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Teachers' emotional health in neoliberalised education: sport, therapy, yoga and meditation as a new construction of "self-care"

La salud emocional del profesorado en la educación neoliberalizada: deporte, terapia, yoga y meditación como nueva construcción del «cuidado de sí mismo»

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Abstract

The emotional experience of teachers has proven essential to understand how the transformations introduced by the neoliberalisation agenda in education are managed. Various studies indicate that the dynamics of business management in education are having significant implications for emotional experiences. This research aims to understand the influence of educational neoliberalisation practices on teachers' emotional experience. A qualitative methodological approach based on an inductive method following the Grounded Theory procedure is used. A theoretical sampling is defined, with the participation of 30 teachers of Compulsory Secondary Education and Baccalaureate in the Spanish context. The teachers' narrative accounts are collected through a semi-structured in-depth interview and non-systematic recordings. It is found that emotional difficulties tend to appear in all the participants in this research. Different problems associated with stress, dissatisfaction or emotional tension were reported. To a lesser extent, mental health problems have been contrasted. Faced with this, teachers look for remedial solutions that allow them to enjoy a less damaging professional career. Rather than resisting the practices that generate their discomfort, teachers seek balances that help them to manage contradictory logics.

Keywords: Education policy; Secondary School teacher; Identity; Mental health; Neoliberalism.

Resumen

La experiencia emocional del profesorado se ha mostrado imprescindible para comprender cómo se gestionan las transformaciones introducidas por la agenda de neoliberalización educativa. Distintas investigaciones señalan que las dinámicas de gestión empresarial de la educación están teniendo implicaciones significativas en las vivencias emocionales. Esta investigación pretende comprender la influencia de las prácticas de neoliberalización educativa en la experiencia emocional del profesorado. Se emplea un enfoque metodológico cualitativo basado en un método inductivo que sigue el procedimiento de la Teoría Fundamentada. Se define un muestreo teórico, concretado en la participación de 30 docentes de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y bachillerato en el contexto español. Por medio de una entrevista semiestructurada en profundidad y registros no sistemáticos se recogen los relatos narrativos del profesorado. Se comprueba que las dificultades emocionales suelen aparecer en la totalidad de los participantes de esta investigación. Se señalan distintos problemas asociados al estrés, la insatisfacción o la tensión emocional. En menor medida, se han contrastado problemas de salud mental. Ante esto, el profesorado busca soluciones remediales que le permitan disfrutar de una trayectoria profesional menos lesiva. Más que resistir a las prácticas que generan su mal-estar, los docentes buscan equilibrios que favorezcan desempeñarse gestionando lógicas contradictorias.

Palabras clave: Política educacional; Docente de secundaria; Identidad; Salud mental; Neoliberalismo.

1. Introduction: state of the question and theoretical notions

The reforms and transformations enacted within the framework of the neoliberalisation of education policy, which propose mechanisms for the Business Management in Public Education (BMPE), have reactivated interest in understanding their impact on teachers' professional identity (Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy, 2022; Singh, 2018; Collet, 2017). The construct of professional identity is complex and relates to a dynamic network of perceptions, emotions, beliefs, judgements and processes that relate to each other and constitute a certain way of perceiving oneself as an education professional that is always under reconstruction (Bolívar *et al.*, 2014). It is not simply a psychological construct bounded by technical aspects of classroom management, methodology or technical mastery of the subject; it also integrates dimensions related to the social conditions in which teachers develop, cultural trajectories and personal biographies (Day, 2018). In this section, academic research has recognised that emotions constitute an immanent part of professional identity and teaching practices (Hargreaves, 1998). The development of an occupation is a fundamental aspect upon which a person finds a sense of purpose, belonging, satisfaction and professional identity (Hendrikx, 2019).

The emotional experience that teachers undergo has been shown to be essential to understand how they negotiate the requirements to which they are subjected and which condition their teaching practice (Duarte and Brewer, 2022; Wilkins *et al.*, 2021; Molina Pérez and Pulido-Montes, 2021). In contrast to proposals that diluted or considered residual the relevance of emotions in teaching tasks, the truth is that emotional experiences are fundamental to understanding the personal-professional transactions that end up shaping professional identity and teaching professionalism (Day, 2018; Singh, 2018). It could be considered that in the new BMPE contexts teachers operate in a complex professional environment due to the generalisation of performance-focused individual accountability and measurable performance policies (Mateluna, 2022). This paper is therefore concerned with the political practices linked to BMPE and their relationship to teachers' emotional health. Academic research is calling for a deeper exploration of the emotional impact of professional performance in institutional settings with discrepant functional logics (Sullivan *et al.*, 2021; Pagès, 2021). While the professional logic is based on the control of work through the training and experience of teachers; neoliberalisation introduces a market element that shifts the control of practice from professionals to the free choices of consumers (Rivas Flores *et al.*, 2023).

