

BURNOUT SYNDROME AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

BURNOUT SYNDROME IN PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61273/neyart.v1i2.211>

| Received: March 16, 2026 | Accepted: May 19, 2026 | Published: June 30, 2026

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Abstract—This study presents the results of the design, pilot testing, and validation of a test to assess burnout syndrome in teachers working in federal elementary schools under the Chihuahua State Education Services (SEECH). The objective was to classify the causes of burnout among teachers and to create a teaching guide that fosters favorable environments conducive to prevention within these institutions. The study employed a mixed-methods approach and a descriptive design, based on the constructivist paradigm. Data were collected for pilot testing; the test was designed and developed; it underwent a thorough evaluation by experts; it was administered to teachers; and it was re-evaluated by experts along with the guide. The design of the guide—which included the test to assess burnout in teachers and suggested techniques to prevent this syndrome—proved highly useful in revealing the actual situation of individual teachers.

Keywords—emotional exhaustion, burnout, work environment, work overload, administrative overload.

Abstract—This research presented the results of the design, piloting, and validation of a test to assess Burnout Syndrome in teachers working at federal elementary schools under the Chihuahua State Education Services (SEECH). The objective was to classify the causes of burnout among teachers and to create a didactic guide that fosters favorable environments, thereby enabling prevention within the institutions. Using a mixed-methods approach and a descriptive study design, within the constructivist paradigm, data was collected for the pilot study; the test was designed and developed, and it underwent a thorough evaluation by experts. It was administered to teachers and re-evaluated by experts along with the guide. The design of the guide, which included the test to assess burnout among teachers and suggested techniques to prevent this syndrome, proved to be highly useful in revealing the actual situation of individual teachers.

Keywords—burnout, emotional exhaustion, administrative burden, work burden, work environment.

INTRODUCTION

Burnout, also known as the Burnout Syndrome, is a chronic condition associated with an inadequate coping response to the psychological demands of work; it impairs the quality of life of those who experience it

suffer from it, and the quality of care declines. It primarily affects physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and teachers, as these are professions with high emotional and intellectual demands. International field studies have prompted specialists in the field of burnout to implement experimental models that contribute to the study and understanding of the topic.

Although the field of knowledge is very broad, few studies have been conducted; however, the findings are troubling from the perspective of health and quality of life; which is why the World Health Organization declared burnout syndrome an occupational risk factor in 2000 (World Health Organization, 2000) and it is currently classified under Category 24: Factors influencing health status or contact with health services in the International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organization, 2024). Furthermore, Patricia Lozano, a human development consultant at UNAM (UNAM DGCS, 2023), highlights that surveys conducted in 2023 point to a new pandemic she termed “the worker burned out by work-related stress or occupational burnout” (Burnout Syndrome).

RANDSTAND (2015) notes that, according to the National Institute of Statistics, 59% of workers in Spain suffer from some form of stress. According to UNAM, 40% of Mexican workers suffer from Burnout Syndrome (UNAM Global Revista, 2023). These alarming figures include a large portion of elementary and secondary school teachers, which highlights the need for research on this issue, as many professionals in the field of education experience the symptoms of this syndrome as a result of the daily stress they face in the classroom—often without even realizing that, left undetected or untreated, this condition escalates rapidly.

The value of this study lies in the fact that the figures presented by the National Autonomous University of Mexico through UNAM Global Revista (2023) show a potential increase in this syndrome in recent years, particularly in professions characterized by grueling work schedules and a dysfunctional organizational culture; therefore, we are faced with a finding that requires an understanding of the reasons behind its emergence in this decade. By designing a test that specifically assessed this situation for workers in the education sector, we were able not only to identify the causes of this problem but also to open the door to developing strategies for timely intervention and exploring treatment alternatives, such as the various techniques suggested in the guide for preventing and/or reducing stress.

There are numerous instruments and scales for measuring this phenomenon, with those aimed at healthcare personnel being the most common (Díaz and Gómez, 2016). There are also those designed for any type of work (Torres et al., 2019). Upon reviewing these instruments, we recognized the pressing need to consider specific elements of the educational work environment for teachers in Mexico, given that the current demands of this profession are increasing and the surrounding environment must be taken into account to determine the causes of teacher burnout, making this premise one of the research objectives.

