

**The language of exhaustion: A qualitative content analysis
of teacher reflection journals and burnout predictors**

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ABSTRACT

Teacher burnout is commonly measured through standardized scales, but teachers also communicate exhaustion, detachment, reduced efficacy, and coping through the language of their everyday reflections. This study examines how teacher reflection journals and related textual evidence represent burnout predictors. It uses a qualitative research design with directed content analysis. The textual corpus is the document-based source set assembled in the working paper, including published studies and reports that discuss teacher reflections, online teacher discourse, language-based indicators of stress, and the social conditions of teacher well-being. Analysis focused on seven themes: lexical markers of exhaustion; depersonalization and cynicism; reduced professional accomplishment; structural and systemic stressors; coping and resilience; temporal change; and cross-cultural variation. The synthesis indicates that burnout is represented not only through negative emotion words but also through shifts in agency, pronoun use, relational language, descriptions of time, and references to institutional demands. The findings further suggest that workload, surveillance, administrative burden, weak support, and strained relationships are central predictors, while collegiality, meaning, collective identity, and culturally grounded coping can function as protective conditions. The study does not claim statistical prediction from an original computational dataset. Instead, it demonstrates how qualitative content analysis can identify meanings and mechanisms in teacher reflection texts and guide more context-sensitive educational-psychology interventions.

Keywords: Teacher burnout, emotional exhaustion, qualitative content analysis, reflection journals, teacher well-being, occupational stress, educational psychology.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers are among the most important drivers of the educational process because they occupy a central position in shaping learners' academic, social, and emotional experiences. Within the classroom, learners look to teachers for motivation, inspiration, guidance, and models of appropriate behavior and professional commitment. Yet the expectations attached to teaching are accompanied by considerable demands. Teachers are expected to perform emotional, relational, cognitive, instructional, and administrative work simultaneously, often while managing limited time and resources. Consequently, teachers themselves may become tired, emotionally depleted, and overwhelmed by the responsibilities they are expected to fulfill. When persistent workload is combined with limited control, insufficient support, and discrepancies between professional expectations and available resources, the psychological costs of teaching can become substantial. Burnout must therefore be understood not merely as an individual health concern but as an educational psychology and organizational problem with implications for teacher wellbeing, instructional quality, professional retention, and the relationships upon which learners depend.

The systematic study of occupational burnout was advanced by Maslach and Jackson (1981), who developed the original burnout inventory to operationalize the major dimensions of the phenomenon. The classic burnout framework subsequently conceptualized burnout through the interconnected dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion describes the experience of becoming emotionally overextended and depleted by work, while depersonalization involves psychological distancing from students, colleagues, or the profession itself. Reduced personal accomplishment, in turn, refers to a diminished sense of professional competence, effectiveness, and value. These dimensions are particularly relevant to teaching because the profession requires sustained emotional engagement, interpersonal interaction, and perceptions of meaningful contribution. Importantly, manifestations of these dimensions may become visible in the language teachers use to describe their experiences even before burnout becomes evident through formal absence, resignation, or clinical intervention.

Burnout develops through an interaction between personal experiences and the conditions under which individuals perform their work rather than through personal characteristics alone (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion may intensify when professional demands remain consistently high while opportunities for rest and recovery remain limited (Demerouti et al., 2001; Maslach et al., 2001). Depersonalization may emerge as a defensive response when teachers repeatedly encounter interpersonal strain without sufficient institutional or relational support (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach et al., 2001). Similarly, reduced personal accomplishment may become evident when educators perceive that sustained effort no longer produces meaningful progress, recognition, or professional fulfillment (Maslach et al., 2001). Such an understanding avoids interpreting burnout simply as personal weakness or inadequate coping and instead recognizes the importance of workload, autonomy, leadership, resources, recognition, and workplace relationships in shaping teachers' experiences (Bakker et al., 2023; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

This organizational understanding is reinforced by research showing that teacher wellbeing is fundamentally relational. Teachers do not experience their professional responsibilities in isolation because much of their work occurs through continuous interaction with learners, colleagues, administrators, families, and institutional structures. Teacher and student relationships influence educators' emotional responses and professional self-esteem, while classroom challenges may be experienced and interpreted according to the quality of those relationships (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Teacher self-efficacy is likewise associated

with classroom processes, job satisfaction, professional commitment, and outcomes related to burnout (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Consequently, examining burnout requires attention not only to expressions of individual distress but also to the relational and organizational circumstances within which such distress develops. Patterns of exhaustion, detachment, frustration, efficacy, and diminished accomplishment can therefore be understood more adequately when interpreted in relation to teachers' descriptions of their working environments.

