Article

Teachers Voices: A Qualitative Study on Burnout in the Portuguese Educational System

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Abstract: Teaching has been identified as an environment of extreme physical, mental, and cognitive demand for teachers and is one of the careers where burnout levels are the highest. This qualitative study aims to (i) understand the importance of personal, organizational, and classroom dimensions concerning the Portuguese education system, (ii) and how these dimensions contribute to burnout in Portuguese teachers from different teaching levels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-six primary and high school teachers. Results offer insights on the impact that different variables have on teachers' burnout. The content analysis suggests that organization is the most relevant dimension contributing to teachers' burnout. On the other hand, the classroom category appears to be the most challenging context for teachers to manage. The results highlight the need to consider the dynamics and interdependency between personal, organizational, and classroom dimensions in the development and prevalence of burnout.

Keywords: burnout syndrome; teachers; risk factors; mental health; school context; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Mental and physical well-being depend on how well individuals can handle the psychosocial, contextual, and physical challenges and demands of their environments [1]. Although stress is a necessary and sometimes useful physiologic response, continuous exposure to high levels of occupational stress may lead to burnout [2].

Burnout is a psychosocial phenomenon characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal fulfilment [3]. Over the past two decades, burnout in teachers has been recognized as a severe professional problem, affecting teachers' motivation and job satisfaction, with consequences for not only students' learning and behavior, but also the broader school environment [4,5]. Compared with other careers, teaching has been identified as one of the careers with the highest levels of perceived stress [6]. According to [2], school as a professional environment is characterized by several contexts susceptible to emotional exhaustion that vary from school to school, and within the same school. The concept of "professional environment demands" refers to physical, social, or organizational attributes of a professional context that require prolonged physical and/or mental effort [7].

Previous research has identified several variables that enable the characterization of extreme mental and cognitive demands present in schools. In Portuguese schools specifically, previous studies suggest that variables associated with teachers' burnout can be better understood when evaluated across three major dimensions: personal, organizational, and classroom [8].

1.1. Individual Intrinsic Variables

Individual resources such as emotional competencies and coping strategies play an essential role in burnout, because they influence the way teachers perceive and respond to their daily challenges and demands [9–11]. Likewise, several authors have observed that a teachers' major contributing factor to teacher exhaustion is their personal inability to manage the plurality of roles and myriad tasks demanded of them by schools and families [12].

1.2. School Context Attributes

The peculiarities of the education system and variables associated with the school environment appear to have an even more dominant role in the prevalence and levels of burnout [13]. These attributes include precarious employment contracts, limited career development opportunities, time pressure, salaries, physical conditions, demands, excessive workload, the multiplicity of tasks, and bureaucracy [7,10,12,14,15].

The variables associated with the school environment deal with perceptions related to the overall school climate and result from interactions in the school context. Several authors claim a lack of emphasis on variables regarding interpersonal relationships, such as the perceived quality of the relationships between work peers, with school principals, or the lack of morale in the workplace [16]. Studies on the perceptions of organizational support show that teachers who perceive less support from their peers and school principals tend to experience higher levels of stress and burnout [17]. The impact of the perceived support also seems to be correlated with other organizational variables, such as the workload [15].

The characteristics of different levels of education also appear to be paramount to understanding the development of burnout, because different teaching levels require distinct teaching techniques and are intended for different audiences [18]. However, results on teachers' burnout among different teaching levels are inconsistent. For example, in a study conducted with Brazilian teachers, elementary school teachers showed the lowest levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and the highest levels of job satisfaction [19]. In another study in Israel, teachers of the youngest students reported the highest levels of burnout [20]. For instance, [21] did not find considerable discrepancies in the burnout levels among Australian elementary and high school teachers.

1.3. Classroom and Student Characteristics

In the classroom context, student misbehavior is regarded as the main culprit for teacher burnout [22]. Other contributing factors include students' lack of motivation, student heterogeneity in performance and competence skills, and class size [11,23].

Parents also seem to interfere with teachers' perception of well-being. Earlier studies suggest that parents' pressure on teachers, and teachers' perception of improper parental educational practices directly contribute to teachers' burnout [2,24].

