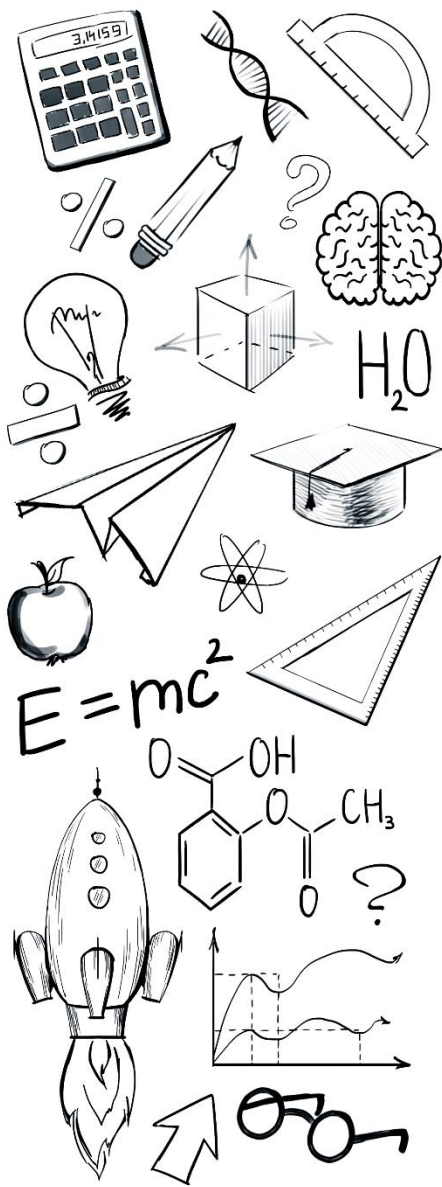


NUEVAS PERSPECTIVAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN EN EL ÁMBITO ESCOLAR: ABORDAJE INTEGRAL DE VARIABLES PSICOLÓGICAS Y EDUCATIVAS



COMPS.

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Pablo Molina Moreno
María del Carmen Pérez Fuentes
Silvia Fernández Gea

Dykinson, S.L.



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ámbito escolar: Abordaje integral de variables
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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORK ENGAGEMENT: A DESCRIPTIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY

BEGOÑA MARÍA TORTOSA MARTÍNEZ & MARÍA DEL CARMEN PÉREZ FUENTES
Universidad de Almería

INTRODUCTION

Work engagement is defined as a state of mental satisfaction, interest and motivation that allows workers to achieve success in the workplace (Bakker, 2017; Schaufeli et al., 2002). If attention is paid to the educational field, Martínez et al. (2019) suggest that teachers' engagement refers to teachers' behavioral, emotional and cognitive participation with the teaching process and the teacher's interest in their learning, being one of the pillars of education because it presents a relationship with the prevention of failure and abandonment of work, as well as greater job satisfaction and motivation (Froiland, 2021; Wang et al., 2016; Zaff et al., 2017). It has often been connected with the experience, professional development and interaction of teachers with students (Kangas et al., 2017) and with self-efficacy, a quality that can produce greater achievement and engagement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

Conceptualising the teachers' work engagement

Work engagement has been defined by behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Fredericks et al., 2004; Lam et al., 2014). The behavioral dimension is based on the idea of active participation in activities (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). The emotional dimension encompasses both positive and negative, motivation, emotional regulation, anxiety, self-esteem, etc. (Fredricks et al., 2016). And cognitive dimension is based on the variables of constancy and effort needed to master complex skills (Ennis et al., 2013).

Engagement can also be considered a process consisting of three interconnected stages: motivation, interest and engagement (Renninger & Bachrach, 2015). Motivation allows teachers to assess task challenges against their own abilities. Interest can be triggered by a situation, challenge or person and then can become a lasting interest to learn more about the phenomena (Renninger & Bachrach, 2015). This interest is influenced by the environment. Teachers can therefore change any environment to make it more pleasant for students and themselves; however, the ability to change environments requires teachers to have a range of skills. Hence the

importance of teacher education to improve their work engagement (Kangas et al., 2017).

Globally, it is estimated that an increasing percentage of teachers present high levels of exhaustion, irritability, lack of energy and job desertion caused by high work demands, being a public health problem, which may be indicative of the appearance of the syndrome of burnout (Ávalos & Valenzuela, 2016; Gutentag et al., 2017; OECD, 2018). Some authors have shown that disruptive behaviors of students and unfavorable treatment with their families are two factors that affect the engagement of teachers, since they contribute to work stress (Coo & Salanova, 2017; Molero et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Mantilla & Fernández-Díaz, 2017; Otero-López et al., 2015).

