

UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

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**Perspectives of Teachers in Quito Ecuador About Their Roles
Following the Covid-19 Pandemic.**

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HOJA DE CALIFICACIÓN DE TRABAJO DE FIN DE CARRERA

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RESUMEN

Este estudio examina el impacto de la pandemia de COVID-19 en el papel de los docentes en tres escuelas privadas de clase alta en Quito, Ecuador. Se centra en las perspectivas de los docentes, abordando específicamente las consecuencias sobre su salud y desempeño profesional, con especial énfasis en el agotamiento y la rotación. Al realizar entrevistas con quince maestros y analizar datos de reuniones, clases y comentarios, este estudio explora la ambigüedad que rodea los roles de los maestros durante la pandemia y sus efectos en su bienestar. Basándose en la literatura existente, el estudio arroja luz sobre los factores que contribuyen al agotamiento y su influencia en el desempeño de los docentes. Los hallazgos revelan cómo la pandemia, incluido el mal comportamiento de los estudiantes, los estándares académicos más bajos y la falta de apoyo institucional y expectativas claras, ha alterado los roles profesionales de los maestros. Además, el estudio proporciona información sobre las experiencias de los docentes antes, durante y después de la pandemia, y enfatiza la conciencia sobre el agotamiento y sus implicaciones en la profesión docente.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, Ecuador, Agotamiento, Apoyo Institucional, Docentes.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role of teachers in three private high-class schools in Quito, Ecuador. It focuses on teachers' perspectives, specifically addressing the consequences on their health and professional performance, with a particular emphasis on burnout and turnover. By conducting interviews with fifteen teachers and analyzing data from meetings, classes, and comments, this study explores the ambiguity surrounding teachers' roles during the pandemic and its effects on their well-being. Drawing on existing literature, the study sheds light on the factors contributing to burnout and their influence on teachers' performance. The findings reveal how the pandemic, including student misbehavior, lowered academic standards, and a lack of institutional support and clear expectations, has altered teachers' professional roles. Additionally, the study provides insights into teachers' experiences before, during, and after the pandemic, emphasizing awareness of burnout and its implications on the teaching profession.

Key words: COVID-19, Ecuador, Burnout, Institutional Support, Teachers

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INTRODUCCIÓN

Burnout is a societal problem that negatively affects individuals as well as organizations. Schaufeli & Enzmann (1998) found that burnout negatively affects organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and has adverse effects at the organizational level, such as increasing turnover intentions. Moreover, Tennant (2001) reports in his study of workers in various fields that burnout has a negative impact on job satisfaction and organizational commitment, reduces work productivity, increases turnover intentions, and has a negative impact on co-workers. Burnout not only affects businesses and organizations, but also individuals. For instance, the World Health Organization (2018) reported that burnout has a negative impact on an individual's physical and mental health, including a negative impact on self-esteem and self-efficacy. In sum, burnout can be defined as an employment-related social problem characterized by feelings of exhaustion, cynicism (dehumanization), or occupational ineffectiveness (decreased sense of personal accomplishment) due to unmanaged chronic job stress that can manifest in a professional context (Park, 2020).

Within the field of education, burnout has become a pressing issue often associated to the phenomenon of teacher turnover (Li & Yao, 2022). Indeed, there is a growing strand within educational research that strives to understand both teachers' experience of burnout and its potential consequences. This strand focuses not only on individual experiences, but also on organizational and environmental factors that contribute to burnout. Bosco et al. (2013), for instance, notes that while individual factors may be a precursor to burnout, it is usually meaningful environmental, social, and organizational changes that trigger it. Organizational environmental factors associated with burnout include job stress, excessive workload, emotional dissonance, communication, relationship conflict, role conflict, role ambiguity, and job insecurity (Park, 2020, p. 47).

Although teacher burnout has been amply discussed in the literature, there is still a shortage of studies that attempt to understand how Covid-19 pandemic may contribute to this phenomenon. This worldwide event created many new challenges for people around the globe in their personal and work lives. There is a vast amount of literature that discusses the effects of the pandemic on mental health and stress (see Talevi et al., 2020); however, there is a limited number of studies focusing on how this event relates to teachers specifically. It is crucial to address this gap, as there is a high likelihood that the Covid-19 pandemic may have accentuated the precarious conditions of teaching that are often associated with burnout.

