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# TEACHERS' CAREER STAGES AS PREDICTORS OF TEACHERS' BURNOUT IN SLOVENIA: THE ROLE OF EMOTION REGULATION DIFFICULTIES

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As the stressors faced by teachers are often social and emotional in nature and as the quantity and quality of these stressors change throughout the teachers' career, the association between career stages, emotion regulation, and burnout, are the focus of the current study. We are interested in whether the career stages predict the levels of burnout, its cognitive, emotional, and physical dimension, and whether interaction between career stages and emotion regulation predict all three dimensions of burnout. The sample included 1468 Slovene pre- and in-service teachers. The findings show significant differences in emotion regulation between career stages in all three dimensions of burnout. Teachers who reported less emotion regulation difficulties reported lower levels of all three burnout dimensions. Pre-service teachers and early-career teachers reported higher levels of all three burnout dimensions indicating the need to pay special attention to teachers' transition to the workplace.

Keywords: teachers, career stages, emotion regulation difficulties, burnout, Slovenia

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## INTRODUCTION

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Teachers' careers have been traditionally considered to consist of two parts: pre-service, which refers to the initial teacher education (universities or colleges), and in-service (from entry and exit from the profession). The pre-service period is a period of acquiring knowledge, competencies, and skills needed for the teaching profession in the process of professional identity formation (Pendergast et al., 2011). The in-service period is further characterised by different stages. In career stages research, two types of theoretical models are recognised, the first describing career progression as a linear path with stages of progression (e.g., Berliner, 1994; Huberman, 1995; Katz, 1972) and the second describing career development as a cycle with progression and withdrawals (e.g. Fessler, 1992). In Slovenia, Huberman's (1995) model has shown a good fit and a valid representation of qualitatively different career stages (Čotar Konrad et al., 2022; Štemberger, 2020). Huberman (1995), based on extensive qualitative research, divides career stages into five stages: survival and discovery (1–3 years of work experience), stabilisation (4–6 years of teaching experience), experimentation/diversification or stock-taking/interrogations (teachers with 7–18 years of work experience), conservatism or clarity (teachers with 19–30 years of work experience). The final stage is disengagement (teachers with more than 30 years of work experience).

There are challenges associated with increased stress and burnout in each stage. At the pre-service level, teacher students are troubled by high academic demands (low academic self-efficacy) in addition to other personal (forming professional identity), economic (expenses associated with independent living and at the same time not having an income), and social factors (e.g. moving away from home) associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood (García-Martínez et al., 2021). In light of these challenges, increased levels of stress are reported in university level students (Enns et al., 2018; Levine et al., 2020). Since we cannot refer to the increased level of stress as burnout at this stage – the students are not yet in the working environment – the level of stress is still informative as it impacts their transition to the workplace (Golubtscih, 2024). It is, however, equally important to emphasise that pre-service teachers in Slovenia are systematically exposed to various dimensions of the teaching profession. They are regularly engaged in the preparation and delivery of teaching sessions and maintain a continuous presence in schools throughout their studies. During the initial stages, their role is primarily observational, whereas in the later phases they progressively assume more active responsibilities in classroom instruction. In the fourth and

fifth years of study, pre-service teachers undertake extended periods of independent teaching (with ongoing mentor support) within designated classes as part of their practicum.

After the pre-service stage, burnout can develop at any stage of a teaching career, however, the first three years are crucial (Yaghaubi & Habibineja, 2015). The entry to the teaching profession stage is characterised by low self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and adaptation difficulties which in combination with lower teaching motivation and problems with classroom management contribute to early-career teachers having a heightened risk of leaving the profession (De Witte et al., 2024; Hellebaut et al., 2023; Van den Borre, 2021) and being more prone to burnout (Carroll et al., 2022). The characteristics of the first (survival and discovery) and the second stage (stabilisation), at the in-service level, do not differ a lot. Researchers indicate that the second stage is more structured and clearer in goals, on one hand, and, on the other hand, can lead to identity risk (Hellebaut et al., 2023). The third stage (experimentation/diversification or stock-taking/interrogations) is characterised by taking on additional tasks and roles outside the classroom that can lead to more responsibilities which, when combined with low resources, can lead to higher stress and potential burnout. The fourth stage (conservatism or clarity) is characterised by a heavy workload with value consonance playing an important role in defining the mechanisms leading to burnout. When teachers through their accumulated teaching experiences perceive a high level of shared values with school values, their stress level is lower (Hellebaut et al., 2023). The mechanism that can possibly lead to burnout in the last stages (disengagement) is the loss of commitment (Hellebaut et al., 2023).

