











Burnout Syndrome in Mexican Teachers: A Study During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers faced significant challenges as they adapted from face-to-face teaching to emergency remote instruction, leading to an increase in work demands and triggering burnout—a psychological syndrome that arises from prolonged exposure to chronic interpersonal stressors. This study aimed to assess burnout levels among Mexican teachers at various educational levels during the pandemic. A total of 632 teachers participated, completing a demographic questionnaire and the Maslach Burnout Inventory via Google Forms, which was distributed through social media. Group differences were analyzed using Student's *t*-test and ANOVA, while correlations were assessed with Pearson's *r* test. The results showed that 54.3% of participants experienced low levels of emotional exhaustion, 42.2% had low levels of depersonalization, and 32.3% reported high levels of personal accomplishment. However, 6.3% of the sample displayed scores indicative of burnout syndrome. Significant differences in burnout levels were associated with gender, age, contractual status, and specific challenges faced. The study concludes that, although burnout prevalence was generally low, a portion of the sample did show symptoms. Factors such as gender, lack of institutional support, contractual conditions, and work experience influenced burnout levels. The dedication of teachers during this period is acknowledged and appreciated.

Keywords:

burnout; Covid-19 pandemic; teaching; health

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O síndrome de burnout em docentes mexicanos: um estudo durante a pandemia de Covid-19

Resumo

Durante a pandemia de Covid-19, uma população especialmente afetada foram os professores, já que as demandas de seu trabalho aumentaram devido à mudança do ensino presencial para o ensino remoto de emergência, desencadeando consequências como o *burnout*, que é uma síndrome psicológica causada por exposição prolongada a estressores interpessoais crônicos. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi analisar os níveis de *burnout* durante a pandemia de Covid-19 em uma amostra de professores mexicanos de diferentes níveis de ensino. Participaram 632 professores que responderam a um formulário de dados pessoais e ao *Maslach Burnout Inventory*. A bateria foi aplicada por meio do *Google Forms* e compartilhada nas redes sociais. Diferenças entre grupos foram analisadas pelo teste t de Student e ANOVA, e as correlações por meio do coeficiente r de *Pearson*. Os resultados indicaram que 54,3% apresentaram baixos níveis de exaustão emocional, 42,2% apresentaram baixos níveis de despersonalização e 32,3% altos níveis de realização pessoal. No entanto, destaca-se que 6,3% da amostra obteve pontuações que caracterizam a síndrome de *burnout*. Além disso, foram encontradas diferenças significativas em relação ao sexo, idade, situação contratual e tipo de problemas enfrentados. Conclui-se que, apesar da baixa prevalência da síndrome, uma parte da amostra apresentou sintomatologia. Além disso, variáveis como sexo, falta de apoio institucional, situação contratual e experiência de trabalho influenciaram a prevalência de *burnout*. Por fim, reconhece-se o árduo trabalho dos professores durante esse período.

Palavras-chave:

burnout; pandemia de Covid-19; docência; saúde

El síndrome de burnout en docentes mexicanos: un estudio durante la pandemia por Covid-19

Resumen

Durante la pandemia de Covid-19, una población especialmente afectada fueron los docentes puesto que las demandas a su trabajo aumentaron por el cambio de modalidad presencial a enseñanza remota de emergencia, desencadenando consecuencias como el *burnout* que es un síndrome psicológico derivado por exposición prolongada a estresores interpersonales crónicos. El objetivo de la presente investigación fue analizar los niveles de *burnout* durante la pandemia por Covid-19 en una muestra de docentes mexicanos de diferentes niveles educativos. Participaron 632 profesores contestando una cédula de datos personales y el *Maslach Burnout Inventory*. La batería se realizó mediante *Google Forms* y se compartió por redes sociales, se analizaron diferencias entre grupos mediante t de Student y ANOVA, y correlaciones mediante r de *Pearson*. Los resultados señalaron que el 54.3% presentó niveles bajos de cansancio emocional, 42.2% obtuvo niveles bajos de despersonalización y 32.3% niveles altos de realización personal; no obstante, se subraya que una parte de la muestra (6.3%), obtuvo puntajes que caracterizan el síndrome de burnout; además, se encontraron diferencias significativas respecto al sexo, a la edad, la situación contractual y el tipo de problemáticas enfrentadas. Se concluye que, a pesar de la prevalencia baja del síndrome, existe un sector de la muestra con sintomatología; así mismo, variables como el sexo, la falta de apoyo institucional, la situación contractual y la experiencia laboral, influyeron en la prevalencia del *burnout*, finamente se reconoce la ardua labor de los docentes en dicho período.

