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THE PERCEPTIONS OF WELL-BEING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF REGULATIONS ON THE WORK SAFETY OF TEACHERS

Case
study

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Abstract

In the first part of the article we will establish a general framework to discuss the prevalence of causes and forms of burnout in organizational climate, focusing on the cases of teachers working in the department of Constanta, Romania. The study is based on a series of interviews that focus on the consequences of prevailing workload, work precarity, organizational climate and occupational well-being related health problems, aiming to provide a more appropriate understanding of the vulnerabilities and the blockages experienced by teachers. Different responses are captured here in a model of stress and coping that focuses on the reflection of their perceived psychological well-being. Finally, by offering a closer examination the respondents' well-being, we will seek to identify a concrete manner of how the faults in the public education system have led to an increased pressure regarding the psychological strain of work, taking into account the multiple levels of the phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

As Romanian education policies undergo annual changes and as school managers try to achieve efficiency while managing budget cutbacks and professional turnover, this article tries to reflect on the occupational health issues that are reported by teachers. The purpose of this article is to highlight psychological hazards in the education services, by offering a closer examination of respondents' well-being in one Romanian department. We chose to underline this dimension of occupational well-being by undergoing a series of 30 interviews (10 public education units, 5 of them urban and 5 rural) within the department of Constanta, choosing both urban and rural respondents. Further, a major direction of the article focuses on the less researched aspects of psychosocial hazards and the implementation of norms and risk assessment processes in order to reduce all types of psychological hazards. Having to identify the perception of well-being it is necessary to take a closer examination into the causes of burnout reported in this sector. (Grebot, 2011, p. 39) Burnout, as a psychological hazard is likely to represent an urgent social problem for Romanian public health officials in the years to come. The sources of strain on public services (that include education) come from a variety of directions, from the constant policy changes, to managerial reforms and from the ongoing process of accountability of public services, to the increased performance growth and work precarity. As we identify the vulnerabilities and blockages among the factors that may affect levels of employee depletion in different sectors, we are more likely to observe the specificity of the educational services. In addition, as agents in many public institutions are experiencing increased insecurity in terms of employment, a higher demand for excessive hours of work, or they are faced with the numerous reforms in the goals their sector has, we must consider the multiple levels of the psychological hazards. This insidious phenomenon is also a result of the accelerated pace of computer technology, and the interference of the line of demarcation between work and family life. Given the sheer volume of changes in education legislation in terms of the content required for the national exams and the methods employed, alongside greater accountability and public assessment, teacher stress is a response syndrome (Brun, Ivers, Biron, & IRSST, 2008). With the rapid changes that have taken place within teaching in the last years, it is very possible that teacher training may well be out of date as the more experienced teachers have problems keeping up with the constant curriculum changes. Secondly, we will corroborate our interviews with the provisions of work safety regulation to underline the void in addressing the psychological hazards. In Romania, as in many European countries, employers

are obliged by national occupational health regulations to implement prevention plans and intervention plans that address work stress and occupational well-being. This article wants to shine a light on a reality of professional life that escapes the regular work safety regulations. (Canada, Treasury Board, & Communications and Coordination Directorate, 1994, p. 19)

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND TEACHING ACTIVITIES

The international practice of the public service reveals an intense preoccupation of the managers to base and develop an organizational culture that reflects the mission of the public institution and contributes substantially to the accomplishment of this mission. In the public schooling segment, this reality is present as the scarcity of resources determines principals to make difficult decisions regarding class sizes and space allocation, hardware facilities. Teaching has always been believed to be a very secure job, but new social-economic and demographic factors influence the Romanian society. As we see a high rate of emigration and migration to the big urban centers because individuals had to relocate because of demographic changes, we can point for example the fact that the number of students decreased in rural areas and teachers had to change schools and transfer. Another reality is that more parents are willing to enroll their kids at schools out of their district because some other establishments have a more attractive package of services like after school programs or intensive English programs.

