

Review article

Psychosocial risks and work stress in teachers



Riesgos psicosociales y estrés laboral en los docentes

Riscos psicossociais e estresse relacionado ao trabalho em professores

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ABSTRACT

In the current era, permeated by the development of technologies and the demands of society, the teachers' mental health and well-being of is a priority due to the social role they have. The objective of this article is to analyze the theoretical criteria regarding the psychosocial risks that influence the work stress of teachers in educational institutions in Latin America and, specifically, in Ecuador. A quantitative, descriptive approach was adopted, with a correlational scope and a non-experimental and transversal design. Theoretical methods such as analytical-synthetic, inductive-deductive and systematization were used in the consultation of publications from indexed scientific journals, preferably in the SciELO database and from the last three years, as well as reports from international organizations. As a result of the theoretical review carried out, a classification of external and internal psychosocial risks to which teachers in Latin America are exposed is presented. These risks must be balanced with professional skills to prevent stress from occurring. The main conclusion reached is that there is a bidirectional relationship between psychosocial risks and stress. The former are agents that increase stress, which can aggravate the negative effects of psychosocial risks, leading to a downward spiral of well-being. This global phenomenon, which also affects teachers in the Latin

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American region, has repercussions on the quality of processes in educational institutions; this is a reason to reconsider the design of actions that mitigate these risks.

Keywords: psychosocial risks; occupational stress; teachers.

RESUMEN

En la era actual, permeada por el desarrollo de las tecnologías y las demandas de la sociedad, representan una prioridad la salud mental y el bienestar de los docentes por el encargo social que poseen. El objetivo de este artículo consiste en analizar los criterios teóricos acerca de los riesgos psicosociales que influyen en el estrés laboral de estos en las instituciones educativas de América Latina y, específicamente, en Ecuador. Se asumió un enfoque cuantitativo, descriptivo, con alcance correlacional y un diseño no experimental y transversal. Se emplearon métodos teóricos como el analítico-sintético, el inductivo-deductivo y la sistematización en la consulta de publicaciones de revistas científicas indexadas, preferiblemente en base de datos SciELO y de los últimos tres años, así como informes provenientes de organismos internacionales. Como resultado de la revisión teórica realizada se presenta una clasificación de riesgos psicosociales externos e internos a los que están expuestos los docentes de Latinoamérica. Estos riesgos deben equilibrarse con las competencias profesionales para evitar que se produzca el estrés. La principal conclusión a la que se arribó es que existe una relación bidireccional entre los riesgos psicosociales y el estrés. Los primeros constituyen agentes que incrementan el estrés, que pueden agravar los efectos negativos de los riesgos psicosociales, llevando a una espiral descendente de bienestar. Este fenómeno global que también afecta a los docentes de la región latinoamericana, repercute en la calidad de los procesos de las instituciones educativas; razón para replantearse el diseño de acciones que mitiguen dichos riesgos.

Palabras clave: riesgos psicosociales; estrés laboral; docentes.

RESUMO

Na era atual, permeada pelos desenvolvimentos tecnológicos e pelas exigências da sociedade, a saúde mental e o bem-estar dos professores são prioridade devido ao seu mandato social. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar os critérios teóricos sobre os riscos psicossociais que influenciam o estresse no trabalho em instituições educacionais na América Latina, e especificamente no Equador. Foi

adotada uma abordagem quantitativa, descritiva, com escopo correlacional e delineamento não experimental e transversal. Foram utilizados métodos teóricos como analítico-sintético, indutivo-dedutivo e sistematização, consultando publicações de periódicos científicos indexados, preferencialmente na base de dados SciELO e dos últimos três anos, bem como relatórios de organismos internacionais. Como resultado da revisão teórica, é apresentada uma classificação dos riscos psicossociais externos e internos aos quais os professores da América Latina estão expostos. Esses riscos devem ser equilibrados com habilidades profissionais para evitar que o estresse ocorra. A principal conclusão alcançada é que existe uma relação bidirecional entre riscos psicossociais e estresse. Os primeiros são agentes que aumentam o estresse, podendo agravar os efeitos negativos dos riscos psicossociais, levando a uma espiral descendente de bem-estar. Esse fenômeno global, que também afeta os professores da América Latina, impacta a qualidade dos processos educacionais nas instituições; razão para repensar o desenho de ações para mitigar esses riscos.