1.4. Present Study

In the current study, burnout is conceived as a subjective experience stemming from self-interpretation and self-evaluation of the context in which individuals are integrated. The sense of stress and burnout is determined by an individual's evaluation of the circumstances and challenges presented to them and the cognitive resources they possess [25].

The present study explores how a set of variables, already identified as relevant for the development and prevalence of burnout in teachers, applies to a sample of Portuguese teachers. Specifically, it aims to understand (i) the relative importance of personal, organizational, and classroom dimensions associated with the Portuguese educational context, and (ii) how they contribute to burnout in Portuguese teachers from different teaching levels.

2. Materials and Methods

This is a qualitative study that used semi-structured interviews "to gain insights into a person's subjective experiences, opinions and motivations" [26], p. 3. Content analysis was

used as a research method. Frequency counting was also used as part of the data analysis to support the interpretation of results (i.e., to indicate the prevalence of a particular category or subcategory in the interviews in this group of teachers) [27].

2.1. Participants

Initial contact was established with school principals from three schools located in the north of Portugal. School principals were asked to forward our calls to teachers who, in their opinion, showed signs of significant stress and exhaustion. It was thus intended to incorporate participants that could be considered good insiders regarding the burnout phenomenon.

Participants were 26 teachers between 48 and 63 years old ($M = 56.7$, $DP = 3.9$); 21 were female (80.8%) and 5 were male (19.2%). Their teaching experience ranged from 17 to 37 years ($M = 29$, $DP = 4.4$). These participants taught in the 1st cycle of elementary school ($n = 4$, 15.4%), 2nd cycle of elementary school ($n = 5$, 19.2%), 3rd cycle of elementary school ($n = 7$, 26.9%), high school ($n = 4$, 15.4%), and in the 3rd cycle of elementary school and high school ($n = 6$, 23.1%), in public schools in the north of continental Portugal. The Portuguese education system is organized into two primary sequential levels of compulsory education: (a) elementary school, including the 1st cycle (1st to 4th grade), 2nd cycle (5th and 6th grades), and 3rd cycle (7th to 9th grade); and (b) high school (10th to 12th grade). Two of the teachers were on medical leave with a diagnosis of psychological exhaustion.

2.2. Procedures

An interview script was developed by experienced researchers in Educational and School Psychology. Four initial interviews were conducted, one for each teaching level (1st cycle, 2nd cycle, 3rd cycle, and high school) to test the suitability of the script's content. This procedure provided data about emerging issues and informed minor improvements to the initial interview script; for example, a question about the students' parents was then included because this subject surfaced during the initial interviews. The same interview script was used for the different teaching cycles given the similar emerging issues but varied in the importance of each item. The final version of the interview script was again tested and ratified by the researchers.

Participants were contacted by phone or email, the terms and conditions of the study were presented, and interviews were scheduled following the participants' availability. Interviews were recorded after informed consent was given. Confidentiality was assured, and participants were informed that they were free to end their participation in the study at any time. In the interview transcripts, all data associated with the participant's identity (e.g., name, location) were eliminated to ensure data anonymity.

2.3. Measures

The semi-structured interview script was developed to explore variables associated with personal, organizational, and classroom dimensions based on a literature review. The interviews started with a generic question ("What is a normal day like for you as a teacher?"), followed by open questions regarding personal (e.g., "How do you manage your personal and professional life?"), organizational (e.g., "Generally speaking, are you happy with the current Portuguese Education System?"), and classroom dimensions (e.g., "How do you manage the classroom?"). The script consisted of twelve questions whose order was not strictly maintained, allowing the participants to answer in a free and unrestricted manner and thereby provide the interviewer with a deeper understanding of the subject.

2.4. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and subjected to a content analysis process according to the three stages proposed by [28]: pre-analysis, content analysis, and output handling, deduction, and interpretation. The pre-analysis process produced a grid of categories and

subcategories. This grid was initially applied to interviews by teaching level (1st cycle, 2nd cycle, 3rd cycle, and high school) to test data adjustment. This procedure led to the elimination or combination of some of the subcategories. Given the finalized grid of categories and subcategories, the twenty-six interviews were coded, and the interrater agreement was implemented. The coding of categories and subcategories was performed manually by two raters, with experience in research in the education field, who carried out the data analysis independently. Disagreements were tie-broken by a third judge, an expert in the professional development of teachers.