Another relevant feature regarding the changing reality of the educational public service is within the organizational policies and management style. The new cost-efficient management policies are a potential source of stress for employees in whatever type of occupation. Furthermore, the supervision and bureaucratic nature of teaching activities can be a source of strain, given a tendency to prioritize the bureaucratic tasks.

Thus, in one of the interviews conducted, a teacher mentioned the continuous effort to keep up with a teacher portfolio that needs to be particularized given the students' level as a response to this type of prioritizing the bureaucratic tasks of the job. The pressures and benchmarks are a constant, from the benchmarks in students' acquisition to the national examination scores and the hierarchy of the school in the department or country as indicators of the educational process quality. From a cost-efficient benchmark oriented management, the leadership style may vary from being passive to repressive and can thus become a source of strain and work conflicts. This can create stressful situations for all teachers in that school. Another source of strain is

the discrepancy between the public image in terms of prestige, salary and respect for the professional status of teachers. (Cecil & Forman, 1990)

The precariousness of the job for the teachers that don't have tenure sometimes for reasons that can't be imputed to them, (i.e. even obtaining a high grade at national qualification exams can't be helped if there is a lack of open teaching positions with tenure) the lack of job security from one year to another also has been found to be related to stress in teachers. The opportunity of a tenure is unpredictable; thus, this reinforces the strain of an external locus of control in the individuals restricted job mobility for women lack of training for career development. Further related to this is the lack of advancement opportunities. In addition to the problems of absenteeism and turnover, many teachers are looking for early retirement as a way out of teaching. This is not to say that for the vast majority this is not legitimate on the grounds of ill health, but for many this is the only way they seem to get away from the job that is causing them excessive pressure. Another aspect of the teaching profession, which may be directly related to work overload, is the problem of having a wide range of pupils with different abilities in one class. Regarding job relocation, there are changes in teaching methods, educational content reform and new organizational structures that implement changes in actual requirements of the job. (Dunham, 2002, p. 7)

THE REALITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH ASPECTS FROM THE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

In this section, we will highlight that the extent and type of stress experienced by teachers will largely depend upon whether the teachers feel threatened by the demands facing them, and the individual teacher may, after facing an initial threat, be able to modify or ameliorate the threat by particular actions. Many stressful experiences occur in the context of social structures or the social stratification systems such as socioeconomic status, age and gender and are often related to a person's place within that structure. All elements contributing to the climate and the working environment contribute to stress. Stress is a central construction in the pattern of psychological suffering associated with workplace suffering due to discrimination (i.e. emotional trauma caused by stress of sexism).

It is important to present a brief review of stress research to understand how stress affects people (Dunham, 2001). Kyriacou (1998) suggested more recently that in attempting to produce a definition we need to consider whether the term is referring to (a) the level of demands made on the teacher (either positive or negative or both) and/or (b) the emotional states engendered in a person in attempting to meet

such demands (again either positive or negative or both). Tending to focus on the negative aspects of teacher stress, Kyriacou states that teacher stress is: *the experience by a teacher of unpleasant negative emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, depression and nervousness, resulting from some aspect of their work.* (Kyriacou, 2000)

The notion of stress is criticized for its operational application in a company: the phenomenon remains subjective, since it is essentially linked to "individual representations" and is therefore very important in the design of the deterioration in working conditions. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish between its causes and its effects. The "rate" of stress is not in itself a relevant criterion for conducting a psychosocial risk prevention policy: we have seen quantitative stress audits show that the level of stress was "normal" in a sector compared to other sectors in the same industry. While in the same organization, there were significant sources of tension at some sites where there was a high number of suicides, death related incidents potentially related to work.

Over the past decade, Romania has adapted the public policy regarding work safety with a focus on ergonomics, but it has yet to elaborate a conclusive agenda on the newly recognized dangers like stress. In parallel with these developments, the National Institute of Public Health and the Labor Inspection in each department are responsible for prevention and intervention in the work safety system in Romania. The managerial style plays an essential role in workplace safety.

