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## Effects of teachers' stress and burnout on their professional performance in public secondary schools in Kenya

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### Abstract

This study explores the effects of stress and burnout on teachers in public secondary schools in Kenya. The research aims to assess the prevalence of stress among teachers, examine its diverse effects on professional performance, and propose implications for educational stakeholders. Utilizing a descriptive survey design, data was gathered through self-constructed questionnaires and interviews. The sample size of the study consisted of 240 teachers and 20 principals from 20 secondary schools. The findings reveal a significant majority of teachers (81.9%) acknowledging the influence of stress and burnout on their performance. This study illustrates the adverse effects reported by teachers, including low output, poor delivery in class, demotivation, lack of concentration, and disorganization. These outcomes underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance teacher well-being and the overall quality of education in the region. Implications for policymakers and educational institutions involve prioritizing teacher well-being, implementing organizational support structures, and integrating stress management modules into professional development programs. The study also emphasizes the need for ongoing research to further understand the specific causes and manifestations of stress among teachers in the Kenyan context. Addressing these challenges not only safeguards the well-being of individual educators but also bolsters the resilience and effectiveness of the teaching community, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes for students.

**Keywords:** Stress; Burnout; Teacher well-being; Teachers' professional performance

### 1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of education, the professional performance of teachers plays an important role in shaping the academic outcomes of students. Globally, research has underscored a significant link between teachers' stress, burnout, and their effectiveness in the classroom (Jackson & Rothmann, 2006; Pienaar & Van Wyk, 2006; Milner & Khoza, 2008). Kenny (2009) further emphasizes that teaching experience can serve as a determinant of extreme stress and burnout, suggesting that there exists a relationship between professional longevity and psychological well-being.

Anshel and Kaissidis (2007), in their study on coping strategies following stressful events, found that there is a relationship between stress, strain, and burnout, highlighting the importance of coping strategies and social support. Their findings support the notion that the professional environment, characterized by unity and understanding among colleagues, significantly impacts teachers' ability to navigate stress and burnout. A supportive atmosphere not only fosters well-being but also facilitates the integration of innovative ideas into teaching practices.

In the Kenyan context, the performance of learners is a matter of paramount concern for both the government and society. The Teachers Service Commission (TSC, 2008) identifies a critical challenge in the education sector, attributing

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suboptimal student performance not to staffing issues but rather to teachers lacking essential pedagogical skills. The introduction of the 8-4-4 system in 1985 amplified the responsibilities placed on teachers, requiring them to impart vocational skills to learners. Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) assert that overloaded teachers may distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work, leading to exhaustion and an inability to proactively respond to students' needs.

Looking ahead, the situation is poised to escalate with the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya. The CBC, introduced as an overhaul of the existing 8-4-4 education system, places additional demands on teachers by expanding their roles to encompass more personalized and holistic student development. This increased workload and the complex nature of the CBC may heighten the likelihood of burnout and stress among teachers, further exacerbating the challenges posed to their professional performance. In the specific context of Kenya, the scarcity of studies on teacher-related stress and workload is evident. Statistics from the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) reveal a concerning trend in KCSE performance, with a consistent decline in mean grades of C+ and above over the years. Recognizing the need to address this issue, this study sought to investigate the effects of stress and burnout on teachers' performance in public secondary schools in Kenya. The study aims to contribute valuable insights into the complex dynamics between teachers' psychological well-being, professional performance, and their ability to enhance student outcomes. By examining the specific challenges faced by teachers in the local context, the research hopes to inform targeted interventions that can uplift the teaching profession and, consequently, improve the educational landscape in Kenya.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

Teachers, like many individuals in demanding professions, grapple with stress and burnout, exacerbated by the significant time spent in the workplace (Locker, 2007). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the teaching profession, where teachers face the dual challenge of maintaining classroom discipline and managing an overwhelming workload, leading to emotional exhaustion (Kokkinos, 2007). The complexities of a rapidly evolving and technologically driven society further contribute to teachers' burnout, impacting their overall performance (Okumbe, 2007). Despite the critical role of teachers in shaping the future, the specific dynamics of work-related stress and burnout among public secondary school teachers in Kenya remain understudied. The consequences of burnout extend beyond personal well-being, affecting teachers' enthusiasm, engagement, and ultimately compromising their capacity to meet students' needs (Wentzel, 2016). Notably, variations in academic performance among schools in the region prompt the question: are these differences linked to teachers' stress and burnout? Addressing this knowledge gap is crucial for understanding the factors influencing teachers' well-being and performance, facilitating the development of targeted interventions to support educators.

#### *Objective of the Study*

The general aim of this study was to establish the effects of stress and burnout on teachers' teaching tasks in public secondary schools in Kenya. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- Establish the levels of stress and burnout among secondary school teachers.
- Determine the effects of stress and burnout on the performance of teachers in their teaching tasks.

