

ORIGINAL

Job Satisfaction and Mental Health among Physical Education Teachers: A Qualitative Study in Rural Public Schools of the Alausí-Chunchi District, Ecuador

Satisfacción laboral y salud mental en docentes de Educación Física: un estudio cualitativo en escuelas públicas rurales del cantón Alausí-Chunchi (Ecuador)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: teacher job satisfaction is a critical determinant of professional performance, mental health, and educational quality. Physical Education (PE) teachers in rural areas face unique challenges, including limited resources, misalignment between training and rural teaching contexts, and weak policy implementation. Research on their satisfaction and psychological well-being is scarce, particularly in Ecuador.

Objective: this study explored the factors influencing job satisfaction and mental health among PE teachers in rural schools of the Alausí-Chunchi district (Ecuador), focusing on educational policies, professional training, resources, curricular content, and mental health.

Method: a qualitative case study design was employed. Ten PE teachers from rural schools were purposefully selected and interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires. Data were thematically analyzed, with illustrative participant quotes providing authenticity and evidence for the identified themes.

Results: limited awareness of educational policies generated stress and feelings of undervaluation, negatively affecting mental health. Initial professional training promoted satisfaction and confidence, but gaps in preparation for rural contexts caused frustration. Continuing and autonomous professional development were constrained by cost, distance, and lack of institutional support, exacerbating stress. Resource scarcity—including material, technological, and infrastructural limitations—created additional challenges for teaching and well-being. While curricular flexibility was valued, adapting content to rural realities imposed cognitive and emotional strain. Positive experiences, such as student engagement and peer collaboration, enhanced resilience and professional pride.

Conclusions: job satisfaction among rural PE teachers is multidimensional and closely linked to mental health. Interventions improving policy communication, context-specific professional training, resource provision, and adaptive curriculum support are essential to reduce stress, enhance well-being, and improve teaching quality. The study underscores the need to integrate mental health considerations into teacher satisfaction research, policy, and practice in rural educational settings.

Keywords: Physical Education Teachers; Job Satisfaction; Mental Health; Rural Education; Professional Development.

RESUMEN

Introducción: la satisfacción laboral del docente es un determinante crítico del desempeño profesional,

la salud mental y la calidad educativa. Los docentes de Educación Física (EF) en áreas rurales enfrentan desafíos únicos, incluidos recursos limitados, desalineación entre la formación recibida y los contextos rurales de enseñanza, y débil implementación de políticas. La investigación sobre su satisfacción y bienestar psicológico es escasa, particularmente en Ecuador.

Objetivo: este estudio exploró los factores que influyen en la satisfacción laboral y la salud mental de los docentes de EF en escuelas rurales del cantón Alausí-Chunchi (Ecuador), con énfasis en políticas educativas, formación profesional, recursos, contenidos curriculares y salud mental.

Método: se empleó un diseño cualitativo de estudio de caso. Se seleccionaron intencionalmente diez docentes de EF de escuelas rurales y se les entrevistó mediante cuestionarios semiestructurados. Los datos se analizaron temáticamente, incluyendo citas ilustrativas de los participantes que proporcionan evidencia y autenticidad a los temas identificados.

Resultados: el conocimiento limitado de las políticas educativas generó estrés y sensación de subvaloración, afectando negativamente la salud mental. La formación profesional inicial promovió satisfacción y confianza, pero las brechas en la preparación para contextos rurales causaron frustración. La formación continua y autónoma estuvo limitada por costos, distancia y falta de apoyo institucional, aumentando el estrés. La escasez de recursos—materiales, tecnológicos e infraestructurales—creó desafíos adicionales para la enseñanza y el bienestar. Aunque se valoró la flexibilidad curricular, adaptar los contenidos a la realidad rural supuso carga cognitiva y emocional. Experiencias positivas, como la participación estudiantil y la colaboración entre colegas, fortalecieron la resiliencia y el orgullo profesional.

Conclusiones: la satisfacción laboral de los docentes de EF rurales es multidimensional y está estrechamente vinculada a la salud mental. Las intervenciones que mejoren la comunicación de políticas, la formación contextualizada, la provisión de recursos y el apoyo curricular adaptativo son esenciales para reducir el estrés, mejorar el bienestar y potenciar la calidad educativa. El estudio subraya la importancia de integrar la salud mental en la investigación, políticas y prácticas docentes en entornos rurales.