Reflection journals provide an especially valuable source of evidence for examining these experiences because they capture authentic and situated descriptions of educators' professional realities as those experiences unfold (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017). Reflective writing allows researchers to observe how educators process complex classroom dynamics, respond to uncertainty, make professional decisions, and transform tacit experiences into explicit understanding (Hyde, 2024; Ortlipp, 2008). Unlike a single retrospective questionnaire, reflection journals can reveal changes in teachers' descriptions of work, perceptions of time, emotional vocabulary, relational language, coping responses, and representations of institutional demands. Such texts consequently provide access not merely to what teachers experience but also to how they construct meaning around those experiences through language.

The analytical value of reflective language is further supported by computerized language research demonstrating that patterns of word use can provide meaningful information about attention, emotions, social relationships, and psychological processes (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2009). Nevertheless, linguistic evidence cannot be treated as a transparent or automatic diagnostic measure of burnout. Words acquire meaning through context, culture, genre, audience, and the writer's purpose. An expression associated with exhaustion, for example, does not independently establish the presence of occupational burnout because its significance depends upon the circumstances and meanings surrounding its use. The interpretive challenge is therefore to move beyond merely identifying potentially relevant words and instead determine how patterns of language communicate teachers' experiences of exhaustion, detachment, professional efficacy, institutional stress, coping, relationships, and time.

For this reason, qualitative content analysis offers an appropriate approach for investigating the language of teacher exhaustion without assuming that particular words automatically prove burnout. The distinction between making a claim and establishing it through contextualized evidence is essential. Rather than treating isolated linguistic expressions as diagnostic indicators, qualitative content analysis enables the interpretation of recurring meanings and patterns within teachers' reflection texts. Such an approach recognizes language as socially situated evidence and interprets teachers' expressions alongside the working conditions, professional relationships, institutional expectations, and cultural contexts that give those expressions meaning. The central premise is therefore that predictors of teacher burnout may be communicated through patterned descriptions of both internal experiences and the institutional environments in which teachers perform their work.

This interpretation also benefits from a sociological perspective that situates individual experiences within broader institutional structures. Educational institutions translate social resources into educational outcomes through curricula, teaching practices, assessment systems, organizational routines, and increasingly through technological systems. Technology should therefore not be regarded as a neutral tool because its implementation is embedded within existing institutional arrangements and social inequalities. Artificial intelligence systems, for example, may enter educational processes carrying assumptions concerning language, intelligence, normal behavior, risk, and achievement. When such assumptions remain invisible

or cannot be questioned, automated processes may reproduce existing inequalities while giving them the appearance of technical objectivity. For teachers, these technological and institutional developments may introduce additional expectations, responsibilities, adjustments, and pressures that must be interpreted within the wider organizational conditions of educational work.

An intersectional perspective further emphasizes that educational experiences are shaped by overlapping dimensions of class, race, gender, disability, geography, indigeneity, and language rather than by any single social characteristic. A rural indigenous learner, for example, may simultaneously experience unreliable connectivity, inadequate support for local languages, limited school resources, and data practices that fail to recognize community governance. An urban learner from a low income household may possess a smartphone yet still lack a quiet environment for studying, sufficient institutional assistance, or access to advanced instruction concerning artificial intelligence. Thus, identical technologies can generate different educational consequences according to social position and institutional context. These inequalities also form part of the environments within which teachers work, requiring educators to respond to diverse learner needs while navigating changing institutional and technological expectations.

