# An analysis of the conceptual link between stress, emotional labour and burnout among teachers in further education (FE) in the U.K.

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## ABSTRACT

The extent to which stressors found in FE and adult education are associated with emotional labour and burnout has yet to be elucidated (Rasheed-Karim, 2020). A more extensive examination is made of the extent to which stressors impact on teachers in further and adult education, and the extent to which this can result in emotional labour and burnout. A mixed methods approach was taken where participants (post14/16 teachers N=61) completed the Emotional Labour Scale (Brotheridge & Lee, 2010) and Burnout Scale (Maslach, 1993) in addition to free-flow responses to questions concerning the types of stressors they experience in the workplace. The emergent themes indicated the main stressors were workloads on managers who also teach and teachers' lack of satisfaction with their attitudes to practice. Others included student behaviours and government legislation and policy. The results according to the emotional labour scale for educators and the burnout scale indicated that teachers used emotions as part of their job role. Teachers did not use stressors in a negative way but would use stressors as facilitators of emotional labour which helped them to counteract the negative aspects of burnout. In opposition to the prevailing view, the current findings showed there is a link between stressors, emotional labour and burnout. Furthermore, surface acting was associated with teachers who worked in basic skills, health and teacher training as well as those who worked between 18-25 hours and over 31 hours. The results have implications for change in policy and practice in FE

## Introduction

It is acknowledged that the FE sector in the U.K. has an inclusive approach to students; riddled with agendas put forward by governments which teachers may not agree with; are independent businesses prone to competition; there is increasing student members without rises in funding; and leadership practices which may exacerbate teachers resources responding to a diversified post 14 intake. It is suggested that the FE sector may be sources of stressors and therefore stress. It is envisaged that stress is a major factor permeating the wellbeing stratification of FE teachers. This paper therefore examines the extent to which reported stress by FE teachers can be linked to emotional labour and burnout as they respond to their working conditions in various departments, job roles and day-to-day hours of work. That is, it is suggested that emotional labour are variables which result from stressors impacting on teachers. Examination, through research of the conceptual link between stress, emotional labour and burnout will extend the literature on wellbeing in FE and so have implications for the workplace. Theories of stress, emotional labour and burnout is discussed to contextualise the research.

## The Concept of Stress

The Yerkes Dodson Curve (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908) referred to an inverted U curve which is synonymous with a model of arousal and consequent levels of stress during human performance (Wickens & Holland, 2000). The latter authors proposed that the optimal level of performance during task completion occurs when there is an intermediate level of arousal. However, when there are lower and higher levels of arousal, poorer task performance is expected. Stokes and Kite (1994) argued that when levels of arousal do not match preferred levels, stress will ensue. Stress in turn will exacerbate arousal levels by causing them to rise (e.g. Teigen, 1994). That is, stress theories accept that people have different levels of anxiety and arousal that help them to perform at their peak. While some people do their best at low anxiety levels, others will benefit from medium amounts. Wrisberg (1994) suggested that individual characteristics of people will determine the anxiety/arousal level at which they can best perform.

Situational factors may influence the subjective feelings of stress, response and coping behaviour. For example, while other people can be distracting or irritating, they can also be sources of support, and increase self-esteem and a sense of personal identity (Levi, 1987). An interactive model of stress proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described stress as an interaction between environmental stressors and individual responses. However, people respond to a single stressor in different ways and only the individual's experience will determine whether stress is experienced (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). That is, individuals will appraise (evaluate) challenging situations so that they might be able to reach positive outcomes. This primary appraisal is followed by a secondary one where individuals choose an option for dealing with the challenge. Othman (2011) maintained that people who appraise their emotions are more able to understand them and so grasp the reasons for behaviour arising from these

emotions. Ross and Altmaier (1994) asserted that options for controlling stressors and stress may arise from the individual, the environment, resources or responses.