Despite this percentage of teachers and certain disagreements in understanding the construct of work engagement, OECD (2018) and Toll et al. (2016) defend that teachers can develop this mental state if they intervene in the barriers that prevent them from carrying out their work, providing facilitating elements such as motivation, satisfaction, social and family support, etc. So a teacher engaged to their work presents high levels of motivation, performance, satisfaction, interest, good results, etc. (Hardré et al., 2013; Mérida-López et al., 2022; Shoshani & Eldor, 2016; Van Wingerden & Poell, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021).

The present study

Work engagement is a relevant predictor of the prevention of failure, exhaustion, stress and dropout from work (Hoigaard et al., 2012; Pfitzner-Eden, 2016). Although it is known the influence of certain variables such as motivation, satisfaction, stress, etc. on work engagement (McCarthy et al., 2016), there is no research on teachers' perceptions, who are one of the essential agents of education, on work engagement of the same (Zamora et al., 2018). Hence the relevance of this study whose purpose was to describe and explore the perceptions of teachers about work engagement at all educational stages through a descriptive qualitative study. This study can contribute to the knowledge of work engagement of teachers to promote teacher education in certain competencies that improve their ability to solve complex situations and increase their levels of work engagement (Kangas et al., 2017).

METHOD

Design

This research is a descriptive qualitative study that allows us to describe in depth, from a naturalistic perspective, a phenomenon little known from the exploration of the experiences and perceptions of teachers of all educational stages (Hernández et al., 2014). Consolidated criteria for qualitative research reporting in terms of research

equipment and reflectability, study design, analysis and results (COREQ) were followed (Tong et al., 2007).

Participants and Environment

The study was carried out in three educational centers in the province of Almería (Spain). The selection of the sample was carried out the intentional sampling technique, meeting the following inclusion criteria: teachers of Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education, experience in rural or urban centres throughout Spain and have given informed consent. The interest in teachers of different educational levels lies in their heterogeneity and difference of years of work experience, which may show some influence on the perception of the participants. One of the researchers invited 30 professionals to participate through phone calls, thus arranging appointments. However, four of them declined due to lack of time. A total of 26 teachers participated (77% women and 23% men). The average age of the participants was 45.27 (DT 14.09) and had been working as teachers for an average of 18.42 years (DT 11.35) (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 26)

	Participant	Gender	Year	Country	Years of experience
Focus group 1. Early Childhood	1	Female	25	Spain	1
	2	Female	24	Spain	3
	3	Female	42	Spain	18
	4	Female	40	Spain	15
	5	Female	26	Spain	3
	6	Female	33	Spain	9
Focus group 2. Primary	1	Female	43	Spain	19
	2	Female	29	Spain	4
	3	Female	44	Spain	20
	4	Female	43	Spain	20
	5	Female	28	Spain	3
	6	Male	60	Spain	29
Focus group 3. Secondary	1	Female	49	Spain	25
	2	Female	59	Spain	30
	3	Female	55	Spain	27
	4	Female	55	Spain	24
	5	Female	40	Spain	13
	6	Female	30	Spain	4
Focus group 4. Mixed with more years of experience	1	Female	63	Spain	30
	2	Female	62	Spain	32
	3	Female	61	Spain	30
	4	Male	60	Spain	30
	5	Male	62	Spain	31
	6	Male	61	Spain	33

Data Collection

The data were collected between January and February 2022 through four focus groups led by researchers trained in qualitative research. The focus groups took place in the educational centers and had a duration of 1:30 h. Before the sessions began, sociodemographic data were collected, data confidentiality was guaranteed and consent was signed. The following question was then asked: "What aspects make you feel engaged in your work?". After the introductory question, new questions arose during the session ("What barriers have you encountered to engage?", "What is necessary to overcome these difficulties?" and "how do you feel when you engage?"). All participants' responses were recorded in audio and transcribed word-for-word. Data collection ceased when the point of information saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

The focus group responses were analyzed with the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti version 22 (Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany). The analysis was carried out by means of a bottom-up strategy, which starts from the textual data towards its classification in topics of analysis. The phases described by Braun & Clarke (2021) were taken into account: (1) Transcripts were read for the familiarization of data and the taking of ideas notes; (2) The main codes were generated; (3) An inductive data analysis was performed: the codes were associated and grouped in themes; (4) The themes were then revised to ensure consistency of the codes and their subsequent outcomes on themes and sub-themes; (5) The details of each theme were refined; and (6) The report was prepared: selected examples of topics and sub-themes, the analysis was related to the research objective and the final report was prepared (Table 2).

