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Managing work-related stress among university teachers who serve students with ASD

Manejo del estrés laboral en docentes que atienden estudiantes con TEA en el ámbito universitario

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Abstract

The present research aimed to analyze the management of work-related stress among university professors, with a special distinction between those with autism. To this end, a qualitative methodology based on phenomenological observation was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight professors, delving into their personal experiences and experiences. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study, which facilitated a dialogic and interactive exchange during data collection, allowing for a detailed exploration of perceptions and coping with work-related stress. The results demonstrate the significant influence that the attitudes of social stakeholders exert on professors' stress management. It is concluded that universities should not only implement training programs focused on addressing diversity, but also provide comprehensive support to professors who work with students with special needs. This dual strategy would not only benefit students but would also contribute to reducing professors' work-related stress, improving their well-being and academic performance in the university context.

Keywords: professors, work-related stress, students with ASD.

Resumen

La presente investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar la gestión del estrés laboral en docentes universitarios, haciendo una distinción especial entre aquellos con autismo. Para ello, se empleó una metodología cualitativa basada en la observación fenomenológica. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a ocho docentes, profundizando en sus experiencias y vivencias personales. Todos los participantes dieron su consentimiento informado para formar parte del estudio, lo que favoreció un intercambio dialógico e interactivo en la recopilación de datos, permitiendo explorar a detalle las percepciones y afrontamientos del estrés laboral. Los resultados evidencian la significativa influencia que ejerce la actitud de los actores sociales en el manejo del estrés entre los docentes. Se concluye que las universidades deben no solo implementar programas de capacitación centrados en la atención a la diversidad, sino también proveer un apoyo integral a los docentes que trabajan con estudiantes con necesidades especiales. Esta doble estrategia no solo beneficiaría a los estudiantes, sino que también contribuiría a reducir el estrés laboral del profesorado, mejorando su bienestar y desempeño académico en el contexto universitario.

Palabras clave: docentes, estrés laboral, estudiantes con TEA.

Introduction

This study addresses the distress caused by occupational stress among educators who work with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a university context. The daily routine and professional competition, which often lead to anxiety and uncertainty, are exacerbated for these educators due to the multiple roles they must fulfill. In addition to their academic responsibilities, they face unique challenges that require significant adaptability, empathy, and specialized knowledge, as well as both academic and emotional preparation to support the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN).

According to Barrera-Pintado and Baculima-Suarez (2024), occupational stress severely impacts the physical and mental health of educators, manifesting in issues such as insomnia, cardiovascular risk, anxiety, and depression, often without the affected individuals being aware of their conditions. Sánchez et al. (2022) caution that the inability to manage emotions increases the vulnerability of teachers. Complementary studies, such as those by Gamas and Ojeda (2023), Avalos et al. (2022), and Vanderpuye et al. (2020), agree that institutions must not only promote educational inclusion but also foster continuous training and interdisciplinary collaboration to create healthy and dynamic work environments.

For this reason, it is essential to provide educators not only with strategies to support students with SEN such as ASD but also with access to resources and psychological support. Ramos et al. (2020) indicate that 72% of educators experience some degree of stress; Condori and Cari (2022) report that nearly 50% experience considerable emotional exhaustion, and less than 15% possess solid emotional intelligence, highlighting a direct relationship between these factors.

In agreement, Viamonte-Quispe et al. (2024) reveal that stress is common, especially in public schools, and Oyola (2024) identifies a significant correlation between occupational stress and anxiety among teachers at the National University of Tumbes. Such findings underscore the urgency for educational institutions to implement preventive and intervention measures to protect the emotional and physical health of their educators, which is crucial for maintaining educational quality and contributing to social development.

Additionally, it is vital to emphasize how an active and optimistic teaching role enhances the effective inclusion of students with ASD, as their well-being is crucial for successfully addressing classroom diversity. Krzemien et al. (2023) suggest that beyond pedagogy, teachers require ongoing sensitization and training to promote empathy, diversity, and inclusion within the educational community. In this regard, Cortés (2021) notes that many educators fail to place adequate importance on a rigorous scientific foundation or on maintaining their mental well-being, which reduces the learning capacity of diverse students.

De la Cruz and Inocente (2021) warn that some educators show resistance to methodological change, hindering their adaptation to student needs and generating a tense environment. Manzur-Vera et al. (2022) complement this by stating that teachers' preconceived ideas can unconsciously influence their pedagogical decisions, causing stress due to demotivation.

These dynamics reflect that a lack of control over decision-making, high job demands, and continuous interaction with students contribute to teacher stress, negatively affecting both their performance and educational quality. The necessity to dedicate long hours to teaching and complementary activities, coupled with an increasing number of students per classroom, creates additional pressures that can manifest as adverse physical and psychological symptoms.