This present study strives to address this gap and understand some of the possible effects the pandemic might have brought concerning the issue. The study focuses on the perspectives of private school teachers in Quito about their roles as educators and how the Covid-19 pandemic affected these. Through semi-structured interviews and classroom observation, the study strives to understand how the pandemic affected teachers in this area in relation to the challenges of the profession and burnout. The data was collected between three private schools of the city where patterns and behavior were observed to investigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on teachers.

The study found significant evidence that supports the claim that teachers in fact do perceive their roles have changed after the pandemic. This is due to many causes such as student misbehavior and their low academic achievements amongst others. Another finding supports the claim by analyzing the lack of institutional support and the ambiguity of the roles of educators. These factors all lead to teacher burnout and to teacher turnover in many cases. In the next section literature on the topic of Teacher Burnout and the pandemic is explored in order to clarify the phenomenon and causes for it.

DESARROLLO DEL TEMA

Burnout and Teacher Turnover

Most of the symptoms of burnout cannot be easily diagnosed and this lack of legibility means that burned-out workers often cannot find solutions (Leitchman, 2022). Some of the symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disorders, fatigue, insomnia, headache, frequent colds and reduced concentration can easily hide as other medical conditions. However, Woo et al. (2020) describe that burnout has three domains that differ from other psychological conditions such as stress, fatigue or depression. These domains are depersonalization, diminished sense of personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion.

Burnout in teachers is often attributed to the lack of support they receive from the institution or their peers in the effort to fulfil their daily responsibilities (Fernández-Arata, et al. 2019). Some of these responsibilities include teaching but extend to socializing students through values or socially approved forms of behavior. The role of teachers is ambiguous and full of conflict. Moreover, teacher responsibilities can be excessive and often lack fair financial compensation (Fernández-Arata, et al. 2019). Indeed, the teaching profession places a large demand that teachers remain up to date with the recent development of the field, requiring them to be constantly learning new strategies such as technological use and pedagogies of emotional intelligence (Oliviera, et al. 2021).

Burnout not only affects teachers' emotional well-being. It also has significant implications for work performance, their relationship with their students, their well-being, self-efficacy and classroom climate (Oliviera, et al. 2021). Even though this syndrome has been present in teachers' lives for some time, it has increased over the last decade due to global events and increases in technological use. Due to these changes, teachers are required to be constantly learning new strategies and adapting to the educational needs of a new

generation of students. In summary, teachers must be a changing and adapting figure that is constantly innovating their pedagogical practices to prepare students both academically and socio-emotionally (Oliviera, et al. 2021).

While burnout has been present within the teaching profession, there is ample evidence that suggests that the emergence of COVID-19 may exacerbate the phenomenon. The pandemic had a significant impact on the economy of many countries, leading to decreased funding in education. Governments from around the world limited crowds by establishing contention policies that included lockdowns and limiting transportation services. This led to jobs moving to a virtual platform and working from home for many people. The educational field was not an exception; it brought various consequences to the school setting. Most of the schools and academic institutions closed their doors to contain the spread of the virus. Indeed, it was reported that "over 90 [percent of the] student population of the world [were] affected by this closure" (Tarker, 2020). At first, academic institutions were not expected to be closed for a significant amount of time. The lockdown gradually extended to the point where nobody had the certainty of when students could be back in institutions. However, education had to go on, even in an unfamiliar way for both the students and the teachers. This is how virtual classes and platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom began to gain more popularity than before.

During Covid-19, teachers had to face various problems such as adaptation of their teaching, an increase of work demands, and other factors that created experiences of burnout (Gómez-Dominguez, et al. 2022). The most common situations teachers faced during the pandemic were the reduction of interest in performing work activities, absence of satisfaction, and decline of their job quality (Gómez-Dominguez, et al. 2022). Apart from stress, teachers also faced other personal problems such as: eating disorders, self-medication, obesity, alcohol abuse, marital and family conflicts and use of psychoactive substances

(Gómez-Dominguez, et al. 2022, pg. 2). The teaching profession has almost always been accompanied with excessive workloads, problems with interpersonal relationships, job insecurity, insufficient training, but due Covid, these problems increased, causing a poor job performance, and the increase of job turnover.

Given that COVID-19 is a fairly recent phenomenon, few studies have been conducted to understand its effects on the teacher profession. There are a growing number of studies focused on teacher burnout and its effect on teacher turnover post-pandemic (see Morton, 2022; Răducu & Stănculescu, 2022; Sokal et al., 2020; Wuest & Subramaniam, 2021; Allen et al., 2020; Pressley, 2021). In Ecuador, however, there is still a scarcity of literature on the topic. Posso Pacheco (2022) study of how teachers adapted to new roles and teaching tools during the post-pandemic is currently one of the only studies addressing this broad issue.

