

Psychosocial risks in education: understanding work-related factors affecting teachers' well-being

Summary

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This report examines psychosocial risks (PSRs) in the workplace and work-related mental and physical health outcomes in the education sector. The results combine a scoping literature review and interviews with key stakeholder representatives from the sector. The study also provides ten examples of good practices that can be implemented to prevent and manage PSRs and improve mental health and well-being among teachers. Finally, based on the study's findings, key considerations and policy pointers are presented to address occupational safety and health (OSH) in the education sector. This research is part of a series of projects coordinated by EU-OSHA that focus on psychosocial risks and mental health at work and that will lead to a European campaign on the topic in 2026–2028.

Understanding the European education sector

The education sector is an important contributor to the European economy and a major employer. More than 10 million people were employed as teaching professionals in 2022, which accounts for 5 % of total EU employment (Cedefop, 2023a). The teaching profession is predominantly female, with women comprising almost 70 % of primary and secondary education teachers, while men make up the remaining 30 %. In contrast, the gender balance shifts in tertiary education, where men represent 55 % of the teaching workforce and women account for 45 % (Eurostat, 2023). The sector is experiencing important demographic challenges as roughly 35 % of current teachers are now approaching retirement age (Cedefop, 2023b). As the supply of teachers falls, the demand for teachers rises; moreover, the increase in demand is also driven by an increase in student enrolment, particularly in upper secondary and higher education, and by a reduction in class sizes (EENEE-NESET, 2023).

This study focuses on instructional personnel (i.e. teaching professionals) within the education sector, which includes classroom teachers, academic staff, teacher aides and teaching/research assistants.

Psychosocial risk in the education sector

Almost 50 % of lower secondary school teachers (ISCED level 2) experience stress at work, while 24 % of teachers report that their job negatively impacts their mental health, and 22 % their physical health (OECD, 2019¹). It is important to note that the work environments of teaching professionals differ significantly from those of office-based jobs, healthcare and service sectors, and industrial workplaces (Wischlitzki et al., 2020). Classroom teachers and teacher aides work in primary and secondary schools, while academic staff and teaching/research assistants are primarily employed in higher education institutions such as universities. Despite differences of setting, all teaching professionals share a common reliance on continuous social interaction as a core component of their roles. As a result of this unique combination of social, emotional and intellectual demands, the nature of work in the education sector differs significantly from that of many other professions. Hence, generalised approaches from other sectors are insufficient to effectively address the specific demands of the education sector.

Different societal trends are likely either to exacerbate or to mitigate PSRs already found in the teaching profession. The demographic shift, including an ageing workforce and declining fertility rates, intensifies the strain as older teachers are more vulnerable to digitalisation challenges, while the presence of fewer younger entrants reduces workforce renewal. The continued expansion of education increases system demands, leading to higher workloads and greater performance pressure across teaching levels. Digitalisation has added further cognitive strain, especially for those who are less digitally adept, while the COVID-19 pandemic created disruptions that blurred work–life boundaries and accelerated technological transitions.

In the context of this study, the authors have adopted a categorisation of PSRs derived from COPSOQ III (Burr et al., 2019), which divides risk into interlinked categories.

▪ Demand at work

The demands placed on teachers can be broadly categorised into: **quantitative demands**, such as workload and time constraints; **cognitive demands**, involving the mental effort required to perform their tasks; and **emotional demands**, which include managing emotionally charged situations and performing emotional labour.

Quantitative demands at work, which involve balancing teaching-related workload with non-teaching responsibilities and extended working hours, are not disproportionately prevalent in any specific teacher

¹ The survey referred has been conducted in 48 countries and economies, including 31 OECD countries and economies (OECD, 2019).

group. According to the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), 71.5 % of lower secondary teacher workload is teaching-related, while the remaining time is divided between maintaining order and discipline (13 %) and performing administrative tasks (8 %), such as recording attendance and distributing school information or forms (OECD, 2019). In higher education, teaching roles are often combined with research responsibilities, an increasing workload and higher performance expectations than other groups (Nicholls et al., 2022; Kis et al., 2022). Balancing teaching and administrative workloads lead to chronic job stress and emotional exhaustion (Jentsch et al., 2023; Sanchis-Giménez et al., 2024). Long working hours are also linked to emotional exhaustion (Kreuzfeld et al., 2022).