Another objective was the design and evaluation of an instrument that considered four specific dimensions prevalent among elementary school teachers in their teaching practice: motivation, work and administrative overload, emotional exhaustion, and work environment. These areas have a multidimensional impact, within a holistic perspective that progresses through four phases: the stress phase, the exhaustion phase, and the defensive coping phase. According to Cherniss (1982, as cited in Martínez Pérez, 2010), these phases occur through a process of psychological adaptation between the stressed individual and the stressful work environment.

In the field of education, particularly among classroom teachers, there is little information available about this syndrome and its implications. However, it is occurring with increasing frequency, progressively encroaching on various aspects of the individual's life in concentric waves that gradually expand to affect the physical, emotional, and mental realms (Marqués et al., 2005). This aspect was considered of great importance; therefore, one of the objectives was to develop a guide with strategies to promote environments that prevent burnout among elementary school teachers. **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Focusing on the educational workplace, we identify burnout syndrome as one of the main factors affecting teacher performance at various levels. The research focused on the design, assessment of functionality, and operability of a test to diagnose burnout among elementary school teachers, as well as on proposing strategies for managing stress, compiling all of this into a guide. Therefore, the aim is to focus on defining how burnout directly affects teachers working in the classroom, as well as to provide general information about the condition.

The study was conducted under a constructivist paradigm, taking into account the views of Berger and Luckman (2003) that the real world is perceived through social interactions and the mobilization of resources and representations; as the intention of the study was to describe and explain the processes in which the substantive role of teachers and students in the construction of knowledge and learning is assessed, in order to generalize and explain the situation surrounding burnout.

This section was based on an empirical investigation of the topic, using a random probability sample of personnel working in elementary education as a reference. To this end, a previously validated questionnaire was designed, administered, and analyzed, providing relevant information on the burnout situation in Chihuahua. A state-wide exploratory-descriptive study was conducted; the procedures and techniques applied, the analysis of the results, and their systematization are described below.

The exploratory study was conducted in the South Central region of the state, which comprises three educational sectors containing both public and private schools—urban and rural, multigrade, and full-service—located within the following municipalities: Sector 25: Meoqui, Delicias, Julimes; Sector 26: Delicias, Rosales; Sector 27: Camargo, La Cruz, and Saucillo. A probabilistic random sample of teachers working exclusively in classroom-based primary education was selected, since their long-term tenure at their schools and stability over extended periods enhance the effectiveness of the consultation and their availability to complete the survey. This sample was drawn from a population of 864 teachers (90 teachers from the South Central Region of the state of Chihuahua). The sample was selected using cluster sampling, meaning that only elementary school teachers teaching first through sixth grade were considered.

The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire, completed by 90 elementary school teachers working in classroom settings. Some questionnaires were distributed and collected in hard copy, while others were submitted electronically via Google Forms; most were distributed through the WhatsApp app. The data were processed using SPSS software, in accordance with (Aceves, 1994; Taylor and Bogdan, 1987). This methodology outlines the strategies used to obtain information and build knowledge about the subject under investigation; it provides the means to carry out the research.

Data analysis was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, as the closed-ended questions were processed using quantitative tools (Arias, 2006). This involved interpreting descriptive statistics and frequency analyses (median, mode). Meanwhile, the open-ended questions were analyzed through qualitative scrutiny, classifying the teachers' opinions and grouping them into categories to identify discrepancies and commonalities. (Weber, 1968) notes that not everything can be explained from a quantifiable perspective.

We chose to analyze the questions separately: first the closed-ended multiple-choice questions, then the Likert-scale questions, and finally the open-ended questions, specifying the number assigned to each question.

DEVELOPMENT

It is said that there is no single definition of the topic; despite years of research, each author conceptualizes it in a unique way based on their own perspectives and interests, establishing their own variations. Although it is evident that most consider it a multidimensional condition, this polysemy in the term is generally accepted and widely used.

Burnout, also known as Burnout Syndrome, is a chronic condition associated with an inadequate coping response to the psychological demands of work; it impairs the quality of life of those who suffer from it and reduces the quality of care provided. It affects physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and teachers.

Conceptual Frameworks

Silva and Carlotto (2003, p. 146) emphasize that "burnout in education is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon resulting from the interaction between individual factors and the work environment."

