

## MENTAL HEALTH, ILLNESS AND TEACHING WORK

Jerto Cardoso da Silva<sup>1</sup>; Luiza Tamara Almeida Leal<sup>1</sup>; Stefanie Schmidt<sup>1</sup>; Maiara da Silva Fuhr<sup>1</sup>; Eduardo Steindorf Saraiva<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The perception of Elementary School teachers about their mental health was the focus of this research. This is a quantitative research that seeks to understand the perceptions of mental health conditions in public schools in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The data collection method used was a questionnaire adapted from the Mental Health and Work Protocol answered by 249 teachers. Data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences – SPSS 18 software. It was found, as main results, that satisfaction, motivation and identity indices with the teaching activity are very significant. Teachers indicate commitment to work, value the profession, but complain that socially they are not valued, but paradoxically are heavily medicated.

**Keywords:** education; teaching work; mental health

### Saúde mental, adoecimento e trabalho docente

#### RESUMO

A percepção dos docentes de Ensino Fundamental sobre a sua saúde mental foi o foco desta pesquisa. Trata-se de uma pesquisa quantitativa que procura compreender as percepções das condições de saúde mental de escolas públicas no interior do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. O método da coleta de dados utilizado foi um questionário adaptado do Protocolo de Atenção à Saúde Mental e Trabalho respondido por 249 professores. Realizou-se a análise dos dados por intermédio do software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences – SPSS 18. Encontrou-se, como principais resultados, que índices de satisfação, motivação e identidade com a atividade docente são muito significativos. Os professores indicam comprometimento com o trabalho, valorizam a profissão, mas queixam-se de que socialmente não são valorizados, mas paradoxalmente estão muito medicados.

**Palavras-chave:** educação; trabalho docente; saúde mental

### Salud mental, padecimiento y labor docente

#### RESUMEN

La percepción de los docentes de educación básica sobre su salud mental fue el enfoque de esta investigación. El objetivo de esta investigación cuantitativa fue comprender de esas percepciones las condiciones de salud mental de escuelas públicas en el interior de RS, Brasil. El método de la recolecta de datos utilizado fue un cuestionario adaptado del Protocolo de Atención a la Salud Mental y Labor respondido por 249 profesores. Se realizó el análisis de los datos por intermedio del *software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences – SPSS 18*. Se encontró, como principales resultados, que índices de satisfacción, motivación e identidad con la actividad docente son muy significativos. Los profesores indican comprometimiento con el trabajo, valoran la profesión, pero se quejan de que socialmente no son valorizados, sin embargo, paradójicamente están muy medicados.

**Palabras clave:** educación; labor docente; salud mental

<sup>1</sup> University of Santa Cruz do Sul – Santa Cruz do Sul – RS – Brazil; jerto@unisc.br; luiza\_tamara@hotmail.com; stefanies@mx2.unisc.br; fuhrmaiara@gmail.com; eduardo@unisc.com

## INTRODUCTION

Health and education are intertwined areas that produce practices and discourses that form our ways of existing. We teach and learn about health and, when we get sick, we look for support in what we believe. Our professional practice and the way we conduct ourselves in the world of work raise health and illness processes in us, in our bodies. We produce and reproduce care practices in our daily lives. Medicine and education are close and constitute each other, and the priority care technology in schools, in cases of illness, whether of teachers or students, is medication. The dialogical field of production and reproduction of this care technology is not always discussed. We very easily associate illness with the biological body and often dissociate it from living conditions, including work.

The objective of this quantitative research was to understand these perceptions about the mental health conditions of public schools in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil. That is, how teachers interpret their working conditions, in relation to satisfaction, motivation, appreciation, recognition, autonomy, emotional exhaustion, stress, fear, among other analyzers. Being able to observe how they perceive the experiences, work routines and how they imply in their lives. Thus, it was possible to observe, through the conditions of production, how are the relationships between mental illness and the teachers' working conditions. Gasparini, Barreto and Assunção (2005) point out that such questions are important, as they help to understand the educator's health/disease process, which is a challenge today.