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Therefore, it is imperative to closely analyze perspectives on managing occupational stress among educators who work with students with ASD. There is consensus that these educators require training and guidance processes to recognize their limits, manage overload, and assertively accept responsibilities while safeguarding their personal well-being. Rivas and Navas (2020) assert that significant changes in educational levels present greater challenges and that the composition of the student group directly influences stress levels.

Trujillo-Juárez and Delgado-González (2021) maintain that the lack of appropriate tools to confront stressful situations complicates university teaching, exacerbating tensions generated by the demands of the academic system, which requires high educational quality and increases stress levels, as Cifuentes-Faura (2020) also indicates. In particular, teachers working with students with ASD face additional challenges due to the difficulties inherent to these students, experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety (Trujillo-Juárez & Delgado-González, 2021).

Considering the aforementioned, this study focuses on analyzing how stress influences the mood, behavior, and quality of work life of a group of university educators who work with students with ASD. The research is based on the premise that occupational stress is often associated with burnout, demotivation, and decreased performance, affecting both the mental and physical health of educators. Understanding and managing this issue enables teachers to implement innovative strategies and maintain the necessary energy to perform their duties effectively.

Furthermore, the success of university inclusion for students with ASD largely depends on the support they receive from their educators. Without the appropriate tools or institutional backing, inclusion becomes unsustainable. Addressing this reality involves moving toward a more just and equitable educational system, where a less stressed educator is also more effective and empathetic.

Thus, the general problem is formulated: How is occupational stress managed among educators who work with students with ASD in a university setting? To address this question, the primary objective of the research is to analyze the management of occupational stress among these educators. More specifically, the study seeks to identify the effect of stress on the emotions of teachers who work with students with ASD, explain how this stress influences their behavior, and describe the impact it has on their quality of life within the university environment.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach aimed at deeply exploring the experiences of educators who work with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a university context. According to Rojas-Gutiérrez (2022), this approach allows for an understanding of how these teachers perceive and manage occupational stress in their daily lives. To achieve this, a rigorous process was structured that facilitated the profound and systematic interpretation of the information collected, which was carefully transcribed and analyzed while respecting the participants' perspectives.

The selection of participants was conducted through interviews with eight educators considered essential, as they actively represent the group under study. Their relevance lies in the fact that they chose to participate and contributed valuable knowledge, resources, and viewpoints that influenced the development of the research and the attainment of accurate results. As García (2023) points out, this method is particularly useful for representing individuals, groups, or institutions involved in a social phenomenon, as it ensures a comprehensive view and allows for meticulous analysis of individual experiences and opinions.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews that offered the necessary flexibility to capture each teacher's personal situation, recording their ideas, emotions, and modes of expression. The primary objective was to investigate the unique experience each teacher has with occupational stress and how this impact influences their well-being, mood, and behavior.

Regarding ethical aspects, the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence were prioritized, ensuring the well-being of participants and avoiding any potential harm. All interviewees provided their informed and voluntary written consent before participating in the study.

Results

The findings of this study provide an in-depth examination of how university educators working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) perceive and manage the work-related stress associated with their educational responsibilities. In alignment with the general objective of the research, the study explores the strategies employed by educators to cope with the emotional and professional demands inherent in this work, as well as the impact of stress on their emotional well-being, behavior, and quality of work life. This information is crucial for understanding not only the challenges they face but also the ways in which they maintain their

commitment and performance, thereby contributing to the success of educational inclusion in the university context.

Below is a table summarizing the questions posed to participating educators and their key responses, reflecting their experiences and perspectives regarding stress management while supporting students with ASD.

Table 1

Perceptions and experiences of university educators on managing work-related stress when attending to students with ASD

Questions	Description from the educators' perspective
Dialog exchange No. 1 How do coping strategies (social support, time management, recreational activities) influence the reduction of work-related stress perceived by educators working with students with ASD at the university?	**E 1:** The support from colleagues, family, and friends allows sharing challenges and seeking solutions together, thereby reducing stress.
	E 2: For me, organizing tasks and setting clear boundaries helps regain control and minimize overwhelm and uncertainty.
	E 3: Recreational activities and hobbies are essential for disconnecting and recharging, but their promotion within the university is limited.
	E 4: Participation in workshops and continuous training courses on pedagogical strategies for students with ASD enhances teaching skills and increases confidence, which reduces anxiety and stress.
	E 5: Assertive communication facilitates expressing needs and establishing boundaries, preventing emotional burnout.
	E 6: Incorporating healthy habits such as balanced nutrition, exercise, and relaxation techniques is fundamental for physical and mental well-being.
	E 7: Relying on colleagues, family, and friends creates an emotional support network that validates educators' experiences. This camaraderie facilitates sharing challenges and finding solutions collaboratively, decreasing feelings of isolation and alleviating emotional burden.
	E 8: It is essential to participate in workshops and seminars on pedagogical skills aimed at students with ASD. This training not only strengthens their competencies but also boosts their confidence, enabling them to face classroom challenges with greater readiness and significantly reducing their anxiety and stress.
Dialog exchange No. 2 Are there training programs and workshops on managing students with ASD that the university considers effective in reducing stress among its educators, and how do these trainings impact their emotional and professional well-being?	**E 1:** The university offers sporadic workshops on ASD, but their frequency and scope do not cover all teaching staff.
	E 2: Current programs are theoretical and poorly applicable to real situations, limiting their utility.
	E 3: Many of us, as educators, perceive that training programs are voluntary rather than mandatory, which diminishes both participation and overall effectiveness.
	E 4: The university faces challenges in systematically evaluating the impact of its training on stress reduction, preventing a clear determination of their effectiveness.