According to Marqués et al. (2005), teachers' stress response is very widespread and frequent, and it "encompasses changes or consequences related to teachers' physical and psychological health, as well as motivational or behavioral changes that lead to low levels of job satisfaction and intentions to leave the profession" (p. 127).

For the purposes of this document, burnout will be defined as: "The imbalance between organizational demands (work-related, administrative, and environmental) and personal resources, as well as the individual's sense of motivation in relation to the work performed. It manifests primarily as emotional exhaustion."

Burnout syndrome is a process that progressively encroaches on various areas or dimensions of the individual, forming concentric waves that gradually expand and affect the physical, emotional, and mental realms.

As can be seen, burnout syndrome is characterized by various human dimensions from a holistic perspective. Of these, the following are considered most relevant for this study of elementary school teachers engaged in teaching practice: motivation, work and administrative overload, emotional exhaustion, and the work environment.

According to Santrock (2002), motivation is a complex process, as it involves a variety of emotions and actions—both biological and learned—that lead individuals to engage in certain behaviors, which in turn enable them to effectively tackle specific tasks or daily activities. Workload refers to an excess of qualitative and quantitative demands related to work. The work activities inherent to teaching, combined with daily demands and the extra effort each professional exerts to respond satisfactorily to these demands, often exceed their capacity for resilience, which raises stress levels and leads to burnout. Coincidentally, Mulki et al. (2013) and D’Anello et al. (2000) highlight that work overload is one of the main factors contributing to work-related stress.

Currently, the education sector is experiencing an increase in the bureaucratization of administrative processes and procedures. Work overload has a significant effect on factors contributing to burnout.

It is common for teachers to find that the time they spend performing their job duties prevents them from taking time for themselves; they ignore their own needs and tend to put on a brave face, pushing themselves beyond what is humanly possible. Much research has been conducted on the work environment and organizational structure. Castro (2012, p. 72) states that “the work environment has a negative influence on the onset of stress, an aspect that, at some point—when it cannot be controlled or managed—can develop into burnout syndrome.”

Therefore, it is imperative to care for and meet the physical and emotional safety needs of employees in the education sector, particularly classroom teachers. Implement relevant programs that provide them with adequate working conditions and relevant, timely, and assertive communication. Foster motivation, teamwork, proactive relationships, and recognition

of achievements. Offer opportunities for professional development with compensation commensurate with their effort and work. Likewise, performance evaluation through positive feedback plays a key role in the organization's success.

RESULTS

The results confirm the need to implement measures to counteract high levels of stress among teachers, as the test indicates that burnout is a latent issue in this profession. Therefore, it is imperative that institutions offer academic programs aimed at strengthening the socio-emotional well-being of professionals who face high demands in this field. In light of these compelling findings, Barrientos et al. (2019) recommend that educational institutions strengthen intellectual and professional competencies through innovative strategies. Furthermore, Gutiérrez et al. (2016) note that when a person recognizes their own emotions, they are able to manage situations by regulating their emotional state. In this regard, the guide's section-based design allows teachers to understand the concept of occupational burnout through a brief theoretical and conceptual overview of the term "burnout," its manifestations, and its impacts across various dimensions. The test, structured around four dimensions with its expert-validated Burnout Syndrome measurement scale—which has an average score of 4.6 out of 5 and a variance of 0.3 among the different scores—was found to provide a quantitative diagnostic assessment of each participant's status regarding occupational burnout syndrome. Finally, the variety of techniques suggested to prevent or reduce stress and manage emotions—along with tracking progress—makes it possible to provide support to education professionals.

DISCUSSION

The findings mentioned in the results section are described in detail in the following paragraphs: Teachers are unaware of burnout syndrome, even though they exhibit symptoms of emotional and physical exhaustion. In this regard, Farber (1984) emphasizes that the state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion is caused by prolonged involvement in emotionally demanding situations. For their part, Maslach and Jackson (1986) consider that the symptoms of burnout develop sequentially in terms of the emergence of overarching traits. One of these is physical and psychological exhaustion.

In general, educational institutions do not provide any guidance or information on this topic.