Cohen's kappa coefficient analyses were conducted to verify the reliability of and validate the grid of categories and subcategories [29]. Mean values of Cohen's kappa coefficient showed an "almost perfect agreement" ($k = 0.81-1$) for the twenty-six interviews ($k = 0.88$) and for the three large dimensions ($k = 0.90$). The robust reliability indices of the different Cohen's kappa coefficients ensured objectiveness and consistency throughout the content analysis process.

Statistic descriptive analysis and frequency analysis were conducted using Microsoft Excel.

3. Results

3.1. Grid of Categories and Subcategories

Content analysis generated a total of ten categories and forty-three subcategories, all mutually exclusive. The personal dimension included personal, social, academic, and professional attributes and the perception of physical, emotional, and mental capabilities (Table 1). The organizational dimension represented characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the Portuguese educational system and included variables of a relational nature (Table 2). The classroom dimension included the characteristics of the classroom context and the variables directly or indirectly related to students, parents, or the value system (Table 3).

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of the personal dimension ($n = 26$).

Category	Definition	Subcategory	Definition
Personal Identity	Set of individual intrinsic perceptions and attitudes.	Positive management of life roles	Ease of family and social context management, due to the professional role demands.
		Negative management of life roles	Well-managed family and social context hardships, due to the professional role demands.
		Coping mechanisms	Resources and/or strategies to face professional context hardships.
		Skills	Physical, cognitive and/or emotional limit perception to face the professional context demands.
Professional Identity	Professional self-concept perception and professional circle affinity sense.	Recognition	Value or recognition perception with the teacher's role, by society and by school peers.
		Lack of Recognition	Depreciation or lack of recognition perception with the teacher's role, by society and school peers. Including loss of dignity and authority.
		Fulfilment	Overall fulfilment with career and professional category, without objectively identifying their source.
		Unfulfillment	Overall dissatisfaction with the career and professional category, without identifying its source.
		Status loss	References to loss of benefits and career stagnation. Including comparison with other career categories.

3.2. Frequency of Categories and Subcategories

Absolute, average, and relative frequency analyses were conducted to understand the representativeness of the dimensions (Table 4) and the categories and subcategories (Table 5). Overall, the organizational dimension was the most frequently mentioned by teachers (39.1%), followed by the classroom (37.7%) and personal (23.6%) dimensions. When considering the different teaching levels, the classroom dimension was the most relevant for teachers of the 1st (43.5%) and 2nd (41%) cycles of basic education.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories of the organizational dimension (*n* = 26).

Category	Dimension	Subcategory	Definition
School System	Portuguese school system properties.	Programs	Perceived imbalance between the school program requirements and the curricular goals, and the time available to teach that which matters.
		Teachers' workload	Reference to the teachers' excessive workload and the perceived imbalance between the available time for scholar and not-scholar components.
		Students' workload	Reference to the students' excessive workload. Includes the free time during school hours cessation.
		Overall Bureaucracy	Amount of bureaucracy associated with teaching. Includes perceived worthlessness and fatigue.
		Teachers' evaluation	Reference to external and internal teachers' evaluation.
		School evaluation	Reference to internal and external school evaluations.
		Legislation	Negative impact of the continuous legal changes in teaching. Includes the perception of inadequacy of the law to the effective school context.
School context	School context properties where the person is integrated.	Schedule	Dissatisfaction with the timetable structure, which makes it harder to mediate between professional and personal life, and teachers' mingling.
		Extra activities	Performance in tasks or duties not directly related to content teaching.
		School circumstances	Poor physical characteristics of the school space and shortage of human resources.
		Specific Bureaucracy	Bureaucracy rise perception specific to that school context.
School atmosphere	Relationship dimension, contributing to the perceived school atmosphere.	Organizational injustice	Injustice perception stemming from hierarchical superior decisions, compared to peers. Including retaliation references.
		Positive relationship with peers	Peer relationship quality perception.
		Negative relationship with peers	Degrading or lack of peer relationship perception.
		Positive relationship with principals	Relationship between teachers and school principals' quality perception.
		Negative relationship with principals	Perception of degrading or lack of relationships between teachers and school principals.
Limitations	Teacher-perceived limitations on their performance.	Projects	Negative impact of the involvement in school projects. Includes external school image concerns.
		Lack of autonomy	Perception of loss of autonomy in decision making (i.e., grade assignments) and lack of freedom of expression.
		Lobbies	Perception of financial school priorities, limiting teachers' roles and response.