Palavras-chave: riscos psicossociais; estresse relacionado ao trabalho; professores.

INTRODUCTION

The current context, permeated by globalization and the political, economic and social transformations that have occurred since the end of the 20th century, has had an impact on human activity. As part of this, the work of the teacher-counselor and guide of the teaching-educational process has been evolving towards other forms of teaching, with which the student learns to learn in a society in which universal access to technologies is intended.

The 2030 Agenda raises the need to guarantee quality education (United Nations, 2018) in which the integration of Information and Communication Technologies, the reduction of the digital breach and the constant updating of study programs are favored. Likewise, the knowledge society demands the development of basic and professional skills, which, together with the necessary transition to the virtualization of education, has contributed to teachers experiencing an overload of their functions as part of the psychosocial risks to which they are exposed and which threaten their mental health.

We agree with Carranco Madrid et al., (2020) when they state that "the teacher is one of the figures most prone to suffer the incidence of psychosocial risks" (p. 323), which has worsened throughout Latin America and particularly in Ecuador, as a result of the health and social crisis caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic (Álvarez-Silva et al., 2022). Remote work, hyperconnectivity, family life and confinement itself led to overcoming the distance between work and home.

The ideas expressed by Montes (2021) are valid when referring to teachers' work, and particularly university teachers, who face the responsibility of training the citizens that society needs, in a world with exponential growth in knowledge and the plurality of knowledge. Given this reality, constant professional development constitutes a fundamental part of their activities, which on many occasions must be carried out outside of working hours, which generates greater psychological tension.

Ecuadorian teachers are not immune to this, since among all the tasks they perform, an important place is occupied by improving themselves in areas that go beyond the limits of the specialization in which they were trained as teachers; areas that, as the author consulted above states, go beyond didactic requirements. This creates a psychological risk that generates negative consequences for physical and mental health.

Authors such as Suárez et al., (2022) delve into the study of factors intrinsic to work overload. This is a psychosocial risk to which teachers are continually exposed in educational institutions, which is associated with certain conditions in the workplace related to organizational issues and the teaching activity itself.

The educational reality of Latin America also shows a lack of responsibility and motivation of students with regard to teaching activities, a lack of institutional management to solve the problems presented and inadequate remuneration, all of which contribute to a state of demotivation for the task of teaching and, with it, to the appearance of symptoms of depression and stress.

In accordance with the above, Jiménez Espinoza & Silva Caicedo (2024) assert that the direct causes of the physical and emotional discomfort of teachers, especially those in Latin America, have been "job instability, excess of work according to the curriculum, the study plan that leads to unpaid extracurricular work hours and daily uncertainty" (p. 42). Specifically in Ecuador, uncertainty is generated from the labor insertion of teachers, which has gone through stages in which it is difficult to hire personnel, even if they are qualified. Competition is high and opportunities are not the same for all regions or educational levels.

The aforementioned authors emphasize the lack of recognition as a fundamental aspect that influences teaching performance, to which Herrera Soria et al., (2024), also Ecuadorian researchers, refer, who agree that teachers are vulnerable professionals due to their numerous responsibilities.

According to the author of this article, when the workload increases and the conditions for carrying it out are not optimal, teachers show depression and uncertainty in the face of these "stressors". To counteract this situation, they must mobilize personal resources such as resilience, self-control, and self-efficacy, which will enable them to cope with the increase in work and manage the situation with positive energy. However, teachers do not always have the necessary tools to mitigate the psychosocial risks to which they are exposed and, inevitably, this influences the triggering of episodes of work stress that can become permanent.

There is a vast scientific literature that deals with this topic of work stress, as it is a call from the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) to transform the mental health of the population. Various researchers address this problem from general perspectives (Lu et al., 2021); others focus on specific population groups and work areas such as health (García-Maroto et al., 2021; Martínez-Mejía, 2022; Castillo Caicedo et al., 2023 y Ramos Armijos et al., 2024) and education (Roa-Cárdenas & González-Puebla, 2022 and Zapata-Constante & Riera-Vázquez, 2024), in which there is a growing rate of work stress.