Turning to cognitive demands, Cedefop (2022) reports that 63 % of teaching professionals in the EU had to learn to use new digital technologies for their jobs post-pandemic, and 64 % invested in more digital skills development. The report shows that older teachers are more adversely affected by digitalisation and the challenges of integrating new technologies into their work, leading to heightened stress levels (Ferreira-Santos, 2022).

In terms of emotional demands, 76 % of employers and OSH managers in educational institutions across the EU-27 report that difficult pupils present the most significant demand (ESENER, 2019). Moreover, 40 % of teachers report disruptive student behaviour as a concern, while less than 60 % describe the classroom environment as 'pleasant' (TALIS, 2018²). Teachers are often required to provide emotional support to students during personal crises, such as family issues, bullying or academic stress (O'Farrell et al., 2023). Teachers working in socio-economically disadvantaged schools may experience even higher pressure (Sinkkonen and Kyttälä, 2014). Female teachers, particularly in elementary and middle schools, are more vulnerable to emotional demands (Noor and Zainuddin, 2011). Other research points to secondary school teachers, who work with adolescents, facing more challenging emotional labour (Kidger et al., 2016). Also, emotional demands that stem from relationships with parents are more pronounced in lower educational grades (Peterson et al., 2011; Baxter and Kilderry, 2024). Additionally, younger and less experienced teachers, especially in elementary education, are particularly sensitive to student relations, which affect their well-being (Collie, 2021). Emotional labour is linked to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Arens and Morin, 2016; Kollerová et al., 2023; Tuxford and Bradley, 2015).

▪ **Work organisation and job content**

According to the OECD (2020), 96 % of teachers report having control over selecting teaching methods, 94 % over assessing students' learning, and 92 % over disciplining students. Nonetheless, lower and middle school teachers (ISCED levels 1–2) are likely more affected by issues of autonomy, since they face greater exposure to external control factors such as strict curricula, standardised testing requirements, and accountability measures that constrain their professional discretion (Salokangas et al., 2020). Reduced autonomy limits their ability to tailor instruction and manage classrooms in line with their professional judgement, often resulting in emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2009, 2010).

In contrast, teachers at higher levels typically face challenges related to larger class sizes, especially in secondary and higher education (ISCED levels 3–8), where class sizes have been increasing as a result of expanding educational access (Hindman and Bustamante, 2019). Larger class sizes are associated with increased workload, reduced individual interaction with students, and higher stress levels (Gil-Flores, 2017). Even though their teaching role is often combined with research responsibilities, academic staff face unique pressures regarding workload and performance expectations.

Multi-grade teaching occurs more frequently in rural schools and poses additional stress for primary school teachers (Darmody and Smyth, 2011; Burns and Machin, 2013). Managing classrooms with students of varying grade levels requires handling diverse learning needs simultaneously, thus increasing cognitive and emotional demands and stress. Conversely, urban and city schools tend to have larger class sizes and serve student populations with greater socio-cultural diversity and high educational needs, increasing the complexity of teachers' work environments and PSRs (See et al., 2020).

Based on TALIS 2018 data, 92.5 % of lower secondary teachers in EU countries attended at least one type of professional development activity in the 12 months prior to the survey (OECD, 2019). However, teachers still reported barriers that prevent them from accessing continuing professional learning opportunities, with time constraints (54 %), financial costs (45 %) and a lack of family time (37 %) being

² TALIS 2018 has been conducted in 48 countries and economies, including 31 OECD countries and economies (OECD, 2019).

the most cited examples (OECD, 2020). The nature of these barriers appears to be common to teachers working at all education levels. Although professional development participation is generally high in the teaching profession (OECD, 2020), the opportunities for career progression remain limited, especially at school level (Palma-Vasquez et al., 2022). Higher education often affords broader career prospects beyond teaching, including opportunities for research, publication and academic leadership, though the opportunities come with additional job demands and stressors.

▪ **Interpersonal relationships and leadership support**

Positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors, along with a recognition of professional contributions, are central determining factors of teachers' job satisfaction, motivation and well-being. Social support and collaboration among colleagues may be limited because the bulk of teachers' work is performed alone with their pupils (EU-OSHA, 2022a). Moreover, only half of teachers in the education sector receive regular support from managers and colleagues (Eurofound, 2020). Regarding cooperation among teachers, those in higher education may be more vulnerable as the result of an environment characterised by increased competition for resources and reputation. The competitive atmosphere has contributed to a weakening of collegial bonds and fostered a more strategic, individualistic orientation among academics, as highlighted by Kosmützky and Krücken (2023). Furthermore, the process of digitalisation has weakened professional relationships across all school levels, affecting the quality of teacher collaboration and support (Pavlovaite and Hallissy, 2021). Poor professional relationships might increase the risk of stress (Kelchtermans, 2017) and emotional exhaustion (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014).