In the case of Spain, policies associated with the neoliberalisation of education that introduce various adoptions of the BMPE mechanisms have been analysed. It highlights practices operating related to increasing competition between schools as a basis for improving results (Murillo *et al.*, 2021); the intensification of standardised devices in order to favour the quantification and comparability of student learning (Parcerisa *et al.*, 2022); emulation of management and leadership models inspired by business organisations (Martín-Alonso and Guzmán-Calle, 2023); or the development of market-oriented accountability mechanisms (Pagès, 2021). However, their contextualisation takes on different articulations in the different Autonomous Communities of Spain. It is considered that practices, programmes and political agendas take on a life of their own, always in continuous mutation, becoming 'adaptable' to the context in which they

are to be developed. Consequently, from the field of educational policy and comparative education, it is essential to study the different local configurations that BMPE adopts in order to facilitate the understanding of educational neoliberalisation. It is, as McCann and Ward (2013, p. 9) have argued, about focusing on “the social and spatial complexity of movements of all kinds”, on “fluidity, mobilisation and deterritorialisation”; but, at the same time, considering the “moorings, stabilities and territorialisations” necessary to understand the global-local logics involved in the process.

This research analyses BMPE practices from the Andalusian context. It underlines the relevance of the logic of quasi-market, standardisation, competition and accountability based on managerial parameters. As a reference, the recent enactment of Decree 21/2020 of 17 February stands out, which introduces new criteria that broaden the areas of influence to promote competition between centres. The quality of the service, consequently, depends on the demand of the “family-customers”. In this way, different models of educational “quasi-market” are configured, by means of policies of freedom of school choice that are based on principles of competition and intensification of standardised indicators that favour quantification (Murillo *et al.*, 2021). Market logic, on most occasions, appears to be linked to a managerial logic based on hierarchical structures where work routines are controlled, organised and evaluated by agents who adopt managerial roles to emulate the private sector (Martín-Alonso and Guzmán-Calle, 2023). Market pressure coexists with bureaucratic-administrative pressure for accountability, which has even been accompanied by individual economic incentive mechanisms¹ in order to improve students’ academic performance (Martínez-Rodríguez and Ritacco, 2020).

New professional demands emerge around teacher audit culture that redefine the very nature of education and impact on emotional experiences (Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy, 2022). The regime of quantification now drives the school behaviour of all actors involved through the techniques of assessment, ranking, datafication and competence (Sullivan *et al.*, 2021). The notion of performativity is central to understanding the impact of educational neoliberalisation on teachers’ emotional experience. Most studies build on the work of Lyotard (1987), which has subsequently been addressed by Ball (2003) with a very prominent profusion in the academic community. Performativity operates through data, comparison and permanent judgement on individuals and organisations in order to incentivise, control and, ultimately, configure rationalities capable of working by themselves to maximise their efficiency (Molina-Pérez and Luengo, 2020; Pulido-Montes and Lázaro, 2017). Through the introduction of performance indicators, evaluations, comparisons and rankings, performative culture reconfigures and reshapes professional identity through a rationality that translates teaching performances into numerical records (Lewis and Holloway, 2019). Systems of control that are increasingly detached from supporting learning or the contextual reality of students and concerned, as an end in itself, with the management of teacher performance (Skerritt, 2022).

Consequently, when major restructuring occurs in professional practices without the input of teachers, the changes become a source of stress, anxiety and other mental and emotional health problems (Skinner *et al.*, 2021; Molina-Pérez and Pulido-Montes, 2021; Iriarte and Erro-Garcés, 2020). In the field of education, few studies have been concerned with understanding the impact of the transformations linked to the global movement of educational reforms on the emotional health of teachers. Most studies,

¹ Programme for quality and improvement of school performance in public schools. Order of 20 February 2008. <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/boja/2008/42/3>.

mainly from the field of psychology, have for decades analysed different situations that have led to a progressive incidence of "burnout syndrome" in teachers (Capone *et al.*, 2019). This is an emotional state that represents an advanced phase of stress, mental exhaustion, tiredness, fatigue, disillusionment, feelings of helplessness and/or despair in the workplace (Bernal and Donoso, 2013). In addition, the literature suggests that burnout syndrome is related, among others, to problems associated with different types of pain, physical discomfort, cardiovascular alterations, gastrointestinal disorders, insomnia or chronic fatigue (Esteras *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this research aims to explore the following research questions:

- How do BMPE practices affect teachers' emotional experience?
- How do teachers manage any emotional difficulties resulting from BMPE dynamics?
- Do emotional difficulties provoke resistant responses to BMPE practices?

These questions constitute a general objective around which the work is articulated:

- To understand the influence of BMPE practices on the emotional experience of secondary school teachers in the Spanish context.

2. Methodological approach

The research questions express the appropriateness of following a qualitative methodology. This procedure determines the use of an inductive method that develops within an interpretative framework in an apprehensive-analytical phase (Charmaz, 2004). To this end, the study starts from a methodological position that understands that emotions, as a fundamental dimension of professional identity, are projected through narrative (Ricoeur, 1996). The narrative captures the richness and details of the meanings that participants give to their motivations, implications, desires and purposes (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019; Courtney and Gunter, 2019). As a hermeneutic approach, it allows, together, to give meaning and understanding to the cognitive, emotional and action dimensions. It is about providing an interpretative view of teachers' accounts while giving narrative meaning to emerging theories (Charmaz, 2004).

For this purpose, the modes of analysis of Grounded Theory are followed. This implies the continuous use of strategies of induction and comparison of information in order to elaborate a theoretical space that integrates the substantive theories of the participants, the formal theories collected in the academic literature and the contributions of the research itself, in accordance with the particularities of the context (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The coding and linkages made on the different particular information are crossed with each other to reconstruct an approach to understand the emotional experience of teachers, in line with methodological approaches used successfully in this field (Courtney and Gunter, 2019; Bolívar and Domingo, 2019).