As this literature review has showcased, there is a growing number of studies that have addressed issues of teacher burnout during the pandemic and its aftermath. There have also been studies that discuss the effects of the pandemic on Ecuadorian education. Nonetheless, there has yet to be a study that interrogates the relationship between these two strands in the literature, namely the relationship of the pandemic and teacher burnout in Ecuador. As will be discussed in the following section, this study strives to address this gap.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to understand teacher's perspectives on their roles as educators and how these might have changed or not after the Covid-19 pandemic. To address this goal, a qualitative study was conducted within three private schools in Quito-Ecuador. All the schools are of some renown and cater to upper middle-class students and their families. Two of them offer preschool, elementary and high-school, while one of them lacks the high-school program due to it being created during the pandemic as a response to virtual

education. The schools provide its main subjects in English (not the first language in the country) and consists of a predominantly female teaching body.

The main difference amongst these institutions is the learning methodology they employ. School A's objective is to empower students and promote independent learning and skills for students to adapt in the future. The learning environment is centered in the student's needs and interests. School B is similar to school A although their methodology includes direct instruction and often promoted a teacher-centered approach. Lastly, school C, one of the oldest schools in the city, still conserves a very traditional school system. These schools were chosen for the study due to their different teaching methodologies, learning environments, and working conditions. Through a relatively diverse sample, the findings aim to understand teacher's perspectives about their roles in a manner that may reflect other schools around the city of Quito.

Data collection began with classroom observations. During classroom observations the focus was on discerning teacher interactions with students, body language to identify feelings or emotions, teaching methods and planning. Through the insights gathered from observations, a group of teachers was invited to engage in semi-structured interviews primarily aimed on eliciting their perspectives on their roles as educators following the pandemic. Interview participants were selected from teachers willing to share their stories about their work life. The participants selected had to have engaged in education as teachers for at least one year before the pandemic and worked in the same field after Covid-19. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes to an hour, where the length of the interview was largely determined by each participant's availability during school hours. The questions focused on their experiences as teachers before the pandemic and their challenges as educators in a post-pandemic work environment.

Once data collection was completed, the analysis process began. Data analysis consisted of two complementary approaches. The first step was inductive and consisted of periodic team meetings to discuss emerging insights which were later formally written as analytical memos. The ideas emerging from the analytical memos were used to create a coding scheme to organize data and literature related to the topics studied. This allowed for the second step, which was largely deductive and entailed using the coding scheme to formally code the entirety of the data set. Through the coding process, the researchers were able to identify a series of themes like student behavior, teacher burnout and institutional support amongst others. After the themes were established, a period of examination took place in efforts to write assertions following the findings. In order to analyze the data to its full extent, the process of searching for disconfirming evidence began. When all evidence was found, analysis of the data related to assertions was the final step.

Findings

The interview process revealed that teachers acknowledged the pandemic altered their perceived roles in their daily experiences of teaching. They predominantly rated that as a result of the pandemic, students showcased a greater need for academic support and socio-emotional guidance. For instance, one teacher from School A mentioned that “the student’s bad behavior has increased through pandemic, they don’t have any limits or rules in their classes and find difficulty visualizing the consequences of actions”. A teacher in School B perceived a similar assessment when she noted that “students have minimal social skills, constantly fight with their classmates and have problems regulating their emotions”. Similarly, another educator from School C mentioned that “the fourth grade has many problems in reading comprehension, they came with a low level in this area; the students have come from the pandemic with many problems in reading and writings”.

Observations also supported this claim; teachers in the three institutions showed signs of extreme exhaustion and frustration. Many of them had gone as far as to stop implementing high academic standards because the children “missed two years of content and abilities due to Covid-19”. The three institutions presented similar signs with teachers having to extremely reduce standards and adapt the contents due to these gaps in students’ skills and knowledge. One educator mentioned her frustration saying her fifth grade kids write as if they were in second or first grade. During the data collection process, teachers mentioned their frustration and lack of control over these issues, mentioning that they didn't know what to do.

In addition to new responsibilities associated with classroom management, teachers discussed that the pandemic required them to adapt their pedagogical practices to remote and online learning. This often-entailed learning to use new platforms without much preexisting knowledge of technological use or professional development on the topic. This was particularly difficult for the older teachers who were not trained in these technological platforms prior to the pandemic. For example, one of the most experienced teachers at school A stated, “We have to incorporate new technological systems, for teachers that are used to knowing only how to turn on and off a computer, that was really hard”. Another teacher from the same institution affirmed, “I didn’t have any technology training, I learned it by myself”.