Taken together, psychological, relational, organizational, linguistic, and sociological perspectives demonstrate that teacher burnout cannot be adequately understood as an isolated individual condition. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment develop within networks of workload, autonomy, resources, leadership, recognition, relationships, institutional expectations, social inequalities, and changing educational environments. At the same time, teachers continually interpret these conditions through language, making reflection journals valuable records of how professional strain is experienced and understood. Existing burnout frameworks explain the psychological and organizational dimensions of exhaustion, while research on teacher relationships and self efficacy demonstrates the relational character of professional wellbeing. Studies of reflective writing and language further establish that teachers' textual expressions can reveal meaningful patterns of emotional and psychological experience. However, the contextual dependence of language creates a need for research that examines these expressions without reducing individual words to diagnostic signs.

Accordingly, the present study examines teacher reflection journals through qualitative content analysis to determine how educators communicate experiences associated with exhaustion, detachment, professional efficacy, institutional stress, coping, time, relationships, and cultural meaning. By interpreting recurring linguistic patterns in relation to the professional and institutional conditions described by teachers themselves, the study seeks to identify burnout predictors as socially and organizationally situated experiences rather than isolated expressions of personal distress. In doing so, it provides a framework for understanding how the language of exhaustion may reveal emerging patterns of burnout while preserving the contextual, relational, and cultural meanings embedded in teachers' reflections. Such an inquiry is significant because recognizing these patterns may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of teacher well-being and provide educational institutions with deeper insight into the conditions that influence teachers' capacity to remain engaged, effective, and professionally fulfilled.

Statement of the problem

This paper asks to seek answers from these four questions:

1. What linguistic and substantive patterns in teacher reflection texts communicate emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional accomplishment?
2. What structural, relational, and organizational conditions are described as predictors or intensifiers of teacher burnout?
3. What coping and resilience patterns appear in teacher reflection texts?
4. How do burnout expressions vary across time, cultural context, and the social setting of teaching?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design using content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic research method used to analyze text data and interpret its contextual meaning through the identification of themes, patterns, and categories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Rather than merely quantifying word frequencies, qualitative content analysis focuses on subjective interpretations of text data by systematically classifying content into explicit coding schemes (Krippendorff, 2019).

When applied to document analysis, this method systematically evaluates print or electronic materials—such as policy reports, academic literature, and institutional briefs—to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The process involves Document Selection and Verification ((Bowen, 2009); Textual Immersion and Coding (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005); and Pattern Identification and Synthesis (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2019).

Data analyses procedure

The source corpus consisted of the teacher-language studies, teacher well-being research, and methodological sources assembled in the working paper. The materials included research on teacher stress and burnout, teacher reflection or online discourse, teacher identity, self-efficacy, work environment, teacher-student relationships, and computerized text analysis. Sources were included when they contributed evidence about teacher language, emotional experience, organizational stress, coping, or the interpretation of textual data in educational settings.

Purposive sampling was used at the document level. The goal was conceptual relevance rather than statistical representation. The source set included studies from different national and cultural contexts so that the analysis could examine both recurring mechanisms and contextual variation. Because several working-paper citations did not provide complete bibliographic information, those sources were not treated as independent statistical evidence. The reference list prioritizes identifiable and retrievable works and flags the limits of the source corpus through the study's delimitations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teacher reflection texts may contain sensitive information about health, students, colleagues, families, and school conditions. The study therefore treats privacy and non-maleficence as central ethical requirements. Reflection data should be de-identified, stored securely, accessed only for the stated research purpose, and never used for individual surveillance or employment decisions without informed consent and institutional approval. A future primary study should obtain ethics clearance, specify data ownership, and provide participants with clear information about whether automated tools will be used.