Regardless of the career stage, the teaching profession, characterised by high emotional demands, is often associated with significant stress and burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2016), making the teaching profession one of the professions more prone to burnout (Garrick et al., 2014). Slovenia ranks among the top five EU countries where teachers report high levels of work-related stress. Nearly half (46.4%) of the teachers indicated experiencing "a lot" or "quite a bit" of stress during their work, while only 4.9% reported being entirely free from stress at work (OECD, 2020). Teachers who reported higher levels of work-related stress were more likely to consider leaving the profession within five years (OECD, 2020). Long-term occupational stress in teachers often results in burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020).

Burnout is defined as a gradual depletion of an individual's coping mechanisms following prolonged exposure to work-related stress (Shirom, 2003). It manifests through emotional, cognitive, and physical dimensions (Schaufeli & Greenglass,

2001), with emotional exhaustion – marked by diminished emotional and psychological resources – being its central feature (Maslach et al., 2016). Social and emotional challenges have been found to play a critical role in the development of burnout, since teachers who experienced heightened social and emotional demands paired with insufficient resources were more likely to face burnout (McCarthy et al., 2016). These challenges frequently require teachers to regulate intense emotions, such as frustration and anxiety, which can contribute to the prevalence and severity of emotional difficulties (Collie et al., 2012; Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021). Emotional regulation difficulties are therefore one of the prominent factors contributing to burnout.

The research on the levels of burnout in different career stages is inconsistent. Some studies (e.g. Chang, 2013) show non-significant associations, some negative associations (e.g. Gavis & Friedman, 2012), and some positive associations (e.g. Hellebaut et al., 2023). Most of the studies focus on early-career teachers, as the first years in the teaching profession are often a challenge, with many early-career teachers experiencing significant concerns. It is, however, difficult to compare studies, as they tend not to use the same career-stages categories when doing the comparisons. For instance, Gonzales et al. (2020) compared teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience to the rest and found no differences in burnout, while Antoniou et al. (2006) compared teachers with less than 10 years of experiences to the rest and found significant differences, with more experienced teachers reporting lower levels of burnout. On the other hand, Day et al. (2007), based on their qualitative data, indicated that mid-career teachers (8-15 years of teaching experience) were more prone to burnout, while the period after 19 years of teaching experience would be calmer. Hellebaut et al. (2023) similarly established, using quantitative data, that teachers beyond 8 years of teaching experience reported more burnout compared to teachers with fewer years of teaching experience. In a Slovenian study (Dolenc, 2023), teachers reported a medium level of burnout, while no significant differences were found in work-related burnout according to the length of teaching experience. It is a fact that additional studies in the field are needed. One of the possible explanations of this inconsistency is the non-linearity of the relationship or the possible influence of emotion regulation as a contributing factor, as suggested by previous studies (Mendes & Miguel, 2024).

Emotion regulation is a key process worth exploring while disentangling the mechanisms of teachers' burnout. Emotions are functional, providing information about our environment

and motivating behaviours that may facilitate adaptation (Reeve, 2015). Therefore, difficulties in emotion regulation can contribute to a wide range of negative outcomes. Generally, two directions of research and conceptualisation on emotion regulation exist in the literature (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The first group consists of control-oriented approaches with a focus on managing emotional experience and expression, particularly controlling negative emotions and reducing emotional arousal. The second group consists of functional-oriented approaches highlighting the adaptive role of emotions and the ability to fully experience, differentiate, and respond to emotions. Maladaptive outcomes can arise from either excessive control or insufficient modulation of experiencing emotions. Adaptive regulation modifies the intensity or duration of an emotion rather than changing the emotion and involves flexibility in the use of emotion regulation strategies (Thompson, 1994). In summary, emotion regulation may be conceptualised as involving the (a) awareness and understanding of emotions, (b) acceptance of emotions, (c) ability to control impulsive behaviours and behave in accordance with desired goals when experiencing negative emotions, and (d) ability to use situationally appropriate emotion regulation strategies flexibly to modulate emotional responses as desired in order to meet individual goals and situational demands. The relative absence of any or all of these abilities would indicate the presence of difficulties in emotion regulation, or emotion dysregulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Difficulties in emotion regulation have been linked to emotional exhaustion (Chang, 2013).

Emotion regulation develops with age, with older adults using more adaptive regulation of emotions (Scheibe & Moghimi, 2021; Urry & Gross, 2010). Specifically, studies (Orgeta, 2009) show improvement in emotional functioning with age, with older participants reporting more positive affects, less negative affects and responding to negative effects more constructively (i.e., they tend to use more functional-oriented approaches). These changes are more pronounced during middle adulthood and for females. As emotion regulation develops throughout the lifespan and with experiences (Urry & Gross, 2010), we would assume that the emotion regulation is different in different career stages of a teacher. Further on, it is necessary to note that emotion regulation is context-dependent, therefore it needs to be studied inside the context where it is used – in the case of teaching that is in the classroom. Studies on teacher samples show early-career teachers reported more difficulties in emotion regulation and that mid- and late-career colleagues would use the strategies of emotion regulation more adaptively (Doyle et al., 2024; Orgeta, 2009).