Table 2. Coding Strategy

Date	Initial code	Sub-theme	Main theme
<i>'I am a happy person because I love and that generates engagement. Do what you like and if you can not do what you like, like what you do' (Group 4-Woman 2).</i>	Feeling of belonging to a group, motivation, rewards, satisfaction, obligation, responsibility	Personal facilitators	
<i>'Not just a physically pleasant environment, but an environment where positive energy, tolerance and respect prevail. The psychologically healthy thing is to flee from toxic environments that poison the soul, so to go ahead with something depends on it not harming us, either biologically or spiritually' (Group 4-Woman 3).</i>	Enabling environment, social influence, social and family support, positive responses	Facilitators of the environment	Causes of the generation of work engagement
<i>'The barriers themselves have been personal rather than social. Lack of desire, lack of motivation or lack of time. What has almost always prevented me from engaging has been the lack of motivation. When I am lacking it is difficult to maintain consistency and in the end the task or project is abandoned' (Group 3-Woman 6).</i>	Lack of planning and organization of time, low resilience, lack of constancy, demotivation, emotional mismanagement, fatigue, lack of humanization	Individual barriers	Barriers to generating work engagement
<i>'Because those people aren't happy. They're not doing what they want. They're not really engaged. It is a false engagement' (Group 1-Woman 2).</i>	'False engagement', lack of social and family support, social pressure, toxic environments, poor social relations	Environmental barriers	
<i>'To know that we have been useful to others' (Group 3-Woman 1).</i>	Satisfaction, well-being, motivation, active, high self-esteem	Positive consequences	
<i>'When you engage with someone and see that you do not arrive, it causes stress or anxiety. When you see that you have many obstacles, they cause a stress situation' (Group 1-Woman 6).</i>	Anxiety, stress, frustration, insecurity, fatigue	Negative consequences	Effects of the work engagement

Rigour

The rigour of the present study was assured by the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994). First, for credibility, three qualitative methodology researchers analyzed the data independently. Subsequently, the results were triangulated between the entire research team and the participants. For reliability and confirmability, the researchers made the transcripts, which were reviewed by the participants. In addition, the use of extracts from participants corroborates the

confirmability. Finally, for transferability, information on participants, context and method was detailed and saturation of data was verified along the narratives of participants. Finally, the transcripts of the experiences were incorporated into the results through citations verified by the participants and this contributed to the rigor of the present study.

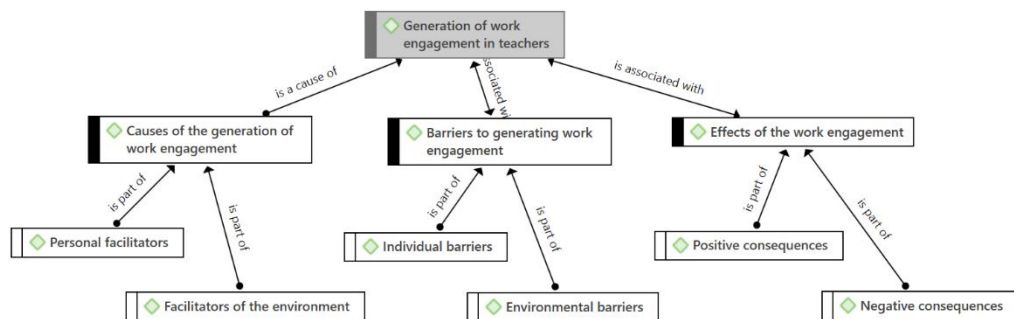
Ethical Considerations

Before the research, the required permits were obtained from the ethics committee (UALBIO2020/046), the school administration, and the participants. Prior to data collection, participants received verbal and written information about the objective of the study. Their participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained prior to the audio recording. During the data analysis, the anonymity of the participants and the total confidentiality of the data were guaranteed.

