

# Work Context and Stress Symptoms in Basic Education Teachers

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## Abstract

The teaching work records a scenario of environmental, organizational and interpersonal precariousness that contribute to the emergence of stress. The aim of this study was to investigate the correlation between work context and stress symptoms in elementary school teachers from public schools. It was a descriptive, correlational and cross-sectional study, whose sample was 196 teachers. Were used a sociodemographic survey, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), the Stress Symptom Intensity Survey (LIS-E) and the Work Context Assessment Scale (EACT). The mean stress symptoms were compatible with the general population; correlations between stress symptoms and work context for both instruments were weak. The work organization factor was assessed as moderate/critical, which indicates the need for short- and medium-term interventions. The socio-professional relations and working conditions obtained satisfactory evaluation. These results allow us to point out important aspects of programs for improving the organization of teaching work.

## Keywords

Teachers, Work, Work Organization, Occupational Stress, Elementary School

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## 1. Introduction

Work, at the same time, constitutes itself as a privileged space for the construction of identity, relationships, and enables experiencing situations that cause suffering and illness (Dejours, 1988). Teachers are not immune to the harmful

capacity of work (Vale & Aguilera, 2016). Studies have characterized teachers' health and illness conditions and confirm high prevalence of behavioral symptoms and health-related complaints (Gontijo, Silva, & Innocente, 2013). The number of leaves of work due to mental illness has been progressively growing (Macaia & Ficher, 2015). Emotional exhaustion and stress are conditions often identified in teachers, along with voice disorders and musculoskeletal disorders (Baião & Cunha, 2013). In addition to individual and personality factors, those related to the work context (work organization, socio-professional relations and working conditions, Mendes & Ferreira, 2008), are considered important predictors of illness (Dalcin & Carlotto, 2017), as they are causing stress symptoms.

Stress symptoms have been frequently reported in the literature in teachers: emotional exhaustion, insomnia, headaches, mood swings, musculoskeletal pain and hopelessness (Ceballos & Santos, 2015; Rey, Extremera, & Pena, 2016). Stress is characterized by a series of changes that occur in the body, as a result of environmental pressures that the subject cannot cope effectively. Its development occurs in phases, so that in a first stage, called the alert phase, there is a rapid change in organs such as liver, spleen, thymus, erosion of the digestive tract and loss of muscle tone; the second stage, resistance, is a period marked by the organism's attempt to rediscover its homeostasis; if rebalancing is not possible, the near-exhaustion begins, with worsening of the initial symptoms; and later, exhaustion occurs, with symptoms very similar to that of the first phase, however, leading the organism to illness (Freitas & Facas, 2013; Goulart & Lipp, 2008; Kock, Biazzi, & Benedetto, 2015; Martins & Honorio, 2014; Souza & Rozemberg, 2013). When it occurs in the work context, stress includes discomfort, feelings of tension, exhaustion, frustration, and unpleasant emotional state (Hirschle, Gondim, Alberton, & Ferreira, 2019), being a risk factor for cancer, major depressive disorder, metabolic syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, sleep disorders, diabetes and burnout (Silva, Bolsoni-Silva, & Loureiro, 2018; Dalcin & Carlotto, 2017), and impair performance and interpersonal relationships.

Factors associated with stress in teachers are excessive working hours, large class sizes, low salaries, student and parent relationship problems, and student indiscipline (Pereira, Teixeira, Pelegrini, Meyer, Andrade, & Lopes, 2014; Silveira, Enumo, Paula, & Batista, 2014). If the teacher works in the context of public schools and the greater the number of students, hours worked and teaching time, working conditions and the general assessment of quality of life are worse (Dalcin & Carlotto, 2017).

Differences between educational levels, educational policies, standards and management models, are among the contextual factors related to teaching (Dalcin & Carlotto, 2017), which require greater attention from researchers, due to their likely association with teachers' illness. In Brazil, the last few years have been surrounded by important educational reforms, while the number of teachers away from work has increased (Piolli, Silva, & Heloani, 2015; Macaia & Ficher, 2015).

The main changes resulting from educational reforms produced the establishment of an institutional assessment system based on the administrative and technical agility and on goals and performance indicators. Management practices were adopted in the public educational context, in order to control the teachers' productive performance. These changes have been reported to imply greater competition among peers, individualism and competition, which is related to the meritocratic management model adopted and generates aversive feelings in teachers (Piolli, Silva, & Heloani, 2015; Piolli, 2013). Another significant change was the extension in Brazil of the elementary school time from eight to nine years, as well as its subdivision into two cycles, the first, initial grades (grades 1 to 5), and the second, final grades (grades 6 to 9), which may have negatively impacted student performance and performance. The impossibility of students to fail in the first three years causes problems in the following grades generating delays. This aspect tends to cause discomfort to teachers, who are blamed for not reaching the aimed educational objectives (Jacomini, 2010).