## Current study

In recent years, a shortage of teachers emerged as a significant issue in Slovenia, exacerbated by increasing levels of stress and burnout among teachers. This issue is particularly pronounced among early-career teachers, who are more prone to leaving the profession.

Even though teacher burnout is a complex phenomenon influenced by a variety of individual and contextual factors, research indicates that particularly emotional difficulties can contribute to the risk of increased stress, which can consequently lead to burnout. However, there is inconsistency in the research regarding the interplay between burnout and teaching experience. Additionally, the role of emotion regulation in this relationship is to the best of our knowledge not yet explored. Studies indicate that early-career teachers struggle more with emotion regulation and are consequently more prone to burnout, whereas more experienced teachers may employ more adaptive emotional coping strategies. Furthermore, research mainly focused on in-service teachers, while less attention was given to pre-service teachers and their experiences regarding emotion regulation and burnout. With inclusion of pre-service teachers, the study aims to gain additional insight with regard to the period of transition to in-service stage. Since teacher education can contribute significantly to the mentioned challenges, investigating these factors before even starting with the teaching profession can provide valuable insights into potential risk factors and protective mechanisms, with the potential of providing support to pre-service teachers and reducing teacher attrition rates in the future.

In order to disentangle this interplay, we will analyse the predictive role of career stages for individual burnout dimensions (cognitive weariness, emotional exhaustion, and physical fatigue) adding emotion regulation difficulties as continuous predictor in interaction effects. Based on the literature review we hypothesize that: (a) emotion regulation difficulties to be a significant predictor of all dimensions of burnout, (b) career stages to be a significant predictor of all dimensions of burnout; (b) the interaction between career stages and emotion regulation difficulties to be a significant predictor of all dimensions of burnout.

## METHOD

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### Participants

The sample included 1468 participants (86.7% females), aged from 18 to 65 years ( $M = 38.51$ ;  $SD = 11.89$ ). The sample consisted of two groups: pre-service teachers ( $n = 277$ ; 87.3% females;  $M = 21.39$ ;  $SD = 2.44$ ) and in-service teachers ( $n = 1191$ ; 86.6% females;  $M = 42.49$ ;  $SD = 9.42$ ) with 0 to 39 years of teach-

TABLE 1  
Career stages accord-  
ing to Huberman  
(1995)

ing experience ( $M = 15.25$ ;  $SD = 9.98$ ). Pre-service teachers were included in primary education studies ( $n = 218$ ) and subject specialisation education studies ( $n = 59$ ). In-service teachers were teaching either basic education ( $n = 864$ ; 92.5% females;  $M = 41.66$ ;  $SD = 8.81$ ) or upper-secondary education ( $n = 306$ ; 69.9% females;  $M = 44.84$ ;  $SD = 10.34$ ), with 20 teachers not providing that answer. Based on years of teaching experience, pre- and in-service teachers were divided into career-stage groups (see Table 1) according to Huberman's definition (1995).

Career stages	N	%	Gender	Age	School type
			(% females)	M (SD)	(% of basic edu- cation teachers)
Pre-service teachers	277	19.0	87.3	21.39 (2.44)	/
In-service teachers					
Survival and discovery (0–3 years)	143	9.8	83.9	31.41 (6.88)	71.3
Stabilisation (4–6 years)	180	12.4	83.9	33.93 (6.35)	74.4
Experimentation/diversification or stock-taking/interrogations (7–18 years)	404	27.8	85.9	40.42 (4.95)	76.2
Conservatism or clarity (19–30 years)	353	24.3	89.2	49.33 (3.95)	74.2
Disengagement (more than 30 years)	98	6.7	88.8	57.94 (2.54)	59.2

## Procedure

The data is a part of a research project, named Positive teacher development model – An interplay of the individual (motivational, emotional, and cognitive) and contextual (school and system level) assets during the school year, which aimed to examine individual and contextual factors that may contribute to job satisfaction and teacher retention and may reduce burn-out. The research project included both pre- and in-service teachers from Slovenia. For the data to reflect the population as closely as possible, all basic and upper-secondary schools in Slovenia were invited to participate. In the present study, 49 basic<sup>1</sup> schools (out of 450 public basic schools in Slovenia) and 21 upper-secondary schools<sup>2</sup> (out of 143 public upper-secondary schools in Slovenia) agreed to participate. Before the data collection procedure, questionnaires were translated into Slovene language using a committee approach (two independent expert translations and decision on the best translation by the third independent expert) and the whole research project was approved by a Committee for Ethics at the Educational Research Institute (nr. 3-2024). After that, informed consents were obtained. Additionally, all participants were told what the survey was about, how the data would be collected, protected, and analysed and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Participants received the link to the online questionnaire battery by the school coordinators. The data col-

lection is longitudinal, and this study uses T1 data collection from the beginning of the school or study year – that is September 2024 for in-service teachers and at the end of October for pre-service teachers. T2 and T3 followed at the middle and at the end of the school or study year, respectively. It took them about 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