In the consulted research on work-related stress in teachers, a topic that concerns the author of this article, a common element is its treatment as a global phenomenon that affects both personal well-being and professional performance. Likewise, the studies analyzed distinguish the establishment of relationships between psychosocial risks and the work-related stress that generates them.

The reference to risks such as workload, content and characteristics of the task performed, work demands, social interaction and organizational aspects, as well as performance-based remuneration, is recurrent in the consulted literature from Latin American authors. All of this constitutes a threat to the proper functioning of the educational institution and the fulfillment of the established goals, which also threatens the survival of the organization itself.

Considering the importance of the topic to achieve a sustainable world and the necessary update based on the most recent studies, this article aims to analyze the theoretical criteria regarding psychosocial risks that influence the teachers' work stress in educational institutions in Latin America.

The study presented here has a quantitative, descriptive and correlational approach, since the variables psychosocial risks and work stress in teachers are associated to determine the relationship between them. It is a non-experimental and cross-sectional design, since the variables are not manipulated and the data are collected at a specific time.

It focuses on the analysis of the literature available in open access scientific journals and reports from international organizations. In the initial stage, a total of 40 articles from scientific journals were accessed; of these, 23 were selected. The inclusion criterion was that they were related to the topic of psychosocial factors and work stress, with a marked intention in teachers from the Latin American region; that more than 70% were hosted in the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) database, which was evident in 78.3%; that the date of the publications were from the last three years (2021-2024), except if it was an article dated 2020 that referred to the Ecuadorian educational context or was written by an author from this country. In this sense, only two were part of this exception. Another of the indicators considered for the selection of the bibliography to be consulted was the fact that the Spanish language predominated. Of the reports from international organizations, those from the World Health Organization (WHO) were considered.

Theoretical methods such as the analytical-synthetic method were used for this analysis, which allowed the individual identification and analysis of psychosocial risks that contribute to stress, and then the synthesis of this information to understand how they interact with each other. The inductive-deductive method was used in the review of the references; this is relevant in the identification of common psychosocial risks in the studies carried out, which makes it possible to formulate a hypothesis on how these influence stress, in order to subsequently arrive at deductions that prove the hypothesis. Systematization was also used, which facilitated critical reflection on the criteria expressed and the research results consulted. With these methods it was possible to understand the current state of knowledge, identify deficiencies and establish a theoretical framework based on what was studied.

DEVELOPMENT

To delve into the concept of *stress*, we started from the etymology of the word. This term comes from the Latin *stringere*, which means to tense or stretch. According to the online dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE), it is the "graphic adaptation of the English word *stress*" and means "tension caused by overwhelming situations and which gives rise to psychosomatic reactions."

In a thorough study carried out by Saavedra (2022), the existence of two terms was evidenced: eustress (positive stress) and distress (negative stress). The author states that both were introduced into the scientific literature in 1976 by the Austro-Hungarian physiologist Hans Selye and "were established as central axes in the response of the General Adaptation Syndrome, whose term refers to the biological stress present in living organisms" (p. 2). This approach brought with it confusion in the scientific community in its attempt to explain whether there were two stimuli that triggered stress or two subclasses.

In this regard, the same author explains that "eustress is the positive and beneficial effect, while *distress* refers to a negative-harmful result in the presence of a generated stressor" (Saavedra, 2022, p. 2). This theory was the starting point for others that have in common the negative or positive response that the human being offers to a certain psychosocial risk or a stressful event or agent.

Considering the above, this article analyzed -from the theory of the Austro-Hungarian author- distress, but following the trend of studying this phenomenon based on the name of *stress* and considering the negative consequences for the mental health of teachers in Latin America. This has been a concern of psychologists, managers, neurologists, among others, which occupies Labor, Industrial or Organizational Psychology, which focuses on the work conditions, external and internal, objective and subjective, that influence work activity and condition its results, including in these the changes that occur in people who work (Oramas Viera, 2023).