The existence of two educational phases in basic education considers that the initial grades are structured so that the same teacher is responsible for the entire curriculum, using more playful techniques, and the relationship with students presumes affection and closeness. In general, these teachers are undergraduate in pedagogy or magisterium. Higher stress levels are common in these initial grades, as teachers are beginning their careers (Prati & Eizirik, 2006). In turn, the teachers of the final grades work in more classes, address a specific subject and have training in the area in which they work. Its relationship is different, considering the phase of adolescence of students, which is characterized by a search for peer proximity and distance from adults. Likewise, adolescents address the opposition of rules and the search for identity (Pereira & Silveira, 2017; Cartaxo & Martins, 2014).

The objective was to investigate the association between work context and stress symptoms in teachers of municipal public elementary schools. It was compared stress levels among the group of teachers in the initial grades and final grades.

## 2. Method

This research was a cross-sectional quantitative study, with correlational and descriptive design.

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 196 teachers from 44 municipal schools, 180 women and 16 men, aged 18 or older (average = 46.9; SD = 7.6) who were recruited by convenience (Baptista & Campos, 2016). Inclusion criteria were public elementary school teachers, men and women, from the school network of a Brazilian municipality. Teachers who did not complete the instruments and who were only in administrative activities were excluded.

## 2.2. Data Collection

For data collection, were used the following instruments:

Sociodemographic survey: assessed the participant's gender, age, year of practice, length of professional practice, educational background, etc.

Work Context Assessment Scale (EACT): assess work context, with 31 items subdivided into work organization (11 items), socio-professional relations (10 items) and working conditions (10 items) (Mendes & Ferreira, 2008). To perform the EACT analysis, the average of the three factors that make up the instrument was calculated and subsequently interpreted from the reference values: from 0 to 2.29 satisfactory context; from 2.3 to 3.69 moderate/critical context; and values above 3.7 severe context (Mendes & Ferreira, 2008).

Stress Symptoms Intensity Survey (LIS-E): self-assessment tool that aims to identify the intensity of stress symptoms, consisting of 34 questions on a 5-point Likert scale, where the score ranges from 0 (no symptoms) to 4 (higher presence of symptoms). Psychometrical properties showed a KMO index = 0.96 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.9 (Ferreira, 2015).

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS): evaluate self-perception of stress with 14 questions ranging from 0 to four (0 = never; 1 = almost never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = almost always and 4 = always). The total scale is the sum of the scores and the scores may range from zero to 56, punctuating the stress level at the time of assessment (Luft, Sanches, Mazo, & Andrade, 2007), and was used Brazilian adaptation. We chose to use the PSS because LIS-E was being in validation.

For the application of the instruments, the school principals were contacted to schedule the day and time for the researchers to visit. The teachers were gathered in a room in their respective work schools, where the researchers explained the research and invited them to participate and explained the study. After agreeing, the Informed Consent Form (TCLE) was signed, signed in two copies, and then the data collection instrument, starting with the socio-demographic questionnaire. The collections were carried out from July 2017 to July 2018.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Data were organized for descriptive and inferential analysis of the sample, presenting frequencies, means and standard deviations. Non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney and Spearman correlation) were used, considering that the instrument data did not present normal distribution (Dancey & Reidy, 2013). The level of statistical significance was  $p \leq 0.05$ .

## 2.4. Ethical Issues

The research was guided by Brazilian Ethics resolutions 466/2012 and 512/2016, which regulates research with human beings, and approved by Research Ethics Committee (CAAE 2.014.441). Participants were assured of anonymity and freedom to leave the investigation at any time during the research, achieved by

signing the Informed Consent Form (TCLE). The research was approved by the municipal education department of the municipality to which the schools belong. This study was funded by Brazilian CNPq Council (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development), by Universal Funding 01/2016, process number 421252/2016-2.