## Instruments

*Burnout.* The *Shirom-Melamed Burnout Questionnaire* (SMBQ) (Melamed et al., 1992) is composed of 14 items and measures three dimensions of burnout: physical fatigue (6 items, "I had no energy for going to work in the morning"), cognitive weariness (5 items, "My thinking process was slow"), and emotional exhaustion (3 items, "I am not capable of investing emotionally in the students."). Respondents rated the extent to which each item applies to them on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The internal consistency on the current sample was excellent for all three dimensions (physical fatigue: 0.93; cognitive weariness: 0.95; emotional exhaustion: 0.93). The three-dimensional burnout model was tested on a current sample using Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The model demonstrated adequate structural validity  $\chi^2(74) = 947.615$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.956, TLI = 0.946, RMSEA = 0.090, 90% CI [0.085, 0.096], SRMR = 0.043.

*Emotion regulation.* The brief version of the *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) is a 16-item self-report measure that assesses the following dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties: non-acceptance of negative emotions (three items, "When I feel upset, I judge myself for having those feelings."), inability to engage in goal-directed behaviours when distressed (three items, "When I'm emotionally overwhelmed, I struggle to concentrate on tasks."), difficulties controlling impulsive behaviours when distressed (three items, "When I'm very upset, I act in ways I later regret."), limited access to emotion regulation, strategies perceived as effective (five items, "When I feel bad, I don't know what could help me feel better."), and lack of emotional clarity (two items, "I have trouble putting my emotions into words."). Respondents rated the extent to which each item applies to them on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The internal consistency was excellent ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). The hierarchical model of emotion regulation difficulties was tested on a current sample using CFA. The model, with modifications, demonstrated adequate structural validity:  $\chi^2(47) = 423.019$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , CFI = 0.955, TLI = 0.937, RMSEA = 0.075, 90% CI [0.069, 0.082], SRMR = 0.039.

## Data analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using RStudio, a statistical computing environment based on R. Firstly, the data was examined for the number and patterns of missing values. There were less than 1.6% missing values on the item level. Little's MCAR test showed that missing values were missing completely at random:  $\chi^2(16) = 15.05, p = 0.521$ . In the current analyses only cases with full data were kept ( $N = 1412$ ). After checking outliers and scatter plots, we decided that additional procedures for removing outliers or normalising distributions were not necessary. After that, since the data were nested (1191 in-service teachers in 70 schools and 217 pre-service teachers in 3 faculties), intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were examined. Most of the ICCs for study variables were low (emotion regulation: ICCteachers = 0.012, ICCstudents = 0.000; physical fatigue: ICCteachers = 0.032, ICCstudents = 0.000; cognitive weariness: ICCteachers = 0.022, ICCstudents = 0.016; emotional exhaustion: ICCteachers = 0.018, ICCstudents = 0.000). Since most of the ICCs were below the suggested cutoff of 0.05 (LeBreton & Senter, 2008), the analyses were conducted at the individual level to focus on self-reported characteristics. Then we calculated the descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables. Prior to the main analyses, confirmatory factor analyses were performed for each study variable. Model fit was assessed using chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative fit indices (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), following the recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999) for a good fit: CFI > 0.95, RMSEA < 0.06 and SRMR < 0.08. For adequate fit, the following cut-off values were applied: CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, and SRMR < 0.08 (Hair et al., 2019). Separate CFA models were conducted for each construct. If indicated by modification indices and justified by the content of the items, a correlation between these items was added. A series of one-way ANCOVAs were conducted to examine the effects of career stages on three dimensions of burnout while adding emotion regulation difficulties as continuous predictor in interaction effects. To examine group differences across career stages in more detail, post hoc comparisons were conducted using estimated marginal means (EMM).

## RESULTS

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### Descriptive statistics and correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 2. Physical fatigue showed the highest mean score, followed by cognitive weariness and emotional exhaustion. All variables exhibited normal distribution based on their skewness and kurtosis.

Strong positive correlations were observed between all burnout dimensions, with the strongest relationship between cognitive weariness and emotional exhaustion. Physical fatigue and cognitive weariness also showed a strong correlation, while physical fatigue and emotional exhaustion demonstrated a moderate correlation. Emotion regulation difficulties showed moderate positive correlations with all burnout dimensions.