Table 3. Categories and subcategories of the classroom dimension (*n* = 26).

Category	Definition	Subcategory	Definition
Classroom	Classroom context exclusive attributes.	Behaviors	Indiscipline and disruptive student behaviors.
		Management	Classroom management and teaching strategies set by teachers.
		Teaching content	Perception of content teaching time.
		Interruptions	Percentage of time not dedicated to content teaching (i.e., Indiscipline).
		Climate	Perception of the classroom climate, characterized by the student-teacher relationships.
		Class	Class attributes, including the number of students per class and students' heterogeneity.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Category	Definition	Subcategory	Definition
Students	Individual and student's family attributes.	Family structure	Family structure of the students and their social–economical context.
		Development	Cognitive and intellectual student development perception.
		Motivation	Students' motivation and attention perception.
Parents	Parents' attributes.	Positive relationship with parents	Teacher–guardian relationship quality.
		Pressure	Parents' power and pressure on teachers' and school principals' perception, and its impact.
		Education	Perception inadequate schooling practices and degree of involvement from parents in the student's school life.
Society	Abstract nature attributes from the individual unique experience.	Values	Perception of loss of values from society, ethic and code of conduct, such as citizenship, solidarity or respect.
		Mission	Perception loss mission from the school and loss of the teaching purpose. Includes perceptions of negative evolutions of the school system (i.e., compared with the past).

Table 4. Frequency of answers per dimension.

Dimension	Total Sample ($n = 26$)		1CBE ($n = 4$)		2CBE ($n = 5$)		3CBE and SE ($n = 17$)	
	AbF	AF	AbF	AF	AbF	AF	AbF	AF
Personal	558	23.6%	99	22.9%	85	24.7%	375	23.6%
Organizational	926	39.1%	145	33.6%	118	34.3%	663	41.6%
Classroom	884	37.3%	188	43.5%	141	41%	554	34.8%

Notes: 1CBE, 1st cycle of basic education; 2CBE, 2nd cycle of basic education; 3BE, 3rd cycle of basic education; SE, secondary education; AbF, absolute frequency; AF, average frequency.

The personal identity category was the most frequently mentioned and shows how the participants felt close to their mental and emotional limits (P04: "I would scramble all the names! Ideas would blur in my brain!"). It also shows how demanding it is for teachers to combine their different life roles (P01: "It's always outside school time (...), and the teacher also has a family!"). For teachers of the 2nd cycle, the subcategory of coping mechanisms appeared to be of particular importance (P05: "I'm handling it because I'm being medicated!").

In the category professional identity, lack of recognition, and loss of status were the noteworthy subcategories. Although these subcategories may seem the same at first glance, it is possible to distinguish the meaning of recognition (P02: "The work a teacher does in the classroom is not of interest, it is not recognized nor valued!") from status (P11: "I consider myself as cheap labor!").

3.3. Organizational Dimension

The education system category was the most frequently cited organizational dimension, especially legislation, and overall bureaucracy subcategories. The frustration with bureaucracy is characterized not only by its quantity but also by the perception of its inutility (P05: "We always have to have papers going back and forth! We have a lot more bureaucracy nowadays than before. It does not serve any purpose. It's just to be filed!"). Similarly, legislation not only encompasses the negative impact of the constant legal changes (P19: "We start the year and give specific guidelines [to students and parents], and it is not the first, nor the second, not the third time that the rules of the game change in the middle of the year!"), but also the failure to understand the usefulness and benefit of those changes (P01: "A new government takes office and everything changes ... What was done already is never considered to, at least, understand what was well-done!"). The sub-

category legislation also appears to rebound in the interpersonal relationship quality (P12: "This year we're [teachers] in a school, next year we'll be in a different one. By the time that we can get relocated to a new school, get used to the new environment and peers, we reach the 2nd semester!"). The negative relationship with peers was the most prevalent complaint in the school atmosphere (P08: "People no longer talk, hang out! They are not friends anymore!").

