Occupational stress in secondary school teachers: examining the role of students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes and the perceived difficulty in conflict management

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This study examines not only the role of students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes but also the difficulties perceived by teachers in managing conflicts as a function of the different sociodemographic and occupational variables (gender, age, professional experience, teaching cycle). The results obtained from a sample consisting in 1386 ESO teachers allow us to conclude that both types of stressors validly discriminate as a function of sociodemographic and occupational variables. Specifically, the stress associated to students' disruptive behaviour and to the difficulties faced by teachers in managing conflict has a greater incidence on female teachers, on second cycle teachers and on intermediate stages in the profession. If these findings are corroborated by further research, it would be important to design prevention and/or intervention programmes that are sensitive to these risk factors.

Key words: Stress, teachers, students' disruptive behaviour, conflict management.

Estrés laboral en profesores de enseñanza secundaria: examinando el papel de las conductas y/o actitudes problemáticas de los alumnos y la dificultad percibida en el manejo de conflictos. En este trabajo se examina, en función de distintas variables sociodemográficas y ocupacionales (sexo, edad, experiencia profesional, ciclo de docencia), no sólo el papel de las conductas y/o actitudes problemáticas de los alumnos, sino también las dificultades percibidas por los profesores en el manejo de conflictos. Los resultados obtenidos, a partir de una muestra de 1.386 docentes de ESO, permiten concluir que ambos tipos de estresores diferencian válidamente en función de las variables sociodemográficas y ocupacionales. Concretamente, el estrés asociado a los problemas de comportamiento de los alumnos y a las dificultades del docente en el manejo de conflictos, incide en mayor medida en las profesoras, en los docentes de segundo ciclo y en aquellas etapas intermedias de la profesión. En definitiva, si estos hallazgos se ratifican en futuras investigaciones, se trataría de diseñar programas preventivos y/o de intervención que sean sensibles a estos factores de riesgo.

Palabras clave: Estrés, profesores, conductas problema alumnos, manejo conflictos.

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The educational task at secondary education levels is perceived, in the opinion of many of the parties involved (parents, teachers, mass media) as one of the contemporary challenges that calls for swift and efficient answers. Indeed, social criticism regarding this teaching cycle –founded on arguments that are not always on agreement (lack of student motivation, abandonment of parental roles by families, cultural diversity, changes to curricular contents, teachers' increased responsibility…)– has contributed to the building of a wide theoretical and empirical *corpus* on this pressing problem.

Taking a historical perspective that allows us to approach the *status quo* of the cumulative knowledge on the reality of the classroom, it is interesting to note that important breakthroughs have taken place, although they have not always been "healthy". The growing teachers' distress (whether under the form of stress, burnout or professional dissatisfaction) is one of the most solid and documented findings in the literature (see, for instance, Byrne, 1994; Manthei, Gilmore, Tuck and Adair, 1996; Otero-López, Castro and Santiago, *in press*; Travers and Cooper, 1993). As to the plethora of explanatory determinants, there is also a widespread consensus amongst researchers that students' disruptive behaviour, conflict management ("in" and "outside" the classroom) and/or disciplinary issues are undoubtedly top-of-the-list risk factors in stress and burnout suffered by teachers (e.g., Borg and Riding, 1991; Kokkinos, 2007; Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978; Otero-López *et al.*, 2008; Travers and Cooper, 1993). If we further examine the empirical evidence on what primary and secondary school teachers cite as the most frequent sources of stress, it should be noted that many authors (e.g., Antoniou, Polychroni and Vlachakis, 2006; Borg, Riding and Falzon, 1991; Byrne, 1994; Friedman, 1995; Geving, 2007; Innes and Kitto, 1989) have underscored the prominence of students' disruptive behaviour (aggressiveness, indiscipline, the 'couldn't-care-less attitude'); there are also some writers (e.g., Galand, Lecocq and Philippot, 2007; Mallet and Paty, 1999) who have claimed that students' disruptive behaviour in the classroom and, generally speaking, within the school, is perceived by teachers as a form of violence. In short, and as Geving (2007) points out in a recent study, violent and disrespectful behaviour amongst students –and towards teachers– along with a number of specific instances of behaviour that disrupt school activities (such as students' passivity or lack of effort) are relevant stressors within the teaching profession.