Research on 'allostatic load' suggests that when an individual is overloaded with stress, the physiological systems which support stress reactivity become deregulated to the extent where eventually an individual is not able to produce a stress response (McEwan, 2006). At this point, burnout is experienced by individuals. To elaborate, adaptation to stressful challenges involves activation of the neural, neuroendocrine and neuroendocrine-immune mechanisms. Allostasis or stability through change is essential in maintaining homeostasis. When the adaptive system is turned on and off effectively, but not too frequently, the body is able to cope with challenges. Allostatic load can lead to disease if sustained over a long period. Types of allostatic loads include:

1.      Frequent activation of allostatic systems.
2.      Failure to shut off allostatic activity after stress.
3.      Inadequate response to allostatic systems.

In fact, contrary to expectation, Thom (2002)) pointed out that complex tasks will involve lower levels of arousal as expected performance is usually lower compared with simpler tasks. Thom argued this is because complex tasks require meeting greater demands placed on individuals and lower levels of arousal help meeting demands. In terms of complexity of tasks, it is envisaged that allostatic load as well as complexity of tasks must confer optimal levels of stress to enable individuals to perform at a maximum level. Some would argue that teaching may involve problem-solving (e.g. Karim, Watts & Toplis, 2011) and others such as Tooby and Cosmides (2008) suggested that emotions play a central role in problem-solving. These conclusions have implications for teachers' experiences of stress and burnout as they cope with tasks of various complexities.

**2.1 Stress and Burnout**

It is generally accepted that stressors often lead to stress. The aspiring FE teacher in Wallace's (2007) view often makes the mistake of thinking that teaching is not as difficult as in schools because students choose to be there. However, staff may find that students will appear uninterested, uncommitted, and indignant. They may be challenging, confrontational and even unmotivated. Some colleges have behaviour management policies, and, on most occasions, the teacher will have to think of strategies to deal with malaise. This is one example of a source of stress and there are many other stressful challenges that teachers in FE encounter.

Stress could therefore be defined as the imbalance between what individuals perceive to be demanding and their perception of their abilities to meet these (Sutherland & Cooper, 1990). There are individual differences in how stress is perceived. Although some stress can be motivating, too much can lead to poor wellbeing. Sulsky and Smith (2005) identified that stress can lead to absenteeism and human error.

Smith (2002) asserted that there are factors external to individuals as well as internal factors and these may restrict individuals' ability to cope. Internal factors are individual differences in terms of personality, skills, as well as experience and individuals will cope with stress in different ways. This is discussed by the interactional model of stress (Cox & Ferguson,1991) who explained that the model focuses on the characteristics of stressors and their outcomes. Furthermore, Cox and Mackay (1981) pointed out that the transactional view emphasises the role of subjective perceptions of the environment and accept the influence of individual differences in coping, appraisal and locus of control. However, Spector (2003) and Parkes (1984) warned that although there is ample evidence showing the main effects of individual differences such as locus of control and its relationship to health outcomes, research into the mediating and moderating roles of this factor is not conclusive. Research has relied on various theories to explain the link between stress and performance and these include arousal and resources models. It is nevertheless unclear whether emotional labour is a result or cause of stress among teachers in FE.

## The Concept of Emotional Labour

*'I have to have a smile on my face. Some mornings that's a little difficult. You're concentrating on what you are doing. It's a little difficult to have that smile all the time. I have one particular girl who says to me, "What? No smile this morning?" so I smile. Clerks are really underpaid people'.* Terkel (1972, p. 247)

This quote represents how emotions are used in organisations. Articulation of emotions is role-related in teaching and Goffman (1967) identified that social rules influence emotional management. Others are prescriptive – emotion management according to organisational or professional rules of conduct and pecuniary-emotion management for monetary gain (Bolton, 2005).

In organisations, emotions may be apparent throughout the hierarchy and Barbalet (2001) discussed that emotions can be understood with respect to the structural relations of power and status that cause them. Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) defined them as 'display rules.' Ashford and Humphrey (1993) argued that display rules influence how people perform emotionally and this forms the foundation of how effectively they conclude tasks. In this context, display rules make social interactions predictable (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Coupland, Brown, Daniels and Humphreys (2008) pointed out teachers tend to acknowledge predictable emotions and will emphasise these in social interactions. There is *emotional harmony* where there is matching between what people feel, display and expect. When there is *emotional deviance,* expressions of emotions are no longer matched with what is expected. People may question the emotional expression of others, and

*authenticity* is the extent to which expressions appear genuine. Grandey, Diefendorff and Rupp (2013) noted that emotional labour is expended in accordance with the requirements of the organisation as well as the employee but is dysfunctional when there is inauthenticity and requires more effort than normally expected.