**TABLE 2**  
Descriptive statistics  
and correlations  
among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1 Physical fatigue	2.79	1.02	0.18	0.07	–		
2 Cognitive weariness	2.27	0.95	0.49	0.07	0.70***	–	
3 Emotional exhaustion	1.96	0.87	0.37	0.07	0.57***	0.74***	–
4 Emotion regulation difficulties	2.01	0.66	1.02	0.06	0.37***	0.48***	0.43***

Note. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

### Analysis of covariance

A series of one-way ANCOVAs were conducted to examine the role of career stages on three dimensions of burnout while adding emotion regulation difficulties as continuous predictor in interaction effects. The results are presented in Table 3.

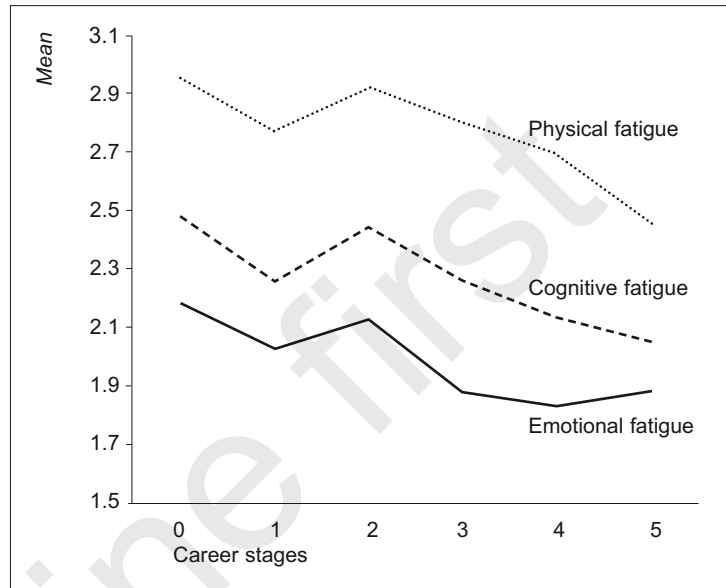
Measure	Sum of squares	<i>df</i>	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
Cognitive weariness						
Emotion regulation	181.70	1	182.19	293.358	< 0.001	0.218
Career stages	12.31	5	2.16	3.975	0.001	0.007
Career stages $\times$ Emotion regulation difficulties	4.38	5	0.89	1.415	0.216	0.003
Residuals	867.13	1400	0.89			
Physical fatigue						
Emotion regulation	182.19	1	182.19	205.011	< 0.001	0.126
Career stages	10.80	5	2.16	2.430	0.033	0.007
Career stages $\times$ Emotion regulation difficulties	4.43	5	0.89	0.996	0.419	0.003
Residuals	1244.13	1400	0.89			
Emotional exhaustion						
Emotion regulation	276.15	1	276.15	394.917	< 0.001	0.171
Career stages	8.93	5	1.79	2.554	0.026	0.012
Career stages $\times$ Emotion regulation difficulties	3.43	5	0.69	0.980	0.429	0.004
Residuals	978.98	1400	0.70			

**TABLE 3**  
Analysis of covariance  
results for the effects  
of career stages and  
emotion regulation on  
burnout dimensions

The results indicated that levels of burnout differed significantly as a function of emotion regulation difficulties and career stage across all three dimensions, however, emotion regulation difficulties explained a larger amount of differences in all three burnout dimensions (the largest in emotional exhaustion, 17%) compared to career stages. Career-stage differences were most pronounced for emotional exhaustion, with

differences in career stages explaining 1% of differences in emotional exhaustion. The interaction between career stage and emotion regulation difficulties was not significant for any burnout dimension, indicating comparable patterns of burnout dimensions across levels of emotion regulation difficulties. For better illustration, the patterns of physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, and emotional exhaustion across career stages are presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1  
Patterns of physical,  
cognitive, and  
emotional dimensions  
of burnout across  
career stages



Note. Career stages: 0 = pre-service teachers; 1 = survival and discovery (years 1–3); 2 = stabilisation (years 4–6); 3 = experimentation/diversification or stock-taking/interrogations (years 7–18); 4 = conservatism or clarity (years 19–30); 5 = disengagement (30+ years).

Physical fatigue consistently showed the highest levels across all career stages, with the highest at the pre-service level and during the stabilisation stage (4–6 years of teaching experiences), followed by a steady decline through later career stages. Cognitive weariness followed a similar pattern but at a lower intensity, showing its highest levels during pre-service and early-career years, more specifically in the period of stabilisation before declining in the serenity and disengagement phases. Emotional exhaustion demonstrated the lowest levels overall, with the pattern following the other two dimensions of burnout.

To further examine group differences across career stages, post hoc comparisons were conducted using estimated marginal means (EMM). Based on that, the differences between groups were calculated (EMMD). These results sometimes dif-

ferred from *raw mean difference* (RMD), since EMM included emotion regulation difficulties as a continuous predictor in interaction effects.