Rocha and Fernandes (2008) point out that the teaching profession currently faces high demands. The accelerated pace of work, performance based on productivity, lack of autonomy, low pay, work demands, devaluation, social disqualification and excessive physical and mental effort; all these demands are interconnected in a world that is becoming globalized, with tensions and demands constant flexibility, in addition to teachers having to deal with new technologies in their practice. This scenario has contributed to the harm to the psychological and physical health of teachers. From this emerges an adverse scenario to the quality of life of these professionals, spreading a way of existing prone to malaise and destabilization of their health.

It is necessary to reflect on the forms of illness of teachers, about the meanings that are constructed and about their working and health conditions. Thus, our intention with this study is to present the perceptions of elementary school teachers about their work, risk of illness and medicalization of teachers from five municipalities in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul.

## ILLNESS AND TEACHING WORK

According to Marcelo (2009), the teaching profession

is characterized as a "knowledge profession"; therefore, knowledge is the element that legitimizes this profession. Still according to this author, the teaching work is based on the "commitment to transform this knowledge into relevant learning for the students" (p. 8). In this sense, to be a teacher, nowadays, it is essential to constantly expand professional skills, considering that knowledge and society are constantly changing.

There is recognition that teachers are fundamental to the development of society; paradoxically, we noticed a precariousness in the working conditions experienced by these professionals. This is part of a historical process that is reflected in the quality of teaching and in its health, in an increasingly evident way, determined by the inadequacy of the conditions in which these professionals' activities are carried out (Pereira, Teixeira, Pelegrini, Meyer, Andrade, & Lopes, 2014).

Studies such as that by Cortez, Souza, Amaral and Silva (2017) point to the growth of work-related illness and psychological distress for teachers. They point out that the elements related to health in the teacher's work must be understood in a multidetermined way. However, they present points that converge in different studies, such as: the working day intensification; the dismantling of policies that legislate about the subject, as the construction of a cycle of physical and mental illness is perpetuated, intensified by the suffering that leads to psychological breakdown and other problems for teachers.

Araújo, Pinho and Masson (2019) highlight a growing work intensification process, relating it to economic precariousness (wage conditions, working hours, contracts) and precarious working conditions (changes in the organization and production process and technologies) flexible management that change work routines and control ways. These, among other factors, have repercussions on the physical and mental health and professional performance of teachers. Although these elements are aware of the teachers, the practices are aimed at the individual, reinforcing the more traditional marks of care aimed at the sick body, with little or no focus on the sickening environment. Studies denote that illness is still perceived from an individualizing perspective, representing a loss of historical and social perspective, as what happens at the individual level is also collective.

By pointing to a body that falls ill, decontextualized from its production conditions, the transforming power of the subjects is limited, as the focus falls on a sick body that must be medicated and not on a teaching staff that must be summoned to think about the differentials of gender, social valuation/devaluation and the invisibility of work, changes in the current subject's relationship with truth, knowledge, and new forms of construction and alienation of work relations.

According to Marcelino (2011), the ways of

experiencing work and teachers' illness are linked to cultural conceptions of what teaching is for teachers; to summarize: 1. Hegemonic conception: concept of teaching as a profession; 2. Idealistic or religious conception: concept of teaching as a vocation; 3. Materialist conception: concept of teaching as a political act, and 4. Organic conception: concept of teaching as a way of life. The way teachers experience teaching can affect, to a greater or lesser extent, their perception of illness. Yes, the teacher is a worker, but these conceptions of work deterritorialize him from the very conditions of his work and link him to the social value of work, much more than the material, economic and unhealthy conditions of his daily life. The teacher's work transcends the working day; this time invades other spaces of life and makes him sick, depriving him of time to live.

From Agamben (2002), we can think that this body has always been a biopolitical body and that postmodern man changes his relationship with life, because, in these times, knowledge is multiple, truths and life are provisional. The relation with the other and with oneself is fluid. In this sense, the teacher who maintains his place of value based on knowledge suffers from these changes. Science continues to be his horizon, but now undermined by his own instability. Other knowledge is empowered and supported by the right of expression, even if it is emptied of meaning. Teaching has changed places and causes a malaise that is still being processed in the daily life of schools. The teacher falls ill apart from this new context.