Nowadays, as technology has become a part of children’s everyday lives, teachers are forced to include this in the classroom to engage students. The three institutions use technological devices almost every day in class including presentations, laptops, and tablets like i-Pad. One participant mentioned that “It is impossible not to include technology into everything we teach, it is such a great source and the kids can’t live without it”. This has become a challenge in one of the institutions where the teachers are used to traditional and structured teaching. The observations proved that even though some educators do have

affinity with technology, it is still an important challenge in the classroom due to distractions, malfunctions and overall finding good platforms.

Another issue presented during the interview process was that teachers perceive their roles have become uncertain because of unclear expectations from the institutions as well as parents. Some teachers in these institutions mentioned the struggles they face as professionals. One of the teachers that taught English online during the pandemic affirmed, "In January I had a virtual English class with 30 students, because they got sick and were unable to go to school. So, I went to the principal because each week there were new students, and I said no more please, I can't even see them on zoom mosaic vision. It was so small that I realized it wasn't healthy". The same participant spoke about her experience with parents saying, "There was one grandfather that was calling me on zoom during the class hour telling me that his grandson was raising the hand and teacher is not listening, but there was a lot of other students raising their hands too". Another teacher from the same institution supported this claim by speaking about her experience in online teaching and adding, "I even had hits and beatings that I had to tell him once, 'Sir, excuse me, that's not the way, not like that. It's not doing him good, leave him.' I correct him because he was hitting the kid's head, and a kid doesn't learn that way" [Tuve hasta golpes y palizas, tuve que una vez decirle, 'Señor discúlpeme, no es la manera. Así no está haciéndole bien, déjele.' Yo le corrijo, porque el señor contra la cabeza del niño, y así no aprende].

The return from online teaching proved roles became even more ambiguous for teachers due to the great number of unexpected challenges far from technology. Observations showed teachers having difficulties with the students' academic knowledge. One teacher even mentioned, "The fifth graders write as if they were in first grade, the second graders have more motor abilities than them". Even though all students lost an important chunk of content during the pandemic, institutions and parents pose a great pressure on educators to

level their kids to where they were supposed to be if the pandemic never happened. These new challenges mean that a teacher with a class of twenty students has to make sure they learn everything they need to in that specific year and fill in the gaps of two years of online learning. The massive amount of content lost means that teachers are the ones who have to improvise to raise the standard and get the students up to their expected academic level. This lowering in academic standards is all up to these teachers who, as mentioned before, have no idea where their role begins and where they should draw the line.

Furthermore, expectations on teachers have become very vague following the pandemic, that the teachers are not sure where their role starts and where it ends. One participant explained how during the pandemic the parents had a double role as parents and teachers, and now that the pandemic is over, many parents expect teachers to do the same. Observations also prove this to be redundant with many parents asking the educators for help raising their children, feeding them, or even teaching them values. The issue has been explored throughout the three institutions and it proves to be a recurring issue in all of them. Teachers mentioned that most of the time parents would put their expectations too high for their kids' abilities, not knowing what happens in the classroom. In one institution, participants mentioned their frustration at the high expectations from the parents as well as the institution and the lack of support these two provide. These are just some of the causes for the perceived ambiguity of the educators' role post-pandemic.

The data analyzed led to two conclusions about the perspectives of private school teachers in Quito about their roles in the profession. First, there is an assumption that the educators perceive their roles have changed because of the pandemic. One of the most recurring issues is the low academic standards that should be placed and the increase in student misbehavior. This leads to teachers being frustrated and impotent, feeling there is little that they can do to enhance the situation.

Second, the teachers' roles have changed in their perception due to unclear expectations and support from their respective institutions. The schools not only demand excessively from them but do not provide the respective support or materials to be able to fulfill these expectations. In the end, this is like a pressure cooker where the growing uncertainty and challenges keep on piling up on one actor and in the end cause the issue of teacher burnout.

CONCLUSIONES

Analyzing the findings above, it leads to the conclusion that the effects of the pandemic have brought about significant changes in the perspectives of educators on their roles. Particularly, in the face of learning challenges of the students after the pandemic, teachers have had to adapt their instructional methods and provide additional support to bridge the learning gaps. They have become not only educators but also mentors, tech facilitators, and emotional support providers. Morton et al. mention that "Teachers were called upon to deliver high-level instruction in the most complex situations during and after the pandemic" (2022). These complex situations often include responsibilities outside of the teacher's job more so after the pandemic. With the shift to online and hybrid platforms, teachers have had to master new digital tools and find innovative ways to engage students virtually. They have embraced a more individualized approach, tailoring lessons to meet the diverse needs of students and offering personalized feedback. Furthermore, teachers have taken on a crucial role in fostering social connections and maintaining a sense of community within the classrooms, recognizing the importance of students' mental well-being.