2.1. Information gathering instrument

The semi-structured in-depth interview is used as the main instrument to delve into complex subjective aspects: emotional experiences, personal biographies, professional values and interpretations of the neoliberalisation of education policy. Its choice as a technique responds to the following considerations:

- It makes it possible to compile broad units of meaning in response to very specific research objectives.
- It allows to fit into a series of thematic blocks and to dynamize their depth.
- It proposes an approach with the informant that favours a dialogical space where keys are provided that investigate the ethical, personal and professional dimensions that are related to the objectives of this research (Kvale, 2015).

With regard to the execution of the technique, an interview script is followed in order to delve into the elements of interest of the research². In the case of the emotional dimension, the instrument addresses three main blocks: the teacher's current emotional state in relation to BMPE practices, the possible discrepancy between their previous projection and their current state, and the strategies, practices, actions and/or attitudes they develop in situations of dissatisfaction or negative emotional states. It should be noted that the questions were posed in an open and flexible way, following a lax, non-directive model and without prioritising the blocks that comprise it in order to favour narrative spaces of interest to the participants. The interviews were triangulated with analysis of official documents, referring to the educational regulations referenced by the participants, as well as observations, field notes and non-systematic reflective annotations. These strategies are part of the work carried out with the QSR NVivo analysis software. They point out possible relationships with other cases, the codes added to other interviews and the particular meaning associated with each participant's accounts to improve the interpretations of the narratives.

2.2. Participants

The research participants are teachers who teach Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO, for its acronym in Spanish) and Baccalaureate in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia (Spain). The selection of informants is based on "cases of interest", following a "theoretical sampling" (Flick, 2012). The definition of a case is delimited by a series of characteristics that are considered appropriate for collecting testimonies with different experiences and professional profiles (Figure 1). The theoretical sampling followed for the incorporation of new informants is executed following the "snowball sampling technique" (Obilor, 2023), based on the following priority criteria and aggregate criteria.

² The work presented here is part of a broader research project that aims to understand the reconstructions of the different dimensions that shape professional teacher identity in the context of BMPE.

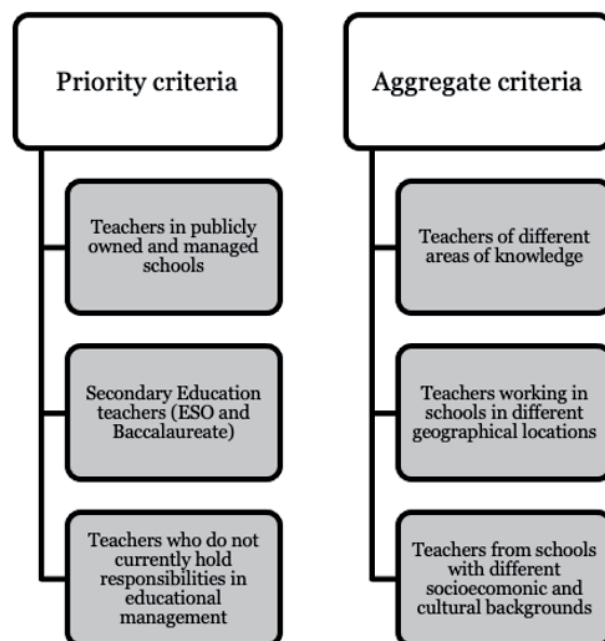


Figure 1. Priority and aggregate criteria for case definition in theoretical sampling

The priority criteria define the participation or non-consideration of cases. Aggregate criteria are defined with the intention of considering teaching profiles with different experiences and professional situations. The methodological aim is to increase the volume of information, its complexity, diversity and interactivity. This is a search for “discrepant cases” and does not pretend that the different trajectories or profiles of teachers serve as data to develop factorial analyses or correlation of variables. Rather, it is about “integrating only a few cases, but those which are as different as possible” (Flick, 2012, p. 82).

Therefore, following a simultaneous process of fieldwork and analysis, it was decided to finalise the data collection procedure when a total of 30 teachers were interviewed. The final number of participants is determined according to the criterion of “theoretical saturation”, set out by Glaser and Strauss (1967), referring to a state of the fieldwork where new narratives do not add significant aspects to the already existing categories for the stated objectives. In this space, it should be noted that this research is governed by the ethical considerations proposed by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB), highlighting respect for informants, informed consent and the protection of their privacy.

2.3. Data Analysis

For the analysis of the qualitative data, the QSR NVivo software is used. Inductive coding is carried out in order to compile the units of meaning of interest for the research. This results in the formation of “in vivo” codes, which are defined using the main idea of the participants. In this way, a first broad framework of topics that emerge when relating the emotional experience of teachers to the context of neoliberalised education is formed. During the analysis process, a task of reorganisation of the information is carried out that focuses on identifying similarities, groupings and saturation of the teachers’ accounts to be integrated into the emerging coding (Charmaz, 2004). Thereby, after the first coding of the

narratives, a map of codes is created that synthesises the key narratives that the teachers have identified and that serves to establish pre-categories for analysis (Figure 2).