#### METHOD

This is a quantitative research. For its realization, semi-structured questionnaires were applied to 249 teachers from 11 public schools, from five municipalities in the interior of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The instrument used was a questionnaire adapted from the Protocolo de Atenção à Saúde Mental e Trabalho, organized by Bahia (2014), which consists of a tool that aims to diagnose and manage the main illness situations and related mental disorders to work. In this questionnaire, participants should indicate the answers, through a Likert scale of five points, which differentiate between zero (never) and five (always). The scale indicators were given through pleasure and suffering at work (satisfaction, motivation, appreciation, recognition, autonomy, emotional exhaustion, stress, fear, among other analyzers). At the end of the questionnaire there was an open question about the use of medication.

The questionnaires were applied by students of the Psychology course who practiced internship in public schools, and the professors were invited to participate according to their interest. After collecting the data, we decoded them and built tables, transferring the information to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences – SPSS 18.0 software, which transformed these data into statistical calculations for further analysis.

This research was approved by the local Ethics Committee under CAEE number: 09843019.0.0000.5343. All participants were informed about the objectives and methods proposed for this work and received the Free and Informed Consent Form, making them aware of such reports, with the purpose of maintaining the privacy of the participants.

#### RESULTS

This study had the participation of teachers from public schools, and the questionnaires were applied by Psychology interns according to the partnership established with public schools in the Rio Pardo valley, totaling 249 questionnaires. The survey had 161 female participants, representing 64.7% of the total, and 40 male participants, representing 16.1% of the total. Still, 48 people did not respond, which is equivalent to 19.2%. The data suggest that the number of women is much higher than that of men in teaching; this is in line with what CEDERJ (2020) points out: "The process of feminization of the teaching profession took effect from the development of industrialization and urbanization of the capitalist system, in the 19th century. [...] The teaching profession began to be identified with characteristics attributed to women, such as: docility, submission, sensitivity and patience." (p. 78).

Cardoso (2019) cites studies that show that female teachers are the most affected by illnesses in the work environment, since they are the majority in the teaching career. In addition, in the society we live in, multiple journeys are required of women. A very significant portion, in addition to having all the responsibilities involved in teaching, need to take care of their families and homes. These and other factors contribute to these professionals being more affected by diseases that afflict education workers. In addition, in relation to the working hours of teachers:

[...] are long, with rare rest breaks and/or brief meals and in uncomfortable places. The intense and variable pace, starting very early in the morning, which can be extended until the evening due to a double or triple work shift. In the hustle and bustle, schedules are not respected, hours of sleep are lost, people eat poorly, and there is no time for leisure. Levels of attention and concentration are required to perform the tasks. When the work is devoid of meaning, is not recognized or is a source of threats to physical and/or psychological integrity, it ends up causing suffering to the teacher. (Tavares, 2007, p. 19).

According to our study, it is possible to identify that the age range is concentrated between 36 and 40 years. This data is in line with the information provided by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira – INEP, which presents a profile of Basic Education teachers in Brazil and demonstrates that

typical Brazilian teachers, in 2017, had an average of 41 years old (Brazil, undated).

We collected all the information about how teachers perceive themselves based on the responses in the mental health and work protocols. Figure 1 demonstrates how teachers perceive their satisfaction, motivation and pride in their profession. We noticed that 42.2% often feel satisfied, 57% always feel motivated and 57% are proud of their profession.

In view of the satisfaction, motivation and pride data, we can think that we still live in a society that is guided by knowledge, which has some implications for the perception of being a teacher. Thus, teaching is a complex activity, since it is permeated by constant challenges and tensions in teaching work. When teachers educate their students, they want them to be prepared to face the same society full of changes and uncertainties in which they live (Mendes & Baccon, 2015). Regarding this process, which is educational, these authors mention that:

Teaching is not an activity that generates immediate and material products. It is a job that demands affective energy investment on the part of the teacher who, when teaching, leaves marks on the student and changes himself. In this way, we reflect that the teaching profession cannot be analyzed as mechanical and meaningless, because it involves feelings, relationships, knowledge of different orders, the individual and at the same time the collective. (Mendes & Baccon, 2015, p. 397).