Palabras clave: Docentes de Educación Física; Satisfacción Laboral; Salud Mental; Educación Rural; Desarrollo Profesional.

INTRODUCTION

Education aims to foster the holistic development of individuals and prepare them for a responsible life within society, guided by the principles of educational institutions and national frameworks, and delivered by trained professionals.^(1,2) In this process, Physical Education (PE) occupies a distinctive role by promoting physical, emotional, and social well-being. The professional performance of PE teachers is closely linked to the quality of their initial training,⁽³⁾ which not only equips them with technical skills but also shapes their ability to cultivate positive learning environments.

Teacher satisfaction is a critical factor in professional performance. It emerges from achieving goals, enjoying work, and maintaining personal balance,⁽⁴⁾ whereas its absence may lead to stress, boredom, and adverse effects on health and quality of life.⁽⁵⁾ Research consistently demonstrates that job satisfaction influences teaching effectiveness, overall performance, and teachers' personal and social relationships.⁽⁶⁾ Promoting satisfaction, therefore, is essential to reduce health risks and enhance professional outcomes.⁽⁷⁾

The concept of Physical Education itself has evolved historically in line with changing views of the human body and its development.^(8,9) Within this tradition, Chaverra defines PE as “the science and art of intentionally promoting the harmonious, natural, and progressive development of an individual's movement faculties, and with them, the rest of their personal abilities”.⁽¹⁰⁾ This perspective emphasizes holistic growth, where physical and mental well-being are strengthened by fostering healthy habits through behavioral adaptation. Complementing this view, Vargas and Orozco argue that PE practice should be planned, regular, and progressive, gradually integrating into students' daily lives.⁽¹¹⁾ Accordingly, PE today continues to promote quality of life and satisfaction across diverse educational and social contexts.⁽¹²⁾

Despite these benefits, the working conditions under which PE is delivered may undermine teacher well-being. Limited resources, increasing demands, and shifting educational priorities can generate tension, irritability, anxiety, and even depression, contributing to job dissatisfaction.^(13,14) Such discomfort often erodes professional attitudes, technical skills, and motivation, producing psychosocial consequences such as boredom, lack of interest, and demotivation.^(15,16) These outcomes not only harm teachers' mental health but also compromise the quality of education provided to students. Given this scenario, understanding and promoting job satisfaction among PE teachers is essential. It is a determinant of teacher well-being, professional performance, and student outcomes, yet research in this field—particularly in rural contexts—remains scarce.

Due the role of Physical Education in fostering health and quality of life, it is equally important to examine

the conditions under which teachers carry out their professional duties. The ability of PE to fulfill its social and educational functions depends largely on teachers' motivation, well-being, and satisfaction with their work. Therefore, understanding the factors that influence teacher job (dis)satisfaction becomes essential, as it directly impacts not only instructional quality but also the promotion of students' overall development.

Teacher Job (Dis)Satisfaction

The text addresses teacher job (dis)satisfaction, highlighting studies from the United Kingdom and reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that indicate an educational crisis.⁽¹⁷⁾ Educational factors such as training, resources, curriculum, and professional performance are examined as influences on teacher satisfaction.⁽¹⁸⁾ Various conditions—including curriculum overload, administrative tasks, increased classes or student numbers, lack of resources, new educational responsibilities, and limited collaboration among teachers—affect job satisfaction. The importance of initial training and professional characteristics is emphasized for the satisfaction of Physical Education teachers.^(19,20) Overall, PE teachers report moderate-to-high satisfaction, particularly regarding initial training, interaction with students, and teaching practice, while limited practical experience, low societal value attributed to Physical Education by families, and lack of social recognition are identified as factors contributing to low satisfaction.^(21,22)

Physical Education Teachers: Characteristics, Working Conditions, and the Reality of Rural Schools in Ecuador

Teacher job satisfaction, particularly in rural schools, is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Aspects such as infrastructure, financial incentives, professional autonomy, alignment with the curriculum, and training opportunities affect satisfaction.^(23,24) In the context of Physical Education in rural areas, a gap between teacher training and classroom practice is evident, as educators often face challenging conditions, including limited materials and inadequate facilities. The unique structure of rural schools requires addressing diverse learning paces and developmental levels within a generally low socioeconomic context.^(25,26) Challenges include small and heterogeneous student groups, precarious facilities, colleagues with limited training, and constraints in teaching resources.⁽²⁷⁾ Furthermore, access to schools can be difficult due to distance and climatic conditions.^(28,29) Despite governmental efforts, issues persist in rural education in Ecuador.