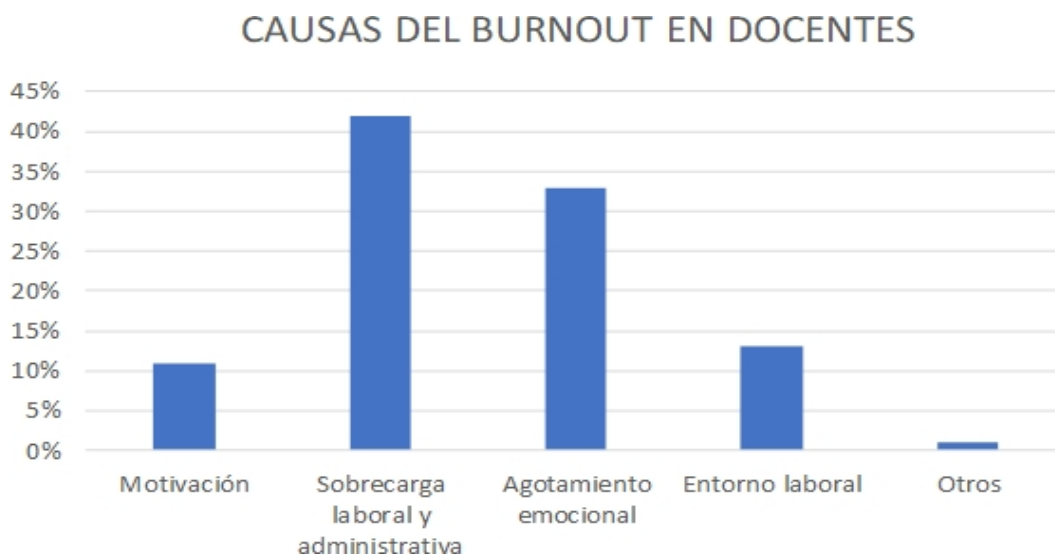
Table 1. *Results of a preliminary survey of teachers.*

1. Do you know anything about burnout syndrome?	Yes, I am familiar with it		No	
	48%		52%	
2.- What are the causes of burnout among teachers?	Low job satisfaction	Financial compensation	Administrative workload	Relationships within the institution
	33%	13%	42%	12%
3. Have you ever experienced symptoms of emotional and physical exhaustion to the point of extreme exhaustion	Always	Almost always	Sometimes	Never
	19%	23%	36%	2%
4. Do you consider it necessary for the institution to have a tool or manual to detect and prevent Burnout Syndrome among teachers	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree agree
	64%	30.5%	5.5%	0%

Source: *Author's own work.*

The causes of burnout among teachers were identified through theoretical inquiry and empirical analysis using questionnaires and interviews. These causes served as the basis for designing and evaluating the test, which focused on four specific dimensions prevalent among elementary school teachers in their professional practice: motivation, work and administrative overload, emotional exhaustion, and work environment.

Figure 1. *Summary of results.*



Source: *Author's own work.*

These four factors carry significant weight compared to others such as: addressing the specific needs of their students, low salaries, limited academic progress, undisciplined students, and parents who are absent from their children's education—to name a few. As shown in the table, these factors combined account for only one percent. In this regard, the joint report by the International Labor Organization and the World Health Organization (ILO-WHO, 1984) mentions that the work environment contains various factors of different natures that are stressful, such as those related to organization, the quality of human relationships, and work systems. When these factors interact, they affect the mental and physical well-being of workers.

The results of the test reveal the following: Of the four dimensions assessed by the test—motivation, work and administrative overload, emotional exhaustion, and work environment— A high level of work and administrative overload is observed, followed by emotional exhaustion, work environment, and finally motivation. High scores are observed for items related to the work environment, where there are always immediate demands that do not

relate to the teaching process, which leads to the feeling that there is not enough time to complete the work. Various authors, such as Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1977); Marqués et al. (2005); and Pettegrew and Wolf (1982), agree that the lack of time to address the multiple responsibilities that have accumulated on teachers is the fundamental cause of their burnout. Maslach (1986) highlights a subcategory in which she emphasizes organizational theory. She argues that the triggers of burnout are the organizational climate, structure, and culture, role dysfunctions, and a lack of organizational health.