Further achievements of the research on the field have been the confirmation of the important role that sociodemographic variables (gender, age, educational level) have in the perception of stress. In this regard, and despite the fact that empirical evidence is far from being conclusive, we mention some studies that have included this type of

factors, albeit in isolation. As to the gender variable, some writers (e.g., Antoniou *et al.*, 2006; Laughlin, 1984; Manthei *et al.*, 1996; Payne and Furnham, 1987) have confirmed that students' disruptive behaviour is experienced as more stressing by female teachers; Borg and Riding (1991), analysing the same behavioural pattern, conclude that younger secondary school teachers report higher levels of stress. Finally, as far as professional experience is concerned, Manassero *et al.*, (2005) have confirmed that the greater the experience the less stressing are conflicts for teachers.

A final note, and probably one of the main hindrances for research in this field, has to do with the fact that the issues which are the very essence of this study – students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes and conflict management – have mainly been analysed using student samples (see, for instance, Baldry and Farrington, 2005; Flannery, Wester and Singer, 2004); in this regard, we concur with other writers on the need to analyse these issues also from the teachers' perspective (e.g., Galand *et al.*, 2007; Geving, 2007; Lawrence and Green, 2005).

In view of the above considerations, this study seeks to approach us to the reality of the classroom but this time from the perspective of the teacher. The objective is to elucidate, in the light of sociodemographic and occupational variables (gender, age, professional experience, teaching cycle), some of the key issues in teachers' distress by looking at the inescapable issues of students' disruptive behaviour and how teachers manage conflicts.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 1386 teachers of *Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (ESO)*, i.e. compulsory secondary education, were recruited for the study. This is a representative sample of the Autonomous Community of Galicia and it is distributed according to typology of school, environment and gender (for further details see Otero-López *et al.*, 2006). As to the respondents' characteristics, the following should be noted: 823 are female teachers (59.4%) and 563 male teachers (40.6%), the range of age is between 26 and 65 years (mean age: 38.6 years), seniority in the profession is between 3 and 32 years (mean: 16.9 years), and 35.8% teach in the first cycle of ESO while 64.2% teach in the second cycle.

Procedure

This study is part of a wider research project into occupational stress and burnout in ESO teachers. Sample collection was done in the final semester of 2005 and the first term of 2006. Self-reports were distributed to the different schools guaranteeing the confidentiality of all the data collected (for further details see Otero-López *et al.*, 2006).

Instruments

Teachers filled in the *Inventory of Occupational Stressors for Secondary School Teachers* (Otero-López *et al.*, 2006). An explanatory factorial analysis (main components, varimax rotation) was conducted which yielded 10 factors that group 66 items and account for 51.9% of the variance (the internal consistence indexes, calculated using Cronbach alpha coefficient ranged between 0.78 and 0.91). The two first factors called 'Students' disruptive behaviour and disciplinary issues' (31.28 % of variance explained, alpha 0.89) and 'Competence/Teachers' perceived assurance' (4.63 % variance explained, alpha 0.80) were the source for the choice of the items that make up the scales used in this study. Upon the principle of parsimony, the items that on the opinion of both other teachers and the research team satisfactorily represented 'students' disruptive behaviour' and 'conflict management' were selected. They all were evaluated in accordance with the degree of distress they generated on the teacher (Likert-type scale: 0 'it causes me no distress' up to 4 'it causes me a lot of distress'). An explanatory factorial analysis confirmed the unidimensionality of each of the scales. The first one, 'Students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes' (alpha= 0.88), includes the following items: 'Verbal abuse on the part of students', 'Increase in aggressions among students', 'Vandalism within the premises of the school', 'The existence of racist attitudes and/or behaviour', 'The students challenging my competence and skills' and 'The students taking a passive attitude in the classroom'; the second, 'Conflict management' (alpha= 0.87), consists of the following items: 'Having to deal with students disciplinary problems', 'Having to meet the parents of disruptive students', 'Difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom', 'The fact that students are constantly 'putting you to the test'' and 'Not being able to deal with conflicts with students'.