Palabras clave:

burnout; pandemia Covid-19; docencia; salud

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Introduction

The year 2020 was marked by a global crisis as the World Health Organization declared a health emergency due to the SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) virus. Governments worldwide were urged to implement aggressive measures to combat the virus's high transmissibility and the severe symptoms (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). This pandemic brought about a wide range of social, economic, and ehealth consequences (Cabezas, 2020; Cuero, 2020). Specifically in the psychological area, the crisis led to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Ferrer, 2020; Medina & Jaramillo-Valverde, 2021; Salari et al., 2020; Vázquez, et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

The field of education was particularly affected. In Mexico, over 30 million students and teachers across various educational levels faced the suspension of in-person activities and the imposition of social isolation. Almost overnight, they had to transition from traditional, face-to-face teaching to distance learning (Alcocer-Gamba et al., 2020; Giler-Zambrano et al., 2022), giving rise to what has been termed "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020).

This rapid shift exposed teachers to new challenges that significantly increased stress levels. Mendiola et al. (2020) classified these challenges into four main types: logistical (managing time and space to conduct classes), technological (navigating the use and management of ICT), pedagogical (adapting teaching strategies for the online environment), and socio-emotional (coping with negative emotions and relationships). As Rojas (2021) highlights, the mandatory use of ICT was particularly challenging, as teachers were forced to adapt with whatever resources were available to them.

Furthermore, it is important to note that even before the pandemic, teachers were constantly exposed to various psychosocial risk factors, making them highly susceptible to negative effects on their physical, social, and psychological health (Camacho & Mayorga, 2017; Freire & Corrales, 2018; Juárez-García et al., 2014; Moreno, 2011; Organización Internacional del Trabajo [OIT], 2012; Spencer et al. 2018). A key factor in this is stress, which Lazarus & Folkman (1986, p. 43) define as a specific relationship between an individual and their environment, assessed as threatening to the individual's resources and overall well-being. Stress is thus not an inherent characteristic of a person or environment but rather arises from an individual's perception of an imbalance between the demands they face and their capacity to meet those demands (Brief & George, 1995).

Teaching also involves a unique stressor: societal expectations that often regard teachers as possessing limitless problem-solving abilities. (Osorio & Prado, 2021). This added pressure, combined with other factors, increases teachers' vulnerability to developing burnout syndrome. Maslach (1982) defines burnout as a chronic stress response characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and sense of low personal accomplishment in individuals who work closely with others. These dimensions are defined as follows: emotional exhaustion (EE)—feeling overwhelmed by work demands and consequently feeling one's physical and psychological resources are insufficient; depersonalization (DP)—developing of negative attitudes, insensitivity and emotional detachment from students, colleagues, or the institution; and low personal accomplishment (PA)—experiencing frustration and negative feelings toward work outcomes (Esteras et al., 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2016; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach, 1982; Rivera et al., 2018).

Research has documented significant levels of burnout among teachers both before and during the pandemic (Aguilar & Mayorga, 2020; Camacho et al., 2021; Cortéz et al., 2021; Cortéz & Heredia, 2022; Bohâlțeanu, 2021; Giler-Zambrano et al., 2022; Infante et al., 2021; López & Zacarias, 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Martelo et al., 2021; Martínez-Pérez, 2010; Salcedo et al., 2020; Saborio & Hidalgo, 2015; Vargas & Oros, 2021).

These burnout levels have been linked to variables such as age—with younger teachers experiencing burnout more frequently—and gender, as women tend to report higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Cheptea et al., 2021; Martínez-Pérez, 2010; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Contractual status also plays a role, with interim teachers experiencing higher burnout levels than those in permanent positions (Cortéz et al., 2021). Additional contributing factors include the length of the workday, working conditions, specific tasks, and workload (Juárez-García et al., 2014; Mejía et al., 2020).