Since *stress* is considered a global phenomenon and its concept has evolved over time to reach the current inter and multidisciplinary approaches (Siyu Lu, Fang Wei & Guolin Li, 2021), it was pertinent to analyze reports from global organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO), the General Union of Workers (UGT). Its study allowed an approach to global projections and policies.

The *draft WHO global strategy on health, environment and climate change: Transformation needed to sustainably improve living conditions and well-being through healthy environments*, presented at the 72nd World Health Assembly (WHO, 2019), was reviewed in a timely manner. It aims to:

to provide a vision and outline how the world and the health community must respond to health risks and challenges through 2030, and to ensure safe, enabling and equitable health environments by transforming the ways we live, work, produce, consume and govern (p. 1).

Among the risks referred to are psychosocial risks, which is why it is insisted that occupational health services coverage must be guaranteed in the workplace. This seeks to contribute to the prevention and control of "modifiable risk factors", specifically those related to non-communicable diseases.

In this sense, Martínez-Mejía (2023) raises the need to create a healthy work environment, defined as "one in which workers and bosses collaborate in a process of continuous improvement to promote and protect the workers' health, safety and well-being and the sustainability of the work environment" (p. 6). Precisely, teachers in Latin America need these safe environments to face the psychosocial risks to which they are continuously exposed and which threaten their mental health due to "the heavy workload, negative behaviors and other factors that generate anxiety at work" (WHO, 2022, n/p).

Latin American teachers, like any other worker, are exposed to various risks, whether occupational, such as the collapse of an area's roof, or others derived from the physical or mental workload, or the so-called psychosocial risks.

This definition was considered to point to the complex network of factors that influence the workers' health and well-being: work, context, personal satisfaction. Psychosocial risks are not only constituted by the demands of work, but also by the way in which the interaction among the work environment, its organization and the worker's degree of satisfaction with his or her skills, cultural context, needs and, above all, with his or her personal life.

According to the authors of this article, understanding psychosocial risks requires a holistic view, as they are not limited to a single aspect of work or personal life, but are the result of multiple interactions and balances. To the extent that this is recognized, healthier and more sustainable work environments can be created, where the worker's well-being is a priority.

Furthermore, the analysis of the articles consulted allows us to consider that the conditions existing in a work situation, whether related to the organization or the content of the work performed, can affect the development of the work and the worker's health. Psychosocial risks have negative consequences on the worker's health and work performance. It is highlighted that these risks are directly related to the structure and characteristics of the environment.

Likewise, Roa-Cárdenas & González-Puebla (2022), when dealing with the psychosocial risks that affect university teachers, insist on the conditions of their work situation and highlight as part of

these "stability, economic remuneration, educational policies, the nature of their work, the requirements of their activity, the formation of work teams, work pressure" (p. 196). These risks cover a wide range of factors that can affect both the physical, psychological, and mental health of teachers and even human relations.

The aforementioned authors presented among the findings of a study published in the article "Review of research on psychosocial risk in university teachers", the significant increase in researchers' interest in the treatment of psychosocial risks during the years between 2010 and 2019. Among the scientific articles analyzed, those with the highest number of publications in Latin America, Argentina and Colombia stood out.

In particular, Ecuadorian researchers Carranco Madrid et al., (2020) mention the psychosocial risks that affect teachers and relate them to: occupational or work stress, burnout or professional burnout syndrome, relational violence and workplace harassment (mobbing or moral harassment, sexual harassment and discriminatory harassment), with which the author of this article disagrees.

In this sense, the authors assume that psychosocial risks originate from an insufficient conception, organization and management of work and a negative social environment. They may be accompanied by an undetermined number of psychosocial agents, called stressors, which can affect psychologically (García Lino, 2020, p. 142).

Stress, fatigue, depression, among other symptoms are the result of exposure to psychosocial risks when these have not been managed properly; hence, they have consequences for a person's mental and physical health and well-being. Núñez & Muñoz (2024) add symptoms such as insomnia, frequent physical ailments and irritability, as direct consequences of stress. Self-perception of these risks and control of psychosomatic symptoms that affect in general are essential (Noroña Salcedo & Vega Falcón, 2022).