Lastly, an *ad hoc* series of items was written aimed at obtaining information on both sociodemographic (gender, age) and occupational issues (professional experience, cycle in which the respondent teaches).

RESULTS

Gender. Table 1 shows the mean scores for female and male teachers, t values and levels of significance for each of the sources of stress evaluated in this study.

Table 1. Comparison between male and female for the different stressors

	Male	Female	t
Having to deal with students' disciplinary problems	2.60	2.79	-3.28***
Having to meet the parents of disruptive students	2.01	2.22	-3.09**
Verbal abuse on the part of students	2.69	2.94	-3.63***
The increase in aggressions among students	2.60	3.06	-8.24***
Difficulties in maintaining discipline within the classroom	1.95	2.24	-3.92***
The fact that students are constantly "putting you to the test"	1.76	2.05	-3.80***
Vandalism within the premises of the school	2.56	2.64	n.s.
The existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes	1.89	2.20	-4.24***
The students challenging my competence and skills	1.56	1.80	-3.17**
The students taking a passive attitude in the classroom	2.65	2.67	n.s.
Not being able to deal with conflicts with students	1.87	2.02	-2.03*

* p< .05   **p< .01   ***p< .001

A general review of the data in the above table shows the existence of statistically relevant differences between male and females in almost every stressor (only two fail to reach statistical significance: vandalism and students' passive role). Specifically, 9 out of 11 items analysed establish significant differences between male and female teachers.

It is therefore confirmed that female teachers tend to feel a greater level of stress than male teachers do. In this regard, it seems that students' disruptive behaviour and conflict management cause more distress in female teachers. Specifically, of the 9 sources of stress that are statistically significant those establishing greater differences (higher t levels) are 'The increase in aggressions among students' and 'The existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes'.

Age. The results in levels of stress for each of the items in relation to age (up to 35 years of age, between 35 and 49 years of age and over 49) are shown in table 2.

A general review of the data in the above table confirms the existence of significant differences in almost every stressor (the exceptions being 'The existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes in the school' and 'Not being able to deal with conflicts with students'). This finding seems to indicate that age "modulates" the stress generated by students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes and conflict management.

Table 2. Analysis of the variance in relation to age

	Group 1 < 35 years	Group 2 35-49 years	Group 3 > 49 years	F	Scheffé
Having to deal with students' disciplinary problems	2.64	2.83	2.50	11.21***	1/2, 2/3
Having to meet the parents of disruptive students	1.95	2.30	1.88	16.36***	1/2, 2/3
Verbal abuse on the part of students	2.73	2.93	2.68	5.78**	2/3
Increase in aggressions among students	2.78	2.94	2.78	4.16*	1/2, 2/3
Difficulties in maintaining discipline within the classroom	2.13	2.28	1.74	18.94***	1/3, 2/3
The fact that students are constantly "putting you to the test"	1.89	2.04	1.70	7.71***	2/3
Vandalism within the premises of the school	2.33	2.74	2.52	12.13***	1/2, 2/3
The existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes in the school	2.12	2.08	2.02	n.s.	---
The students challenging my competence and skills	1.67	1.78	1.56	3.10*	2/3
The students taking a passive attitude in the classroom	2.44	2.71	2.71	7.55**	1/2, 1/3
Not being able to deal with conflicts with students	1.88	2.02	1.87	n.s.	---

* p< .05   **p< .01   ***p< .001

The most marked differences according to the mean scores and the F value occur in the following stressors: 'Difficulties in maintaining discipline within the classroom', 'Having to meet the parents of disruptive students', 'Vandalism within the premises of the school' and 'Having to deal with students' disciplinary problems'. In any case, the general tendency is that group 2 (range of age between 35-49) presents the highest scores in comparison to the youngest group (under 35 years of age) and specially when compared to the oldest group (over 49 years of age).