Teaching is defined as a completely relational activity; it is to be immersed in interpersonal relationships all the time. Teachers, in addition to teaching and transmitting knowledge to their students, are also emotionally and cognitively involved, with a constant concern with

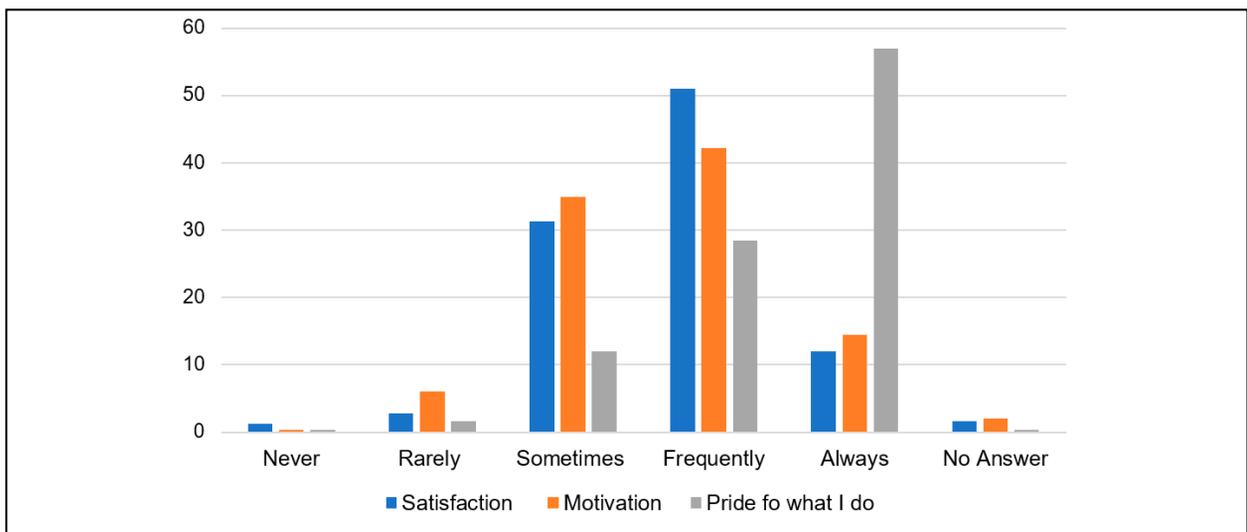
learning, causing exhaustion, and at the same time providing pleasure, fulfillment and gratification in a profession that is basically relational whether with students, the community and the institution. Sharing moments with others, teaching, making subjects think, can be related to pride, satisfaction and identification with this work. According to Mendes and Baccon (2015) it is these feelings that motivate the permanence of these professionals in this profession, constituting its existential meaning.

Next, Figure 2 shows how the respondents feel about well-being. Teachers often perceive themselves well and fulfilled; however, they do not feel recognized in the work context. This corroborates Figure 1, which demonstrates that teachers who feel satisfied, motivated and proud of their profession; therefore, they perceive well-being and professional achievement in the educational context.