In a study of Irish teachers, one third of teachers and senior management had been targets of bullying at least 'every now and then' by other teachers and staff members. On average, no less than 6 % of respondents reported enduring bullying at work either weekly or daily (DCU, 2022). Bullying by colleagues is a serious concern that disproportionately affects teachers from racialised groups at all education levels, highlighting an intersection of psychosocial risks related to both professional dynamics and systemic discrimination (Lander and Santoro, 2017; Arneback et al., 2023). According to Kollerová et al. (2023) and Dangleben (2019), victimisation through workplace bullying is associated with an increased risk of emotional exhaustion, burnout and depression among teachers.

Principals and supervisors play a key role in shaping education centres' climates and teachers' professional experiences (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2009). In situations where teachers are already stressed, low levels of supportive management are an important factor that can contribute to negative emotions (Ostermeier et al., 2023). Studies in Germany (Jentsch et al., 2023) and Italy (De Cordova et al., 2019) show that transparent, values-driven leadership and managerial support can buffer stress and reduce exposure to violence.

Recognition – both intrinsic and extrinsic – is crucial for sustaining teachers' motivation and sense of purpose. Nearly one third of employees in the education sector felt they had lost some sense of meaning in their work (Eurofound, 2020). Furthermore, public attitudes toward the teaching profession are generally positive but declining. The results from the European School Education Platform Education and Training Monitor 2023 shows that roughly 76 % of respondents considered teaching not to be a respected and valued profession in their country, while 82 % felt that teachers were not sufficiently appreciated for their work (ESEP, 2024). However, the figures vary significantly by country. Across the EU, teachers' perception of the value and importance of their profession remains low, with only 15.8 % feeling that their work is valued (OECD, 2020). The lowest levels of perceived recognition among teachers were recorded in Belgium (5.3 %), France (6.6 %), Slovenia (5.6 %) and Slovakia (4.5%). 'PISA panic' and intense media campaigns in the wake of declining outcomes on international assessments have led teachers to feel that they are being held accountable for systemic problems (Spruyt, 2021).

Teachers in higher education often hold higher education degrees, which formally acknowledge credentials and confer a degree of protective prestige that is commonly unavailable to other teaching sectors (Fuller et al., 2013). However, professional identity is complicated within academia by balancing research and teaching activities, with teaching frequently viewed as secondary to research. As a result, teachers receive less recognition and lower status in academic settings (Benavides Martínez, 2020).

▪ **Work–individual imbalances**

Almost one in five teachers are employed on a temporary contract, and in some countries, such as Spain, Austria and Romania, more than 25 % of lower secondary teachers are on fixed-term contracts and

there is a clear prevalence of short-term engagements (Eurydice, 2021). The number of young teachers with such work arrangements is particularly high compared to their older peers (Eurydice, 2021). This situation is especially concerning given the declining proportion of teachers under 30 in the EU, where only 8 % of primary and secondary teachers were under 30 as of 2022. Such employment conditions have a negative impact on younger teachers' health and well-being and significantly increase the risk of early-career attrition (Giunchi et al., 2020), exacerbating teacher shortages across many EU countries. A study shows that fixed-term contract teachers report lower well-being and maintain greater emotional distance from students, which may further affect job satisfaction and retention (Capone and Petrillo, 2020). There are significant differences in teachers' salaries between Member States. Additionally, in countries like Estonia, Ireland, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden, the average salaries for teachers at all or most education levels fall below per capita GDP (Eurydice, 2023). In addition, early-childhood teachers (ISCED level 0) tend to earn less, while upper secondary teachers (ISCED level 3) generally earn more, owing to differences in their minimum qualification requirements (Eurydice, 2023).