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## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Concept of Stress and Burnout

Stress and burnout in the context of teaching are well-established phenomena with far-reaching implications for teachers' well-being and professional efficacy. Scholars have extensively examined the various dimensions of stress within the teaching profession, characterizing it as a complex interplay of external pressures and internal responses (Lonser, 2016). Defined as the body's physiological and psychological response to demands exceeding one's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stress manifests uniquely for teachers due to the diverse nature of their roles.

Moreover, burnout, often considered an advanced stage of chronic stress, is a prevailing concern in the teaching profession (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It is described as a state of prolonged physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from continuous exposure to stressors in the workplace (Edu-Valsania, Laguia & Moriano, 2022). The educational context, marked by high demands and responsibilities, amplifies the likelihood of burnout among teachers (Arvidsson, Leo, Larsson, *et al.*, 2019). Researchers emphasize burnout as a gradual process, indicating a gradual erosion of passion and commitment to the teaching profession over time (García-Rivera, Mendoza-Martínez & García-Alcaraz *et al.*, 2022).

To gain a deeper understanding of the concept of stress and burnout in education, it is essential to explore the psychological and emotional aspects associated with these phenomena. A study by Hakanen, Bakker and Schaufeli (2006) highlights the psychological strain experienced by teachers, emphasizing the link between excessive job demands and the manifestation of stress symptoms. Additionally, emotional exhaustion, a key component of burnout, has been identified as a critical factor influencing teacher attrition and job dissatisfaction (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

## 2.2. Sources of Stress and Burnout

Teachers encounter a myriad of stressors emanating from their professional responsibilities. The sources of stress and burnout among teachers are varied, stemming from the diverse nature of their professional responsibilities. A considerable body of literature underscores the diverse stressors that educators contend with in their daily roles. High workload is consistently identified as a primary stressor in the teaching profession (Arbia, Carbone, Stanzone & Szpunar, 2023). The pressure to cover curriculum requirements, prepare engaging lessons, and assess student performance creates a demanding work environment that can lead to heightened stress levels. Administrative pressures also significantly contribute to teachers' stress and burnout (Wanyonyi & Ouda, 2019).

The bureaucratic aspects of education, such as paperwork, documentation, and compliance with policies, can be time-consuming and mentally taxing for teachers. These administrative demands divert teachers' focus from instructional activities, contributing to heightened stress and diminishing overall job satisfaction. Moreover, time constraints pose a pervasive challenge for teachers (Hakanen *et al.*, 2006). The need to balance teaching responsibilities, grading, and lesson planning within limited time frames places additional strain on educators. This constant juggling act can result in feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion, further exacerbating the risk of burnout.

In addition to internal pressures, teachers grapple with external challenges related to maintaining classroom discipline and managing student behaviors (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The challenging roles of handling diverse student personalities, addressing disciplinary issues, and ensuring a positive learning environment add emotional and psychological burdens to teachers. The dynamic nature of the educational landscape, marked by societal expectations and technological advancements, introduces new stress elements into teaching (Khadka & Khadka, 2023). The pressure to adapt instructional methods to meet evolving educational standards, coupled with the integration of technology into the classroom, can lead to feelings of inadequacy and professional strain (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). It therefore emerges that teachers face a confluence of stressors arising from their professional duties. High workload, administrative pressures, time constraints, classroom management challenges, and the evolving educational landscape collectively contribute to the complex web of stress and burnout within the teaching profession.

## 2.3. Effects of Stress and Burnout in Relation to Teachers' Performance

### 2.3.1. Physical/physiological effects

The physical toll of stress and burnout on teachers has been extensively examined in the literature. Chronic stress has been linked to adverse health outcomes, including heightened levels of cortisol, commonly referred to as the stress hormone (American Psychological Association, 2018). Prolonged exposure to elevated cortisol levels can lead to fatigue, sleep disturbances, and compromised immune function, all of which impact teachers' overall physical well-being (Bellingrath, Weigl & Kudielka, 2008). In addition, studies have explored the physiological effects of burnout, revealing a correlation between emotional exhaustion and cardiovascular issues (Dimsdale, 2008). This connection underscores the severe implications of burnout on teachers' health, emphasizing the need for interventions to mitigate these physical repercussions.

### 2.3.2. Behavioral/relational effects

Behavioral and relational dynamics are significantly influenced by teachers' experiences of stress and burnout. Teachers experiencing burnout often exhibit increased absenteeism and decreased job commitment (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). The erosion of commitment is reflected in reduced engagement with colleagues and diminished participation in collaborative efforts (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Additionally, cynicism and emotional withdrawal become prominent behavioral manifestations, negatively impacting teacher-student relationships and the overall classroom environment (Maslach *et al.*, 2001).