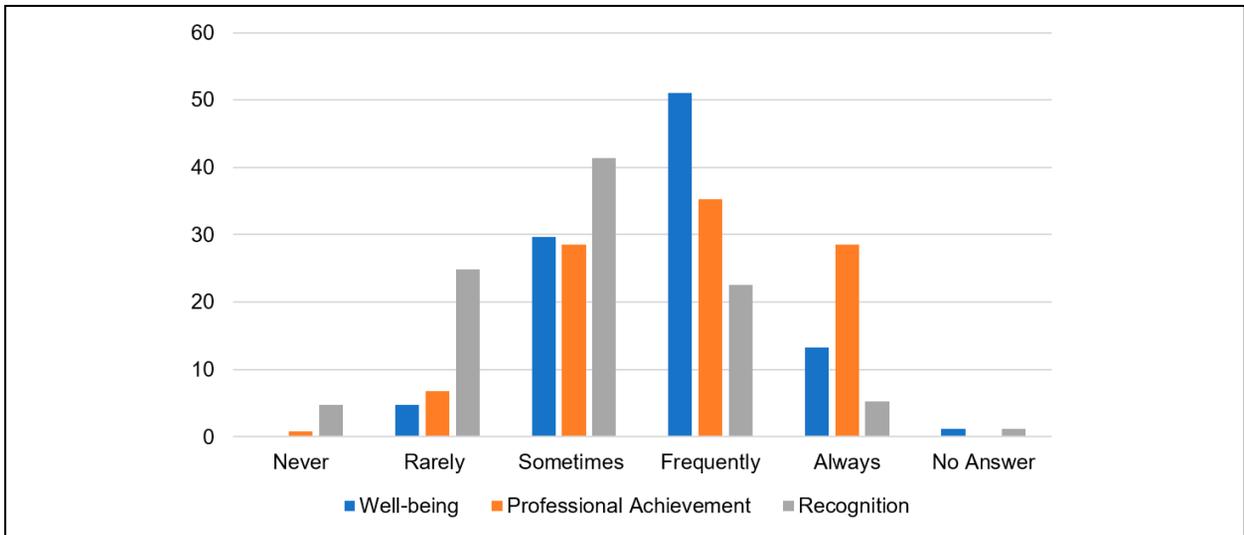
In Figure 3, 72.7% (adding together: sometimes and rarely) of teachers feel little appreciation. In addition, 47.8% perceive themselves to be emotionally exhausted, 71.5% point to stress in the work environment and 48.6% of the sample are dissatisfied. Based on these data, we can reflect that the teaching profession, over the last few decades, has undergone several changes and the educational system is facing an unprecedented crisis, in which teachers need to fight for decent working conditions and respect. However, these professionals are increasingly required to have good qualifications and constantly update their knowledge. The lack of investment in the educational system makes them have to invest their own resources to remain qualified (Freitas & Cruz, 2008). Moreover, “the master, seen before as an essential professional figure for society, is today a professional who fights for the appreciation and social recognition of his work” (Lemos, 2005, p. 5).

Many teachers feel unmotivated and dissatisfied

**Figure 1 - Satisfaction, Motivation and Pride for what I do.**



**Figure 2 - Well-being, Professional Achievement and Recognition.**



with their profession, which can harm their physical and mental health. If these teachers are unmotivated or even sick, it will probably interfere with the students' learning process, impairing the quality and productivity of their work (Larocca & Girardi, 2011). Faced with these scenarios, many of the teachers are unmotivated with low wages (delays and installments), social discredit, lack of recognition of work, overload of various tasks, students' indiscipline, demands from parents, from the school, violence, lack of security, among others.

