, burnout may be one of the main causes leading to retirement (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014).

The teaching work of older teachers is a complex challenge today, influenced by multiple variables related to professional stress, physical and mental health, institutional support and social relationships. Recognizing and managing these variables through appropriate prevention and intervention strategies can help reduce burnout, improve work ability, enhance well-being, and increase older teachers' willingness to integrate technology more effectively within the classroom.

Educational institutions should be made aware of the intense stress and pressures that teachers experience and which, over time, lead to negative consequences. Furthermore, they should provide adequate resources to support teachers in stressful situations and facilitate their improvement of performance in the classroom. In addition to institutional resources, teachers should make greater use of personal resources for the same purposes. In this way, intense situations could be balanced more effectively to maximise performance and minimise the consequences of stress, that further can lead to lowering their well-being and increase the risk of burnout. Furthermore, the facilitation strategies that teachers should use to enhance the teaching process would be recommended to focus on raising awareness of the available technological tools and their pedagogical benefits, while addressing time constraints and the need for support and incentives to develop the educational process.

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