### 2.3.3. Emotional and psychological effects

Emotionally and psychologically, the impact of stress and burnout on teachers is profound. A study by Ingersoll and Strong (2011) highlights the emotional exhaustion experienced by teachers, emphasizing the connection between

excessive job demands and the manifestation of stress symptoms. Burnout is associated with diminished job satisfaction, heightened feelings of cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). These emotional and psychological effects contribute to an overall decline in teachers' mental well-being and job performance. The erosion of teachers' enthusiasm and engagement further undermines their capacity to meet students' needs (Wentzel, 2016). Notably, this decline in performance is not limited to the academic realm; it extends to co-curricular activities and overall school climate.

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### **3. Materials and Methods**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The study utilized a descriptive survey design to collect research data. This research approach, as outlined by Denscombe (1998), is designed to offer a snapshot of a specific situation at a given time. Unlike experimental designs, survey research does not aim to manipulate variables or control conditions (Kelley, Clark, Brown & Sitzia, 2003). Given that the events or conditions being studied have already occurred, the researcher selects pertinent variables for the analysis of their relationships. The independent variables included physical complications, emotional exhaustion, behavioural disorders and changes in thinking process. The primary focus was to ascertain how these factors influenced teachers' professional performance. The dependent variables, reflecting aspects of teachers' professional performance such as emotions, drug and substance abuse, motivation, anxiety, and concentration, were determined through the lens of stress and burnout.

#### **3.2. Location of the study**

The research was conducted in Kandara Sub-County, situated within Murang'a County, Kenya. Spanning an area of 336 square kilometers and with an approximate population of 250,000 people, Kandara Sub-County is positioned approximately 61 kilometers from Nairobi, Kenya's capital. Kandara Sub-County is characterized by agricultural activities, with coffee and tea being common cash crops cultivated on both small and large scales. Residents are also engaged in small-scale daily farming and subsistence agriculture. The choice of Kandara Sub-County as the study location was driven by the pressing issue of declining school performance over the past five years, attributed to teachers' stress. The absence of prior studies addressing this challenge in the locality and the constraints of time and cost further justified the selection of Kandara Sub-County for the study.

#### **3.3. Target population and sample size**

The target group was all the 42 public secondary schools in Kandara Sub-County. The study targeted 840 teachers and 42 principals from the public secondary schools in Kandara sub-county of Murang'a County. From this population, stratified random sampling was used to select a sample of 240 teachers and 20 principals. This translated to 29.5% of which it was a miniature picture of the entire group.

#### **3.4. Data Collection and Analysis**

The primary instrument employed for data collection was a self-designed questionnaire. Administered to the sampled respondents from 11 secondary schools within the constituency, the structured questionnaire featured predominantly closed-ended questions. This method facilitated the collection of primary data on teachers' stress levels and their underlying causes. In addition to the questionnaire, the study utilized interviews as a supplementary data collection tool. These interviews were exclusively conducted with school principals, as they possessed crucial information not possible to entirely capture using the questionnaire. Face-to-face interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of aspects such as teachers' performance and motivational factors that may not have been fully addressed by the questionnaire. The data were then analyzed and presented using frequency tables, pie-charts and bar-graphs. Qualitative data was organized into themes and the findings were analyzed in line with the research questions.

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### **4. Results and Discussion**

#### **4.1. Levels of stress and burnout among teachers**

The first goal of this study was to establish the levels of stress and burnout among teachers in Kenya. As it turned out, majority (81.9%, n=167) of the teachers agreed that they had experienced stress or burnout in their place of work, 16.2% (n=33) indicated that they had not experienced stress or burnout in their place of work, while 2% (n=4) of the teachers did not give a response. Interviews with the school headteachers revealed that, majority (70%, n=14) were of the view that stress and burnout were experienced at their place of work sometimes, 20% (n=4) indicated that stress

and burnout were experienced at their place of work on more frequent basis while 10% (n=2) of the headteachers indicated that stress and burnout were experienced at their place of work rarely. These findings reveal a significant concern regarding the prevalence of stress and burnout among teachers in Kenya, with 81.9% of respondents acknowledging their experience of these challenges. This finding underscores the pervasive nature of stress and burnout within the teaching profession and necessitates a thoughtful examination of its implications. Previous research aligns with these findings, emphasizing that the teaching profession is particularly susceptible to high levels of stress and burnout (Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). The impact of stress on teacher well-being has been a consistent theme in educational research, with studies highlighting its association with reduced job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, and compromised effectiveness in the classroom (Hakanen et al., 2006; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