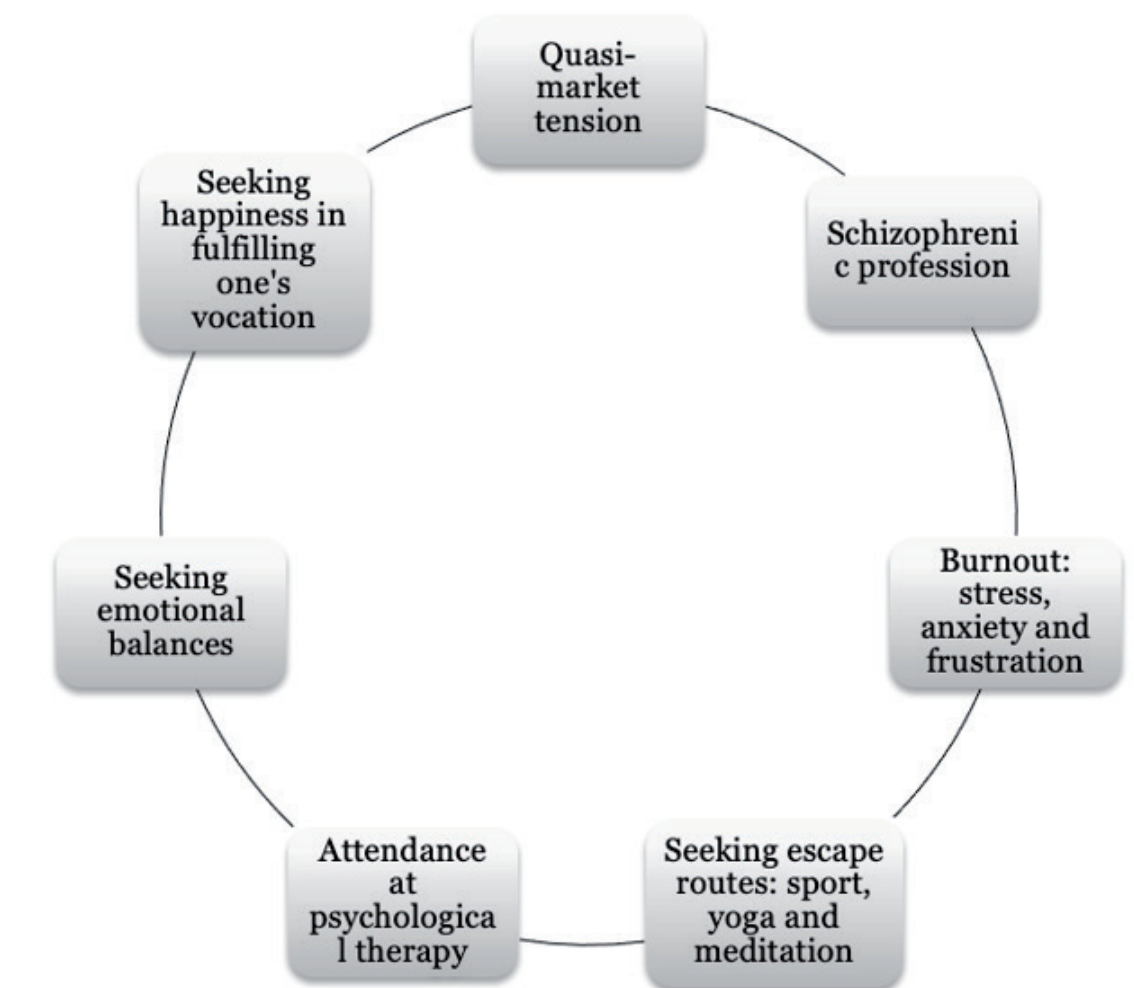


Figure 2. Pre-categories after in vivo coding of teacher interviews

This is followed by a phase of interpretative analysis of the in vivo codes, often referred to as “researcher’s bricolage”. For this, the systematic procedure proposed by Grounded Theory is followed. After the in vivo coding of the information, an axial coding is established which culminates in the definition of categories. In this phase of the analysis, relationships between the pre-categories are sought without resorting to the algorithms used by the software. This is considered to avoid artificial linkages mediated by word-counting mechanisms. This favours a contextualised interpretation marked by the different phases and registers that complete the empirical process and the intangible information gathered in the research (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019). In this way, two main categories are established that group together the in vivo coding:

- Tensions and emotional health issues in the face of business management practices in education.
- Seeking emotional balances to manage stress.

Figures 3 and 4 show an extract of the model followed for the analysis, where the procedure carried out from the textual narrative of the participants to the formation of inductive categories can be seen. In the following section, these categories are developed by combining the teachers' narrative (substantive theory), the academic discussion (formal theories) and the interpretations mediated by the research context.

Unit of meaning	In vivo coding	Category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We are under obvious tension to keep the school expanding the number of students (...). If you don't get that number of students, you are losing teachers". T1. • "There is a certain schizophrenia in the teaching staff because we are always in a contradiction". T. 25. • "I live it with a lot of anxiety and a lot of stress and it generates a lot of discomfort, a lot of conflict". T. 17. • "I feel really frustrated and burnt out". T. 12. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quasi-market tension • Schizophrenic profession • Burnout: stress, anxiety and frustration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tensions and emotional health issues in the face of business management practices in education

Figure 3. Coding process for the category "Tensions and emotional health issues in the face of business management practices in education".

