

# TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING WORK AND REPERCUSSIONS ON THEIR HEALTH

*Percepções de professores sobre trabalho docente e repercussões sobre sua saúde*

*Percepciones de profesores sobre el trabajo docente y sus repercusiones en la salud*

Original Article

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## ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze teachers' perceptions of the teaching work and the repercussions on their health. **Methods:** Qualitative study conducted with twelve teachers from public schools of a municipality of Bahia. Data were collected between October 2011 and January 2012 using focus group. Data were analyzed and interpreted using the Content Analysis Technique resulting into three thematic categories: Needs for changes in the work environment; Factors influencing the teacher's health; Consequence of the teaching work on their health. **Results:** It was verified that teachers need assistance for their health and familiar arch with public policies aimed at disease prevention. They reflect that the teaching work is demanding and requires discipline in the classroom but is undervalued, which contributes to the development of musculoskeletal and emotional disorders. Multiple job factors and lifestyle have consequences on teachers' health, changing their quality of life. **Conclusion:** This study allowed to assess the teaching scenario, characterized by a high demand of activities, physical and mental overload and professional undervaluation. The development of intervention strategies and the evaluation of its applicability are needed to improve teachers' the quality of life.

**Descriptors:** Faculty; Occupational Health; Perception; Public health.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Analisar as percepções de professores sobre o trabalho docente e as repercussões em sua saúde. **Métodos:** Estudo de natureza qualitativa constituído por doze docentes da rede estadual de ensino de um município da Bahia-BR. A coleta de dados ocorreu entre os meses de outubro de 2011 e janeiro de 2012, através de grupo focal. Para análise e interpretação dos dados utilizou-se a Técnica de Análise de Conteúdo, emergindo três categorias temáticas: Necessidades de mudança no ambiente de trabalho; Fatores que influenciam na saúde do professor; Consequência do trabalho docente em sua saúde. **Resultados:** Observa-se que os docentes necessitam de assistência para sua saúde e arco familiar, com políticas públicas visando à prevenção de agravos. Refletem que o trabalho docente apresenta uma alta demanda, aliado à disciplina em sala de aula e desvalorização profissional, que contribuem para o surgimento de distúrbios musculoesqueléticos e emocionais. Múltiplos fatores do trabalho e os hábitos de vida repercutem na saúde docente, modificando sua qualidade de vida. **Conclusão:** O estudo possibilitou investigar um cenário docente caracterizado pela alta demanda da atividade, aliados a sobrecarga física e mental e desvalorização profissional. O desenvolvimento de estratégias de intervenção e avaliação de sua aplicabilidade é necessário para melhoria da qualidade de vida de professores.

**Descritores:** Docentes; Saúde do trabalhador; Percepção; Saúde Pública.

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Received on: 07/28/2013

Revised on: 09/10/2013

Accepted on: 11/24/2013

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## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Analizar las percepciones de profesores sobre El trabajo docente y las repercusiones en su salud. **Métodos:** Estudio de naturaleza cualitativa constituido de doce docentes de la red estadual de enseñanza de un municipio de Bahía-BR. La recogida de datos se dio entre los meses de octubre de 2011 y enero de 2012 a través de grupo focal. Para el análisis e interpretación de los datos se utilizó de la Técnica de Análisis de Contenido Del cual surgió tres categorías temáticas: Necesidades de cambio en el ambiente de trabajo; Factores que influyen en la salud del profesor; Consecuencia del trabajo docente en la salud. **Resultados:** Se observa que los docentes necesitan asistencia en salud y familiar con políticas públicas para la prevención de enfermedades. Los mismos reflejan que el trabajo docente presenta elevada demanda asociada a la asignatura en clase y desvalorización profesional que contribuyen para la aparición de disturbios musculoesqueléticos y emocionales. Múltiples factores del trabajo y los hábitos de vida hacen repercutir en la salud Del docente cambiando su calidad de vida. **Conclusión:** El estudio permitió investigar un escenario docente caracterizado por La elevada demanda de actividad asociado a la sobrecarga física y mental y desvalorización profesional. Es necesario el desarrollo de estrategias de intervención y evaluación de su aplicabilidad para la mejoría de la calidad de vida de profesores.

**Descriptores:** Docentes; Salud Laboral; Percepción; Salud Pública.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the work and its relationships to health have been guided by sociocultural, economic and productive relations, which allows it to differ according to the society in which it lives. The work-health relationship in the school environment requires education professionals to understand the methods of organization of work and the conditions that trigger the health-disease process in these professionals. Such knowledge contributes to the research on work processes and the repercussions on health due to the interaction between the environment and the individual<sup>(1, 2, 3)</sup>.