Moving on to another aspect of the analysis, when comparing the groups in twos (*a posteriori* Scheffé's test), middle age teachers are found to be those who establish the significant differences. In other words, they perceive the different problems and demands as more stressing. More specifically, middle age teachers are significantly different from the oldest teachers (comparison 2/3) in all stressors except on the students' passive attitude in the classroom. Besides, group 2 is significantly different from group 1 in five stressors; that is, the youngest, when compared to middle aged teachers, perceive less distress in the following situations: having to deal with disciplinary problems, meeting the parents of disruptive students, aggressions among students, vandalism and students' passive attitude. Finally, the oldest group is significantly different from the youngest group (comparison 1/3) only in two stressors: teachers in the oldest group are more upset by students' passivity whereas the youngest group feels more distress when trying to maintain discipline in the classroom.

Professional experience. As to the comparison of the different stressors in relation to the professional experience of teachers, results are shown in table 3. While we are aware of the close link between age and professional experience, this variable has

been included to gain a deeper understanding of its discriminatory power (consequently, 4 groups were created: less than 10 years of experience, 10-19 years, 20-29 years and over 29 years of experience).

Table 3. Analysis of the variance in relation to professional experience

	Group 1 < 10 years	Group 2 10-19 years	Group 3 20-29 years	Group 4 > 29 years	F	Scheffé
Having to deal with students' disciplinary problems	2.71	2.85	2.71	2.50	4.99**	2/4
Having to meet the parents of disruptive students	2.04	2.26	2.26	1.83	7.76***	2/4, 3/4
Verbal abuse on the part of students	2.76	2.92	2.92	2.64	3.63**	2/4, 3/4
Increase in aggressions among students	2.77	2.90	2.97	2.77	2.73*	1/3, 3/4
Difficulties in maintaining discipline within the classroom	2.17	2.29	2.14	1.75	8.13***	1/4, 2/4, 3/4
The fact that students are constantly "putting you to the test"	1.88	2.03	2.01	1.71	3.47**	2/4
Vandalism within the premises of the school	2.41	2.63	2.76	2.57	4.89**	1/3
The existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes in the school	2.11	2.12	2.02	2.05	n.s.	---
The students challenging my competence and skills	1.67	1.78	1.69	1.65	n.s.	---
The students taking a passive attitude in the classroom	2.48	2.62	2.80	2.74	6.82***	1/3, 1/4
Not being able to deal with conflicts with students	1.76	1.96	2.06	2.05	3.79**	1/3

* p< .05   **p< .01   ***p< .001

A general review of the above table confirms the existence of significant differences in 9 out of the 11 stressors evaluated (the exceptions being the following items: racist behaviour and/or attitudes in the school and the students challenging my competence and skills). It seems therefore that experience has an influence on the perception of specific instances of student disruptive behaviour and their management.

Specifically, results confirm that less experienced teachers (less than 10 years) and particularly those with the longest experience (over 29 years), perceive as less stressing the students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes and conflict management. It is therefore teachers with "some" experience (10-29 years) who feel the greatest stress as a consequence of these issues (this finding confirms those made in the aged-related comparison). The highest F values correspond to items: 'Difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom', 'Having to meet the parents of disruptive students' and 'The students taking a passive attitude in the classroom'.

The results obtained using the Scheffé test indicate in this direction as it is the intermediate age groups (2 and/or 3) that establish the greatest inter-group differences (particularly when compared to group 4). It should be underscored here that the stressor on the difficulty in maintaining discipline in the classroom is the one that differentiates the oldest group from all the other groups.

Teaching cycle. Table 4 shows the mean values for stress generated from students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes and conflict management for teachers teaching in the first cycle of the ESO *versus* those teaching in the second cycle. According to t values and the level of statistical significance, results seem to confirm that most stressors (except those challenging the teacher competence and the students' passive attitude) establish statistically significant differences between the two groups defined *a priori*. The resulting discriminatory pattern is that for all items (except 'racist behaviour and/or attitudes') first cycle teachers show lower levels of distress when compared to ESO second cycle teachers. The most discriminating stressors are those connected with maintaining discipline, the students constantly "putting the teacher to the test" and dealing with students discipline problems.