Given these pre-existing conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic likely intensified stress levels and the risk of burnout among teachers. It was therefore essential to investigate these effects, as this research could provide an empirical background for assessing the current state of teacher well-being and informing interventions to improve their health. Accordingly, the objective of this research was to analyze the levels of burnout among a sample of teachers at different educational levels during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Method

Participants

The study included 632 teachers from various educational levels—preschool, elementary, secondary, middle school, and high school— across multiple states in Mexico. All participants signed an informed consent form, which outlined the research objectives, confidentiality and anonymity standards, and procedures for handling the collected responses.

Design

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design, as measurements were taken at a single point in time to examine the associations between several variables (Ato et al., 2013).

Instruments

Data was collected using an ad hoc personal data questionnaire comprising 15 items to gather information on attributive variables such as area of residence, educational level taught, number of students and groups, contractual status, institutional support, and challenges faced by the teachers. Additionally, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), adapted for the Mexican population (Aranda et al., 2016), was used. The instrument consists of 22 items on a Likert-type scale with 7 response options ranging from 1 (“never”) to 7 (“every day”), divided into three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (9 items; $\alpha=.90$), depersonalization (5 items; $\alpha=.79$), and personal accomplishment (8 items; $\alpha=.71$). The MBI measures frequency and intensity of burnout symptoms, with high scores in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and low scores in personal accomplishment, indicating the presence of the syndrome.

In this investigation, the cut-off points for each dimension of burnout were defined as follows:

- Emotional exhaustion: Minimum score of 9, maximum score of 63. Levels were categorized as Low (9-27), Medium (28-45), and High (46-63).
- Depersonalization: Minimum score of 5, maximum score of 35. Levels were categorized as Low (5-15), Medium (16-25), and High (26-35).

- Personal accomplishment: Minimum score of 8, maximum score of 56. Levels were categorized as Low (41-56), Medium (25-40), and High (8-24).

Procedure

This research was conducted following the ethical guidelines for working with people and animals offset by the Mexican Society of Psychology (2009) and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2017). Additionally, the project received approval from the ethics committee of the authors' affiliated institution (folio: CE/012022/1464). Data was collected remotely through a questionnaire administered via Google Forms, which allowed only one response per participant. The survey link was distributed on social networks (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.) using non-probabilistic snowball sampling; participants were encouraged to share the link with colleagues to increase the sample size.

After data collection, the responses were compiled and cleaned in the SPSS software (v.25) to prepare for analysis.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and percentages, were calculated to characterize the sample and summarize scores on the burnout dimensions.

Next, subgroups comparisons were conducted using Student's t-statistics and ANOVA with Tukey's post-hoc tests for pairwise comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's δ . Finally, correlations between variables were examined Pearson's r test.

Results

The sample included 632 teachers from different educational levels across various states in Mexico, with ages ranging from 20 to 73 years (\bar{X} = 43.61, SD = 11.50). Most participants were women (72.9%), with men making up the remainder of the sample. On average, the participants worked with 4 groups (SD =3.7), each group consisting of approximately 30 students (SD =13.2) and taught 3 different subjects (SD = 2.7). Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the sample characteristics.

Table 1.

Sociodemographic variables

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Residence área		
North	21	3.32
Center	557	88.13
South	54	8.54
Educational level they teach		
Preschool	61	9.7
Elementary	160	25.3
Secondary	141	22.3
Upper middle	104	16.5
Superior	166	26.3
Contractual situation		
Permanent position	487	77.1
Interim teacher	145	22.9
Perception of support from institution for adapting to the distance modality		
None	76	12
Poor	87	13.8
Insufficient	90	14.2
Regular	139	22
Sufficient	186	29.4
Total	54	8.5

Note: North=Baja california sur, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas; Center= Aguascalientes, Ciudad de México, Estado de México, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Michoacán, Morelos, Nayarit, Puebla, Querétaro, Zacatecas; South= Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Veracruz, Yucatán.

Due to the shift to remote teaching, all participating teachers reported experiencing at least one of the following challenges: technological, logistical, pedagogical, and socio-affective. The most commonly reported issues were

technological (64.6% of the sample) and socio-affective (56.2%), followed by logistical (42.2%) and pedagogical (39.7%) challenges.