Unit of meaning	In vivo coding	Category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "You have to look for escape routes. Running is very good for me, it's like a time of disconnection". T.18. • "I practice yoga, I do meditation (....) and I have attended psychological therapy". T.17. • "I try to find an emotional balance (...). I have learned to juggle with emotions". T. 15. • "I have suffered a lot, but I keep myself well, because (...) it was very vocational, the classes give me a lot of happiness". T. 25. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking escape routes: sport, yoga and meditation • Attendance at psychological therapy. • Seeking emotional balance. • Seeking happiness in fulfilling one's vocation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking emotional balances to manage stress

Figure 4. Coding process for the category "Seeking emotional balances to manage stress".

3. Grounded theory: between narrative and academic discussion

3.1. Tensions and emotional health issues in the face of business management practices in education

Concern with the assessment of learning continues to occupy an important place in academic research. The complexity of its analysis lies in the imbalance of perspectives that guide it. Thus, while assessment models are proposed to favour students' academic and personal trajectories, addressing methodological and structural transformations (Santamarí, 2020); the neoliberal conception of evaluation ends up radiating into academic debates and teaching practices. Teachers participating in this research often refer to assessment to describe scenarios related to diagnostic assessments, standardised assessments or finalist tests that affect the school's position in a competitive schooling environment. In this context, the practices of quantification of learning and the promotion of quasi-market mechanisms based on competition philosophies (Murillo *et al.*, 2021) are generating emotional health problems associated with the logic of performance pressure:

We are under obvious tension because the school continues to expand the number of students. There is a war going on in my school because there are three schools in the town, two state schools and one private-subsidised school. There is a brutal competition for new students. I didn't imagine that. We had an emergency meeting to set up a working group and send press releases to the media, publicity, schooling workshops... It's tense, because if you don't get that number of students, you are losing teachers. TEACHER 1

The teacher feels tied to a system with which he or she has to comply. And every time an assessment arrives, or so I experience it, the burden of not achieving the results for everyone is great, because a red light goes on and nobody likes to see red lights go on. There are already the calculations, the results tables which, obviously, are going to call into question your own methods, your own abilities... TEACHER 2

Teachers are subject to emotional tensions resulting from a system that demands academic results, disseminates accountability mechanisms and resituates the value of learning, which now resides in its measurability and comparability through standardised tests and educational rankings (Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy, 2022; Parcerisa *et al.*, 2022). The dynamics of pressure generate unease, vulnerability and permanent uncertainties due to the different logics that operate simultaneously (Sullivan *et al.*, 2021; 2017; Pagès, 2021). Teachers somatise this tension through emotional problems, which stem from the struggle between two opposing logics to give meaning to the "professional self". On the one hand, the old vision of what it means to be an education professional, linked to commitment, community service, student learning and development, and control of their practice and knowledge. On the other hand, the demand for a new 'neoliberalised' vision of being a teacher, linked to performance, meeting standards, accountability and school productivity in a competitive environment dominated by the logic of the market

(Singh, 2018; Skinner *et al.*, 2021; Holloway and Brass, 2018). This tension is apparent in the account of Teacher 25:

We are asked to be very objective (...). This goes so far that the inspector forced us to put a table at the end of the exams with the learning standard, the achievement indicator... I, even with good will, can see the good side of that, but it is true that it is absurd. Now, what does that clash with? Well, when you arrive at an important assessment and, with these absolutely closed criteria, you say: "I have done everything as the administration has told me, this child cannot have a degree because I can't make up the mark". And that's where the pressure of the system comes in. Now in inspection they pass, because it seems that the dynamic there is to pass and pass so that the percentages improve. The problem I see is that they ask us for one thing and the opposite; they ask us for impossible things. So, what I have detected throughout the reflection I have done over the years of my career is that, in the end, there is a certain schizophrenia in the teaching staff, because we are always in a contradiction. TEACHER 25

It is interesting to see how the concept of "schizophrenia" is introduced to account for ambivalence, vulnerability and ongoing doubt about appropriate teaching practice. The term "schizophrenic pedagogical position" was introduced by Bernstein (2000) and has been subsequently deepened in studies such as Singh's (2018) to point out the ambiguities and uncertainties that the recontextualisation of neoliberalisation reforms causes among teachers, generating "educational pathologies". The fact is that achieving academic results has led to professional demands that provoke states of tension for teachers. Situated in a performative environment, some teachers come to associate the effective practice of their work with achieving the results demanded by educational administrations (Mateluna, 2022). This is not only explained as a perception of professional competence, but also has a strong emotional component associated with what Ball (2003) understood as the "terrors of performativity":

Many times, I do think that my main task is to have good percentages..., I have said: "We are moving heaven and I don't know what so that the statistics come out well", so that they say: "We are doing well". In a way you feel calm because otherwise there are always pressures that affect you personally and as a teacher. TEACHER 30

Here it is a matter of results, statistics, raising the pass rate... So, if having a pass rate means that you don't have to do certain bureaucratic documentation, then where you have a 4 you get a 5, and that way you don't have to do any more paperwork. Is there no remuneration? No, but in the end you are taking an important emotional burden off your shoulders and that also gives you a lot of peace of mind. TEACHER 32

Numbers and data become an affective and effective mechanism. Affective because they are capable of producing sensitive dispositions to turn teaching into a "data profession"; and effective because they encourage teachers to respond to what is demanded of them from a "free" practice, from seduction and the absence of imposition (Lewis and Holloway, 2019). Quantification as dogma sometimes leads teachers to experience emotions of guilt or irresponsibility if they do not achieve the results that are defined outside their space of participation.