The emotional exhaustion dimension yields high scores on items related to a lack of time for enjoyable activities, as well as on those related to headaches, neck pain, and back pain. The Antonio Alayón Neurological Center in Spain (Centroalayon, 2018) describes this dimension as a state reached through emotional and cognitive overload; it is extreme mental exhaustion accompanied by severe physical fatigue and primarily muscular pain; it may also be accompanied by somatic symptoms. It develops slowly and silently. The report emphasizes that the best way to overcome this state is to relax and rest by engaging in rewarding activities.

On the other hand, respondents indicate in the work environment dimension that the material and infrastructure resources needed to perform their jobs well are poor. They also rate the level of commitment to supporting the work of others as poor, and, in equal measure, communication among staff (colleagues and supervisors). These results support the studies by Travers and Cooper (1997), which suggest changes at the organizational level—such as providing counseling support and increasing material, personnel, and time resources—which would lead to a substantial improvement in the psychological health of education workers.

The results regarding motivation are puzzling because, despite the negative impact of the other areas, the percentages indicate that respondents “almost always feel satisfied when performing their work.” This is true even though they report that their schedule, responsibilities, and workload are never proportionate to the compensation they receive. On this point, Hederich-Martínez and Caballero-Dominguez (2016),

emphasize that motivation plays a fundamental role in thought and action. Autogenic motivation allows one to remain positive and inspire others to a state of well-being and security. The overall test scores highlight that 48% of teachers are experiencing high levels of stress and 4% are experiencing burnout. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1986), as well as Dr. Selye, cited by Neidhardt et al. (1989), a high level of stress disrupts the harmony between body and mind, making it impossible not only to perform one's work effectively but also to respond appropriately to everyday situations.

Table 2. *Summary of test results.*

No.	TEACHERS/TEST	SCORE	RESULTS
1	19% of teachers	80 or less	LOW
2	29% of teachers	81–120	MEDIUM
3	48% of teachers	121–160	HIGH
4	4% of teachers	161–200	BURNOUT

Source: *Author's own analysis.*

This finding is striking, given that the percentage of teachers affected by high levels of stress is considerable. Furthermore, considering Navarro's (2016) description of high stress—as a series of changes that occur slowly and progressively, escalating unnoticed until burnout sets in—these numbers are alarming. Kelchtermanns and Strittmatter (1999) emphasize the prevention of burnout among teachers from three perspectives: first, public administration focused on educational policies promoting recognition and school autonomy; second, the provision of personal and material resources such as financial compensation, promotions, and improvements in working conditions; and third, the creation of support and counseling services.

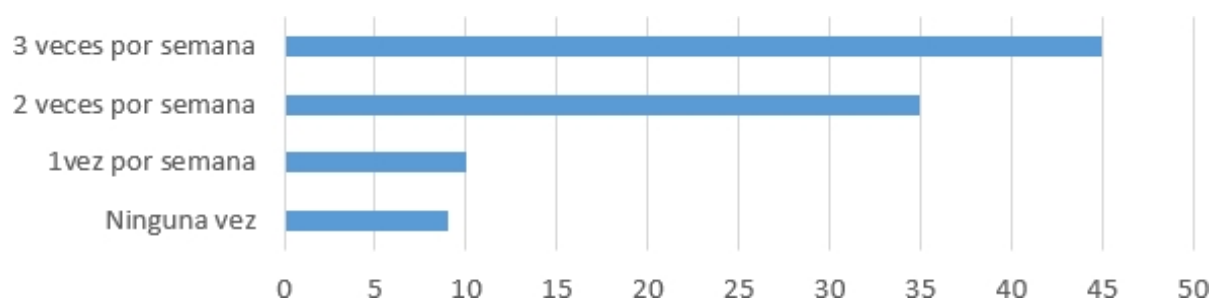
Regarding the implementation and monitoring of the outcomes of strategies to manage work-related stress using simple techniques to address this problem and manage emotions, the implementation provided basic tools that improved the organizational climate, communication, and the situation of each teacher. To assess the effectiveness of the techniques,

the results of the assessment tool were analyzed to document the observed outcomes, and a matrix was created based on teachers' observations as they applied each technique.

Data from a three-month follow-up period after the techniques were implemented was collected to assess their results. The analysis reveals the following in three areas: systematization of the techniques' implementation on a weekly basis; the usefulness of the techniques used; and other benefits that the teachers reported experiencing.