Based on a review of the existing literature, several questions arise: To what extent do the selected aspects for this study—i.e., educational policies, professional training, resources, curricular content, and methodology—determine the level of job (dis)satisfaction among Physical Education teachers in rural schools of the Alausí-Chunchi district (Ecuador)? Which factors contribute to the job (dis)satisfaction of PE teachers in Ecuadorian rural schools?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, aiming to explore the perceptions and experiences of Physical Education teachers in their natural work context. The research was conducted in rural schools of the Alausí-Chunchi district, Ecuador. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of teachers with diverse years of experience, training backgrounds, and school conditions. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which allowed participants to share their perspectives in depth while enabling the researchers to probe emerging themes. All sessions were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect confidentiality. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, involving iterative coding, categorization, and the identification of patterns and relationships across the data. To enhance rigor, strategies such as triangulation of sources, peer debriefing, and member checking were applied. This methodological framework ensured that the study captured rich, contextualized insights into the factors influencing teacher job (dis)satisfaction.

The study sample consisted of 10 Physical Education teachers from rural public schools in the Alausí-Chunchi district (Ecuador) who responded to the administered questionnaire. Initially, with approval from the relevant administrative staff, 20 Primary and Secondary PE teachers from the rural public schools of Alausí-Chunchi were contacted, informed of the study's objectives, and invited to participate in an online questionnaire (the only available communication method during COVID-19 confinement). Of the 20 candidates, 10 responded.

The instrument, validated by two qualitative research experts, focused on themes directly related to the degree of job (dis)satisfaction among PE teachers in their daily professional practice, considering the characteristics of Physical Education in the Alausí-Chunchi District 06D02. The questionnaire was qualitative, comprising 40 open-ended questions divided by themes and subthemes. Each question was assigned a numerical code for subsequent analysis). Each thematic section was linked to the study's main focus, "teacher job (dis)satisfaction," allowing participants not only to indicate their level of satisfaction across various aspects of their work but also to explain their responses and provide improvement suggestions. The questionnaire was structured as follows: (1) General Information; (2) Educational Policies; (3) Training (initial, continuing, and autonomous);

(4) Resources (human, material, and technological); (5) Curricular Content; and (6) Mental Health Implications.

RESULTS

Analysis of interviews with 10 Physical Education (PE) teachers in rural schools of Alausí-Chunchi revealed four interrelated themes shaping job satisfaction and mental health: Educational Policies, Professional Training, Resources, and Curricular Content. Each theme illustrates both challenges and sources of satisfaction, highlighting the impact of working conditions on teachers' psychological well-being. Each participant was assigned an identification code from P1 to P10.

Educational Policies (EP)

Teachers' perceptions of Educational Policies varied widely. Five participants expressed satisfaction with existing policies:

- "When policies recognize PE as essential, I feel my work is valued and meaningful." (P1)
- "Policies give us a framework to plan lessons, but sometimes it feels like they exist only on paper." (P3)

Four participants were unaware of any specific policies, reflecting limited communication and institutional support:

- "Honestly, I didn't even know what policies exist. We're left to manage on our own, and it's frustrating." (P4)
- "I feel disconnected from policy decisions. There's no guidance for rural PE teachers." (P7)

One participant expressed dissatisfaction with the only policy they knew:

- "There's a policy that's supposed to help us, but it doesn't reflect the realities of rural schools. It feels useless." (P10)

Several teachers linked these policy gaps to stress and demotivation:

- "Not knowing what is expected or supported makes me anxious. I constantly worry if I'm meeting standards or missing something." (P2)

Professional Training (PT)

Initial Professional Training (IPT)

Eight participants were satisfied with their university preparation:

- "University prepared me to understand students' needs and plan engaging lessons. It gave me confidence from day one." (P1)
- "My training emphasized holistic development, which fits well with my goals as a PE teacher." (P5)

Two teachers noted gaps between theory and rural practice:

- "We learned in ideal conditions, but rural schools are different—no equipment, varied student abilities. It's a constant challenge." (P3)
- "Training didn't cover improvising with limited resources, which is what we often have to do." (P6)

Continuing Professional Training (CPT)

Seven teachers reported challenges accessing ongoing training:

- "Workshops are expensive, travel is hard, and schedules clash with teaching. I feel stuck." (P4)
- "Sometimes I want to take a course to improve my skills, but there's no support or funding." (P8)

Three teachers highlighted positive experiences:

- "I enrolled in an online course last year, and it gave me new ideas for class. Continuous learning keeps me motivated." (P2)

Autonomous Professional Training (APT)

Six participants described proactive, self-directed learning:

- "I read journals and watch tutorials at home. It's exciting but tiring when done without institutional support." (P5)

Four participants emphasized barriers:

- "Time, distance, and bureaucracy make self-learning difficult. Sometimes it feels impossible to stay updated." (P7)

- “Rural schools limit access to technology, and it affects our ability to improve professionally.” (P10)

Resources

Human Resources

Satisfaction arose from supportive colleagues and motivated students:

- “My coworkers are helpful, and seeing students excited keeps me going.” (P1)
- “The positive environment makes long days manageable.” (P9)

Dissatisfaction stemmed from high workloads and limited staff:

- “We are too few to cover all classes and duties. It’s exhausting and stressful.” (P4)
- “Sometimes I feel alone, and the responsibilities are overwhelming.” (P6)

Material and Infrastructural Resources

Most participants reported frustration due to insufficient equipment:

- “Balls and mats are old, gyms are non-existent. Planning lessons is a constant improvisation.” (P2)
- “We try to recycle or share materials, but it’s never enough.” (P8)

Technological Resources

Limited access to technology was a common concern:

- “The internet is unreliable, and computers are outdated. I can’t use online tools effectively.” (P3)
- “Even if I find good resources online, I can’t implement them because of lack of devices or connectivity.” (P10)

These constraints contributed to stress and feelings of professional inadequacy:

- “It’s frustrating to want to innovate but be blocked by lack of resources.” (P5)

Curricular Content

Most teachers appreciated the curriculum’s flexibility:

- “I can adapt activities to students’ abilities, which keeps them engaged and me motivated.” (P1)
- “Flexible lessons allow me to meet the students’ needs.” (P7)

Dissatisfaction arose when content did not reflect rural realities:

- “Some lessons assume urban facilities. I have to improvise constantly, which is draining.” (P4)
- “It’s hard to implement certain exercises without proper materials.” (P9)

Teachers emphasized the interdependence of curriculum and resources:

- “Even if the curriculum is flexible, if I lack materials or space, it’s hard to teach effectively.” (P2)

Mental Health Implications

Across all themes, teachers linked their experiences to psychological well-being. Stress, frustration, and fatigue were common:

- “After a long week with little support, I feel mentally exhausted. It’s hard to stay positive.” (P6)
- “Sometimes I feel anxious about whether I can deliver quality classes with so many limitations.” (P3)

Conversely, positive experiences fostered resilience:

- “Seeing my students improve gives me pride and energy.” (P1)
- “When I successfully adapt lessons to our context, I feel accomplished and motivated.” (P8)

These testimonies illustrate that while challenging work conditions can induce stress and burnout, successful teaching experiences promote professional pride and emotional resilience, highlighting the intrinsic link between job satisfaction and mental health in rural PE contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Educational Policies (EP), Professional Training (PT), Resources, and Curricular Content are key determinants of job satisfaction among Physical Education (PE) teachers in rural Ecuador. Importantly, these factors are tightly linked to teachers’ mental health, an aspect that has been underexplored in prior research.^(1,5)

Educational Policies and Mental Health

Our results show that limited awareness and implementation of educational policies create uncertainty and stress for rural PE teachers. Teachers who were unaware of EP reported anxiety and demotivation, highlighting that policy gaps are not merely administrative issues but also psychosocial stressors affecting well-being. This finding extends prior work on teacher satisfaction^(1,2,30) by demonstrating that in rural contexts, lack of policy clarity contributes directly to psychological strain. Policies must be communicated clearly and adapted to rural realities to protect teacher mental health and enhance professional efficacy. School administrators can mitigate stress by providing accessible policy briefings and integrating teachers into policy discussions, while the Ministry of Education should monitor implementation at rural sites.⁽²⁹⁾