Sometimes I've come to think that I'm the one who's doing it wrong. There are times when I get overwhelmed and it seems like I'm the only one to blame for all this... But there are politicians who legislate the education system, there are families who could also get involved... TEACHER 19

When your student doesn't reach the "standards", you can't avoid the feeling: "I should have cared more, I should have done more", and you take it to the personal level and that is a very difficult weight to manage emotionally. It's a feeling, sometimes of anger and sometimes of impotence... Although, deep down, I know that I've done everything I could. TEACHER 11

On an emotional level, I experience it with a lot of anxiety and a lot of stress, and it generates a lot of discomfort, a lot of conflict. Although rationally I don't want to attribute so much responsibility to myself, the truth is that the families, the administration (...). There is a lot of social pressure. TEACHER 17

Discomfort and pressure are the common denominator of most of the teachers' narratives. The relevance of the performative culture configures an emotional experience that is always conditioned by rigidity, ambivalence and discrepancy (Fuller, 2019; Mateluna, 2022). This can lead to tension in the perception of professional identity, as expressed by Teacher 25, or generate more serious situations for mental health that require professional treatment, as reported by Teacher 29:

I have made a great effort in my professional life to separate how the system conceptualises me from how I conceptualise myself, but it has meant a great emotional effort (...). The pressure for results, and also the incentives, when we were in the Quality Plan, for example, I have tried not to let all that affect me. It's true that this has caused me suffering, because yes, because it means distinguishing yourself, it means coming into conflict with colleagues (...). So, I have had to make an effort of mental resistance. TEACHER 25

There are times when I have been forced, when I have been in highly hostile environments, when I have had to artificially grade my students. I have been forced to juggle with numbers. I come from a situation where I have been bullied and I have even needed professional help to overcome the effects it has had on me. I already know that the only thing they're going to ask me for are numbers, qualifications, and the rest I'm going to try to dedicate myself only to seeing who is worthwhile and who isn't, and to giving everyone what they ask for. TEACHER 29

The pressure for results, standardisation, datafication and commensurability of teaching-learning processes has become a means of scrutinising teachers' work (Skerritt, 2022). This is most often perceived as an act of violence in professional practice that generates discomfort and suspicion. There is a sense of rupture between the claimed identity and the identity imputed by the BMPE reforms (Collet, 2017), which has a strong emotional impact on teachers. Teachers experience emotional conflict as they leave behind their own conceptions of what it means to be an educational professional, or their

pedagogical judgements, to make way for a practice that constantly attempts to respond to elements of the neoliberalised educational environment (Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy, 2022; Hendriks, 2019). It is a tension between the sighted sense of professional identity and the rapid demands of BMPE reform that can lead to states of overwhelm, vulnerability or stress, as expressed by the following teachers:

We teachers feel vulnerable before the administration. Colleagues who are about to retire say: "Well..., they will have to be approved, but not because I want to, not because they reach the level, not because of my professional ethics, but because they put pressure on me, and if I don't do it, they make me do paperwork". This unease exists in the majority, even in those who are not aware, because they see that their work ethic, their professionalism is quite diluted because you are no longer taken as a reference in education. You have to be just another bureaucrat, you have to have forms filled in and you have to have results. TEACHER 4

We are starting the course and they are already asking me to have an evaluation so that I can make an assessment. That generates a lot of stress for me, I don't know how to manage it. You don't know them, how can you assess them already, with a one-day test? It affects my dynamic and it also makes me a bit overwhelmed because then there are the results and all that they imply. TEACHER 23

It seems that educational competence begins and ends in a didactic programme, with timetables, standards and competences. It seems to me quite perverse, if I am honest. I feel really frustrated and burnt out. The discomfort comes from the point and time when the educational administrations demand this type of items, grids and rubrics that are absolutely unfeasible. TEACHER 12

The narratives support claims that are aligned with other research findings in this line. As Skinner *et al.* (2021) or Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy (2022) conclude, it is evident that an educational culture governed by performance demands, learning standards and enforced through control and accountability mechanisms undermines teaching and learning opportunities, diminishes teachers' job satisfaction and acts as an obstacle to the spontaneous and creative work that used to characterise the teacher's task. The general expression of teachers is one of emotional fatigue related to their mechanical role and their weariness with a professional degradation that standardises their practices and reduces their capacity for agency in an ecosystem marked by performative culture and accountability (Molina-Pérez and Luengo, 2020).