It is observed that, over time, the implementations in the organization of work, the changes in the educational system and the adoption of new technologies have generated several changes in everyday life of the teacher<sup>(4)</sup>. These changes had a deep impact concerning the increased demand for the work of this professional, which, in turn, limited his time for leisure activities and health care<sup>(4,5)</sup>.

The teaching work presents conditions that comprise physical, cognitive and affective efforts. Studies have shown specific factors of this profession play a major role in the development of negative effects on health<sup>(5,6,7)</sup>. Time

pressure, professional undervaluation, difficulty in keeping contact with colleagues and lack of autonomy are some out of several factors that have contributed to the onset of diseases and dissatisfactions, like the symptoms of anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion<sup>(5,6,7)</sup>.

Studies conducted in Brazil aiming to identify working and health conditions of teachers have contributed to the identification of mental health problems, musculoskeletal disorders and vocal health. Respectively, the Burnout syndrome, musculoskeletal pain and dysphonia have been pointed as teachers' major health problems<sup>(1,2,4,7-9)</sup>.

The search for better health conditions and quality of life for the teacher arises from the need to understand the relations that are inherent to the work regarding the structural and psychological factors that rule the teacher-work relationship. Additionally, it is important to deepen the knowledge through the perceptions of the worker in order to foster targeted policies.

Thus, this study aimed to analyze teachers' perceptions of the teaching work and the repercussions on their health.

## METHODS

This is a qualitative study conducted in a public school in the municipality of Jequié-BA. The qualitative research is a scientific activity aimed at the construction of reality; however, it is concerned with social sciences at a level of reality that cannot be quantified, working with the universe of beliefs, values, meanings and other deep concepts of relationships that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables<sup>(10)</sup>.

The state school system of this municipality had, in the year 2011, 12 schools, which were all located in an urban area. One out of the 12 schools was randomly chosen for the application of the study. Data were collected using the focus group methodology, which is characterized by the exchange of experiences concerning a certain issue, allowing the interaction between the participants and a mediator who fosters the debate in order to favor the exchanges and discoveries between subjects<sup>(11)</sup>.

Data collection occurred from October 2011 to January 2012. The meetings took place in the pedagogical coordination office of the school on days and times set in agreement with the coordination. During the meeting with teachers, the objectives and the conduct of the study were explained; thus, 12 teachers agreed to participate in the study and then signed the Free Informed Consent Form.

The focus group comprised one moderator, two observers and the study subjects, and two voice recorders registered the discussions<sup>(11)</sup>. The moderator was responsible for conducting the activities according to a pre-

established set of questions and the observers registered non-verbal aspects and the dynamics of the interaction between teachers. This interview questionnaire included questions about the expectations towards the activities to be developed in the school, influences of the teaching work on health, knowledge about body posture and lifestyle. Two meetings took place within a one-week interval, and they were enough for the development of the current study.

Transcripts of the speeches were made from the recordings and then underwent the Content Analysis Technique<sup>(12)</sup> following three moments: first, a “floating reading” of the transcription of the focus group was performed, making it possible to aggregate the main ideas that emerged during the discussions and their meanings. Secondly, the meaning units were selected from words, phrases, paragraphs and passages that presented a specific meaning in response to the questions that guided this study. Finally, the meaning units were categorized according to the degree of proximity and similarity, determining, therefore, categories that express meanings that provide a different view of the theme, which were codified in order to prevent them from being lost in the diversity of messages worked. Thus, three thematic categories emerged: Needs for changes in the work environment; Factors influencing the teacher’s health; Consequence of the teaching work on their health.

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the *Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia – UESB* (State University of Southwestern Bahia) under Opinion No. 209/2009. In order to ensure anonymity of participants, teachers were named T followed by a cardinal number (1,2,3...).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given below are the thematic categories that emerged in the study.

### Needs for changes in the work environment

The category “Needs for changes in the work environment” refers to the teachers’ yearning for changes in the work environment aiming at the maintenance and promotion of teachers’ health.