The prevention system is very important insofar as employees can become aware of different types of hazard. In the organizational level, the manager, the responsibilities with work safety regulations and the external actors like Labor Inspection can assess the extent to which each organization responds to the legal requirements on work safety. Another important notion here is with the dimension of work conflicts and toxic work climate, as exponents of potentially harmful conduits. As with other forms of occupational stress, exposure to a toxic work climate, one that fuels discrimination or harassments has potentially harmful effects on the emotional well-being of employees.

As some managers are still inclined to consider stress as an indicator of employee's commitment and productivity, a change in organizational culture is necessary. As the research in the field shows, stress is unlikely to have a long term positive effect on behavior.

Work dynamism, a small amount of "positive stress", as for some managers stress is proof of productivity, responsiveness, organizational sense can slowly have negative effects on long term (Golembiewski, Munzenrider, & Stevenson, 1986). Another important aspect is that the research found a relatively strong negative association between

exposure to a and declining job satisfaction and engagement. Such reactions on the part of the target may in themselves lead to organizational effects, linked to a lack of motivation and creativity, and to an increase in accidents and errors. Whether constructive, negative, or ill-adapted, many behavioral responses can affect the organization by affecting levels of absenteeism, productivity, and team and group performance. At the end of the axis, therefore, the regulation of the relationship with risks, to health and safety, rests on the individual strategies of the workers, including what work safety plans. One of the ways of regulation consists in defensive strategies based on denial, trivialization or the naturalization of risks. These strategies, which do not eliminate risk, but seek to control fear and anxiety and by valuing work. Articles 175-191 of the Romanian Labor Code regulate the obligations of employers in the field of safety and health at work. The employer is under an obligation to take all necessary measures to ensure that workers and / or their representatives receive all necessary information concerning safety and health risks to which they may be consulted on these aspects and is involved in discussions about their safety and health at work. It also ensures safety and health in all aspects related to the work, article 175§2 Labor Code. (Ticlea, Popescu, Tufan, Tichindelean, & Tinca, 2004) Here, too, the obligations of the workers by whom they are responsible for caring for their own health and safety, and for the safety and health of others at work are presented. The instructions given to them by their employer are in the center of prevention and regulation of work hazards. Thus, occupational health and safety see many benefits for an organization, but is also a legal and social obligation for the entities. It is present in the specialty literature as a form of good management, because it helps to show that the company is socially responsible. (Filip, Crăciun, Mantale, Panainte, & Butnariu, 2001)

A good occupational health safety policy can improve the image and value of the organization, strengthen the skills and health of workers, optimize their productivity, reduce company costs and disrupt work. The international practice of the public services reveals an intense preoccupation of the managers to base and develop an organizational culture that reflects the mission of the public institution and contributes substantially to the accomplishment of this mission. In schools, the psychological dimension of work safety should prevail, but the reality is that due to the scarcity of resources, the support and intervention for teachers' emotional well-being is minimal (not all schools have a psychotherapist). Moreover, the same field reality determines principals to make difficult decisions regarding class sizes and space allocation, hardware, teaching facilities, decisions that can only

fuel the level of work strain. (Kinnunen & Salo, 1994)

Changes in the external environment of the schools determine the flexibility of the process of adapting the system of values that form the organizational culture of an institution. It is well known and demonstrated that the values of organizational culture, unlike other categories of values, change more easily and in a longer period of time, but there is a widely accepted view that changes in organizational structure and the content of the values of the organizational culture must adapt to the economic, social, legal, political and administrative context, a context that exists in a country during a given historical period. (Ashford, 1988)

As we already know, public service is closely linked to the political power of the state and I emphasize the state because it is implied that the relationship of subordination is not towards political parties or coalitions. The educational services do not escape these influences. The culture of the public institution does not control all members' perceptions, thoughts and feelings. But the process by which public officials learn to control the internal and external environment involves all these policies that affect emotional well-being.

A GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

Still not the center of work safety, emotional well-being lacks intervention plans for most of the sectors. As the public services encounters pressures from the ongoing process of accountability of teaching activities to performance benchmarks and high competition not only among students, but also between schools and districts on the performance at national exams, all these are among the factors likely to affect levels of teachers turn over in different sectors. In addition, employees in many advanced market sectors are experiencing increased job insecurity, demand for excessive hours of work, the need for continuous training because of the accelerated pace of computer technology. In many European countries, employers are obliged by government regulations on occupational health to implement preventive interventions that address work stress and burnout. A healthy organization can maintain a healthy and satisfying work environment over time, even in times of market turbulence and change. (Ashford, 1988)

The burnout among teachers and health is particularly common. Studies on the burnout in teachers across Europe focuses on gender, age, grade level taught, but also on organizational factors like role ambiguity, imbalance of effort and material reward or recognition, difficulties with pupils but also the workload (teaching activities and bureaucratic tasks). The Romanian specificity of the phenomenon in education is given by the issue of

understaffing, increased size of classrooms, the lack of control regarding the educational resources like manuals, the difficult work schedules especially for teachers that have a long commute, the inadequate job security (even the achievement of a high grade at the annual qualification exams for teachers is not a sure criteria for securing a teaching position with tenure in an urban, well placed school, given the scarcity of tenure posts and the precarisation of teaching jobs from one school year to another school year). The lower job satisfaction is marked by emotional exhaustion that can be increased during certain periods of the school year, as the national test period and end of school semesters mark the period of fatigue.

To identify the phenomenon, we interviewed 30 teachers across 10 public education units and then applied content analysis of their responses regarding the sources of stress, their well-being and their perception of the general work climate. The approach in this research methodology has as a starting point attending a database of texts and identify variables, called categories, concepts, properties. Thus, grounded theory was selected as an inductive method, which aims to generate a theory from a corpus of data, based on plausible relationships between concepts and sets of concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Researchers using this methodology are interested in modes of action and interaction between different types of categories, concepts, properties. The ability to label variables from a corpus of interviews and code the relationships between them is called theoretical sensitivity. This analysis is made by identification, labeling, categorization, description of phenomena and their properties and include: a) encoding open, the transcribed content is made up of codes that can then be used in reports; b) axial coding, which identifies causal links between different codes, categories, properties; c) selective coding, which establishes a category as central group, and all other categories relate to this basic category (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This method was selected because it is a qualitative development of a theory, developed through a systematic process that emphasizes the significance of concepts and their correlation to its content, like the sources of stress, its relationship with well-being and organizational practices on work safety.

The conceptualization and crystallization of concepts, categories are a process that can form the basis for future quantitative research. Grounded theory is not a priori established, is an inductive method, derived from studying the phenomenon, it represents, in our case, teachers' perception of their well-being. (Daniel, 2009)

By generating codes, we grouped the emerging concepts from the interviews around social and work factor regarding burnout (Figure 1). Using open coding, we aimed to describe the perception of well-

being on three fundamental areas – work factors, social factors, organizational factors- by setting attributes and actions that are taken from the interviews in the field. The limitations of the study are consistent with the small interview sample (30) and the process of access to the interviewed teachers. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

Therefore, in the coding process, having a good work environment was identified as a big impact for teachers. Especially those having no tenure or in the first years of activity identified that support from the principal and their department as having a big impact on their emotional well-being and security. Moreover, the changes that are associated with the negative outcomes at work easily emerge as crucial. The emotional climate and comfort from the experience of a welcoming superior can have a negative outcome on teachers' perception of their work well-being. Thus, the discussions emphasized on the bureaucratic culture of a manager with a lot of teaching experience versus organizational and political competencies is also impactful.

Teacher's satisfaction is not an initiative that finds priority in occupational health and the awareness of this professional vulnerability given the type of negative triggers is often regarded as auxiliary to the profession and unavoidable given the reality. The lack of systematic support is often a source of stress. For the new educators, the sources of stress are extremely important and a cause of teachers' turnover in the first 5 years of practice. Given the dichotomy of the teaching situations from their training and education practice to the harsh reality of being in charge feeling overwhelmed and the lack the support and experience in solving the realities of managing a classroom is considered as a big discrepancy from the university training to the professional environment.