Table 4. Comparison between 1st cycle vs. 2nd cycle teachers for the different stressors

	First cycle	Second cycle	t
Having to deal with students' disciplinary problems	2.50	2.81	-5.07***
Having to meet the parents of disruptive students	1.95	2.22	-3.72***
Verbal abuse on the part of students	2.67	2.91	-3.36***
Increase in aggressions among students	2.77	2.92	-2.44**
Difficulties in maintaining discipline within the classroom	1.84	2.25	-5.32***
The fact that students are constantly "putting you to the test"	1.66	2.06	-5.15***
Vandalism within the premises of the school	2.45	2.69	-3.35***
The existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes in the school	2.22	2.01	2.79**
The students challenging my competence and skills	1.69	1.71	n.s.
The students taking a passive attitude in the classroom	2.62	2.69	n.s.
Not being able to deal with conflicts with students	1.77	2.05	-3.66***

**p< .01   ***p< .001

DISCUSSION

The results of this study broadly confirm our initial hypothesis inasmuch as they validate the importance of the socio-demographic variables as modulating the perception that teachers have of students' disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes and conflict management.

As to gender, and in line with the findings documented in the literature (e.g., Antoniou *et al.*, 2006; Laughlin, 1984; Manthei *et al.*, 1996), it has been found that students' disruptive behaviour and conflict management are perceived as more stressing by female teachers than by male teachers. The strength of these findings takes us to put forward several hypotheses to explain this fact. It could be surmised, for instance, that women will more easily report on their concern for certain aspects of their job –in this case, school violence and how to deal with it– whereas males would consider this

reporting as a sign of "weakness". It could also be argued, as Payne and Furnham (1987) claim, that female teachers would be more concerned about establishing a good rapport with their students than male teachers; the fact that students show less inhibition of disruptive behaviour in the presence of women than they do before males also could be another hypothesis worth examining.

As to the items that do not have statistical significance in relation to gender ('vandalism within the premises of the school' and 'the students taking a passive attitude in the classroom') our results coincide again with Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978). Specifically, these researchers also found that disruptive behaviour and lack of discipline in students generate greater stress in female teachers. However, there were no significant gender differences in the items 'scarcely motivated students' or 'poor attitude towards work'.

As to age and professional experience our results also confirm those obtained in the literature (see, for instance, Borg and Riding, 1991; Manassero *et al.*, 2005). Specifically, they confirm that young teachers but particularly the oldest (and consequently, those with longest professional experience) show the lowest stress rates from students' disruptive behaviour and conflict management. In other words, it is at the "intermediate stages" that these stressors have the greatest weight.

A possible explanation to these findings would be that at the beginning of the professional career when the teachers are still very young their enthusiasm and motivation may be a factor that protects them from stress, while tiredness, routine and difficulties in modifying the behaviour of some students may become a risk factor. Further into this issue, the fact that this tendency is reverted with the passing of time would be explained by the fact that older teachers –and with a wide professional experience– face these casuistries more efficiently.

Finally, and in relation to the teaching cycle variable, results also demonstrate the importance of this factor in accounting for occupational distress levels. Specifically, the ESO cycle in which the teacher instructs "modulates" the perception that the teacher has about the behaviour of their students and the management of conflict. It should be noted that broadly speaking second cycle teachers, unlike first cycle teachers, suffer a greater professional distress. The only exception to this differential pattern is the item 'the existence of racist behaviour and/or attitudes in the school': first cycle teachers have higher scores (at statistically significant levels) than second cycle teachers. This finding, albeit unexpected, could be understood if we take into account the growing incorporation

to our educational systems of students from other ethnic groups and/or cultures. It seems therefore more likely that there should be a greater number of cases of this nature at the lowest levels of the educational system. In any case, and looking at the general finding (greater stress in second cycle teachers) a tentative hypothesis would be the age of the students; it is a repeatedly demonstrated fact in Developmental Psychology that as students grow further into adolescence (with all the changes this entails whether physical, hormonal, of greater autonomy and independence, challenge to figures of authority …) disruptive behaviour and/or attitudes greatly increase. Histories of school failure, troubled life stories, the feeling that they are "trapped" against their will in the classroom (educational system change) would also be other factors to be considered to account for this fact.

In conclusion, the results of this study show that gender, age, teaching cycle and professional experience seem to have an important influence in the perception of school violence by ESO teachers and, consequently, in their levels of occupational stress.

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