Ecuadorian teachers are not exempt from exposure to these risks, as confirmed by the study carried out by García Lino (2020), who states that there is a growing dissatisfaction among teachers that leads to health problems, hence the challenge of working with secondary school students. The author points out that "the need to (...) develop training processes at the school level, in an environment where all students attend with different motivations, moods and interests, undoubtedly imposes pressure on the teacher" (p. 142).

Based on the study carried out, some examples of working conditions that lead to psychosocial risks for teachers in Ecuador can be listed:

- Excessive workloads: preparing classes, reviewing assessments, carrying out individual and group tutoring for students, participating in curricular activities. Additional activities such as participating in projects, research work, continuing education, among others.
- Conflicting demands: These occur when two or more demands conflict with each other, such as quality teaching and limited preparation time; attention to special educational needs and a high number of students in the class.
- Little or no participation in decision-making: adjustments are made related to the teacher's work and their opinion is not taken into account.
- Rigid structure: predominance of power and authoritarianism over friendly and assertive dialogue.
- Inadequate working hours: lack of breaks, unpredictable or excessive hours.

Added to these are: poorly managed organizational changes; lack of support from management or colleagues; and, as regards the environment in which teaching takes place, it is valid to point out the negative and toxic work environment. This can be characterized by competitiveness, lack of cooperation and recognition, and the generation of conflicts; all of which leads to teacher dissatisfaction with his institution.

From the above analysis it was concluded that there are various psychosocial risks to which teachers are exposed in Latin America and, specifically, in Ecuador. It is considered through the systematic review carried out that these can cause stress reactions due to the perception of imbalance between work demands and the individual's ability to face them.

The authors of this article found interesting the close, bidirectional relationship between these risks and stress. The former, which include factors such as excessive workload, job insecurity, a negative work environment and lack of social support, are considered stressors; stress, in turn, can aggravate the negative effects of psychosocial risks, leading to a downward spiral of well-being. For example, a teacher facing an excessive workload and lack of resources may experience a high level of stress, which decreases the ability to manage other work and personal demands, further intensifying psychosocial risks. These and stress are interconnected, such that each can amplify the impact of the other on teacher well-being.

On the other hand, Moreira Macías & Vera Velázquez (2023) identify stress from two perspectives:

(a) recognize it as multiple reactions that the organism has to the difficulties or demands of the environment, the imbalance between these and the way in which it faces or solves them, and (b) it can be understood as a negative emotional state accompanied by physiological changes and perception of the subject according to the demands of the environment, this can affect their well-being due to the lack of tools to face the situations (s/p).

This definition offers a comprehensive view of stress, encompassing everything from physiological to emotional reactions. Recognizing stress as a set of body responses to external demands underlines the importance of coping ability. The second perspective, which defines stress as a negative emotional state influenced by perception and physiological changes, highlights the subjective impact and its potential to affect well-being. This duality emphasizes the need for effective strategies to manage stress, promoting both personal resilience and a less demanding environment. The integration of these perspectives allows for a more holistic and empathetic understanding of stress and its effects.

Taking as a reference the systematization carried out so far, the possibility of assuming an analysis of these risks from the external and internal point of view was considered, since both converge and interact with professional skills and can trigger work stress if there is no balance between all of them (Figure 1).

The result obtained from the analysis is shown in the diagram, in which psychosocial risks are grouped according to the physical environment, one hand, and the organizational aspect, on the other, which are interrelated. These influence teachers who, if they have a poor development of their professional skills -understood as a psychological configuration made up of cognitive, motivational and axiological components necessary to carry out their work- are unable to find the necessary balance and this leads to stress.

Each of the risks presented in the scheme is expressed in the risk factors. These, according to Roa-Cárdenas & González-Puebla (2022), are the conditions that arise in a work situation, which are directly related to the organization and content of the work, its social environment and the performance of the task and which can affect the development of the work and the health (physical, mental or social) of the worker. It was derived from the analysis of this definition that these risks

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are conditioned by the historical-specific context in which the teacher works; therefore, they vary depending on the institutions in which they work and the demands of society.