The results regarding systematization show that 91% of the teachers implemented the proposed techniques with varying frequency; these teachers belong to groups in which a space was provided for them to jointly develop the suggested techniques. Consistent with this finding, authors such as Gonzalez et al. (2018) and Freire et al. (2016) highlight the importance of group settings and active listening as forms of emotional support that influence the prevention and treatment of high stress and burnout, which are associated with a significant improvement in physical and emotional well-being.

Figure 2. *Summary of the application of relaxation techniques,*



Source: *Author's own work.*

Teachers who implemented these techniques report that, in doing so, they experienced various sensations that helped them manage stress, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Usefulness of relaxation techniques.*

TECHNIQUES	USEFULNESS
Deep breathing	Reduced the sensation of pain. Improved lung capacity.

Muscle relaxation	Helped identify and cope with the of stress
Working with thoughts	Helped adapt better to changes.
One more step	Practiced aspects of a assertive .
It improves empathy	It fosters collaborative work.
Stimulated creativity	It facilitated problem-solving.
Turns challenges into opportunities	It helped dealing withcrises with greater strength and determination.

Source: *Prepared by the author.*

Helping teachers become aware of their current situation enabled them to take steps to improve their emotional and physical well-being; once they began this process, they set out to improve their health and work more efficiently, which had a direct impact on the workplace and on the students' holistic education. This finding is supported by Smith (2011), who points out that high levels of stress predict physical and mental health problems.

Building on the technique's ability to enhance empathy, favorable results were obtained in collaborative work. As Kyriacou (1987, 2003) notes, when a teacher discusses problems and exchanges opinions with a group of colleagues, they feel understood and acquire the necessary tools to carry out appropriate interventions.

Other benefits reported by teachers who voluntarily provided additional observations on the results after implementing the techniques for a three-month period include: The analysis of the results is impressive, as it demonstrates a significant improvement in pain levels and interpersonal relationships, highlighting the importance of creating spaces, policies, and school organizational structures that prioritize these types of exercises in daily school life.

Table 4. *Categories highlighted by teachers.*

CATEGORIES	TOTAL
Improved posture	Very high consensus

Warmer interpersonal relationships	High consensus
Awareness of sensations associated with tension.	Moderate consensus
Greater concentration	Low consensus

Source: Author's own work.

The guide was provided in print format; however, some participants suggested developing a digital app for taking the test and tracking progress with the strategies, as they consider mobile devices to be more practical and useful than printed materials. This proposal was very interesting and will be taken into account.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the proposal contained in the guide are compelling regarding its usefulness and the pressing need to address and diagnose burnout syndrome among teachers who work in front of classes in elementary schools.

The design and implementation of the test, as well as the guide, help provide a comprehensive assessment of each teacher's situation and an overall analysis that is useful to the institution. It also provides each school principal with relevant information about the work environment and dynamics, enabling them to address the deteriorated and dysfunctional aspects that undermine the work environment, as well as the teaching staff's proactivity and effectiveness.

Regarding the implementation and monitoring of the outcomes of strategies for managing work-related stress, it is concluded that the results obtained after applying these techniques are satisfactory and have improved teachers' personal well-being in terms of their physical and emotional health, reducing symptoms of pain and improving interpersonal relationships.

Based on the testimonies provided by expert teachers and teachers who participated in the validation process of the proposal—which consisted of a Theoretical-Conceptual Framework, a test to assess burnout syndrome, and the use of a compilation of stress management techniques devised by experts—it is reaffirmed that the proposal is functional, applicable, and replicable in other educational contexts.

FUTURE WORK

This research indicates that the two main causes of burnout among elementary school teachers are administrative overload and interpersonal relationships. In future work, the aim is, on the one hand, to investigate which administrative tasks teachers perform that do not belong to their core duties, as well as to propose ways to relieve them of these burdens; on the other hand, to investigate what causes interpersonal relationships with their work teams to become strained and to find ways to smooth out friction and even make those relationships more pleasant. In this way, the main root causes of burnout among elementary school teachers would be addressed. Subsequently, we will evaluate whether this syndrome is present at other educational levels and identify its underlying causes.

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