Table 5. Frequency of answers per category and subcategory.

Category Subcategory	Total Sample (*n* = 26)			1CBE (*n* = 4)			2CBE (*n* = 5)			3CBE and SE (*n* = 17)		
	AbF	AF	RF	AbF	AF	RF	AbF	AF	RF	AbF	AF	RF
Personal Identity												
Positive management of life roles	10	0.4%	3%	1	0.2%	2%	6	1.7%	8%	2	0.1%	1%
Negative management of life roles	91	3.8%	24%	21	4.9%	34%	7	2%	10%	65	4.1%	27%
Coping Mechanisms	66	2.8%	17%	7	1.6%	11%	15	4.4%	21%	44	2.8%	18%
Capabilities	212	9%	56%	33	7.6%	53%	45	13.1%	62%	134	8.4%	55%
Sub-total	379	16%	100%	62	14.4%	100%	73	21.2%	100%	245	15.4%	100%
Professional Identity												
Recognition	3	0.1%	2%	1	0.2%	3%	0	0%	0%	2	0.1%	2%
Lack of Recognition	73	3.1%	41%	20	4.6%	54%	5	1.5%	42%	48	3%	37%
Fulfilment	17	0.7%	9%	2	0.5%	5%	3	0.9%	25%	12	0.8%	9%
Dissatisfaction	34	1.4%	19%	3	0.7%	8%	4	1.2%	33%	27	1.7%	21%
Loss of Status	52	2.2%	29%	11	2.5%	30%	0	0%	0%	41	2.6%	32%
Sub-total	179	7.6%	100%	37	8.6%	100%	12	3.5%	100%	130	8.2%	100%
School System												
Programs	64	2.7%	17%	16	3.7%	19%	10	2.9%	23%	38	2.4%	15%
Teachers' workload	43	1.8%	11%	5	1.2%	6%	5	1.5%	11%	30	1.9%	12%
Students' Workload	22	0.9%	6%	9	2.1%	11%	1	0.3%	2%	15	0.9%	6%
Overall Bureaucracy	93	3.9%	25%	21	4.9%	25%	7	2%	16%	65	4.1%	26%
Teachers' Evaluation	21	0.9%	6%	4	0.9%	5%	1	0.3%	2%	16	1%	6%
School Evaluation	23	1%	6%	3	0.7%	4%	1	0.3%	2%	19	1.2%	8%
Legislation	108	4.6%	29%	25	5.8%	30%	19	5.5%	43%	64	4%	26%
Sub-total	374	15.8%	100%	83	19.2%	100%	44	12.8%	100%	247	15.5%	100%
School Context												
Schedule	50	2.1%	23%	8	1.9%	32%	11	3.2%	28%	31	1.9%	20%
Extra Activities	86	3.6%	39%	7	1.6%	28%	18	5.2%	46%	61	3.8%	40%
School Circumstances	28	1.2%	13%	5	1.2%	20%	2	0.6%	5%	21	1.3%	14%
Number of Classes	17	0.7%	8%	2	0.5%	8%	2	0.6%	5%	14	0.9%	9%
Specific Bureaucracy	37	1.6%	17%	3	0.7%	12%	6	1.7%	15%	27	1.7%	18%
Sub-total	218	9.2%	100%	25	5.8%	100%	39	11.3%	100%	154	9.7%	100%
School Atmosphere												
Organizational Injustice	50	2.1%	20%	6	1.4%	23%	3	0.9%	9%	41	2.6%	22%
Positive Relationship with Peers	20	0.8%	8%	1	0.2%	4%	8	2.3%	24%	11	0.7%	6%
Negative Relationship with Peers	94	4%	38%	11	2.5%	42%	13	3.8%	39%	70	4.4%	37%
Positive Relationship with Principals	12	0.5%	5%	2	0.5%	8%	3	0.9%	9%	7	0.4%	4%
Negative Relationship with Principals	73	3.1%	29%	6	1.4%	23%	6	1.7%	18%	61	3.8%	32%
Sub-total	249	10.5%	100%	26	6%	100%	33	9.6%	100%	190	11.9%	100%
Limitations												
Projects	16	0.7%	19%	6	1.4%	55%	0	0%	0%	10	0.6%	14%
Lack of Autonomy	50	2.1%	59%	4	0.9%	36%	2	0.6%	100%	44	2.8%	61%
Lobbies	19	0.8%	22%	1	0.2%	9%	0	0%	0%	18	1.1%	25%
Sub-total	85	3.6%	100%	11	2.5%	100%	2	0.6%	100%	72	4.5%	100%
Classroom												
Behaviors	121	5.1%	28%	9	2.1%	14%	37	10.8%	42%	75	4.7%	26%
Management	132	5.6%	30%	22	5.1%	33%	25	7.3%	28%	85	5.3%	30%
Teaching content	8	0.3%	2%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	8	0.5%	3%
Interruptions	48	2%	11%	5	1.2%	8%	5	1.5%	6%	38	2.4%	13%
Climate	77	3.3%	18%	13	3%	20%	15	4.4%	17%	49	3.1%	17%
Class	52	2.2%	12%	17	3.9%	26%	6	1.7%	7%	29	1.8%	10%
Sub-total	438	18.5%	100%	66	15.3%	100%	88	25.6%	100%	284	17.8%	100%
Students												
Family structure	23	1%	15%	8	1.9%	18%	2	0.6%	7%	13	0.8%	16%
Development	57	2.4%	37%	27	6.3%	61%	5	1.5%	18%	25	1.6%	30%
Motivation	75	3.2%	48%	9	2.1%	20%	21	6.1%	75%	45	2.8%	54%
Sub-total	155	6.5%	100%	44	10.2%	100%	28	8.1%	100%	83	5.2%	100%
Parents												
Positive relationship with parents	38	1.6%	16%	10	2.3%	16%	7	2%	30%	21	1.3%	14%
Pressure	77	3.3%	33%	12	2.8%	19%	5	1.5%	22%	59	3.7%	40%
Education	119	5%	51%	41	9.5%	65%	11	3.2%	48%	67	4.2%	46%
Sub-total	234	9.9%	100%	63	14.6%	100%	23	6.7%	100%	147	9.2%	100%
Society												
Values	12	0.5%	21%	6	1.4%	40%	1	0.3%	50%	6	0.4%	15%
Mission	45	1.9%	79%	9	2.1%	60%	1	0.3%	50%	34	2.1%	85%
Sub-total	57	2.4%	100%	15	3.5%	100%	2	0.6%	100%	40	2.5%	100%

