

Professional Challenges of Educators in Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Educators, including teachers and professional associates, increasingly face challenges that extend beyond traditional pedagogical roles, particularly when working with children with developmental difficulties in inclusive educational settings. In addition to instructional responsibilities, they are expected to respond to diverse learning and behavioral needs, collaborate with multidisciplinary teams, communicate with families, and provide sustained emotional support to students. These demands require high levels of professional competence, flexibility, and emotional engagement, which can place considerable strain on educators' psychological resources. This issue is particularly relevant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where inclusive education has been formally promoted, but where structured support for educators is often fragmented. In such conditions, educators may rely heavily on personal commitment to compensate for systemic gaps, which may further increase vulnerability to stress and burnout. Thus, the aim of this review paper is to provide a systematic analysis of literature published between 2010 and 2025 focusing on psychological challenges faced by educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both empirical and review studies addressing professional stress, emotional labor, emotion regulation, social support, and mental health interventions were examined. The findings indicate that effective emotion regulation, supportive work environments, and strong institutional and collegial support are key protective factors in preventing burnout and sustaining professional well-being.

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Introduction

The role of educators in contemporary education has changed significantly compared to traditional models of teaching. In addition to basic pedagogical functions, educators are now expected to actively participate in inclusive processes, individualize instruction, collaborate intensively with parents, and engage in continuous professional development (Bandura, 1997). These expanded professional demands lead to increased emotional load and exposure to professional stress, which can have negative consequences for both the quality of education and the mental health and overall professional well-being of educators (Agyapong et al., 2022; Ibrahimi-Džaferović, 2024).

Research indicates that the teaching profession is among the occupations with a high level of daily stress, comparable to that experienced in the medical profession (Gallup, Inc., 2019; Hepburn & Brown, 2001). Workplace stress research is particularly important due to its long-term negative effects on employees' psychological well-being, health, and work performance. Certain professions, including teaching, are especially exposed to high levels of stress. According to a study by Dokoza et al. (2020), teachers exhibit a moderate level of professional stress, with factors such as the need for professional recognition, inappropriate student behavior, and increased workload further raising stress levels, especially among female teachers. On the other hand, higher levels of social support and pronounced personal integrity are associated with lower stress levels, indicating their protective effect. Besides stress, research has also indicated high levels of depression and anxiety, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kovac et al. 2021). Therefore, maintaining the professional health of educators represents a key prerequisite for the effective functioning of educational institutions and an important strategic challenge for educational systems (Osipova, Nikishov & Rakitskaya, 2018).

In the context of inclusive education, educators additionally face challenges related to working with students with developmental difficulties, a lack of systemic and professional support, and uneven institutional solutions. These challenges are often accompanied by increased emotional demands and role overload, which further intensify everyday work stress and reduce educators' capacity to cope effectively with job pressures. Previous research shows that unfavorable working conditions, high workload, and a sense of professional insecurity are significant risk factors for the development of professional burnout among educators (Ibrahimi-Džaferović, 2024). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, these challenges are further exacerbated by the complex administrative structure of the educational system and insufficiently developed mechanisms of institutional support for educators (Husremović & Sarajlić, 2023). Although professional stress, emotional demands, and educator well-being are recognized as key factors affecting the quality of the educational process, their systematic study and consistent integration into educational policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain limited. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to conduct a systematic review of relevant scientific literature published between 2010 and 2025, with a particular focus on the inclusive educational context in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Methodology

This paper is based on a systematic review of relevant scientific literature published between 2010 and 2025, conducted in accordance with general guidelines for systematic and scoping reviews in the social sciences. The aim of the review was to identify and analyze empirical evidence on psychological aspects of teachers' professional practice, with particular emphasis on occupational stress, burnout, emotional labor, emotion regulation, and well-being within inclusive and general educational settings.

The literature search was conducted in the following academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ERIC, and Google Scholar, in order to ensure comprehensive coverage of educational, psychological, and health-related research.