Moreover, the lack of institutional support also has profoundly transformed the role of teachers. Without proper guidance and resources, teachers have been left to navigate the challenges of new methods on their own. The sudden shifts in teaching platforms have required teachers to quickly adapt their teaching methods and learn new technologies, often without adequate training or support. This lack of institutional support has increased the workload and stress levels for teachers, as they strive to maintain educational standards while juggling the demands of hardened classroom management. The absence of clear expectations and instructions has also resulted in a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, making it difficult for teachers to effectively plan and deliver lessons. The pandemic has placed an additional

burden on teachers, forcing them to shoulder responsibilities beyond their usual scope and hindering their ability to provide the quality education they strive for.

Indeed, the constant pressure to uphold educational standards in the midst of uncertainty of the role and limited resources and support has intensified teacher burnout during and after the pandemic (Morton, 2022). The prolonged state of unpredictability, including sudden policy changes and shifting guidelines, has left teachers feeling overwhelmed and struggling to maintain their own well-being (Sokal et al., 2020). The increased workload, the challenges of adapting to new tools and methods, and the emotional toll of supporting students' social and emotional needs remotely have all contributed to burnout. As a result, many teachers have reached a point of exhaustion, feeling emotionally drained and disillusioned with their chosen profession (Răducu & Stănculescu, 2022).

The phenomenon has undoubtedly grown since the pandemic, but what does that mean for teachers in Ecuador? The data collected shows that most participants were unhappy and stressed about their jobs. A significant number of these mentioned even wanting to leave the profession or are currently leaving it due to the high stress and uncertainty. Morton et al mention “Teacher shortages have existed for decades, but the exodus from classrooms since the COVID-19 pandemic is cause for serious alarm”. This statement aligns with the data that has been observed through this study. Teacher burnout is a significant cause for teacher turnover; the challenges post-pandemic has only shown the issue getting worse.

Addressing teacher burnout, especially post-pandemic, is crucial for the well-being of teachers and the overall success of the education system in Ecuador since there is a huge gap in between that is not discussed sufficiently thoroughly. The significant impact of teacher burnout is reflected in the alarming rate of teacher turnover (Li & Yao, 2022). The loss of experienced teachers due to burnout and turnover has far-reaching consequences for the education system in the country. It disrupts the continuity of learning, as new teachers may

not have the same level of expertise or familiarity with the curriculum. It also limits the quality of instruction and support for students, as the departure of many educators leaves a gap in mentorship and guidance (Morton, 2022).

In the long run, the ambiguity of the standards and limitations of the role might end up in more teachers leaving the profession which means unqualified nonprofessionals entering the teaching field. As García mentioned, in the US the number of unqualified teachers had a significant increase from 2011-2012 (2019). Unqualified teachers are people who don't count with a certification in the education field. This increase is starting to present itself do to teacher turnover. As mentioned before, the interviews showed ample evidence of educators eager to leave the profession with the ambiguity of the role as the leading cause. This means the lack of standards posed from the institution and the parents which don't know where the teachers role starts or ends. This ends up overwhelming the staff and preparing them for a sure burnout.

Final thoughts

In conclusion, this study underscores the perspectives of teachers on their role due to the significant and transformative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic within three prestigious private high-class schools in Quito, Ecuador. Through interviews with teachers and analysis of observational data, the research has illuminated the profound ambiguity surrounding teachers' roles and the subsequent impact on their health and professional performance. The findings reveal a disconcerting pattern of burnout among teachers, primarily driven by the challenges presented by the pandemic, including student misbehavior, diminished academic standards, and a lack of clear expectations and institutional support. These findings emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive support systems and resources to address the well-being and professional development of teachers. The study also contributes to the growing body of literature on the effects of the pandemic on the teaching profession, offering

valuable insights into the experiences of teachers before, during, and after the crisis. By raising awareness of burnout and its implications, this research calls for concerted efforts to mitigate the negative consequences and foster a resilient and supportive environment for teachers. Ultimately, such measures are vital to ensure the continuity of high-quality education and the well-being of educators in the face of future challenges.

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