The new-found profession implies a lot of experience and willingness to adapt from all the actors of the educational process. The school principals often put new educators in „swim or sink” positions concerning their ability to adapt to the reality of managing a class; the students and the parents. A source of stress identified is the strenuous teacher parents' relationships. Given the clash of personalities that can arrive, is important for teachers to be adapted and well equipped in order to manage the classroom. Concerning the stress that managers experience on their behalf, we identified the financial limitations, the reality of unsanitary units, the amortized cost of the rehabilitation of the school infrastructure, the constant pressure to provide the best management solution in impossible financial situations. Regarding what influences the teachers' perception of well-being, factors like age, gender, teaching experience and training also play a role on the impact different strains have for the emotional well-being is the anxiety about the profession, or day to day routine of teaching tasks.

During interviews, a source that hinges the psychological well-being is also identified in the scarcity of proper methods of coping with stress, such as the lack of assessment of how successful the teaching process is and how it can be improved, as most of the respondents attested, they give more importance to the formalized aspects like curriculum, classroom management issues and competencies for teaching or the results the students obtain at national exams.

The mentoring and coping strategies to reduce and long-term planning and curriculum, the acquirement of new competencies to the new school issue. 50% of new teachers leave in the first 5 years, the entry stage being a particularly stressful period. Even for teachers that are not novices, overseeing new classes or having to adapt to a new curriculum impose a change in a routine and can be a source of anxiety. The managerial issues that must be discussed are also crucial. Given that for the non-tenure professor, having the support of the school principal as crucial. One of the interviewed persons, a Math professor with 15 years of experience talked about the pressure to ensure a high percentage of continuous training/formation credits during the school year in order to maintain a position for the qualification exams. The low number of tenure teaching positions in the urban schools maintain a competitive situation. „As every year I have to prepare a thick file that allows me to keep my position at this school, I have to be careful to gather formative activity points from every activity, from organization's commitment to different boards, to participate in extracurricular activities with my class, undergo continuous formation classes or workshops, mentorship and competition participation with my class”. The culture of gathering points for your personal evaluation becomes a professional target. Competition between teachers for the results of their students at school competitions is one of the benchmarks. “We are widely aware we push students to participate in them for our benefit too. At the end of the year you are experiencing such fatigue. Fatigue measured in the diplomas and certificates you put in your file for the next school year.”

Another interviewee, a Biology teacher sees her position in danger because of the reduction of many classes and hours allocated to the discipline per week. „Truth is even with tenure there is no safety, I can get transferred if my position is reduced to less than 18 hours per week. For Biology that means that fewer classes with just one hour of Biology per week means my position can get eliminated. The 20 years of experience don't value much. The other Biology teacher has a master's degree and her personal evaluation will put her above me”.

Regarding the stress of the long commute, the teachers from the rural schools identified this as a main factor of strain. Firstly, this is pointed out

because of the high cost of the commute and secondly the uncertainty that the local authorities will have enough money to cover their expenses. „So every year is the same struggle, the commute costs almost 1/3 of the salary. The question is if the local authorities will have enough money to return the cost or for how long do we have to wait for the reimbursement. School starts in September, but in 6 years I did this commute I usually see the first money from local authorities in January.”