### 3. Results

The sample of teachers was composed by 180 women (91.8%) and 16 men (8.2%), with a predominant age of 46 years or older ( $n = 113$ ; 57.7%). Married or in stable union were predominant ( $n = 124$ ; 63.3%), the Christian ( $n = 170$ ; 86.7%), and with family income of 3 to 6 minimum wages ( $n = 83$ ; 42.3%). In the initial grades, 130 teachers participated (66.3%), and final grades, 66 (33.7%). Regarding the level of education, 154 (78.6%) have specialization; the predominant working time was 15 years or more of teaching ( $n = 129$ ; 65.8%), and work at the school between 0 and 4 years and 11 months ( $n = 52$ ; 26.5%). **Table 1** shows complete information of the participants.

The total stress symptoms showed in **Table 2** indicated a mean of 21.63 points. In the first grades the average of stress was 21.95 and final grades, 21.03, with no statistical difference. The general average of the LIS-E was 25.33, first grades reached 26.05 and final grades, 23.92, with no statistical difference.

The total score of EACT indicates that the work context was rated as moderate/critical, although without statistical difference (see **Table 3**). Similarly, the evaluation of the initial and final grades indicated moderate/critical classification. For the EACT Work Organization factor, both the general classification, as well as the evaluation of the initial and final grades presented a moderate/critical context, in the Socio-Professional Relations factor, the evaluation was considered satisfactory both in the total average and in the initial and final grades, and in Conditions of Work, the total mean was classified as satisfactory; in the initial series presented satisfactory classification and in the final, moderate/critical.

Almost all EACT items presented higher averages in the final grades, indicating greater impairment for this group. The ones that presented statistically difference in Work organization were the items 2—Tasks are fulfilled with deadline pressure (first grades  $M = 2.85$ ; final grades  $M = 3.25$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ), with moderate classification/criticism for both; 7—Expected results are unrealistic (first grades  $M = 2.55$ ; final grades  $M = 2.90$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ), both moderate/critical; 8—There is division between who plans and who executes (first grades  $M = 2.68$  final grades  $M = 3.14$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), both moderate/critical, and 9—The tasks are repetitive (first grades  $M = 2.89$  and final grades  $M = 3.19$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ), classified as moderate/critical. 25—Furniture in the workplace is inadequate (first grades  $M = 2.35$ , final grades  $M = 2.78$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ), both classified as moderate/critical and question 26—The working tools are insufficient to perform the tasks (first grades  $M = 2.59$ , final grades  $M = 3.06$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), classified as moderate/critical.

**Table 1.** Description of the participants.

Variable	Description	Initial grades		Final grades		Total
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	%
Sex	Woman	125	69.40%	55	30.60%	91.8%
	Man	5	31.20%	11	68.80%	8.2%
Age	18 - 25 years 11 months	1	50.00%	1	50.00%	1.0%
	26 - 35 years 11 months	12	85.70%	2	14.30%	7.1%
	36 - 45 years 11 months	44	65.70%	23	34.30%	34.2%
	46 years and more	73	64.60%	40	35.40%	57.7%
Academic training	Incomplete graduation	1	100.00%	0	0.00%	0.5%
	Graduation	15	68.20%	7	31.80%	11.2%
	Incomplete specialization	4	100.00%	0	0.00%	2.0%
	Specialization	102	66.20%	52	33.80%	78.6%
	Incomplete Master degree	1	50.00%	1	50.00%	1.0%
	Master degree	6	50.00%	6	50.00%	6.1%
Time working as teacher	0 - 4 years 11 months	4	80.00%	1	20.00%	2.6%
	5 - 9 years 11 months	10	62.50%	6	37.50%	8.2%
	10 - 14 years 11 months	31	72.10%	12	27.90%	21.9%
	15 years and more	83	64.30%	46	35.70%	65.8%
Time working at school	0 - 4 years 11 months	55	72.40%	21	27.60%	38.8%
	5 - 9 years 11 months	19	54.30%	16	45.70%	17.9%
	10 - 14 years 11 months	33	63.50%	19	36.50%	26.5%
	15 years and more	19	65.50%	10	34.50%	14.8%
Marital status	Not married	22	59.50%	15	40.50%	18.9%
	Married/Stable union	82	66.10%	42	33.90%	63.3%
	Divorced	20	69.00%	9	31.00%	14.8%
	Widowers	5	100.00%	0	0.00%	2.6%
	Other	1	100.00%	0	0.00%	0.5%
Religion	Christian	114	67.10%	56	32.90%	86.7%
	Spiritualistic	14	82.40%	3	17.60%	8.7%
	Mormon	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	0.5%
	No one specific	1	50.00%	1	50.00%	1.0%
	Not answer	0	0.00%	2	100.00%	1.0%
Familial income	0 - 1.9 minimum wage	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	0.5%
	2 - 2.9 minimum wage	12	80.00%	3	20.00%	7.7%
	3 - 5.9 minimum wage	55	66.30%	28	33.70%	42.3%
	6 - 9.9 minimum wage	41	64.10%	23	35.90%	32.7%
	10 - 14.9 minimum wage	19	70.40%	8	29.60%	13.8%
	15 minimum wage and more	3	60.00%	2	40.00%	2.6%

Source: data.