Others, such as Morris and Feldman (1996), Zerbe (2000) and Grandey (2000) saw emotional labour as an intrapsychic process where people put effort into managing their emotions when interacting with others. In *surface acting*, expressions are modified; that is suppression or faking emotions, so job expectations are met. *Deep acting* occurs when feelings are modified to meet job expectations. That is, there is reappraisal of feelings. People may experience emotional dissonance when tension exists due to an inconsistency between feelings and displays. The research of Yin, Huang and Lee, (2017) with Hong Kong primary school **teachers** showed that surface acting expressions played a dysfunctional role, but deep acting and the expression of naturally felt emotion facilitated **teacher** efficacy. The results indicated that teachers should expend emotional labour wisely.

Extending research on teachers' emotions beyond general educational contexts and Western samples, Lee and Van Vlack (2018) examined how teachers' emotions correlated with their **emotional labour** strategies and classroom management **self-efficacy** with an East-Asian sample in an English teaching context. Surface acting (**emotional** expressions modification) correlated positively with anxiety and frustration, whereas deep acting (internal feelings modification) correlated positively with enjoyment and pride and negatively with anxiety. Enjoyment and anger correlated positively and frustration negatively with classroom management **self-efficacy**. The results suggested that deep acting is linked to experiencing positive emotions, which in turn is positively related to classroom management **self-efficacy**, whereas surface acting is linked to experiencing negative emotions, which in turn relates negatively to classroom management **self-efficacy** (e.g. Yin, Huang & Lee, 2017). Grandey, Diefendorff and Rupp (2013) concluded that deep acting is useful for the organisation and the employee, but surface acting and dissonance are not. Emotional labour is measured by self-reports and Demetriou, Uzen and Essau (2015) pointed out that self-report questionnaires have disadvantages because respondents may not be truthful when answering questions posed to them. There are therefore issues of reliability and validity in using self-reports to collect data. A more effective and efficient way was proposed by Brotheridge and Lee (2010) and that was to use scales to express levels of emotions, i.e. the Emotional Labour Scale. However, the link between emotional labour and burnout is less clear among FE teachers in the U.K.

### 3.1 Emotional Labour and Burnout

Based on numerous studies reported in various research papers, it is suggested that emotional labour is a correlate of burnout and occurs among teachers who suffer from stress. Zapf (2002) detailed how burnout is often experienced when emotional labour is combined with problems experienced in the employee's organisation. Symptoms of stress and burnout may be similar but significant distinctions should be made. Burisch (2006) for example, stated that stress can intensify burnout but is not the main cause of burnout. Although employees experience stress due to general workload etc., they may not experience burnout. That is, while stress produces urgent action and hyperactivity, burnout may result in helplessness.

A correlation related to burnout is student misbehaviour. Chang (2013) reported a study of 492 teachers. The study focused on episodic, unpleasant emotion resulting from student misbehaviour. This was positively correlated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. Burnout is for many, for example, Maslach and Jackson (1981) and Maslach (1993) a useful indicator of wellbeing. There is a process of development from the first stage of emotional exhaustion to feelings of lack of accomplishment. Allen, Diefendorff and Ma (2013) proposed a hypothetical model linking display rules and the burnout syndrome.

An argument of this paper is that emotions such as anger and fear play important roles in managing behaviour in teaching practice among FE and adult education and can in the long-term influence their levels of wellbeing. A measure of emotional labour helps the exploration of variables such as burnout (Mann, 1999). Mann discussed that a scale would permit individuals to monitor how they cope with emotional labour levels in a day and this may help them to reduce sources of stress. A conclusion and implication reached from Ekman's writings (1973) is that FE teachers will try to comply with college standards when they interact with students and use motional display rules. Also, employees who are part of a team or who believe they belong to a team may feel it necessary to display types of emotion.