The school schedule is also indicated as a source of exhaustion. For the teachers that a reasonable distance of the commute and having a malleable school schedule is very important. As one History teacher that has a one-hour commute answered: „If all my classes are put in the first 3 days of the week that is so much better, but that depends from a lot of other factors like classes that are available and sometimes that is managed exceptionally difficult.” Our respondent offered insight into the reality that one classroom is usually shared by 2 units to optimize the space. “The schedule is made in accordance with the available classrooms. The productivity bell that they teach you in methodic is not exactly important when more important is to have a space. So you have Math at 2 pm on a Friday or you have Literature after Physical Education on a Thursday. Or you have History with the 12th grade on a Monday at 7:50. That is not the best schedule for students. At the end of the hour you are drained.” Concerning the class size and the overall class level another issue arises analyzing the interviews. The level of students' performance is measured annually, but teachers have limited leeway on the adaptability of the class curricula as it is reflected in the manual level, by the mandatory requirements set by the Ministry of Education or by the standardized core requirements included in the national evaluation items. Having to prepare for a class with a diverse range of academic levels takes a considerable time and is for teachers in the first years of practice a harsh reality. As one interviewed teacher stated: „I graduated with an English BA and my master was in Traductology, but the first years of teaching English were sobering. You have 10, 15% of the students that are genuinely interested, participating and making good progress. Their proficiency and achievement of mandatory requirements for an ESL student in the 5 years of study are reflected differently from class to class and from student to student. Then we have 50% of the class that have a good level and can work a selective range of exercises with minimal errors. Then we have the rest of the class that are under the assessment level for their preparation. The exercises in the manual are often too difficult for them so for them to fill in the gaps you need to prepare a different type of teaching content, from homework to reading exercises. At the end of the day you have the manual, the exercise books for those that require a more difficult level and

the special exercises for those that have to fill in gaps for their acquisition.”

This is not a unique situation for English teachers, many other teachers try to cover a diversity of knowledge levels for their students, considering the mandatory requirement for the class level or the national testing.

CONCLUSIONS

The teaching profession is generally considered as being stressful and generating numerous cases of burnout. We sought to explore the general level of teacher’s stress by a series of open interviews, identifying the sources of strain, the coping actions used by teachers, their perception of the well-being and we corroborated them with the work safety regulations and policies in order to underline what actions the teachers think could be taken by schools and the government to address this phenomenon. Thus, we could identify that the assertion of how insidious this phenomenon is among teachers themselves is not accompanied by a recurrent interest in the protection of teachers’ well-being and mental health as none of the strategies regarding employee protection might not always find confirmation in the priorities the policy makers have. (Forman, 1983)

One of the conclusions signaled that social factors like a lowered job satisfaction, student and supervisor interactions, poor pay and discrepancy between the sense of self-fulfillment versus the external recognition correlate with the work-related factors like the organic hazard of noisy environment and workload, the lack of facilities or the poor quality of the existing facilities. As evident from the coding process of the responses, another significant aspect is in the organizational factors that can have a negative impact on teachers’ well-being we have identified from interviews the following categories: the organizational style and peer relationships, the pressure from supervisors regarding the work requirement, the bureaucratic structure and the priority of work. (Gulwadi, 2013.)

At the level of stress factors, we postulate that the administrative burden, the negative relationships with colleagues and the stress in the classroom influence emotional exhaustion. The indiscipline and the administrative burden, which would alter the confidence of the teacher in his practice also reduce the perception of personal accomplishments (see Figure 1).

Thus, as seen in Figure 1, we can correlate the codes referring to the identified frustration and exhaustion as the two most common types of reactions to teacher stress. Some of these factors identified in the coding process appear similarly in previous research regarding stress in the education services, but our work tries nevertheless to establish a substantial

connection with burnout and the perception of their well-being in the Romanian context. Specifically, along our work we have tried to identify how the components of burnout are influenced by the stress experienced by the teacher in his daily work, classroom discipline problems, the pressure felt vis-à-vis the local authorities and school managers, the perception of the administrative burden, as well as the poor relations with colleagues and parents.

Understanding the links between stress factors and the emotional components of burnout, we hope to provide opportunities for the prevention and the specific intervention for this population. The strain felt, the emotional tension due to an adverse situation, the lack of balance affects the well-being are all taken into consideration. The behavioral indicators show that there are few protective factors in the contextual situation and a lack of proper work safety polity when in order to respond to the situation, as we have a scarcity of the intervention policies in the management of human resources in the sector. As the prior researches have underlined, support interventions and mentoring must identify the stressful situation in the routine stage and before it has any long-term impact on the emotional well-being of teachers.