Notes: 1CBE, 1st cycle of basic education; 2CBE, 2nd cycle of basic education; 3BE, 3rd cycle of basic education; SE, secondary education; AbF, absolute frequency; RF, relative frequency; AF, average frequency. Section 3.3.

In the school context category, the extra activities subcategory was the most mentioned and conveys the dissatisfaction with the accumulation of activities or functions not directly related to teaching (P01: "The teacher doesn't clean the toilets yet, because he does everything else (...) because he does everything else!").

In the limitations category, lack of autonomy is the most mentioned subcategory and describes a type of content directly related to stipulations that limit teachers' actions (P13: "And the pressure to change the grades!? I lost count of the times grades given by me were changed!").

3.4. Classroom Dimension

The classroom category is the most frequent complaint, which describes teachers' strategies to manage the classroom and the students' disruptive behavior. These two subcategories are closely related since the previously mentioned teachers' strategies seem to be brought up as a reaction to the students' behavioral issues (P08: "I do a lot of expulsions"). In addition, the connection between student misbehavior and the idiosyncrasies of the school system seems to be evident (P26: "Indiscipline could be minimized if there was enough support from school to protect the teacher (...) Inside the classroom I don't have any fears, I feel good, I feel safe (...) what's beyond the classroom is out of my control!"), in particular the lack of autonomy (P06: "[Students] assume they can do anything and we cannot do anything about it!").