The acknowledgment of stress and burnout among teachers in this study raises concerns about its potential influence on the quality of education delivered. Past research has demonstrated a link between teacher burnout and diminished instructional quality, ultimately impacting student outcomes (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). This suggests that addressing teacher well-being is not merely an individual concern but has broader implications for the overall educational landscape. The results of this study also highlight the need for organizational support and interventions to mitigate stress and burnout among teachers. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive work environment, providing mental health resources, and implementing stress reduction strategies (Travers & Cooper, 1993; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Additionally, professional development programs should be reevaluated to incorporate modules on stress management and coping strategies, aligning with research that underscores the role of ongoing training in teacher well-being (Kyriacou, 2001; Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

#### **4.2. Effects of stress and burnout on teacher performance**

The study sought to establish the effects of stress on teachers' teaching task in public secondary schools in Kenya. It emerged from the study that majority of the teachers (86.3%, n=176) agreed that stress and burnout influenced their performance as teachers. Another 11.8% (n=24) indicated that stress and burnout did not influence their performance. This significant agreement among teachers underscores the pervasive nature of stress and burnout within the teaching profession and its palpable effects on their ability to carry out teaching responsibilities effectively. The results agree with existing literature that emphasizes the interconnectedness between teachers' well-being and their professional performance. Previous studies have demonstrated that high levels of stress and burnout can lead to reduced job satisfaction, diminished instructional quality, and compromised effectiveness in the classroom (Kyriacou, 2001). The current study's alignment with these established trends reinforces the urgency of addressing stress-related challenges among teachers to ensure optimal educational outcomes in public secondary schools. The implications extend beyond individual teachers to impact the broader educational landscape, emphasizing the imperative for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to enhance teacher well-being and, by extension, the quality of education provided in the region.

The teachers indicated that stress and burnout affected their performance in various ways, as depicted in Table 1. The results imply that stress and burnout had numerous adverse effects on teachers contributing to their dismal performance in their teaching and other roles including making them feel demotivated, lack concentration, get disorganized and hence the poor delivery in class. The finding that 27.3% of the teachers reported that stress and burnout led to low work output aligns with previous research that has consistently demonstrated a negative correlation between elevated stress levels and reduced productivity among teachers (Hakanen *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, 23.9% of teachers reported experiencing poor delivery in class due to stress and burnout. This echoes the broader literature that underscores the detrimental impact of burnout on instructional quality, with burned-out teachers struggling to maintain effective teaching practices (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The reported demotivation by 23.3% of teachers is consistent with studies highlighting the link between stress, burnout, and diminished motivation in the teaching profession (Maslach et al., 2001).

The results also show that there were 17.6% of teachers who indicated a lack of concentration as a consequence of stress and burnout. This finding corresponds with existing research that associates burnout with cognitive impairments, potentially hindering teachers' ability to focus and engage effectively in their professional duties (Kyriacou, 2001). The reported disorganization by 4% of teachers aligns with studies emphasizing the disruptive effects of stress on organizational skills and task management (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Interestingly, a small proportion (2.2%) of teachers expressed that stress prompted them to work even more, while 1.7% felt under pressure to work. These findings suggest varied coping mechanisms among teachers, with some responding to stress by intensifying their efforts. The varied responses by teachers underscore the complex nature of stress and burnout in the teaching profession, with individual teachers employing diverse strategies to navigate the challenges they face (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

**Table 1** How stress and burnout affected teacher performance

Effects of stress and burnout	No. of teachers	Percent
Low output/performance	48	27.3
Poor delivery in class	42	23.9
Feeling demotivated	41	23.3
Lack of concentration	31	17.6
Being disorganized	7	4.0
Stress motivates one to work even more	4	2.2
Feeling under pressure to work	3	1.7
Total	176	100

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## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shed light on the significant impact of stress and burnout on teachers in public secondary schools in Kenya. The findings reveal a concerning prevalence of stress and burnout among teachers, with a majority acknowledging its influence on their professional performance. The adverse effects reported by teachers, including low output, poor delivery in class, demotivation, lack of concentration, and disorganization, underscore the pressing need for interventions to address the challenges faced by educators in this region.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual teachers to the broader educational landscape. High levels of stress and burnout among teachers can compromise the quality of education delivered, impacting student outcomes and overall educational effectiveness. Policymakers and educational institutions should prioritize the well-being of teachers, recognizing it as integral to the success of the education system. To address these challenges, interventions should encompass organizational support, targeted professional development, and policies that prioritize teacher well-being. Creating a supportive work environment, offering mental health resources, and implementing stress reduction strategies are essential steps toward fostering a healthier teaching community. Professional development programs should incorporate modules on stress management and coping strategies to empower teachers with the skills to navigate the challenges of their profession effectively. The study also underscores the need for ongoing research to delve deeper into the specific causes and manifestations of stress and burnout among teachers in Kenya. Long-term interventions informed by empirical evidence can contribute to sustained improvements in teacher well-being and, consequently, the overall quality of education in the region.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of Conflict of interest*

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest in the authorship of this research.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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