The portrayal of emotions that are not felt create '*emotional dissonance*' (Hochschild, 2012). This state creates tension where there is a discrepancy between feelings and displays. However, it is believed that emotional labour may enhance the performance of employees (Briner, 1999) and in the context of this paper, student performances generally. Negative consequences resulting from emotional dissonance, hence emotional labour include general dissatisfaction, estrangement between self and true feelings (Hochschild, 2012), feelings of work overload (Wharton & Erickson, 1993), lack of work identity (Van Maanen & Kunder, 1989), and lack of openness with co-workers and burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). This is generally discussed as syndromes of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who have contact with people (Mann, 1999).

According to the conservation of resources theory (Buchwald & Hobfoll, 2004), burnout occurs when there are few resources over extended periods of time. For

example, Shaufeli and Enzmann (1998) pointed out that high levels of job demand may contribute to reactions resulting from stress such as absenteeism and disability at work. As a result, employees will regulate their emotions, and this may induce stress caused by physiological arousal and stressors found in the job. Brotheridge and Grandey (2002), Brotheridge and Lee (2002) and Grandey (2000) revealed that the consequence is burnout. According to Schaufeli (2003) the caregiving service professionals are more likely to be at risk of burnout. The literature on emotional labour and burnout is therefore extensive covering customer service, teaching in primary and the secondary sector as well as the medical profession.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), like Hochschild (1983), identified that when employees do not show genuine expressions, emotional labour may have a negative impact and the employee will dissociate from their 'self'. Ashforth and Humphrey did not provide an explanation as to how this may occur. Nevertheless, Zapf (2002) suggested that surface acting reduces an employee's self-worth and self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) explained self-efficacy as an individual's belief in his/her capability to organise and execute a course of action needed to meet the demands of a situation. Such courses of action may involve modification of emotions, thoughts and behaviours which require cognitive effort and surface acting. This would produce emotional exhaustion and poor wellbeing (Yagil, 2012). Moreover, emotional dissonance over longer periods of time depletes resources and the result is burnout (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Grandey Fisk, Mattila, Jansen & Sideman,2005). Scott and Barnes (2011) associated surface acting with work withdrawal. Edwards (1991) also explained that regulating emotions at work may be the result of employees realising that the environment is a poor match. The individual may select other organisational settings to gain employment. That is, employees who work in jobs that require high levels of emotional labour may experience withdrawal behaviours (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Research generally showed that suppressing genuine emotions is linked to stress, resource depletion (Baumeister, Vohs & Tice, 2007) and burnout (Bono & Ilies, 2006).

Research investigations showed that most of the stress and burnout experienced by teachers arise from job demands; workloads, the extent to which teachers manage their time effectively and student behaviour (Rasheed-Karim, 2020). Current research extends these conclusions and addresses the nature of the link between stress, emotional labour and burnout in FE.

## Materials and Methods

Volunteer teachers from further education colleges were emailed a Qualtrics survey. This consisted of the Teachers Emotional Labour and the Burnout Scales. Teachers were offered a list of options to choose from with respect to their job roles, department of work and hours they worked. They were also asked to relate what they found stressful at work.

## Results

The following details data collected from an online survey created using a Qualtrics template of the kinds of stressors teachers experience. Participants (N=61) were teachers from colleges in the U.K. Individual teachers could not be identified due to ethical concerns in research and they were not asked to divulge pseudonyms.

### 5.1 Quotes from Teachers

*Management*: Dealing with management; too many tasks to deal with and continual difficulties; uninformed management; pressure from above to get better results from students working at a lower level.

*Student Behaviour*: Lack of punctuality and respect; students' inability to communicate; too many students who behave badly; students who prohibit others from learning/achieve due to extreme behaviours.

*Workloads:* Management of workloads; covering sessions; marking and planning lessons; paperwork overloads.

*Administration/workloads and Pay:* Too much administrative work and much of this is duplicated; extra workloads are not covered by payment to teachers.

*Government Legislation/Policy/Code of Practice:* Marking and time limits imposed by hand backs; compulsory GCSE for all learners; pay and conditions and neo-liberal government who support this.

*Staffing*: Workloads arising from lack of staff.

*Role Conflict/role Ambiguity:* Conflicts in responsibilities or expectations; stress is experienced when receiving insufficient or vague instructions.

*Time Constraints*: Time management such as completing marking.