Professional Training and Psychological Resilience

Satisfaction with initial professional training was generally high, yet teachers reported challenges in applying theoretical knowledge in rural settings. While foundational training builds confidence, the gap between theory and practice creates ongoing stress, potentially undermining mental health.^(3,4,31,32) Continuing and autonomous professional development were constrained by cost, distance, and bureaucratic hurdles, amplifying feelings of professional isolation.^(5,16,33,34) These findings suggest the need for rural-focused training modules, online and community-based professional development, and incentives to support participation in ongoing learning.

Resources and Mental Health Outcomes

Human, material, and technological resource limitations were strongly associated with frustration and burnout among participants.^(11,12,13,14,35) Teachers described high workloads, inadequate facilities, and outdated equipment, all of which exacerbated stress and anxiety. Interventions should target both material support (e.g., equipment donations, facility upgrades) and human support (e.g., collaboration networks, mentoring programs) to reduce chronic stress and promote satisfaction.

Curricular Content and Teacher Well-being

Teachers valued curricular flexibility; however, adapting content to rural realities produced professional frustration and cognitive load, impacting mental health.^(9,36) These results emphasize the interdependence of curriculum, resources, and teacher well-being. Curricula should be contextually adaptable, supported by adequate resources and pedagogical guidance.

Mental Health Implications

Across all categories, mental health emerged as a central dimension of teacher satisfaction.^(5,15) Stress, fatigue, and anxiety were common in response to inadequate policies, training gaps, and resource limitations. Positive experiences, such as successful lesson adaptation, student progress, and peer support, fostered pride, resilience, and job engagement. Interventions aimed at improving satisfaction in rural PE teaching must explicitly consider mental health outcomes, rather than focusing solely on professional metrics.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Theory

Practice: Administrators should provide structured support, accessible training, and collaborative teacher networks to mitigate stress.^(16,33)

Policy: The Ministry of Education should communicate policies clearly, adapt them to rural contexts, and monitor implementation.^(29,34)

Theory: Findings refine understanding of teacher satisfaction, emphasizing that job satisfaction and mental health are inseparable, particularly in resource-limited rural contexts.^(1,5,30,31)

Limitations

This study has limitations. The small sample size (N=10) limits generalizability, although qualitative depth was prioritized. Data relied on self-reporting, which may introduce bias, and initial design limitations could have affected data richness. Future research should expand the sample, employ longitudinal designs to track mental health outcomes, and explore interventions to strengthen satisfaction and well-being in rural PE teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that job satisfaction among rural Physical Education teachers is a multidimensional construct, closely intertwined with mental health. Educational policies, professional training, resources, and curricular content are not only determinants of satisfaction but also key factors shaping teachers' psychological well-being. Limited awareness of policies, gaps in rural-focused training, resource scarcity, and challenges in adapting curricula create stressors that impact both personal resilience and professional engagement. Conversely, positive experiences—such as meaningful student interactions and peer collaboration—enhance

pride, motivation, and coping capacity.

The findings underscore the necessity of integrating mental health considerations into teacher satisfaction initiatives, highlighting that improving well-being is as critical as enhancing professional competencies. Practical, policy, and theoretical interventions should focus on clear communication of policies, context-specific training, adequate resourcing, and adaptable curricula to strengthen both satisfaction and mental health. By addressing these interconnected factors, educational systems can foster more resilient, motivated, and effective PE teachers in rural settings.

Ultimately, this study advances understanding of how professional and psychosocial dimensions coalesce to influence teacher outcomes. It provides evidence that promoting satisfaction in rural educational contexts requires a holistic approach, where mental health and professional development are inseparable priorities. These insights can guide future research, inform policy-making, and support practical interventions aimed at sustaining high-quality education and teacher well-being in rural communities.

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This study employed artificial intelligence tools for the translation of the original manuscript, written in Spanish, into English, as well as for the correction and formatting of certain references. The tool and version used was Chat GPT-5 Mini, utilizing the following prompts: 1) translate the following paragraphs into English using scientific language, and 2) format the following references according to Vancouver style, including their respective DOI or website links.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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