The search strategy involved combinations of keywords and Boolean operators in both English and Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian (BHS), reflecting the intention to include both international and regional scholarship. The primary search terms included: *teacher stress*, *burnout*, *emotional labor*, *emotion regulation*, *teacher well-being*, and *inclusive education*, as well as their BHS equivalents. Additional terms such as *occupational stress*, *psychological well-being*, *school climate*, and *institutional support* were used in supplementary searches to capture potentially relevant studies that may not have used the primary terminology. Reference lists of selected articles were also screened to identify additional relevant publications not captured in the initial database search. The inclusion criteria were: (a) empirical quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods studies, as well as systematic and narrative reviews, published between 2010 and 2025; (b) studies focusing on psychological aspects of professional practice in education, including professional stress, burnout, emotional labor, emotion regulation, coping strategies, and institutional or organizational support; (c) papers available in English or BHS languages; and (d) studies relevant to both international and regional educational contexts. Although the primary focus was on contemporary research, selected theoretical and conceptual works published prior to 2010 were included when necessary to support conceptual clarification and interpretation of more recent findings. The exclusion criteria were: (a) studies focusing exclusively on students without addressing teacher-related variables; (b) intervention studies not reporting relevant psychological outcomes for teachers; and (c) papers with incomplete reporting, methodologically unclear procedures, or insufficient relevance to the objectives of this review. Conference abstracts, unpublished theses, and non-peer-reviewed materials were also excluded to ensure the overall quality and reliability of the synthesized evidence.

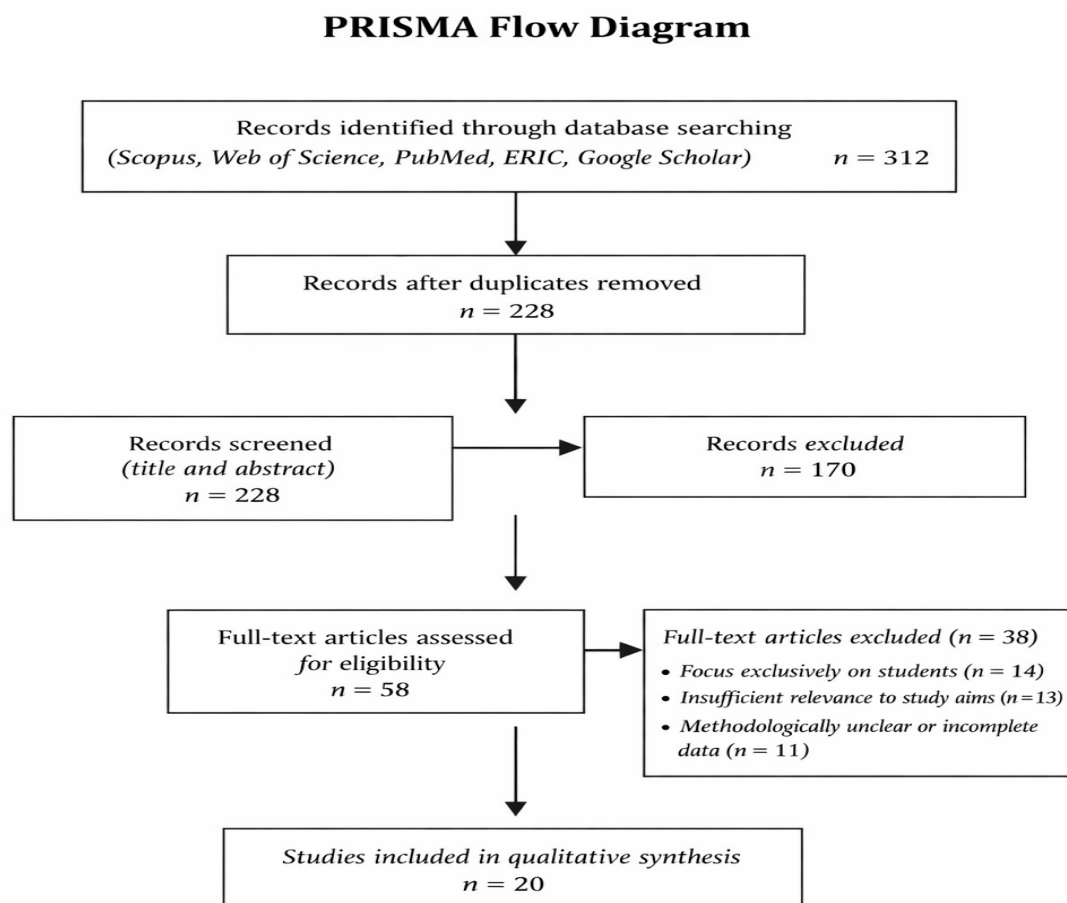
The study selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. The initial database search yielded a total of 312 records. After removing duplicates, 228 unique records remained and were screened based on titles and abstracts. During this phase, 170 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, primarily due to a sole focus on students, lack of psychological constructs related to teachers, or insufficient relevance to inclusive or educational practice. The full texts of the remaining 58 studies were then assessed for eligibility. Of these, 38 studies were excluded due to limited relevance to the research objectives, exclusive focus on non-educational occupational groups, or inadequate methodological reporting. Ultimately, 20 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis.