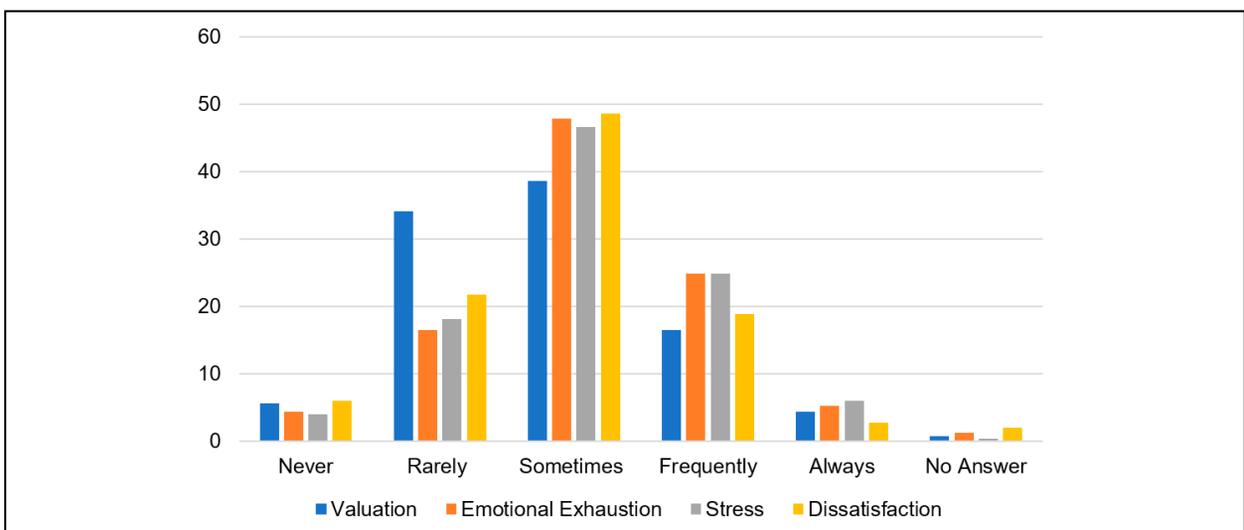
In addition, the teaching profession consumes a large part of the teachers' time and, often, the pace of their activity is intense, requiring high levels of concentration and attention for the execution of pedagogical goals. For this reason, professors generally present symptoms such as anxiety, anguish, excessive tiredness and irritability,

related to stress in the work environment, as shown by the study by Junior and Lipp (2008), in which it is stated that 56% of the researched population presents some stress level.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that such symptoms can negatively influence the quality of life of teachers, as well as the clear communication with colleagues, students and the school community, a fundamental element for carrying out their activities. In addition, professors may feel unmotivated and dissatisfied with teaching, which contributes to low professional performance, generating occupational stress (Junior & Lipp, 2008).

In Figure 4, we can see that, when we combine the indexes sometimes and frequently, we have a total workload of 65.9%. If we do the same sum of the

**Figure 3 - Appreciation, Emotional Exhaustion, Stress and Dissatisfaction.**



same indicators, it results in 66.7% of frustration in the profession. Added to that, 41% feel insecure in the work environment.

Studies such as that of Lemos (2009), demonstrate that frustration in teaching work is connected to the lack of recognition of the profession that is placed in the background in the social sphere, insufficient time to carry out activities, improper working conditions and low wages. According to the same author, teachers' frustration "[...] is with their work, the work done, not with the teacher's work in general" (p. 244). In addition, the enormous workload of teachers and the obligation to offer quality education, despite having few material and human resources, generate feelings of frustration, insecurity and overload in the work environment (Gomes & Brito, 2006).

Weekly, the teachers' workload must be distributed between spending time in the classroom and reserving time for the development of school activities. However, due to factors such as the multiple working hours of the teachers - most of them work in more than one school, the countless daily trips (from their homes to the schools), the high number of students per class, the little time for preparation of school activities - most teachers prepare them at home -, the poor conditions in the work environment (lack of materials such as books, computers, among others) and constant interruptions by colleagues, students, parents and the management team, the teachers' free time is destined for such tasks, which contributes to an overload in the work environment. According to Gomes and Brito (2006), "the real work of the teacher goes beyond the limits of time and space of work at school", that is, the time to carry out all these activities is scarce" (p. 56).

Finally, when answering about the use of some medication, as shown in Table 1, we observed that 33.7% use some medication. This index is worrisome,

since, as emphasized by Firbida and Vasconcelos (2019), the processes of medicalization in education are alarming. We noticed the influence of the biomedical area, permeating teaching in modernity, mainly via the medicalization of the school context and the worker. The countless difficulties related to the schooling process become medicalized, pathologized and supported by biologizing explanations.