### 5.2 Teachers' Emotional Labour Scale

On a scale of 0 (never) to 5 (always) teachers were asked to rate how frequently they engage in behaviours with students, co-workers, supervisors/line managers and heads of departments on an average day at work. Between 3 and 4 indicates 'most of the time'. In terms of emotional display rules, participants were asked to respond to statements on a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The teachers engaged in naturally felt emotions, surface acting and deep acting. They tended not to hide or simulate emotions.

**Table 1:** Cuker's (2009) Teachers' Emotional Labour Scale Statements, Mean Above Three: Occurrences and Frequency

| N | Statements | Mean | Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| 28 | The emotions I show to my students match the emotions I feel | 3.11 | natural expressions |
| 28 | The emotions I express to students are genuine | 3.64 | natural expressions |
| 28 | The emotions I show my students come naturally | 3.46 | natural expressions |

Questions also asked teachers to rate on a scale of 1-5 how much they agree/disagree with statements with respect to their emotional display rules.

**Table 2**: Brown's (2011) Teacher's Emotional Labour Scale Means Above Three

| N | Statements | Mean | Literature Review |
|---|---|---|---|
| 27 | Part of my job is to make my students feel satisfied with the work I do | 3.74 | Grandey (2003) |
| 27 | My place of work expects me to act enthusiastic in my interaction with students | 3.85 | Schaubroeck and Jones (2000) |
| 27 | I am expected to supress my bad moods or negative reactions to students | 3.19 | Grandey (2003) |
| 27 | I know the emotional display rules I am expected to display to students | 3.56 | Grandey (2003) |

**5.3 Burnout Scale**

On a scale of 0 (never) to 6 (always), teachers were asked to rate the extent to which they experienced emotions, including frustration and exhilaration. They were also asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements about their working experiences. Teachers reported personal accomplishments, the ability to deal with emotional issues calmly and effectively as well as positively influencing students.

**Table 3:** Burnout Scales for Teachers

| N | Statements | Mean | Type |
|---|---|---|---|
| 28 | I can easily understand how my students feel about things | 3.96 | Personal Accomplishment (PA) |
| 28 | I deal very effectively with the problems of my students | 3.96 | PA |
| 29 | I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work | 4.39 | PA |
| 27 | I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students | 3.85 | PA |
| 26 | I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job | 4.04 | PA |
| 27 | In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly | 4.00 | PA |

The Qualtrics survey also gathered data of departments teachers worked in, their role types and hours worked. These are presented below.
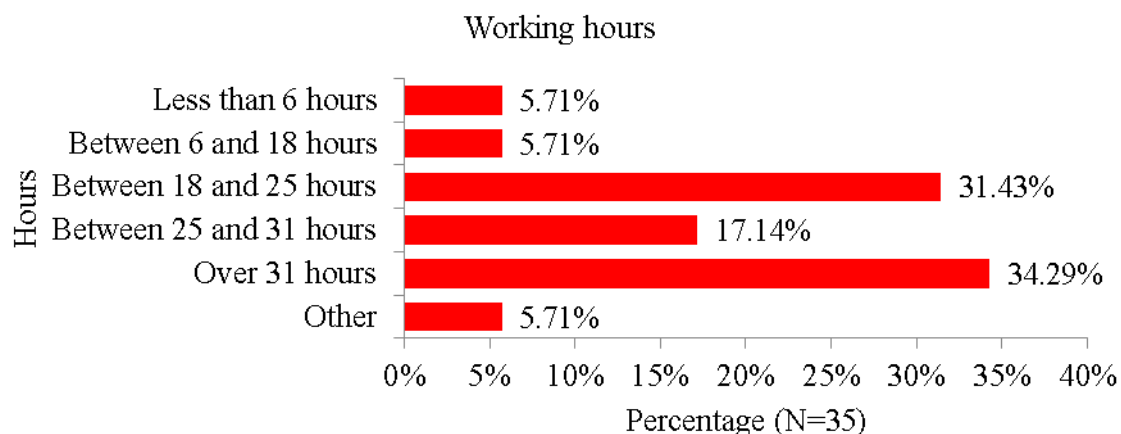
**Figure 1:** Departments in Which Teachers Work
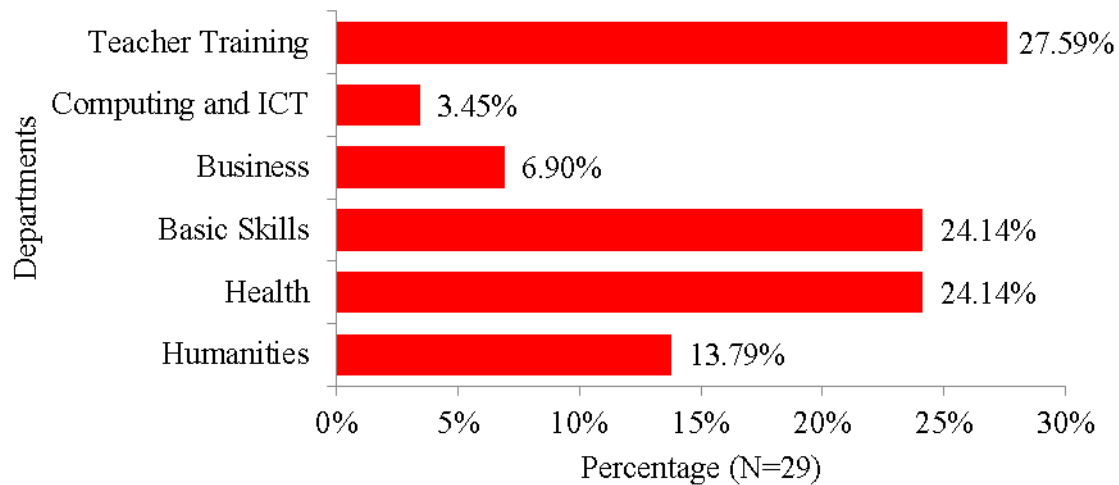