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FIGURES

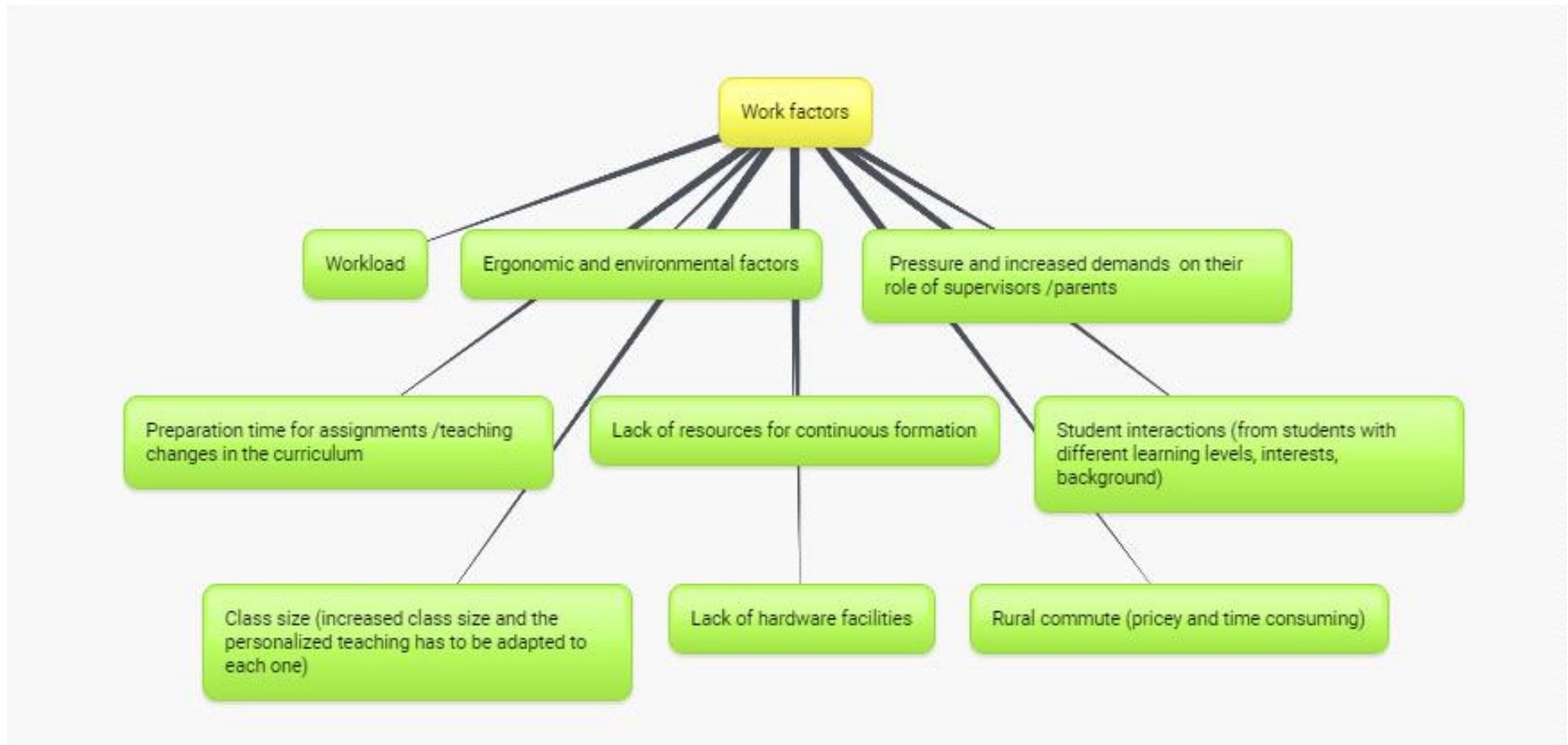


Figure 1. Emerging concepts from the interviews around social and work factor regarding burnout
Source: made by authors