**Table 2.** Comparative group of initial and final grade teachers to evaluate stress symptoms.

	Total		First grades		Final grades		Mann-Whitney	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	U	<i>p</i>
PSS	21.63	7.98	21.95	8.11	21.03	7.67	3816	0.27
LIS-E	25.33	16.52	26.05	16.38	23.92	16.70	3889	0.37

Source: data.

**Table 3.** Comparison of the averages in different grades of EACT.

	Total		First grades		Final grades		Mann-Whitney	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	U	<i>p</i>
Work organization	2.81	0.77	2.68	0.79	3.08	0.71	309.5	0.15
Socio professional relations	2.21	0.95	2.25	0.93	2.21	1.03	376.5	0.72
Work conditions	2.24	0.87	2.12	0.91	2.48	0.81	287.5	0.07
Total	2.60	0.71	2.36	0.76	2.61	0.77	3695	0.15

Source: data.

The correlations were weak between stress symptoms and work context (Spearman's rho): between LIS-E and PSS, relating them to the Work organization factor was 0.39; LIS-E and Socio-professional relations was 0.32 and with PSS 0.27; between LIS-E and Working conditions 0.31 and with PSS 0.26; correlation between LIS-E and EACT was 0.39 and with PSS was 0.36. Considering the stress tests and school time, profession time, classroom hours and age, weak correlations were found, ranging from 0.13 to 0.06. The correlation between total EACT and Labor organization, Socio-professional relations and Working conditions factors with school time, profession time, classroom hours and age were weak, ranging from  $-0.01$  to 0.13. LIS-E and PSS showed a strong correlation (0.78), and these tests and EACT correlations showed moderate to strong between factors, ranging from 0.44 (Labor organization and Working conditions, moderate) to 0.86 (socio-professional relations and EACT, strong).

#### 4. Discussion

The sample presented consisted of 91.8% of women, which is consistent with most studies conducted with elementary school teachers, in which the male population is reduced, at least in the Brazilian context. The presence of women in teaching gradually reverses as the years of education increase, and upon reaching higher education, the preponderance of men is higher (Dalagasperina & Monteiro, 2014; Rodrigues, Paula, & Silveira, 2017; Silveira, Enumo, Paula, & Batista, 2014; Valente, Botelho, & Silva, 2015). Even though this sample is non-random, it is compatible with the gender distribution scenario among elementary school teachers identified in literature.

The evaluation of stress symptoms had PSS mean 21.63, close to that men-

tioned in the translation and validation study for the Brazilian general population (21.37 points, Luft, Sanches, Mazo, & Andrade, 2007), and for the LIS-E (25.33 points). Similar stress levels to the general population may be related to a moderately stressful environment (Gutierrez, 2016; Koga et al., 2015; Paschoal & Tamayo, 2004). Even if the teaching profession has risk factors linked to the presence of stress, the teacher's perception plays a major role in how it will deal with environmental pressures, whether or not it develops symptoms of stress. When facing environmental pressures, the individual can overcome adversity without generating illness (Hirschle, Gondim, Alberton, & Ferreira, 2019). Satisfactory (positive) perception about Socio-professional relationships at work, as occurring in this sample, tends to act as a predictor of well-being at work and also to represent a protective factor regarding workers' mental health. Social support from interpersonal work relationships (Birolim, Mesas, González, Santos, Haddad, & Andrade, 2019) may contribute to lower stress levels among teachers. The greater the satisfaction with peer relationships, the lower the levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, professional fulfillment, and burnout (Dalcin & Carlotto, 2017).

There was no statistical difference in stress between PSS and LIS-E averages considering first and final grades. It is possible that both beginning and final grade teachers are encountering similar difficulties with work structuring, workload, economic factors, troubled student relationships, elements that may be related to the approximation of scores obtained on stress scales, affecting the two groups similarly (Gouveia, 2016; Pereira et al., 2014; Scandolara et al., 2015), although the scores are close to that of the general population.