Significant differences in cognitive weariness were observed between the stabilisation stage (years 4–6, stage 2) and the conservatism or clarity stage (years 19–30, stage 4). Specifically, teachers in the stabilisation stage reported significantly higher levels of cognitive weariness compared to those in the conservatism or clarity stage ( $EMMD = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.077$ ,  $t(1400) = 2.857$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). These two groups also noticeably differed in raw mean comparison (*raw mean difference* = 0.31). No other pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance.

No significant differences were found between groups in physical fatigue. However, teachers in the disengagement stage (30+ years, stage 5) showed marginally lower scores in physical fatigue compared to those in the stabilisation stage (years 4–6, stage 2) ( $EMMD = 0.333$ ,  $SE = 0.121$ ,  $t(1400) = 2.760$ ,  $p = 0.065$ ). Additionally, teachers in the disengagement stage reported a somewhat lower mean score for physical fatigue compared to pre-service teachers (30+ years, stage 0) ( $EMMD = 0.306$ ,  $SE = 0.117$ ,  $t(1400) = 2.620$ ,  $p = 0.093$ ). This was also the highest *raw mean difference* between the two groups (*raw mean difference* = 0.51), but it ended up being marginally significant when the differences in emotional regulation were accounted for. No other pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance, indicating that the remaining career stages did not differ significantly in their mean scores for physical fatigue.

Significant differences in emotional exhaustion were observed between certain groups. A statistically significant difference was found between the stabilisation stage (years 4–6, stage 2) and conservatism or clarity stage (years 19–30, stage 4) ( $p = 0.024$ ). These two groups exhibited a moderate *raw mean difference* of 0.29, with the clarity stage (stage 4) having lower scores than the stabilisation stage (stage 2). These two stages are the only ones that are significantly different in two areas of burnout. Additionally, pre-service teachers (stage 0) reported significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to teachers in the conservatism or clarity stage ( $EMMD = 0.204$ ,  $SE = 0.068$ ,  $t(1400) = 3.003$ ,  $p = 0.032$ , stage 4). This was also the highest intergroup difference (*raw mean difference* = 0.35). A difference nearing significance was observed between stabilisation stage (years 4–6, stage 2) and experimentation/diversification or stock-taking/interrogations stage (years 7–18, stage 3) ( $p = 0.053$ ). No other pairwise comparisons reached statistical significance, indicating that the remaining career stages did not differ significantly in their mean scores for all three burnout subscales.

## DISCUSSION

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In light of detected difficulties associated with teachers' profession, such as increased stress levels and burnout, which have a potential to jeopardise teacher retention, the current study analyses the relationship between career stages and burnout. Since burnout is multidimensional (i.e., physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, and emotional exhaustion), it is important to analyse the relationships on a dimensional level. The study focuses on teachers' professional development, pre-service and in-service. This is especially important as teacher training can contribute significantly to the future challenges of the teaching profession. Additionally, the role of emotion regulation difficulties is explored.

First of all, our findings show strong positive associations between all burnout dimensions. The strong interconnectedness adds proof to the constructional validity indicating the multidimensional nature of burnout. The strongest relationship was found between emotional exhaustion and cognitive weariness, indicating a strong interconnectedness of emotional and cognitive processes in burnout. As the emotional dimension is a central feature of burnout (Maslach et al., 2016), the research (as well as prevention and intervention efforts) should start there, since the changes in emotional dimensions would be reflected also in the cognitive dimension as well as in the physical dimension due to their interconnectedness. However, our results demonstrate that physical fatigue is the most prevalent dimension of burnout among Slovenian teachers, followed by cognitive weariness and emotional exhaustion. We expected emotional exhaustion to be the most prevalent, as it was confirmed before by a study from Hellebau et al. (2023). Emotional exhaustion is described as feeling emotionally drained by intense interactions, and the classroom is a room full of intense relationships. The difference in findings is worth further exploration as it could indicate the possible contextual level influences. For instance, contextual effects have been established in Greece, where they identified increased levels of teacher burnout in times of the Greek financial crisis (Kamtsios, 2018). The same study also established the opposite pattern to ours, with more experienced teachers reporting higher levels of burnout, indicating the need to explore systemic influences and characteristics of teachers' professional development from a cross-country perspective. In addition to the contextual hypothesis, it is also possible that physical fatigue is easier to detect in comparison to emotional exhaustion and cognitive weariness. It might be that the Slovene teachers tend to report burnout on a physical level. Along these lines, Scheuch et al. (2015) reported German teachers reporting more physical fatigue complaints, such as

exhaustion, fatigue, headache, and tension compared to non-teachers. These hypotheses are worth exploring in future research.