The description of the severity of students' behaviors allows for the grasp of its seriousness (P04: "One of my students set fire to a teacher's hair! So, you can see the kind of students I had!"). For 2nd cycle teachers, the impact of students' behavior seems to be particularly harmful (P05: "It is one of the most important questions to me: classroom indiscipline!"). For 1st cycle teachers, the classroom characteristics and students' heterogeneity are significant (P02: "Because there are so many students with so many different learning programs. And I am here thinking: "What shall I do!?").

Concerning students, lack of motivation is the most mentioned subcategory by teachers (P05: "Students' motivation is elsewhere!").

In the parents' category, teachers perceive their relationship with parents as positive, even though interaction with parents seems to be negative. The perceived pressure by parents on teachers is felt both directly (P25: "Scenes of parents storming into school and wanting to break the teachers or student's faces, are a common scenario nowadays!"), as well as indirectly (P21: "[The school board] would change the grades fearing that parents would not be happy about it!"). For teachers of 1st cycle classes, the perception of parental educational practices is significant (P14: "As long as parents do not take responsibility for what they should do, we cannot do that job here in the classroom, it is impossible!").

Lastly, mission is the subcategory most mentioned in the society category (P13: "And the school has been more and more a deposit for everything, a scapegoat for everything (...) almost feels like a factory!").

4. Discussion

This study intended to understand the relative importance of the personal, organizational, and classroom dimensions related to the Portuguese educational system that contribute to burnout of Portuguese teachers at different levels of education.

Overall, the variables identified in this study (e.g., life roles management, bureaucracy, extra activities, indiscipline, class size) corroborate previous research on teacher burnout [14–16,23]. The multiplicity of emerging categories and subcategories uphold the idea that school as a professional context provides multiple scenarios that contribute to teacher's exhaustion [2,30]. Our findings give important clues about the weight that different variables effectively have on teacher burnout.

4.1. Burnout Dimensions

The school environment has been identified as one of the most critical organizational variables [31] concerning the quality of the social relationships in the workplace [32]. Literature suggests that the perceived support from school principals is more critical for teachers' well-being than the perceived support from peers, because principals interfere with personal goals [33–35]. Nevertheless, our results suggest that the deterioration of relationships between peers is a more significant contributing factor to burnout than the deterioration of relationships between teachers and principals. Therefore, the quality of the relationships among school actors has a specific impact on teachers' well-being,

Among the school system attributes, the legislation seems to be an essential source of tension in teachers [36]. However, our results suggest that legislation gains significance only when considering the implementation of several ongoing changes. For teachers interviewed in this study, those changes give rise to feelings of instability and uncertainty. In the literature, few studies have considered the impact of the ongoing legal changes in teachers' burnout [36]. The importance of this variable in the Portuguese context appears to stem from the countless changes implemented in Portugal's school system in recent years [37].

Our study suggests that teachers struggle the most in managing the classroom context. Recent data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018 [38] show that just 46.7% of Portuguese teachers feel confident enough to run the classroom. Data from the same report [38] show that only 73.5% of the time spent in the Portuguese classroom is dedicated to teaching/learning tasks. This result suggests a significant amount of wasted time, possibly with discipline issues or tasks not directly related to teaching. In our study, most classroom interruptions appeared to be caused by student misbehavior (P24: "Student misbehavior is always there. You cannot teach!"), which has been identified as the main culprit for teacher exhaustion in Portugal [11,36]. Furthermore, the dissatisfaction with extracurricular activities suggests that the tasks not directly related to teaching are perceived as risk variables to teacher exhaustion [15].