**Figure 2:** Teacher Roles
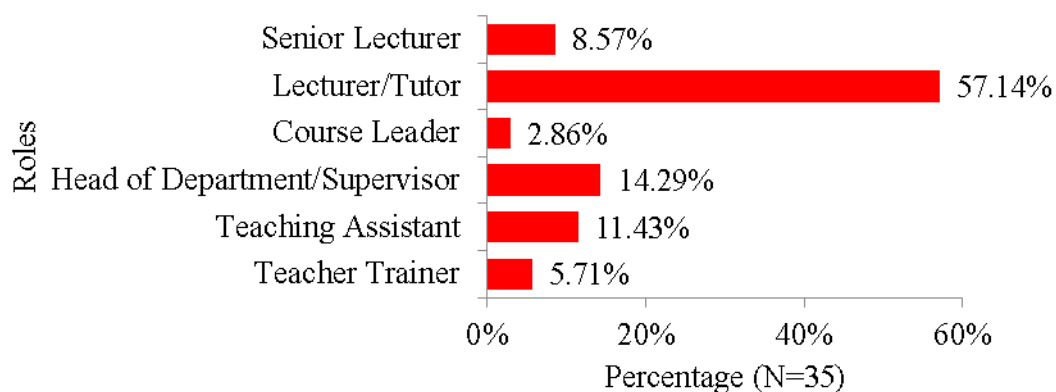


**Figure 3**: Working Hours of Teachers



## Discussion

The results show there is a link between stress, emotional labour and burnout. Teachers mainly experienced stress arising from management practices, student behaviours, workloads, pay scales, admirative tasks, government policy, codes of practice, staffing levels, role conflicts and time constraints. These stressors and therefore experienced stress by teachers can be engendered through the existing makeup of FE in the U.K. Nevertheless, teachers/lecturers and not in senior positions who work in specific job roles such as teaching basic skills, health courses and teaching certificates

in education felt they had accomplished many worthwhile things in their job roles. This may be because teachers worked between 18-31 hours per week and so may have had the opportunity to impact students' lives and wellbeing.

Teachers used natural expressions understand their students' feelings and so could deal with their emotional problems. They thought that their job role expected them to show enthusiasm when interacting with students as this had a positive influence on the satisfaction levels of students. Further research may investigate how stress, emotional labour, and symptoms of burnout such as exhaustion felt by teachers help students achieve or feel more satisfied with their progress and wellbeing. Other research may focus on investigating the culture of FE organisations and the impact this may have on teachers' wellbeing

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