Further on, our findings confirm the significant role of emotion regulation difficulties in burnout. Statistically significant differences across levels of emotion regulation difficulties were found for all three burnout dimensions. Teachers with different levels of emotion regulation difficulties differ in the levels of burnout. The more (or less) difficulties they report, the more (or less) emotional exhaustion, cognitive weariness, and physical fatigue they report. Therefore, effort in supporting teachers' emotion regulation is needed. The support for teachers' emotion regulation is important not only for their own well-being and their burnout levels but also for their students' well-being (Štremfel et al., 2024). Teachers who function better on a social and emotional level have been shown to engage in more emotionally supportive interactions with students, which further leads to students being more socially, emotionally (and academically) competent. Furthermore, teachers with more adaptive emotion regulation have better teaching styles (i.e., more autonomy support) and better classroom management skills (Farhi & Rubinsken, 2024).

In addition to emotion regulation difficulties playing a role in burnout dimensions, our findings also show the important role of career stages. Teachers in different career stages reported different levels of all three dimensions of burnout. Pre-service teachers and early-career teachers, more specifically the ones having between four and six years of teaching experience, reported the highest levels of all three dimensions of burnout. Post-hoc analyses revealed more specific patterns. In cognitive weariness, significant differences were found between teachers with four to six years of teaching experience (stabilisation stage) compared to teachers with 19–30 years of teaching experience (conservatism or clarity stage). As the teachers in the latter group showed lower levels, we can assume that the teachers in our sample went into the direction of gaining clarity in their career-path as opposed to conservatism. However, future qualitative studies would be needed to further explore this hypothesis. Differences between other career stages were not significant. A similar pattern was found in emotional exhaustion, that is, teachers with between four and six years of teaching experience reported significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to teachers with 19–30 years of teaching experience. Additionally, pre-service teachers reported significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to teachers with 8–19 years of experience. The differences in physical fatigue between career stages were not significant. The lack of career-stage differences in physical fatigue may

reflect a stronger association between emotion regulation difficulties and physical fatigue relative to emotional exhaustion and cognitive weariness. The raw differences in burnout dimensions between career stages are similar (see Figure 1), but the differences are non-significant only in physical fatigue.

As teachers between four and six years of teaching experience are also the ones most prone to leaving their teaching career (De Witte et al., 2024; Van den Borre, 2021), these findings are alarming. It is interesting that in-service teachers that just started with their career reported somewhat lower levels of burnout as in-service teachers in the stabilisation phase. During the period of stabilisation, early career teachers can encounter an identity crisis and without adequate support, they may decide to leave their job. Burnout can be understood also as a significant discrepancy between professional expectations and less satisfying reality (Friedman, 2000). After a couple of years, early-career teachers can evaluate the profession as not meeting their expectations. At the same time, the rise after the first years can also be a result of accumulated fatigue during the initial adaptation phase and an increase in workload. The lower levels of burnout in the first years of employment might be a result of resolving one of the developmental tasks in the developmental period of emerging adulthood, that is, to secure employment. Additional qualitative analysis could provide more insight into the subtle differences inside the early-career stage.

It is especially concerning that pre-service teachers are equally stressed as teachers with four to six years of teaching experience. The pre-service period is marked with transition, first to university life and second to professional life and employment. The pre-service period brings significant changes and challenges, such as adapting to life away from home, cohabiting with individuals of different cultural values, managing romantic relationships, and navigating job searches (Arnett, 2000; Pedrelli et al., 2016). Having a large amount of teaching experiences in their pre-service stage, they can also anticipate the challenges before them. In addition to these challenges, students face academic pressures, financial responsibilities, and adult obligations (Sussman & Arnett, 2014). The successful transition may have served to reduce their stress. However, this period does not last long and leads to another peak in burnout in the phase of stabilisation. Research shows that quality induction or introduction programmes (activities that are planned and implemented to support transitions to the workplace) are important for early-career teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997), and that teacher acculturation into the profession with a structured and well-supervised induction period is crucial (Howe, 2006). The induction process has many

focuses, but research shows that what early-career teachers value most, out of several support systems (workload reduction, school enculturation, working with individual professional development plans, observation in the classroom, and mentoring on the job) are the conversations and feedback from a mentor (Aarts et al., 2020). In this regard, organisational culture in general and an open communication atmosphere, in particular, determine how teachers, especially early-career teachers, can learn in their work (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). A supportive community of practice and mentoring are vital to improving the transition from pre-service teacher education to the teaching profession (Gordon, 2020). In addition, based on our findings, emotion regulation support is important as well. This form of support is already needed at the pre-service level, where this type of support leads also to a sense of belonging (and consequently to teacher identity development). Both, teacher identity as well as sense of belonging, are found to be protective factors against elevated levels of stress during the pre-service stage (Meehan & Howels, 2018). These findings highlight the importance of social and emotional processes at the university level.