	E 5: Workshops focus more on ASD than on the emotional well-being of the educator, which is crucial for stress management.
	E 6: Like other educators, I express that the lack of follow-up and resources after workshops leads to rapid forgetfulness of information and prevents its application in daily practice.
	E 7: One of the main obstacles is that many educators view continuous training as optional rather than essential for their development, resulting in lower participation and, consequently, decreasing the overall effectiveness of these programs.
	E 8: Workshops on Autism Spectrum Disorder often neglect the emotional well-being of educators, negatively affecting their ability to provide effective support.
Dialog exchange No. 3 How do workload and the availability of support resources, such as specialized teaching materials and multidisciplinary personnel, relate to stress levels among faculty working with students with ASD at the university?	**E 1:** I can point out that a workload that encompasses not only class preparation but also curriculum adaptation, the development of specific materials, and individualized attention generates constant pressure. The absence of an efficient support system makes educators feel isolated in this task, intensifying their physical and emotional exhaustion.
	E 2: The lack of access to specialized teaching materials limits the tools available for instruction, forcing educators to invest additional time and effort in creating their own resources, thus increasing their stress levels.
	E 3: The scarcity or absence of a multidisciplinary team—including psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists—leaves the educator solely responsible for the comprehensive care of the student, which represents a significant source of stress.
	E 4: I believe that adequate support allows for the distribution of responsibilities and offers more comprehensive care, thereby reducing pressure on the educator.
	E 5: The lack of adapted classrooms, calm spaces, or sensory resources within the university hampers the creation of an inclusive learning environment.
	E 6: As educators, we are forced to improvise solutions, which is not only exhausting but can also create a less favorable environment for student development, consequently increasing the stress levels of faculty.
	E 7: The absence of a multidisciplinary team composed of psychologists, occupational therapists, or speech therapists places all responsibility on the educator, creating a significant source of stress, as they cannot be expected to be experts in all these areas.
	E 8: For me, having adequate support allows for the distribution of responsibility and provides more comprehensive care, which significantly reduces pressure on the educator.

Dialog exchange No. 4 What is the perception of institutional support, flexibility policies, recognition, and communication offered by the university to manage stress arising from working with students with ASD, and how could it be improved?	**E 1:** I feel that the university lacks specific institutional policies to address students with ASD. Flexibility and support seem to depend more on the goodwill of authorities than on clear and appropriate protocols.
	E 2: Although working with students with ASD is complex and requires additional effort, educators do not feel recognized by the institution.
	E 3: I believe that communication between university administration and educators is deficient; professors feel that their needs and challenges are not heard, which limits their ability to manage stress.
	E 4: A critical aspect is the lack of access to psychological support services for managing work-related stress.
	E 5: Although there are flexibility policies, educators perceive them as insufficient to effectively adapt to the needs of students with ASD. Rigidity in schedules, assessments, and methodologies hinders genuine inclusion, thereby increasing stress.
	E 6: I experience stress due to the lack of coordination among various university departments; the absence of fluid communication complicates the search for comprehensive solutions for students.
	E 7: Flexibility and support seem to depend more on the goodwill of authorities than on a well-defined formal protocol, generating uncertainty for both students and educators.
	E 8: The limited availability of psychological support services for managing work-related stress is a critical issue. This institutional shortcoming leaves educators without the necessary tools to face the emotional demands of their work, which can lead to severe burnout.

The findings of this research demonstrate that university teachers who work with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience considerable work-related stress. This stress is directly related to their workload and insufficient support resources. Even with funding available for products aimed at students with autism and the presence of a professional team, the support remains inadequate. The lack of an effective support system leaves these educators feeling isolated in their roles, exacerbating their physical and emotional exhaustion. This finding aligns with the specialized literature on professional well-being in inclusive educational contexts.