The identification of the work environment as a promoter of negative situations of health for the teacher can be noticed along with the needs for help in order to prevent these outcomes, i.e., teachers show the importance of adopting preventive methods in the school environment in order to limit and/or avoid work-related diseases like vocal, mental and musculoskeletal disorders. This can be seen in the following speeches:

*“It would be interesting if something could be done, if they cannot do anything about our voice, they should at least do something about these pains that start afflicting us”* (T2)

*“Aiming at the well-being of the worker, helping him and his family.”* (T3)

*“Prevention should have come well before.”* (T6)

*“Activities to prevent, in this case, to avoid feeling anything.”* (T8)

Problems related to teachers’ health have been shown by studies discussing the concern about the working conditions of these professionals<sup>(13)</sup>. A study conducted with teachers of the municipal school system of Salvador-BA showed that, in addition to many other factors, the excessive noise, temperature, humidity and dust were often present in the work environment<sup>(14)</sup>.

The teachers participating in the present research demonstrated they know about the health problems they have and recognize the need for health care strategies targeted at the professional in his work environment. However, there is a need for public policies and health actions to ensure promotion and rehabilitation taking into account health education in the school environment<sup>(4)</sup>. In the Brazilian Federal District<sup>(15)</sup>, strategies for the promotion of the vocal health of teachers of a certain school were important in the prevention of teachers’ health harms. Thus, there is a need for public policies aimed at teachers’ health with health programs developed by healthcare professionals<sup>(16)</sup>.

### Factors influencing the teacher’s health

Major impacts on the teacher’s health come from the new education policies, which changed the school organization and management. Work intensification can endanger teachers’ health and education quality through environmental and organizational determinants<sup>(17)</sup>.

In this sense, the category “Factors influencing the teacher’s health” showed aspects interfering in the health-disease process, pointing the work overload, the concern for their own health, the indiscipline among students, the organizational pressure by the school, the professional undervaluation and the inappropriate furniture as important elements for the occurrence of adverse events regarding the teacher’s health. These reports can be seen in the following transcriptions:

*“The workload and the number of students.”* (T6)

*“Given this social context we live, you should wonder... you have five classes... you got two hundred, imagine... two hundred different heads.”* (T1)

*“You gotta take a quick shower, sometimes you don't even relax and start a new activity.” (T10)*

*“I didn't look for medical care because it isn't something you can't bear, but it bothers.” (T1)*

*“Does anyone remember to stretch before writing?... That's what we're talking about, that's it, we are not used to it... I have never done that, I did it only once, those exercises the hearing doctors taught us.” (T3, T7)*

The speeches draw attention to the many aspects that influence the health-disease process of the teacher. The teacher's increased workload is an important aspect in his professional life, especially within the organizational context of the activities performed like teaching activities, reading, preparation of activities, among others that may not be in accordance with the purpose of the institutional/employment time. Another condition that leads to an increased workload is the fact that teachers have more than one job. These situations can overload teacher's functional performance and cause health harms<sup>(18-20)</sup> like general malaise, dizziness, fatigue, physical and mental exhaustion<sup>(21)</sup>.

Regarding the concerns for the own health, especially the ones related to the teaching work environment, the implementation of strategies aimed at continued care may be more efficient and effective. To create, stimulate, practice and continue the search for positive health habits should be included in everyday teaching work in line with the needs and particularities of the group and the organizational environment of the school, which should be expressed and desired.

Another important aspect mentioned by teachers is the noisy environment caused by students' indiscipline. The speech with too much effort and the continuous demand for this process can damage phonation structures and hence cause vocal alterations over time. Some of these factors are those related to the lack of information on how to produce speech with an appropriate functionality for the different teaching tasks, and the socioculturally developed life habits<sup>(22)</sup>.

The teachers' speeches express the classroom routine:

*“Students are not quiet; they don't pay attention to class.” (T4)*

*“You are afraid of having one student fight the other and finding yourself in the middle of it, understand?” (T12)*

*“We don't know how they're going to react; they are very aggressive.” (T12)*

It has been verified that “indiscipline” in the school environment, characterized by students' misbehavior,

causes a feeling of fear, anguish and emotional stress in teachers. The situations experienced in the school can trigger physical and mental alterations in teachers with the existence of an association between students' indiscipline and musculoskeletal and vocal complaints since the professional needs to speak with much effort and stand for long periods in order to keep the class under control<sup>(23)</sup>.

The pressure for school organization and the process of professional undervaluation are two conditions that have been pointed by teachers as conditions that negatively contribute to the maintenance of health.