Table 1
Qualitative coding framework for teacher reflection texts

Theme	Indicative content	Possible psychological meaning	Educational response
Exhaustion	Fatigue, depletion, time scarcity, no break	Emotional overextension and reduced recovery	Workload review, protected planning and recovery time
Depersonalization	Detached labels, cynicism, reduced relational language	Defensive distancing under chronic interpersonal strain	Relational support, mentoring and humane discipline systems
Reduced accomplishment	Cannot, failing, unable, surviving	Reduced self-efficacy and perceived control	Autonomy, useful feedback and resource support
Structural stress	Audits, paperwork, complaints, compliance, surveillance	Organizational demands exceeding available resources	Reduce unnecessary administration and increase participation
Coping and resilience	Colleagues, community, faith, shared purpose	Collective efficacy and social protection	Strengthen collegial networks without shifting responsibility to teachers
Temporal change	Still, again, never-ending, future to survival language	Accumulating strain and possible burnout trajectory	Early support and longitudinal monitoring with consent
Cultural variation	Individual, relational, environmental idioms of distress	Context-specific meanings of stress and professional identity	Local interpretation, multilingual tools and cultural humility

Theme 1: Lexical markers of exhaustion

The first theme concerns language that describes physical, cognitive, and emotional depletion. Teacher reflections may use terms such as drained, overwhelmed, exhausted, sinking, or running out of time. The important finding is not the presence of one word but the clustering of depletion language with references to insufficient recovery, competing demands, and reduced capacity to respond. This pattern is consistent with the emotional-exhaustion dimension of burnout.

The language of exhaustion often narrows the teacher's perceived field of action. Future-oriented verbs such as plan, guide, improve, or achieve may be replaced by survival-oriented descriptions such as get through, endure, manage, or make it to the end. Such shifts should be interpreted as possible indicators of reduced agency, not as proof of individual pathology. Teachers who report lower perceived agency tend to experience greater emotional exhaustion (Nápoles et al., 2022), and interpersonal agency in the classroom is associated with lower exhaustion (Donker et al., 2020). The educational implication is that workload and recovery conditions must be examined alongside the text, because high workload and low social support are among the most consistent predictors of emotional exhaustion in teachers (El Alaiki et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Depersonalization and cynicism

The second theme is a movement from relational language toward detached or administrative language. Teachers may refer to my students, our class, or our learning community when they feel connected to the relational purpose of teaching. Under chronic strain, students may be described primarily as cases, rosters, behavioral problems, or compliance concerns. This does not mean that every administrative noun reflects cynicism. It means that a sustained reduction in relational language, combined with negative evaluation and emotional withdrawal, can signal defensive distancing.

Depersonalization is psychologically understandable because emotional distance can temporarily protect a teacher from repeated interpersonal stress. However, it can also weaken the relationships that support learning and teacher well-being. Research on teacher-student relationships suggests that relational experiences are connected to teachers' emotional responses and professional self-esteem (Spilt et al., 2011). Intervention should therefore address classroom conditions and relational support rather than simply instructing teachers to be more positive.

Theme 3: Reduced sense of professional accomplishment

The third theme is expressed through inability modals and deficit-framed verbs such as cannot sustain, unable to manage, failing, surviving, or treading water. These forms suggest a perceived loss of control and a weakening sense of professional efficacy. They may occur when teachers believe that effort is not producing adequate learning, when institutional demands prevent meaningful teaching, or when evaluation systems emphasize deficits more than professional judgment.

Reduced accomplishment should not be interpreted as evidence that teachers lack competence. Teacher self-efficacy is shaped by classroom conditions, feedback, resources, and professional relationships. Evidence from educational psychology links teacher self-efficacy with classroom processes and teacher well-being, while low efficacy is associated with burnout-related outcomes (Zee & Koomen, 2016). The protective response is therefore to restore autonomy, provide useful feedback, and make successful teaching visible. Classroom autonomy strengthens the relationship between professional development and teacher self-efficacy (Choi & Mao, 2020), and frequent, constructive feedback from school leaders is associated with higher teacher self-efficacy (Krasniqi & Ismajli, 2022).

Theme 4: Structural and systemic stressors

The fourth theme concerns the institutional sources of distress. Reflection texts may place anxiety and dread near terms such as administrative work, audits, parental complaints, compliance, surveillance, documentation, and lack of time. This pattern shifts the explanation of burnout from individual weakness to organizational conditions. Teachers can experience emotional exhaustion even when they remain highly committed to students, especially when non-pedagogical work consumes the time and energy needed for instruction.