Almost 45 % of teachers stated that their job leaves little time for personal life (TALIS, 2018). Regarding work–life balance, female teachers are particularly vulnerable owing to the 'double presence' phenomenon: the simultaneous demands of professional responsibilities and disproportionate family caregiving duties, including childcare and eldercare (García et al., 2016). Their dual burden often results in increased stress and work–family conflict for women in teaching roles, especially in primary education, where women make up a higher proportion of the workforce. Academics and higher education teachers face blurred lines between multiple demanding roles, such as teaching, research, mentoring, pastoral care, consultancy and public engagement, which substantially elevates inter-role conflicts and burnout risk (Kinman, 2014; Slišković and Maslač Seršić, 2011). The digitalisation of education has further intensified these challenges by increasing 'borderlessness' in work schedules, blurring the boundaries between professional and personal life, and heightening work–life conflicts and feelings of isolation (Eurofound et al., 2020). This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when rapid shifts to online teaching imposed additional workloads and stress without adequate resources or preparation time. Evidence reviewed during the study indicates that inter-role conflict, particularly between work and personal life, increases the risk of stress (Kinman, 2014).

▪ **Conflict and offensive behaviours**

According to TALIS 2018 data, 14.5 % of lower secondary teachers identified their main sources of stress as intimidation or verbal abuse from students. Primary teachers report the highest levels of physical attacks by students and harassment by students' parents (Berlanda et al., 2019; De Cordova et al., 2019; Gerberich et al., 2011). The violence includes non-physical violence such as intimidation, verbal abuse, threats and bullying, but also physical assault (being hit, being pushed or having objects thrown). Special education teachers are particularly vulnerable to aggressive behaviours from students as a result of their students' complex needs and behavioural challenges (Jasik-Ślęzak and Kasian, 2019). Teachers from racialised groups also face a heightened risk of harassment and discrimination in the workplace, which can lead to feelings of isolation and increased PSRs (Arar et al., 2024).

In contrast, tertiary education settings tend to experience much lower rates of violence, threats and bullying, indicating that academics are generally less exposed to difficult students (EU-OSHA, 2022a; DANES, 2018). Nonetheless, non-physical violence is present across primary, secondary and higher education levels (Nyberg et al., 2021). Primary and lower secondary teachers, who often have more direct contact with family members, are more exposed to violence and harassment from parents. Research suggests that tensions between parents and teachers are on the rise and can sometimes escalate into verbal or physical conflicts. Evidence reviewed shows that challenging relationships with parents are associated with heightened stress levels among teachers (Otero-López et al., 2009; Rodríguez-Mantilla and Fernández-Díaz, 2017).

The shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated risks associated with offensive online behaviours. Teachers have faced increased exposure to cyberbullying, harassment and negative comments, particularly through social media and digital platforms (EU-OSHA, 2022a). Exposure to violence, bullying and cyberbullying heightens the risk of stress, anxiety and sleep disturbances (Berlanda et al., 2019; Rudkjoebing et al., 2020; EU-OSHA, 2022a).

Protective factors

While the reviewed literature's primary focus is on identifying psychosocial risk factors that contribute to adverse mental health outcomes, certain factors might act as both risk and protective factors. According to the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model (Bakker et al., 2005), job resources, such as autonomy, social support, and opportunities for professional development, can mitigate the negative impact of job demands on teachers' well-being. Six main categories of protective factors were identified as particularly relevant in promoting teachers' mental health and job satisfaction: autonomy and influence over work; collegial relationships (Olsen & Huang, 2019); positive relationships with students' parents (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2022); supportive school/university leadership (Jentsch et al., 2023; Harms et al., 2017); professional development opportunities (Kelchtermans, 2017); and favourable school characteristics, such as smaller class sizes (Eryilmaz et al., 2025), well-resourced institutions equipped with adequate materials and facilities (Vousiopoulos et al., 2019), teaching at the primary and lower-secondary levels (ISCED levels 1–2) (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2009), and teaching subjects outside the core humanities and mathematics–science curricula (Barbieri et al., 2019).