The classification of work context as moderate/critical indicates a borderline situation and requires short- and medium-term interventions, due to the risk of aggravation of suffering, given the continuous exposure to risks (Mendes, 2007). The data revealed the presence of higher EACT scores in the final grade teachers. In this cycle there is a gradual change of students regarding motivation to learn, which causes difficulties at work. The daily challenge of trying to keep their students interested and planning lessons that are attractive often ends up not achieving the expected effect and generates feelings of frustration and discouragement in teachers (Caldas & Hübner, 2001). Behavioral issues between students and teachers correspond to one of the main difficulties faced in teaching. Often teachers are unable to handle class behavior, which generates a sense of helplessness and displeasure at work (Barbosa, Campos, & Valentim, 2011; Freitas & Facas, 2013; Gutierrez, 2017; Tostes et al., 2018; Weber, Leite, Stasiak, Santos, & Forteski, 2015). Final grade teachers may suffer greater pressure and demand for results for the accountability of education professionals for student performance (Vieira, Vidal, & Nogueira, 2015). The work pace of teachers from 5th to 9th grade (Gouveia, 2016; Vieira, Vidal, & Nogueira, 2015; Zibetti & Pereira, 2010) may also contribute to the higher score in this item, with greater pressure on final grade teachers (Arvidsson, Håkansson, Karlson, Björk, & Persson, 2016).



The socio-professional relations presented satisfactory evaluation. A good level of interpersonal and professional relationships in the teaching work context can favor the workers' quality of life. On the other hand, it is possible to observe the association between the poor quality of relationships with feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration and demotivation at work, which are generally related to burnout development (Carlotto et al., 2013).

The correlations between stress levels, teaching time, work context and age were weak. There is no consensus in the literature about the effects of age and length of profession on stress. These variables may serve as a protective factor against depressive and stress symptoms, given the experience gained over the years, how to cope with adversity, and the improved repertoire of problem solving (Goulart & Lipp, 2008). In contrast, some authors state that the longer the elapsed time, the greater the exposure to stressors and aggravates the stress levels presented (Pereira et al., 2014; Scandolaro et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2015). Although environmental variables favor the onset of stress symptoms (Molina, Fialho, Amaral, Bach, Rocha, & Souza, 2017), it is possible that other aspects such as personal problems that occur outside work, add to the context of work to increase the risk of stress (Reis, Fernandes, & Gomes, 2010). Therefore, this point remains controversial, and it is possible that these differences are due to the way the research was conducted, the different stress assessment instruments applied and the type of analysis performed.

It was investigated the work context in relation to stress symptoms in teachers of public elementary school. Regarding the work context, the Work organization factor was rated moderate/critical and the others, Socio-professional relations and Working conditions were evaluated as satisfactory. The stress symptoms evaluated are close to the results of the general population, and there was no statistical difference in the comparison of stress levels between the teachers of the early and late grades. The final grade teachers scored higher on almost all EACT items, which requires attention. Among the items that presented satisfactory classification, they are included in the factor Socio-professional relations and two in Working conditions, and the highest score obtained was in the item referring to the workload. Although the literature describes that many of the items that make up EACT are indicated as risk factors for stress, no strong association was found between the factors that make up the work context and the presence of stress symptoms in this sample.

Work context is an important variable in studies of worker health. Labor activity is an important space for the construction of the identity of the working individual, enabling experiences of pleasure or suffering (Dejours & Abdoucheli, 1994). The fact that the sample of this study has a work context assessed as moderate/critical suggests the need for care, especially in the items with the highest scores, because in the short and medium term, they may increase the negative cost of labor, leading to the worsening of psychic suffering. Socio-professional relations and Working conditions were classified as satisfactory, which reveals positive aspects that promote health and protection, which con-

tribute to well-being at work (Mendes & Ferreira, 2008).

Some data from EACT may have been influenced by the fatigue effect at the time the questionnaires were answered, since the research is part of a larger project and the collection was performed with several instruments on the same day. It should also be considered that the instrument does not capture variables that are specific to the teaching context, such as relationships with students, parents of students or the community in which the school is inserted.

Considering that the work context was moderate/critical, as well as the data from the detailed analysis of the most damaging items, it would already be possible to propose a plan to contain teacher exposure to these conditions. Continued exposure to moderate/critical factors tends to develop greater harm to the mental health of the worker. It is suggested to include in research agenda studies with representative samples of the teaching population and that includes the investigation of other forms of presentation of depressive and anxiety symptoms.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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