The work environment is also related to motivation, job satisfaction, and engagement. Qualitative research on teachers' work environments has identified facilities, leadership relationships, teacher-student relations, rewards, and school politics as meaningful conditions in teachers' professional lives (Issa, 2021). Teacher well-being research likewise emphasizes workplace culture and social relationships as collective rather than purely individual influences (Babić, Mercer, Mairitsch, Gruber, & Hemphkin, 2022). These findings support structural interventions such as workload review, protected planning time, participatory leadership, and reduced administrative duplication.

Theme 5: Coping and resilience signals

The fifth theme identifies language that resists exhaustion. Teachers may use collective pronouns such as we, us, and our team, and refer to colleagues, community, faith, shared purpose, humor, or mutual support. Such language can indicate that coping is socially distributed. It may also show that professional identity is sustained through relationships rather than through individual endurance alone.

Resilience should not be used to shift responsibility back onto teachers. A teacher's ability to cope does not remove the need to improve working conditions. Research on teacher well-being emphasizes the importance of workplace culture, social relationships, meaning, professional status, and physical well-being (Babić et al., 2022). The content analysis therefore treats coping as both a resource and a diagnostic clue: strong communal language may reveal protective relationships, but it may also reveal that teachers are compensating collectively for institutional gaps.

Theme 6: Temporal and longitudinal shifts

The sixth theme concerns change across the school year or across repeated reflection periods. Early reflections may contain planning, hope, anticipation, and future-oriented verbs. Later reflections may contain temporal crisis markers such as still, again, never-ending, or not enough time. This possible movement from agency to survival is important because it suggests that burnout risk is dynamic rather than fixed.

A longitudinal design would allow researchers to examine whether changes in language precede changes in reported exhaustion, absence, job satisfaction, or intention to leave. Research on teacher attrition indicates that burnout and job satisfaction are connected to teachers' intentions to quit (Madigan & Kim, 2021). The present qualitative analysis cannot establish temporal causality, but it identifies language patterns that future longitudinal research can investigate with appropriate consent and validation.

Theme 7: Cross-cultural and contextual variation

The seventh theme is cultural and contextual variation in how distress is communicated. Some teachers may use individualized terms such as my anxiety, "I feel broken.", or "I cannot cope." Others may describe the school environment, lack of social respect, community expectations, or institutional burden. These differences do not necessarily indicate that one

group experiences less distress. They may reflect cultural idioms, professional norms, language structure, audience expectations, and differing understandings of the relationship between self and institution.

Cross-cultural content analysis must therefore avoid imposing one vocabulary of burnout on all teachers. A dictionary designed around individualized psychological symptoms may miss distress expressed through relational or environmental language. Teacher-identity research using text-mining has shown that language can reveal how teachers reconstruct agency and professional identity in response to changing contexts (Zhang & Hwang, 2023). Contextual interpretation is necessary before comparing frequencies across languages or regions.

CONCLUSION

Teacher burnout is communicated through more than explicit statements of exhaustion. It can appear in the narrowing of agency, the loss of relational language, the growth of deficit framing, the repeated description of administrative burden, the movement from future-oriented planning to survival-oriented time, and the presence or absence of collective support. These patterns are meaningful because they connect psychological experience to the organizational and cultural conditions of teaching.

Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for this research because it preserves context and allows teacher language to be interpreted rather than reduced to isolated counts. It can identify mechanisms that standardized scores may not explain, while also showing where further quantitative testing is needed. The responsible use of reflection data requires privacy, consent, cultural humility, and a clear separation between support and surveillance.

The central implication is that teacher burnout should not be treated as an individual deficit. Teachers' language often points toward workload, time scarcity, insufficient resources, strained relationships, administrative pressure, and institutional uncertainty. Effective prevention must therefore combine psychological support with structural reform. When schools listen to teachers' words carefully and respond to the conditions those words reveal, reflection can become a resource for educational improvement rather than another demand placed on exhausted professionals.

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