Regarding the MBI results, Table 2 displays the distribution of burnout levels across each dimension. The data show that 54.3 % of teachers reported low levels of emotional exhaustion, while 42.2 % had low levels of depersonalization. In contrast, 32.3% reported high levels of personal accomplishment. It is important to note that burnout syndrome is characterized by high scores in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, along with low scores in personal accomplishment. In this sample, 6.3% of teachers exhibited this pattern, indicating the presence of burnout syndrome.

Table 2.

Teachers Burnout by dimension

Dimension	Low	Medium	High
Emotional exhaustion	54.3%	15.8%	29.9%
Depersonalization	42.2%	36.4%	21.4%
Personal accomplishment	44%	23.7%	32.3%

Regarding group differences, there were statistically significant differences in emotional exhaustion between genders, with a moderate effect size. Women reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion ($\bar{X}=20.488$) compared to men ($\bar{X}=14.859$) ($t_{630}=5.176$; $IC_{95\%}=7.76-3.49$; $\delta=0.46$; $p<0.01$).

Significant differences were also found in depersonalization and personal accomplishment based on teachers' contractual status, although the effect sizes were small. Teachers with interim contracts exhibited higher levels of depersonalization ($\bar{X} = 7.641$) and personal accomplishment ($M = 33.882$) than those with permanent positions ($\bar{X} = 6.234$ and $\bar{X} = 31.809$, respectively) (depersonalization: $t_{630}=3.054$; $IC_{95\%}=0.50-2.31$; $\delta=0.288$; $p<0.01$; personal accomplishment $t_{630}=1.909$; $IC_{95\%}=0.059-4.20$; $\delta=0.180$; $p<0.01$).

Additionally, Table 3 shows that teachers who reported facing pedagogical, logistical, and socio-emotional challenges during online classes had higher levels of emotional exhaustion than those who did not encounter these issues.

Table 3.

Significant differences between groups by burnout dimension regarding the type of problems encountered

Dimension	Means		T	Effect size (δ)	Degrees of freedom	Significance level
	Si	No				
Technological problems						
Personal accomplishment	31.477	33.754	2.388	0.951	630	0.010
Pedagogical problems						
Emotional exhaustion	20.294	18.089	2.196	0.920	630	0.028
Logistical problems						
Emotional exhaustion	21.861	16.846	5.126	2.094	630	0.001
Socio-affective problems						
Emotional exhaustion	22.791	14.061	9.375	3.646	630	0.001
Depersonalization	7.104	5.855	3.199	0.522	630	0.001

Note: Significance level $p < .05$. Effect size values based on Cohen's δ test: .2 small effect, .5 medium effect and .8 large effect.

Table 4 presents the results of the ANOVA post-hoc analysis, examining differences in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization across different educational levels taught. The analysis shows that elementary school teachers reported significantly higher levels in both dimensions compared to teachers at other educational levels.

Table 4.

Significant differences in dimensions and taught educational level

Dependent variable	Area (I)	Area (J)	Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig.	Confidence interval 95%	
						Lower limit	Upper limit
Emotional exhaustion	Superior	Primary	-5.42	1.35	.001	-9.13	-1.71
		Secondary	-4.53	1.40	.011	-8.37	-0.70
Depersonalization	Secondary	Preschool	-4.94	1.75	.040	-9.73	-0.14
		Elementary	-3.78	1.31	.035	-7.39	-0.16

The association analysis revealed weak but significant negative correlations between age and both emotional exhaustion ($r=-.183$; $p<0.01$) and depersonalization ($r=.176$; $p<0.01$). This indicates that younger teachers reported feeling more emotionally drained and exhibited greater negative attitudes, insensitivity, and emotional distancing towards others.

Additionally, personal accomplishment showed a weak negative correlation with the number of students per group ($r=-.130$; $p<0.01$). This suggests that teachers with larger class sizes experienced lower levels of personal accomplishment, which in this context implies increased feelings of frustration and ineffectiveness.