Impacts of psychosocial risks

The specific job characteristics and demands that are presented here show that the education sector is more vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes than other occupations (Iriarte Redín and Erro-Garcés, 2020). Work-related stress is highly prevalent among teachers. TALIS 2018 shows that nearly half of European lower secondary teachers report stress, though the figures vary widely by country (87 % in Portugal versus 49 % in Cyprus). Teachers also report elevated rates of insomnia, with studies suggesting a prevalence of between 36 % and 61 % (Gierc et al., 2023). Around 27 % of European teachers reported feeling emotionally exhausted during the pandemic, which is above the average across sectors (Eurofound et al., 2020). Anxiety is widespread among educators; for instance, 78 % of Spanish teachers reported symptoms during the 2020/2021 school year (Teacher's Ombudsman, 2022). A review by Agyapong et al. (2022) found that depression was the most frequently reported mental health condition among the studies on teachers included in their review. A study conducted in the UK including 555 secondary school teachers found that 19.4 % exhibited moderate-to-severe symptoms of depression, which were strongly associated with feeling unable to talk to a colleague when feeling stressed or down, dissatisfaction with work, and high presenteeism (Kidger et al., 2016). Burnout is a critical issue, characterised by exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. Meta-analyses by García-Carmona et al. (2019) found that nearly a third of studied teachers were suffering from severe burnout, with many experiencing depersonalisation and low levels of personal accomplishment. Mental health issues are often co-occurring. Studies demonstrate a strong overlap between stress, burnout, anxiety and depression, with high comorbidity rates worsening long-term health outcomes and increasing the risk of chronic psychological distress (Bianchi et al., 2014; Jones-Rincon and Howard, 2019).

Broader societal impacts

High levels of PSRs among teachers have far-reaching impacts beyond individual well-being, affecting workforce stability, student outcomes, and broader economic and social systems. Stress and burnout undermine teachers' job satisfaction, impacting both performance and retention (Admiraal and Kittelsen Røberg, 2023). Teachers who face high workloads, long hours or inadequate support systems are at greater risk of leaving the profession or retiring early (Madigan and Kim, 2021). The loss of teaching professionals can put strain on remaining staff and deepen teacher shortages across Europe (Eurydice, 2021; Scheuch et al., 2015). Additionally, teacher well-being directly shapes student outcomes. Supportive teacher–student relations correlate with improved academic scores (OECD, 2015). Conversely, emotionally exhausted or stressed teachers provide lower-quality instruction, diminished classroom engagement and less effective support (Oberle and Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Teacher attrition also disrupts learning continuity, which has been shown to reduce student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff, 2013; Harding et al., 2019).

The education sector is fundamental to the European economy, employing over 10 million people (Cedefop, 2023a). Teachers' exposure to PSRs contributes to substantial human capital and financial costs. Attrition forces schools to spend more on recruitment, training and substitute staff. Moreover, it can exacerbate existing inequalities, with under-resourced schools (often working in disadvantaged areas) struggling to retain or recruit new teachers (UNESCO, 2024). Healthcare systems also bear the burden. The European Trade Union Institute (2025) has estimated the economic toll of work-related

stress across the European Union at over €100 billion annually, with teaching professionals making up a significant component of the burden owing to their heightened exposure to PSRs.

Conclusion and policy pointers

Teachers in the education sector face unique psychosocial risks that significantly affect their mental health and well-being. While society may express general respect for teachers, psychosocial risks such as low pay, heavy workloads and poor work–life balance can undermine this respect in practice, leading teachers to feel less valued than they are in theory (OECD, 2020). Moreover, the psychosocial risks are not distributed equally across the teaching workforce. Primary and special education teachers are more exposed to violence and parental conflicts, while higher education staff experience work–life imbalances, large class sizes and competitiveness. Younger teachers face insecure contracts, low pay and limited mentoring, whereas female teachers are particularly affected by work–family conflicts. Despite the challenges, protective factors such as supportive leadership, strong collegial and parent relationships, smaller classes, and professional development opportunities can help to mitigate risks. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing digitalisation have further amplified existing pressures, eroding work–life boundaries and intensifying stress. Yet psychosocial risks in education remain underestimated compared to physical hazards and are often inadequately managed because of resource, legal and expertise constraints. To address these issues effectively, a systemic and sector-specific approach is required. Key considerations and policy pointers for different stakeholder groups include:

- **Employers.** Conduct systematic psychosocial risk assessments using tailored tools (e.g. EU-OSHA OiRA) to identify and address sector-specific risks.
- **Social partners.** Advocate for stable contracts, fair pay, and mentoring programmes to support younger and new teachers. Promote campaigns that address teacher well-being, reduce discrimination, and advance continuous training and transparent reporting of psychosocial risks.
- **Researchers.** Develop and evaluate evidence-based interventions to reduce workload and emotional demands while enhancing job resources. Focus on vulnerable groups such as younger teachers, women, educators from racialised groups, and special education professionals.
- **Policy-makers.** Invest in reducing class sizes and improving student–teacher ratios to ease cognitive and emotional burdens.

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