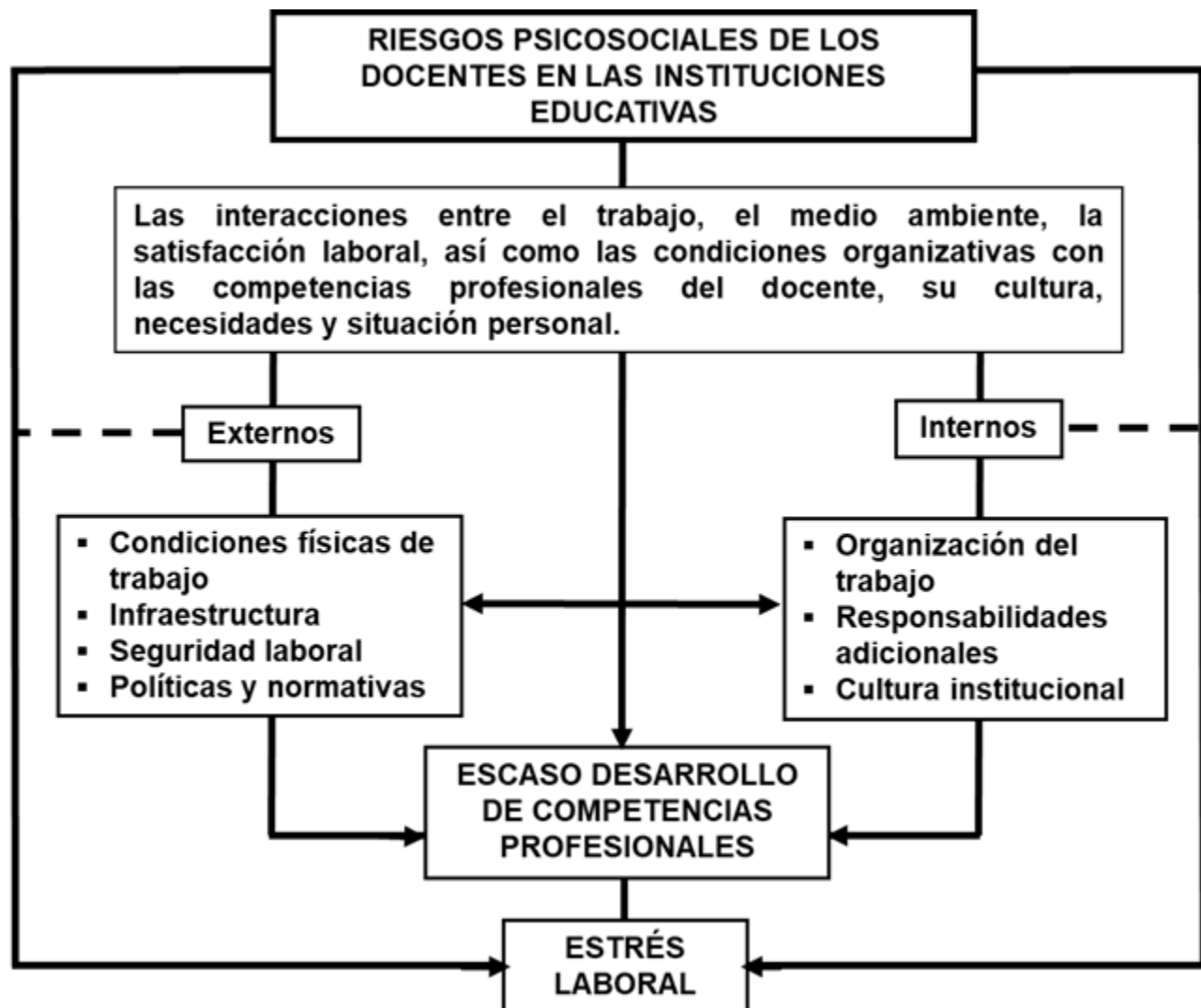


Figure 1. External and internal psychosocial risks that trigger work-related stress in teachers in Ecuador

It is worth noting that since stress is considered an individual's reaction to the demands of the context with which he or she interacts, the risk factors that produce it are changing, as has been analyzed based on the demands of today's society.