Interestingly, there was no evidence of a significant interaction between career stage and emotion regulation difficulties for any burnout dimension. As there are studies reporting an increase in adaptive emotion regulation with age and teaching experience (Scheibe & Moghimi, 2021; Urry & Gross, 2010), we expected the interaction would have played a role. However, there are newer studies that did not confirm the increase in adaptive emotion regulation with age (e.g., Fahri & Rubinsen, 2024; Mendes & Miguel, 2024). According to these findings and our results as well, it seems that the choice of adaptive vs maladaptive emotion regulation strategies might depend on other factors than age, such as social context, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics, and work-related events. It might also be that the relationship differs across different school contexts, teaching subjects being one of them. This is a path worth exploring in future studies. Furthermore, there might have been an interaction effect between career-stages and different types of emotion regulation difficulties together with emotion regulation strategies, which is also worth exploring in future research.

## **Limitations and future directions**

There are several strengths to the present study. First, this is the first study comparing the burnout levels (on a dimensional level) in a combination with emotion regulation across the career stages of teachers in Slovenia. Second, we had a large

sample of 1468 pre-service and in-service teachers. The inclusion of pre-service samples in the analysis is novel in the literature, since studies so far have analysed either pre-service or in-service teacher samples. Our study therefore brings important insight in the period of transition to the in-service stage.

Yet, there are also some limitations to the present study that demand further research. First of all, the current results are based on cross-sectional data that does not fully respond to the processed nature of burnout. Future longitudinal studies are needed to shed light on how burnout develops throughout the career stages (possibly disentangling between person and within-person effects). These are planned as a continuation of this study. Huberman's (1996) model as a contextual support at this point strongly relies on previous studies conducted in the Slovene context (Čotar Konrad et al., 2022; Gradišek et al., 2020). In future studies we suggest a mixed method approach with inclusion of qualitative data exploring the characteristics of teachers in each of the career stages (with the focus on burnout and emotion regulation difficulties). This could also diminish response bias as we have only relied on self-report data. An additional limitation in data collection was that the sample was not representative of the entire population of teachers. Last but not least, teacher characteristics that might have contributed to the level of burnout were not included in the analysis. Aligned with detected research (Carroll et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2024; Sohail et al., 2023), additional directions worth exploring are teachers' self-efficacy, teachers' emotions, emotion regulation strategies, social support, and parental challenges. Future studies should look into different school levels, contextual characteristics, as possible contributors to teachers' burnout as well as class size, since this could also play a role. Also, considering characteristics such as motivation for the profession and teaching identity would be worthwhile. For instance, teachers report less burnout when they are autonomously motivated in comparison to when they are controlled motivated, and at the same time the quality of motivation changes throughout the career, with more experienced teachers being more autonomously motivated.

Nevertheless, this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between burnout and emotion regulation difficulties across different career stages of teachers in Slovenia, offering an important contribution by including both pre-service and in-service teachers and starting to disentangle the dynamics of teacher well-being throughout their careers. Due to contextual influences that shape the teacher profession, the findings from our study are relevant for Slovenia, with future studies exploring its cross-cultural relevance needed.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Basic education in Slovenia is organised as integrated primary and lower secondary education, i.e., as a single structure nine-year basic school. It is compulsory and attended by children aged six to fifteen.

<sup>2</sup> Upon completion of compulsory basic education, students – typically aged 15 – may choose to continue their education at the upper secondary level at a school and a programme of their own choice. Programmes are divided into general upper secondary education, technical upper secondary education and vocational upper secondary education.

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## Razvojne faze karijere nastavnika u Sloveniji kao prediktori njihova sagorijevanja: uloga poteškoća u regulaciji emocija

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Budući da su stresori s kojima se nastavnici suočavaju često socijalne i emocionalne prirode, a količina i kvaliteta tih stresora mijenjaju se tijekom karijere učitelja, povezanost između faza karijere, regulacije emocija i sagorijevanja u fokusu je ove studije. Zanima nas predviđaju li faze karijere razinu sagorijevanja, njegovu kognitivnu, emocionalnu i fizičku dimenziju, te utječe li interakcija između faza karijere i regulacije emocija na sve tri dimenzije sagorijevanja. Uzorak je obuhvatio 1468 slovenskih studenata nastavničkih studija i zaposlenih nastavnika. Nalazi pokazuju značajne razlike u regulaciji emocija između faza karijere u svim trima dimenzijama sagorijevanja. Nastavnici koji su prijavili manje poteškoća u regulaciji emocija prijavili su i niže razine svih triju dimenzija sagorijevanja. Studenti i nastavnici na početku karijere prijavili su više razine svih triju dimenzija sagorijevanja, što upućuje na potrebu usmjeravanja posebne pozornosti prilagodbi nastavnika na radnom mjestu.

Ključne riječi: nastavnici, faze karijere, poteškoće u regulaciji emocija, sagorijevanje, Slovenija



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