*“I leave here worried about notes on the record book, I didn't sleep last night, I woke up at five in the morning, started to correct exam papers, before coming here, I have already filled two record books.” (T3)*

*“The course plan I should have written and delivered to the direction board is already delayed.” (T9)*

*“They try every single minute to distort your work.” (T10)*

*“At the end of the year they pay a starvation wage... I consider it a disrespect.” (T12)*

The pressure for school organization has contributed to an increased workload of teachers and is promoted by the imbalance of demands of the teacher's work and school deadlines<sup>(6,23)</sup>. Professional undervaluation is a condition that can be bidirectional for being a factor that contributes to the production of adverse effects for teacher's health and also for being a response to the conditions faced by this professional. In the latter, political-administrative factors like the forms of governmental recognition for this professional and the low payment are elements that can favor negative health outcomes<sup>(14,24,25)</sup>.

The evaluation of ergonomic aspects of the school environment was another factor characterized as a contributor to teacher's health problems.

*“I see myself like this all the time, I stand, lean on one leg only, I put the all the weight on one leg only.” (T1)*

*“When it's time to write, dudes... I start with the repetitive movements.” (T3)*

*“The blackboard is inappropriate for short people... I can only write from the middle to the bottom.” (T8)*

*“The desk, the chair. They keep you in a wrong posture...” (T11)*

Through the speeches, it is possible to see that the teachers assessed by the present research highlight aspects related to the furniture of the school and aspects related to body posture in the development of activities.

These conditions have contributed to the development of physical stress. It is important to highlight that keeping an inappropriate posture can lead to the onset of musculoskeletal disorders<sup>(8,9,20)</sup>.

Standing or sitting for long periods, in addition to the inappropriate furniture of the school, can directly and intensely damage the musculoskeletal structure and, at a second level, compromise mental health<sup>(26)</sup>. A study conducted with teachers of the municipal school system of Salvador-BA, Brazil, found a positive association between the inappropriate furniture of the school and musculoskeletal disorders in the dorsal region<sup>(8)</sup>.

### Consequence of the teaching work on their health

The reality of the teacher's life and the conditions and organizations of the teaching work are permeated by the school environment and influence the health-disease process of this professional<sup>(25)</sup>. Thus, the category "Consequence of the teaching work on their health" was expressed by teachers pondering aspects of emotional stress caused by the work, leisure deprivation, and musculoskeletal disorders.

*"We undergo stress every day, don't we? ... we undergo emotional stress too." (T5, T8)*

*"... the school is our priority, understand? and what about our leisure?" (T10)*

*"When I prioritize work my health is left behind, my leisure is left behind..." (T11)*

The speeches express teachers' tension at work and are associated with work-related factors like working long hours, increased workload and the perception of professional undervaluation, which together may produce psychoemotional consequences and lead to the onset of nervousness, emotional distress and stress, and also worsen emotional exhaustion<sup>(23)</sup>.

The organization of the work and the conditions imposed to the teaching work, which make teachers devote a considerable amount of time to school activities, in addition to the household chores and the professional growth, prevent the teacher from performing leisure activities. This situation includes the double day, which excessively demands teachers physically and mentally, and limits the time available for leisure activities<sup>(27)</sup>, i.e., the activities performed at the teacher's workplace can change the way he organizes his time and hence affect his will to leisure<sup>(17)</sup>. Being deprived of these activities may trigger stress<sup>(7)</sup>.

In the natural course of the teaching career, the teacher can present musculoskeletal problems like low back pain,

repetitive strain injury and muscle pains, which are caused by their working conditions, characterized by increased workload, inappropriate furniture and excessive demands. Teachers' speeches express these problems as follows:

*"I have serious problems in my cervical spine and they're reaching my hand." (T2)*

*"I finished correcting the exam papers and I had to bandage my arm before going to bed so I could move my arms the next day, understand?" (T9)*

*"I get like this, with this pain in my leg, the leg doesn't stop aching." (T10)*

Musculoskeletal disorders are considered one of the most common problems revealed by studies on teacher's health. The indicators for the occurrence of these events present very high prevalence in different places of study<sup>(6,8,9,28,30)</sup>. The investigation of this event unfolds work-related factors that contribute to its onset and maintenance, as the organizational aspects of the school, psychosocial aspects and the physical demands teachers face every day.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study aimed to verify, through teachers' perceptions, the working conditions and the health conditions of these professionals. Their speeches reveal a scenery that is characterized by an increased workload coupled with physical and mental overload and professional undervaluation.

The characteristics of their jobs have a negative impact on their health, making it difficult to perform leisure activities and favoring the onset and/or maintenance of psychoemotional and musculoskeletal disorders.

It is necessary to develop intervention and prevention problems in the work environment of these professionals in order to keep them at the schools. Additionally, intervention studies may help understand the use of these strategies in order to add positive events to the teacher's life.

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