RESULTS

Inductive data analysis led to three main themes and six sub-themes (Table 2, Figure 1). All of these have enabled the objective of describing and exploring the teachers' perceptions of work engagement at all stages of education to be achieved.

Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Themes and Sub-themes



Causes of employment engagement

This theme reveals the causes perceived by teachers that promote the generation of work engagement. Two sub-themes emerged under this theme: (a) personal facilitators and (b) facilitators of the environment.

Personal Facilitators

More than half of the participants (n= 16) stressed that setting goals and rewards when you engage, whether personal, economic or social, play an important role in engaging. The rewards referred to the incentive teachers receive during or after their

professional work. This reward was associated with an economic award or a personal or social stimulus. That is, teachers engage themselves to work because they earn a salary or because they receive a stimulus that gives them benefits, such as the feeling good about yourself or, simply, the obligation to cover some need:

“And also for a need. We all have a need to engage, a reward, even if it is your personal esteem” (Group 4-Woman 1).

Other causes that, according to twelve teachers, promote the generation of engagement are the satisfaction and motivation felt when working:

“The motivation, usefulness and personal reward one receives are worth it”
(Group 3-Woman 6).

However, according to twenty teachers, the causes that promote the generation of engagement are not always intrinsic to the person, but also depend on other external facilitators.

Facilitators of the Environment

According to the point of view of twenty-one teachers, the favorable environment and good relations with the closest people are key facilitators when generating work engagement. Favorable environment meant an environment of tolerance and respect that helps the teacher to exercise professional work in a positive way and, in turn, good social relations referred to social interactions based on work involvement, engagement to the well-being of others and to fostering a sense of belonging to a group. Therefore, teachers also indicated that social and environmental influence must be taken into account when generating engagement:

“When the companions are very involved, there is a high degree of engagement of the people in the activity that is, because that causes that there is a degree of contagion” (Group 3-Woman 4).

On the other hand, according to fourteen participants, social recognition is essential to achieve this objective. That is, that people in the environment value what you do and recognize the importance of the profession:

“We are workers and we are people and if you want us to work well, that support and recognition is necessary” (Group 1-Women 2).

Barriers to generating work engagement

This theme reveals the barriers perceived by teachers that hinder the generation of work engagement in them. Two sub-themes emerged under this theme: (a) individual barriers and (b) environmental barriers.

Individual Barriers

Twenty-one teachers stressed that the biggest barrier they have to face is the lack of planning and organization of time, because this poor time management prevents them from engaging in the various work activities that encompass professional work, since they also have to face other responsibilities.

“I consider that I have a fairly high engagement in both the personal and the work environment, which causes the level of family engagement to decrease slightly due to lack of time” (Group 3-Women 6).

On the other hand, thirteen teachers believe that low levels of resilience, emotional management and constancy make it difficult to engage with professional work, causing demotivation and accommodation when exercising the work:

“For me, the barriers have been personal rather than social. Lack of desire, motivation or time. When I lack motivation it is difficult to maintain constancy and in the end ends up abandoning the task or project” (Group 3-Woman 6).

The generation of teacher engagement is also hindered by emotional needs. Hence the importance of emotional support for less engaged teachers. However, half the teachers emphasized that the barriers that hinder their work engagement cause them high levels of fatigue and, due to poor emotional management, these barriers can trigger burnout syndrome:

“Now that I am older, the main obstacle is the will, which sometimes fails because one is already tired” (Group 4-Woman 3).

Environmental Barriers

However, according to the opinion of ten teachers, there are factors inherent in professional education that hinder the generation of engagement. A large number of teachers revealed that toxic environments, poor social relations and perceived social pressure to cope with the various responsibilities they faced affected their engagement to their work. Some teachers did not even feel supported by their family or peers, affecting their work engagement levels:

“If the environment helps you, well. But I saw that the environment was making that it could not even flow” (Group 1-Woman 2).

Ten teachers mentioned the existence of engagements imposed or forced by society or families, which they called ‘false engagements’, which cause emotional difficulties, and hinder work engagement:

“Because those people aren’t happy. They’re not doing what they want. They’re not really engaged. It’s a false engagement” (Group 1-Woman 2).

On the other hand, four teachers expressed their discomfort with the lack of humanization, that is, they indicated that teachers are treated without taking into account their human condition and without empathy:

“Most people increasingly tend to be locked in their bubble and make a life focused solely on instant pleasure [...] Unfortunately, individualism is increasingly prevalent” (Group 4-Woman 3).