**Table 1 - Medication Use**

Use of Medication	Percentage	Participants
Yes	33,7%	84
No	54,6%	136
No answer	11,6%	29

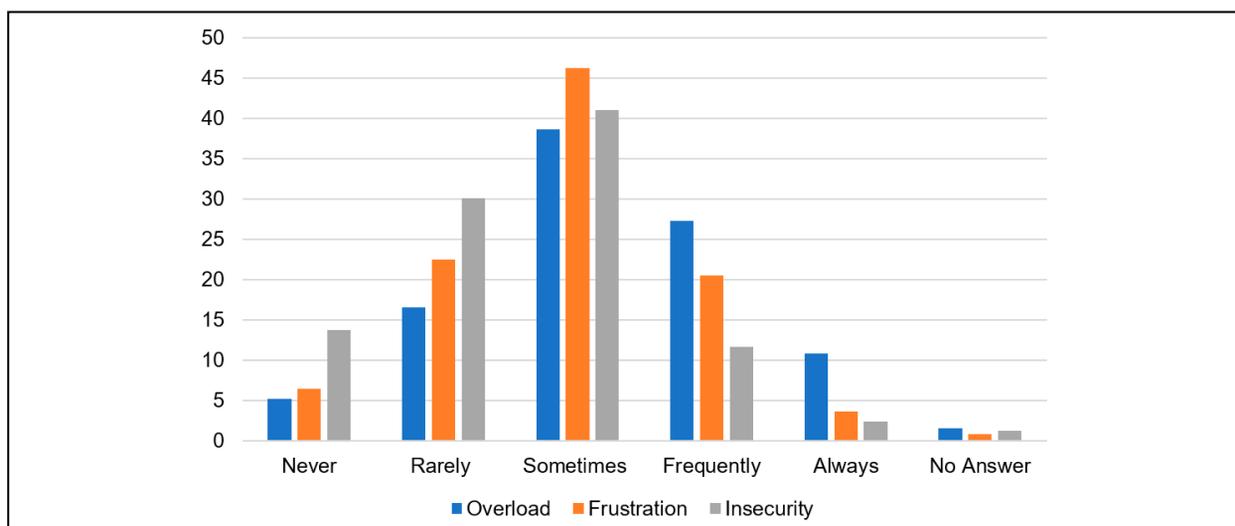
Source: The authors (2020).

## DISCUSSION

From the analyzed data, we can understand how public school teachers in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul interpret their working conditions, instigated by the tool that intends to analyze the relation between mental health and their work activities. We can observe that from the experiences of their daily work, the teachers attributed the following aspects: satisfaction, motivation, appreciation, recognition, autonomy, emotional exhaustion, stress, fear, among other analyzers. Thus, it is clear that such indicators have a positive or negative effect on the mental health of teachers.

The surveys presented indicate a significant increase in the educators' demands and work demands. Linked to this, in the year 2021 (when this research was carried out) teachers in the south of Brazil faced economic difficulties, due to installment payments and salary delays. Paradoxically to what we might have expected, when we correlated stress factors and dissatisfaction with teaching work, we noticed very significant levels of

**Figure 4 - Overload, Frustration, Insecurity.**



satisfaction, motivation and identity with the teaching activity. Teachers indicate commitment to work, value the profession, but complain that socially they are not valued. Not being socially recognized was one of the few negative points presented in this study by the teachers.

However, we observed a rate that we consider significant of teachers who use medication (33.7%). As Ferreira, Silveira, Sá, Feres, Souza and Martins (2015) show, the use of medication prescribed to the educators, accounts for 31% of teachers. Such authors associate this with the increase in the prevalence of mental disorders, which warns us that the instruments we use to verify the psychological well-being and mental health of teachers can be reviewed and expanded with new questions that analyze the need for medication and mental disorders in teaching work. This may be indicative of a process of becoming ill in and in education.

Although the mental health and job satisfaction indices are positive, as pointed out by our sample, we wonder about a considerable indicator of medication to support working conditions. This makes us wonder if the teachers are attentive and perceive their illness process, in view of their working conditions.

A limitation that we noticed in this study was the exclusively quantitative approach; we consider that if the teachers had been interviewed we could have discussed other aspects and deepened the aforementioned issues. In this sense, we suggest new studies in the area, mainly those that problematize the use of medication and medicalization in the education area, with the intention that they can bring other contributions to the scientific community.

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