The context in which the teacher operates is decisive. This was corroborated in Ecuador during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this stage, many teachers, not being familiar with the technologies - essential to not stop the teaching-learning process- felt the consequences of the abrupt transition from face-to-face to non-face-to-face modality and found themselves in need of rapidly preparing themselves in a self-taught manner. Studies carried out by Álvarez-Silva et al., (2022) show that the hours of connectivity, the lack of strategic planning, the poor connectivity and low quality of the Internet in some areas impacted the human psyche and led to high levels of work stress.

A broad concept of the term stress comes from the health field and is related to the body's response to the changes that occur. Siyu Lu & Guolin Li (2021) allude to the above, stating that "stress is addressed as a state of homeostasis that is being challenged" (p. 18), that is, that external demands challenge the body's ability to maintain its internal stability.

It is understandable that the body and mind seek to maintain an internal balance (homeostasis) and when faced with stressful situations, this balance is affected. Stress arises precisely as a response to these challenges, mobilizing physical and mental resources to cope with the situation. However, if stress is prolonged or intense, it can result in an inability to return to balance, negatively affecting health and well-being.

If the situation that causes stress continues over time, the balance of the body's demands is not achieved and the individual's emotional well-being is put at risk, leading to Burnout. or burnout syndrome, which affects their health condition (Rodríguez-González et al., 2024). This topic has also been widely researched and is recognized in the literature as an emotional fatigue syndrome that produces loss of motivation and feelings of failure. However, whether stress or burnout, it is a reiterated criterion in the consulted bibliography that both can contribute to the development of various diseases and disorders in the work environment, both physical and mental, and Cruz-Zúñiga, et al. (2021) add to these the social ones.

Zapata-Constante & Riera-Vázquez (2024) mention when referring to workers at the Ecuadorian Social Security Institute that among these diseases are disorders derived from anxiety, sleep and eating disorders, hypertension, strokes, type 2 diabetes, gastrointestinal and respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal disorders and chronic pain. These authors also mention behavioral problems, aggression and violence; hence the importance of implementing global, national and institutional strategies to mitigate the psychosocial risks that lead to stress.

In search of a solution to the problem that triggers stress, Moreira Macías & Vera Velázquez (2023) explain that in the Republic of Ecuador, the ministerial agreement MDT-2022-237 was established in 2020 in article 154 numeral 1 of the Constitution, which states:

It should be noted that communication between workers and managers serves to have a better response in the assignment and delivery of tasks, constant updating of knowledge, and better job performance. Incidence formed within job performance clearly identifies the work environment or other processes that affect the worker (pp. 67-68).

In this regard, the WHO (2022) recommends in the Comprehensive Action Plan on Mental Health 2013-2030, in objective three, to implement promotion and prevention strategies in the field of mental health. To this end, it establishes among its actions the "promotion of safe, conducive and decent working conditions for all" (p. 30). To this end, greater attention must be paid to "aspects such as organizational improvements at work; the implementation of scientifically proven programs to promote mental well-being and prevent mental health disorders" (p. 30). For the first time, there is an emphasis on training managers to prevent stressful work environments.

It is evident that the design of innovative actions in healthy environments is imperative for Latin America, and following the ideas of Miguel Tobal et al., (2024), the possibilities offered by information and communications technologies must be taken advantage of, especially mobile applications, which have become effective tools to combat disorders of the human psyche; hence, this is an open path for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

The issue of psychosocial risks and work-related stress among teachers in Latin America is a concern for the scientific community. The references analyzed confirm that stress represents a significant challenge that not only affects the health and well-being of education professionals, but can also impact the quality of teaching and learning.

There is a bidirectional relationship between psychosocial risks and stress, taking into account that the former are configured as stressors that aggravate stress and this, in turn, can exacerbate the negative effects of psychosocial risks, leading to a downward spiral of well-being.

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The psychosocial risks of teachers in Ecuadorian educational institutions can be classified according to their external and internal aspects, which are related and interact with the professional skills that they possess; if there is no balance between them, work-related stress may be triggered.

It is necessary to design and implement solid institutional policies, psychological support and well-being programs that promote a healthy and sustainable work environment in the education sector in Latin America and especially in Ecuador, which will allow research on the subject to continue and offer solutions to this global problem.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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