It is in the classroom context that variables related to parents surface. The literature highlights the importance of parent–teacher relationships [2,39]. In our study, teachers tended to classify their relationships with parents as being positive. However, participants also identified parents as an important source of stress. This reference suggests that the quality of the relationships between teachers and parents does not allow us to understand the significant impact of parents' role in teachers' well-being. It is possible that the perception of the lack of autonomy (P10: "We like to have our autonomy in scientific terms, educational . . . But even in the scientific section parents interfere!") and the leverage and pressure from parents on teachers (P14: "People are terrified with parents. All it takes to incite panic is a parent complaining about a colleague!") force teachers into adopting neutral stances to avoid conflict with parents. The job–demand–control model may aid with understanding these results [40]. According to this model, autonomy is an essential resource for individuals to positively handle job-related demands and, consequently, reduce emotional exhaustion [39,41].

In addition, we found other variables linked to parents that seem to significantly contribute to teachers' exhaustion (e.g., educational practices, students' family structure). In the literature, however, the role of these variables has been poorly explored, because they are indirectly correlated with other variables (i.e., students). Thus, it might be hard to identify those variables in quantitative studies that tend to restrict the participants' answers to preconceived questions.

Broadly, results corroborate the literature [41,42], proposing that the organizational dimension is the most relevant to the development and prevalence of burnout. Nevertheless, our results emphasize the importance of the individual's perception of available resources for managing burnout regarding the personal dimension. Our study shows that burned out teachers perceive an imbalance between teaching demands (i.e., extracurricular activities) and the lack of resources to deal with those demands (i.e., skills). This result

can be explained by the Job Demand and Resources Model of [7]. According to this model, the greater the imbalance between the demands and perceived resources, the higher the stress levels. In our study, adopting palliative strategies (e.g., psychiatric medication) suggests that Portuguese teachers struggle to cope with their perceived teaching demands. This predicator bolsters the need for preventative measures with teachers, targeting the development of specific coping competencies to deal with the demands and challenges of the school environment.

Another important finding of the personal dimension is that, contrary to findings in the literature [43], salary is not a significant source of tension. Similar results were found in a qualitative study by [28], hinting at the importance of differentiating the type of rewards (i.e., material vs. non-material) that effectively contribute to or mitigate teacher burnout. Our study also suggests that non-material rewards (e.g., recognition) have only relative importance compared to other variables.

Finally, this study also identified a set of abstract variables, such as social values and school mission, which suggest that burned out teachers tend to generalize their negative perspective at a macro level, further intensifying the negative impact of burnout. The contribution of these values to burnout has been associated with individuals' cognitive and emotional calculus regarding the gap between their values and the organizational ones [44].

4.2. Burnout and Teaching Levels

Results suggest that the categories that contribute to teacher burnout are identical across teaching levels. Nonetheless, the relevance of each category may vary depending on the teaching level. For instance, the classroom dimension seems to be more relevant to teachers of the 1st and 2nd cycles. Moreover, for 1st cycle teachers, the student workload, education, and development subcategories were notably more frequently mentioned. This outcome may be due to the intrinsic characteristics of mono-grade teaching, consisting of prolonged daily contact with students and more regular teacher–parent interactions [18].

5. Conclusions

This study offers insights into different variables' contributions to Portuguese teachers' burnout and the impact of each variable. Our findings highlight the multidimensional nature of burnout and emphasize the need to adopt a holistic approach to research and intervention programs on burnout. It is crucial to consider the simultaneous action, dynamics, and interdependency among variables, to be able to understand the progress and prevalence of burnout in teachers.

The results of this study allow us to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of burnout in the teaching profession, based on a phenomenological characterization that reflects the individual experience and, therefore, can complement the limitations of the available quantitative research. Our study identified poorly studied or even neglected variables via inductive analysis, whose roles should be explored in future studies on teacher burnout. These neglected variables include the perception of educational practices, parents' power, life and social values, or the school's mission. The emergence of these variables may have resulted from the qualitative methodology used in this study, allowing teachers to reflect about their burnout experience thoroughly [3,26].

6. Limitations

This study presents limitations that should be considered in the analysis of results. Although the inter-judge agreement guaranteed the integrity of the qualitative research, the researchers' unique interpretation may be somehow echoed in the data analysis. Even though there is a predominance of women, either in the teaching profession (more than 72% in Portugal) [45] or in the burnout condition [8], we cannot make gender comparisons because the sample in this study was predominantly female. The findings within the various teaching levels should also be reviewed with caution, given the small size of the sub-samples.

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