Similarly, weak negative correlations were found between institutional support and both emotional exhaustion ($r=-.245$; $p<0.01$) and depersonalization ($r=-.160$; $p<0.01$). Teachers who reported receiving less support from their institutions to adapt to online teaching felt more emotionally exhausted and displayed higher levels of depersonalization.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly altered daily life worldwide, and in Mexico, teachers were among the first professionals to switch to remote mode as schools were closed to prevent virus spread. Despite sudden shift to online instruction, the demands of teaching persisted, exposing educators to increased stress and an elevated risk of burnout syndrome. Alongside traditional teaching responsibilities, adapting to emergency remote teaching—an entirely new experience for most—further amplified the pressures on teachers during the pandemic.

Burnout syndrome, as already mentioned, arises from prolonged exposure to stressful conditions, with cognitive, behavioral, physiological, and social effects that impact both the affected individuals and those around them (Maslach, 2009). Teaching is associated with several factors that may heighten the risk of burnout, as the pressures of the syndrome can negatively impact educators' health and the quality of instruction. Given these implications, this study aimed to analyze burnout levels among Mexican teachers across various educational levels during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The findings indicate that teachers faced technological, pedagogical, logistical and socio-emotional challenges due to the abrupt transition to remote teaching. This aligns with the findings of Mendiola et al. (2021), who reported similar issues, with technological challenges being the most common. This high incidence of technological issues suggests a lack of preparation among teachers for adapting to online teaching (Rojas, 2021).

In terms of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory results showed low levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, along with high levels of personal accomplishment across the sample. However, a percentage of participants exhibited symptoms characteristic of burnout syndrome, consistent with findings from other pandemic-era studies (Camacho et al., 2021; Cortez et al., 2021; Cortez & Heredia, 2022; Infante et al., 2021; Lopez & Zacarias, 2020; Martelo et al., 2021; Pillaca, 2021; Salcedo et al., 2020; Sanchez-Pujalte et al., 2021). As Maslach (2009) notes, some teachers felt overwhelmed, developed negative attitudes toward students and colleagues, exhibited distant behavior, and experienced feelings of frustration and ineffectiveness, even questioning their choice of profession.

The comparative analysis revealed gender-based differences in burnout, with women showing significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion than men, consistent with previous research (Martínez-Pérez, 2010; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). Interestingly, although men often report higher levels of depersonalization in other studies, this difference did not emerge in our data. It is possible that the unique challenges of emergency remote teaching, combined with the general stress of the pandemic, may have affected women's emotional states more intensely, leading to depersonalization levels similar to those of men.

Further, contractual situation, the types of challenges encountered (technological, logistical, pedagogical and socio-emotional), and the degree of institutional support for online teaching adaptation were all associated with increased emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This finding is consistent with previous research by Esteras et al. (2018), Cortéz et al. (2021), and Martínez-Pérez (2010), who observed that job stability and institutional support play crucial roles in burnout risk.

Educational level also influenced burnout dimensions. Interestingly, elementary school teachers reported both higher levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of personal accomplishment. This may suggest that despite the greater demands associated with teaching younger students, elementary educators found meaning and fulfillment in their work, possibly buffering against the negative effects of exhaustion.

Regarding age, the negative correlation with emotional exhaustion aligns with prior research (Aguilar & Mayorga, 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Saborio & Hidalgo, 2015), indicating that experience may help teachers develop effective coping strategies. Additionally, teachers with larger class sizes reported lower levels of personal accomplishment, suggesting that managing a higher number of students may reduce feelings of fulfillment and effectiveness.

In summary, this study highlights the significant impact of the pandemic-induced shift to remote teaching on educators' well-being. The abrupt change exposed teachers to new stressors, with participants reporting some level of burnout symptoms, representing a risk to their health. Prolonged exposure to these stressors could exacerbate symptoms, potentially impacting both teachers' health and the quality of education they provide.

In conclusion, given the critical role that teachers play in shaping future generations and contributing to societal development, targeted interventions are essential. These interventions should address both individual needs for teachers with high burnout levels and systemic changes in organizational support to promote teacher well-being. Future research should continue to assess teachers' well-being as they navigate the "new normal" in teachers, providing insights into long-term effects and potential interventions.

One limitation of this study is that the data collection was conducted online, which may have limited access for some teachers, and most of the sample resided in the central Mexico.

Finally, we wish to emphasize the tremendous dedication of teachers across all educational levels, whose resilience and commitment helped sustain the Mexican educational system during this challenging period, despite numerous obstacles and limitations.

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