3.2 Seeking emotional balances to manage stress

Professional biographies in the context of neoliberalisation are characterised by imbalances in the dimensions that make up teacher identity, identity crises and new identity fabrications that are reconstructed to try to be effective in the logics of the BMPE (Duarte and Brewer, 2022; Wilkins *et al.*, 2021). For this reason, it is increasingly common to find stories that point out different ways to mitigate the emotional imbalances that occur in their daily lives. Practising sport has become an escape route to take care of emotional health. And the fact is that teacher discomfort not only involves situations of burnout in

the professional sphere, but also, on different occasions, ends up radiating to different personal spheres:

It's a profession that burns too much (...). If you don't do your part to take care of yourself, you end up wearing yourself out. You have to look for escape routes. For me, for example, running is very good, it's like a moment of disconnection that allows you to go back home and keep going, to keep updating yourself... TEACHER 18

It is a strong emotional tension. I do a lot of sport, I cycle, and there are times when I need to get there, get on my bike and go alone to get some oxygen. Then I come back with more peace of mind and I try to find solutions to manage this type of problem, because it is true that it affects your life with your wife, with your family... TEACHER 30

In other cases, practising sporting activities that allow them to disconnect from pressurised environments and volatile demands is not enough, and teachers point to other actions aimed at taking care of their mental and emotional health. Attending therapy, yoga or meditation are increasingly common practices among teachers to manage the difficult emotional experiences they experience.

Emotionally it's very difficult and that ends up creating mental problems. I try to set limits. I trained in Gestalt therapy³ for four years, which also included many hours of therapy. I have an important psychological job there, and that has helped me. I think that therapy is necessary for teachers in order to feel good and to be able to work well. TEACHER 25

I practice yoga, I do meditation, and I started to do meditation as a fundamental basis to be able to be better; I have attended psychological therapy paying for it out of my own pocket... It seems to be a taboo subject, but it is a situation that I also perceive in other people who are involved in teaching. TEACHER 17

Teachers seem to find answers to the emotional difficulties they experience in practices that alleviate their fatigue, rather than in questioning or explicitly resisting the logics and dynamics that provoke it. The management of their emotions becomes a fundamental aspect in the face of the complex social realities and tensions that hinder their professional activity. For this reason, assistance to psychology professionals appears on different occasions during the research and in different professional profiles. Teachers, through therapy, seek the engagement or psychological well-being of the person at work (Bernal and Donoso, 2013). *Engagement* is related to a state of full energy, professional commitment and satisfaction, the opposite of the aforementioned burnout. Along these lines, some studies suggest that Spanish teachers have increasingly better emotional competences to withstand the imbalances inherent to the profession (García-Domingo, 2021). It is interesting to note, therefore, how, from the field of psychology, studies are proliferating that are interested in the coping strategies of teachers' emotional distress.

³ Although this teacher refers to Gestalt therapy as a professionalised psychological intervention, this paper must warn that this practice is currently under evaluation within the framework of the Plan for the protection of health against pseudotherapies (<https://conprueba.es/sites/default/files/multimedia/documentos/plan-pseudoterapias.pdf>). It is essential to consider that some practices that are accompanied by the term 'therapy' may pose a danger to public health due to their lack of scientific backing.

These studies, see Martínez-Ramón (2015), tend to use questionnaires to measure different variables associated with *burnout* and which account for psychological responses.

As this area of knowledge is of great interest, this research aims to understand the motivations that lead teachers to practice sport, go to therapy, meditation or yoga in order to take care of their mental and emotional health. This can be understood by observing how, for the most part, teachers try to find spaces that allow them to live a less stressed emotional experience. In some cases, they are aware of being "on a tightrope", as Teacher 15 explains below, but their previous professional background makes it easier for them to find frameworks where they can protect themselves. In other cases, see Teacher 16, the key is to negotiate balances between previous practices or ideals and the harsh contextual reality of the classroom. These stories are based on different emotional expressions, one from boredom and instability and the other from current professional satisfaction, but they reveal a strategy that is widely shared among teachers. Most participants are constantly trying to find emotional balances or elements that allow them to avoid states of discomfort and tension:

I try to find an emotional balance. My period of adaptation to the education system was: first, "I am going to look for a place of security", to have a control over how much bureaucracy the administration can ask from me. Once you get to that "semi-safe" zone, you can start living. It's just that you're constantly on a tightrope, in uncertainty and mental instability. I think that when you have enough experience is when you do as you please and do your own thing. Last year I had a colleague who had an anxiety attack, pure panic. I've learnt, but to avoid that you need experience and to juggle with your own emotions. TEACHER 15

I'm happy with what I'm doing, it's worth continuing the effort but with a certain rationality and a certain balance. You can't try to change the world, this is very hard work, it takes a long time to see results. You don't have to take a student's failure personally. So I think that "I'm going to change the world...", yes..., go to a slum and change the world (laughs)... TEACHER 16

The search for "intermediate spaces" that allow emotional balances is a trend analysed in Molina-Pérez and Luengo (2020) and which may confirm that a majority of teachers respond to the discomfort caused by the educational neoliberalisation agenda through emotional management. It could be considered that the BMPE has introduced sufficiently intense subjective and structural frameworks for teachers not to propose, from a detected position of weakness, an alternative critical response or resistant practices that allow them to reverse the dynamics that are causing their attrition. Teachers, as Wilkins *et al.* (2021) analyse, have learned to deal with neoliberalisation, to reconstruct themselves by seeking elements of satisfaction that allow them to balance the damaging emotional aspects. Hybridising discrepant logics to try to have a more stable emotional experience sometimes involves giving up principles and convictions or redirecting efforts towards those spaces that provide professional well-being. On most occasions, this comes from the direct relationship with students at classroom level and the vocational aura that emerges in most of the narratives:

I am witnessing all these changes with a great deal of dismay. What happens is that I try not to let it affect me. I look for the reference point that interests me: that of my students. If I see that my students come to class happy, I don't feel this failure, I don't feel that my professional identity has been violated. It is true that the institutions are crushing us. All this talk about standards is an absolutely neoliberal model that comes from the business world, and it is trying to be forcibly applied in education, which is absolutely perverse. TEACHER 12

I go into my classroom and I stand in front of my students and at that moment I feel that that's why I'm there. It's true that you have all those problems, you're more nervous, you're frustrated, you're angry..., but ten minutes go by, you start to develop your class, to talk to the students, and at that moment I reaffirm myself in my profession. TEACHER 1

I have suffered a lot, but I keep myself well because, besides, as in my case teaching was very vocational, it is true that classes give me a lot of happiness. At least, that space of satisfaction is essential for me. That part of it sustains me and compensates for everything else. TEACHER 25

When the emotional experience is narrated from the perspective of satisfaction with teaching at the classroom level, the fulfilment of the vocation or the intimate relationship with the students, a part of the teaching staff recognise themselves as satisfied and with a strong feeling of personal and professional fulfilment; facts that give voice to the emotional perceptions of teaching satisfaction collected through quantitative research (García-Domingo and Quintanal, 2022). The space with the students is conceived as a shield, or an island, in Hargreaves' terms (2003), of protection against the BMPE that triggers negative emotional states.

The only things that get on my nerves are the inspection and the administration. I am very happy with my work with the students. I feel that I am where I want to be. And, emotionally, I am in a phase of my work and my profession that does not generate any kind of rejection in me. TEACHER 14

In summary, it is suggested that teachers have assumed that teaching, by nature, involves emotional tensions and, in some cases, mental or emotional health problems, as noted in other research (Skinner *et al.*, 2021; Daliri-Ngametua and Hardy, 2022). In the face of this, most participants feel challenged to manage their emotional distress effectively. This is a "self-care" that is not related to the "resistant self-improvement" described by Ball and Olmedo (2013), which is based on critical self-examination. Rather, in this case, teachers seem impelled to seek immediate remedial solutions to the emotional exhaustion caused by an experience characterised by ennui, unease and perceived burnout.

4. Final Reflections

It has been possible to contrast that neoliberalisation of education becomes a source of stress, anxiety, dissatisfaction and problems related to teachers' mental and emotional health. Problems of exhaustion, tension and weariness have been detected, in line with the research on teacher *burnout* (Skinner *et al.*, 2021; Capone *et al.*, 2019; Iriarte and

Erro-Garcés, 2020; Molina-Pérez and Pulido-Montes, 2021). Market and competition mechanisms, the logics of quantification, standardisation and bureaucratisation, together with the managerial management of educational systems, lead some teachers to experience problematic emotions in the development of their occupation (Daliri-Ngametua, 2022). It has been found that, on various occasions, this leads to a degradation of their professional experience and imbalances in their identity because of burnout, perceived helplessness or the questioning of their own professional self-esteem (Bolívar *et al.*, 2014).

As a result, teachers use different strategies to cope with the emotional problems associated with the neoliberalisation of education. Most teachers resort to meditation, yoga, sports to "disconnect" from the pressure of the education system, or psychological therapy. The management of vulnerability lies in finding quick solutions that allow them to coexist and coexist with discrepant logics, without causing emotional states that are detrimental to their professional development. It is not observed that the actions that teachers implement to mitigate their emotional fatigue are aimed at questioning or challenging the logics and practices that provoke it. "Self-care" is not based on opposition or resistance to the dynamics of BMPE, as has been analysed elsewhere (Ball and Olmedo, 2013), nor does it respond to a convinced adherence to neoliberalised education, but rather to an emotional accommodation that allows for a less stressed teaching practice.

Teachers want to be able to enjoy a more balanced professional experience, regardless of the professional sacrifices that need to be made. For this reason, negotiations at the individual level to alleviate the emotional disharmony that comes with the profession are repeatedly observed. It is a matter of finding spaces aimed at balancing ideals, desires, purposes and practices. Thus, the discomfort of giving up their judgements or educational ideals is balanced when it is considered that, from individuality, each teacher seeks their best version to respond in an agile, vocational, flexible and resilient way to the structural deficiencies that are denounced (Molina-Pérez and Luengo, 2020).

To conclude, it is necessary to point out some limitations and lines of research that may favour the transferability of the data and their academic discussion. Firstly, the participation of teachers from a single Autonomous Community, Andalusia, is noted. Although BMPE mechanisms identified in other Spanish regions and in the international context have been taken into account (Murillo *et al.*, 2021; Pulido-Montes and Lázaro, 2017; Mateluna, 2022; Skinner *et al.*, 2021), their application and intensity varies in different regional and national contexts. This makes it advisable to develop local studies to trace the consistency of data as a criterion of quality in qualitative research. Secondly, the exclusive use of the semi-structured in-depth interview technique stands out, considered individually, albeit accompanied by other non-systematic records. Although biographical-narrative research is fundamental in this methodological approach, it is necessary to incorporate group techniques, such as focus groups or discussion groups, and ethnographic procedures that make it possible to contrast the coherence between teachers' narratives and their practice. Finally, it will be interesting to be able to delve into other school actors who, due to their specificity, have not been included in this research. This is the case of the group of teachers who work in educational cycles or teachers with responsibilities in educational management.

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