Effects of work engagement

This topic describes what are the personal effects that provoke work engagement in teachers. Two sub-themes emerged under this theme: (a) positive consequences and (b) negative consequences.

Positive consequences

The results of this study showed that the teachers involved in the work presented a series of positive personal consequences such as satisfaction and motivation towards the work performed, general well-being and a feeling of being active, useful for society and valued by society. More than half of teachers (n= 19) pointed out that these positive consequences improve the levels of self-esteem, positively impacting the engagement to the professional work performed:

“Engaging to something lets me know that I have been helpful to others” (Group 3-Woman 1).

Negative consequences

Despite the positive consequences of being engaged in work, teachers (n= 16) say that when they encounter many of the difficulties mentioned above or do not achieve the stated goal, they suffer negative emotional consequences such as anxiety, stress, frustration, fears, insecurity, nervousness, stress and tiredness. According to teachers, these consequences negatively impact when generating work engagement and may cause the opposite effect: burnout syndrome:

“Sometimes tired and a little overwhelmed, but usually happy and satisfied” (Group 4-Woman 3).

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to describe and explore teachers' perceptions of work engagement at all stages of education. Previous studies show that work engagement can prevent failure and job desertion (Hoigaard et al., 2012; Pfitzner-Eden, 2016). However, the lack of knowledge regarding teachers' perceptions of work engagement makes it difficult to understand, which may be indicative of the evidence that teachers are increasingly suffering from burnout syndrome (Gutentag et al., 2017; Molero et al., 2019; Salmela-Aro et al., 2019; Zamora et al., 2018).

The results of this study show that motivation, satisfaction and favorable social relations and environment are some facilitators of the generation of work

engagement (Hardré et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Shoshani & Eldor, 2016; Van Wingerden & Poell, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). However, some of the barriers that make it difficult for teachers to engage with professional work are low scores in emotional intelligence and high levels of demotivation and stress, concurring with the studies of Ávalos & Valenzuela (2016), Otero-López et al. (2015) and Rodríguez-Mantilla & Fernández-Díaz (2017). Skills such as emotional management and resilience should be part of educational training programmes (McCarthy et al., 2016), existing specific educational programmes based on mindfulness that train emotional intelligence and reduce stress (Coo & Salanova, 2017).

According to other studies, the results show that professionally engaged teachers present a series of positive personal consequences such as satisfaction and motivation towards the work done (Hoigaard et al., 2012). However, when they encounter many of the difficulties mentioned above, they suffer negative emotional consequences such as stress, tiredness and anxiety (Molero et al., 2019; Salmela-Aro et al., 2019).

Strengths and Limitations

The use of focus groups brings remarkable strengths, since they have allowed to analyze the differences in discourse between teachers of different educational stages. This is an area which needs to be deepened in order to be able to design teacher training programmes for specific groups. However, this study is not without limitations. A limitation is the circumscription of the sample to teachers of the stages of Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education. Although the study, due to its qualitative nature, focuses on providing evidence on the depth of the phenomenon, it would be interesting to note whether the correlates reported could be considered common among teachers of these stages in general, regardless of their specialization. Therefore, it would be advisable to include the perspectives of other teachers, comparable to each other, to arrive at shared meanings and a set of common categories that can contribute to the understanding of this construct.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that there are several facilitators and barriers that promote and/or hinder the generation of work engagement in teachers, causing a number of consequences for teachers that may be positive or negative. On the one hand, motivation, satisfaction and social relations and the favorable environment facilitate teachers the generation of work engagement. On the other hand, low scores in emotional intelligence and high levels of demotivation, stress and anxiety complicate the generation of work engagement and, consequently, the teachers involved in the work have positive consequences for their work such as satisfaction and motivation and negative consequences such as stress, fatigue and anxiety. Our

findings emphasize the need for teacher education and intervention educational programmes in order to train teachers to deal with complex situations that arise in the world of work and to be able to engage more in the exercise of their professional work.

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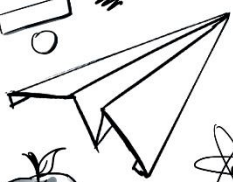
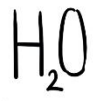
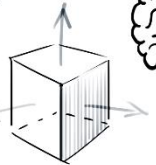
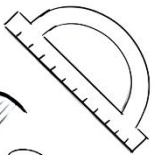
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