On the other hand, the analysis of coping strategies reveals that social support is a fundamental element in alleviating stress. Camaraderie and the sharing of experiences with colleagues, friends, and family allow educators to understand that they are not alone in their difficulties, and collaborative efforts to find solutions help dispel feelings of isolation. However, perceptions regarding institutional support are critical; educators believe that the university lacks clear policies, formal recognition, and effective communication channels. This disconnection between their professional efforts and institutional backing constitutes an additional source of stress, negatively impacting their emotional well-being.

In this regard, teachers suggest adopting concrete measures that promote real change. They call for the creation of formal institutional policies that acknowledge and value their work, as well as the implementation of psychological support services. Furthermore, they demand mandatory training in this area. The general perception is that if the university provided stronger support, better coordination between departments could be achieved, and the necessary material resources would be supplied. This would not only help reduce stress but also enhance the educational quality directed at students with autism, creating a more inclusive and sustainable environment for all involved.

Discussion

When analyzing the results related to work-related stress among university teachers who attend to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, a multifactorial process emerges, closely linked to both the implementation of coping strategies and institutional support. The evidence collected highlights that social support from peers, family, and friends, along with appropriate time management that includes task organization and the establishment of clear boundaries, are fundamental pillars for reducing overwhelm and feelings of isolation. However, there is a significant lack of promotion of leisure and recreational activities outside the workplace, which are essential resources for disconnection and energy recovery, as noted by Condori and Cari (2022). These authors also emphasize that ongoing training in specific pedagogical strategies for students with ASD not only strengthens competencies and professional confidence but directly reduces anxiety, as some educators report feeling better prepared to face classroom challenges and thus mitigate stress.

Teachers' perceptions reveal serious limitations in the training programs offered by the university. They highlight the infrequency and lack of mandatory workshops or updating courses, which diminishes their reach and contribution. Existing programs often focus more on theoretical frameworks than on practical application, limiting their effectiveness in addressing real situations in the classroom. This critical deficit aligns with the observations of Barrera-Pintado and Baculima-Suarez (2024) and Cortés (2021), who assert that these trainings primarily focus on the characteristics of ASD, overlooking the emotional well-being of the teacher, a key aspect for managing stress. Moreover, the absence of follow-up and resources after workshops hinders the consolidation and effective application of knowledge in daily practice.

Regarding the relationship between workload, support resources, and stress levels, a direct negative correlation with teachers' well-being is observed. Attending to students with ASD demands an additional workload that involves curricular adaptation and the development of specific materials, generating constant pressure. In this regard, Ramos et al. (2020) highlight the scarcity of specialized teaching materials and the absence of a multidisciplinary team comprising psychologists, speech therapists, and therapists, which forces educators to assume full responsibility for care, becoming a significant source of burnout. This lack of efficient support necessitates improvising solutions and complicates the creation of inclusive environments, increasing stress and physical and emotional exhaustion, as noted by De la Cruz and Inocente (2021).

From this perspective, perceptions of institutional support emerge as a crucial aspect requiring attention. Gamas and Ojeda (2023), along with Oyola (2024), indicate that educators perceive the absence of specific institutional policies and clear protocols for attending to students with ASD, feeling that flexibility and support depend more on the goodwill of authorities than on formal guidelines. Additionally, the lack of recognition for the extra effort involved in this work, coupled with poor communication between administration and faculty, limits the ability to manage stress. A particularly critical aspect is the absence of institutional psychological support services for managing work-related stress, leaving educators without adequate tools to cope with the emotional demands of their work, thereby increasing the risk of severe burnout.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis conducted, this research reveals that the main factor contributing to work-related stress among university professors who attend to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder is the lack of specific training. Nevertheless, this deficiency can transform into a positive stress factor, provided it is accompanied by suitable work environments and the availability of sufficient resources. The mental health of teachers is closely linked to the support provided by a solid organizational structure capable of ensuring support services that strengthen their professional efforts.

In addition to institutional factors, various studies indicate that a work environment that fosters healthy interpersonal relationships has a significant impact on teachers' psychological well-being. Given that professional burnout is a common phenomenon, mental health in the workplace plays a fundamental role. Teachers invest considerable time and energy in building and developing their careers, and while they possess knowledge about disease prevention, having a robust emotional and psychological support structure is essential for effectively facing risk factors and preventing physical and mental health issues. This support positively contributes to both teaching performance and the quality of interaction with students.

Ignoring these issues can lead to serious consequences. When stress and physical exhaustion negatively affect the quality of teachers' performance and their relationships with students, the academic development of the university is compromised. Considering that the university is a fundamental pillar for the country's progress, it is necessary to ensure that its mission transcends the training of professionals capable of being productive; it must also strive to create environments that promote the mental health of all its members, including teachers. In this

sense, by caring for its faculty, the institution strengthens not only its role as a generator of knowledge but also its commitment to progress and social well-being.

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