The selected studies were analyzed using a structured data extraction process, including information on study design, sample characteristics, educational context, key psychological variables, and principal findings. A narrative synthesis approach was applied to identify recurring themes, patterns of association, and methodological trends across studies. This approach was chosen due to heterogeneity in study designs and outcome measures, which

precluded quantitative meta-analysis. The synthesized findings were then organized thematically and integrated into the results and discussion sections of the paper. The PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram for study selection.



Note: PRISMA flow diagram depicting the study selection process.

The diagram includes only the empirical and review studies that were part of the final analysis, while theoretical papers and international reports were selectively used for the conceptual framing of the research topic.

Results

Emotional labor in helping professions

Emotional labor refers to managing one's own emotions in a professional context in order to meet job requirements, which is particularly pronounced in helping professions that involve intensive and continuous work with people (Hochschild, 1983). In the educational context, emotional labor encompasses constant emotional availability, expression of empathy, control of emotional reactions, and maintenance of professional relationships in emotionally demanding and unpredictable situations. Educators working with children with developmental difficulties are additionally exposed to increased emotional load due to high responsibility for the child's development, frequent parental frustrations, limited institutional resources, and continual engagement with emotionally challenging situations. In the absence of adequate professional and institutional support, the risk of emotional exhaustion and professional burnout increases significantly (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

The analyzed studies indicate a strong connection between emotion regulation and the occurrence of burnout among educators. Empirical studies conducted among educators in European countries show that difficulties in emotion regulation significantly increase the risk of emotional exhaustion, particularly in secondary education (Brandão et al., 2025). Meta-analytic findings further confirm that adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as deep emotional processing, positively affect professional well-being and reduce the risk of burnout, while surface-level emotional labor strategies represent a significant risk factor (Wang et al., 2025). Similar patterns have been identified in studies on digital burnout in the context of online teaching, where emotion regulation plays a mediating role between professional competencies and teachers' emotional exhaustion (Yang & Du, 2024). These findings confirm that emotional labor and emotion regulation are key psychological mechanisms related to educators' professional well-being.

Professional stress and burnout in education

The contemporary concept of professional competence in education encompasses not only expertise and pedagogical skills but also the ability for self-reflection, emotion regulation, and care for one's own mental health. Professional burnout is defined as a state of chronic emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal or professional accomplishment (Maslach, 1982), with educators being among the professions at high risk for its development. According to the same author, emotional exhaustion, as the central component of burnout, manifests through loss of energy, emotional emptiness, and reduced professional engagement, most often as a result of overload, unclear job demands, and impaired interpersonal relationships at work. Depersonalization develops as a response to chronic stress and is reflected in a detached attitude toward work and service recipients, while a reduced sense of personal accomplishment includes the experience of low professional efficacy, further amplified by a lack of social support and opportunities for professional development.

Research shows that professional associates in education (psychologists, pedagogues, speech therapists, and social workers) are exposed to particularly high professional demands due to daily responsibilities toward students, parents, colleagues, and the broader social context (Slišković et al., 2012; Zvizdić & Dautbegović, 2014). Such multiple responsibilities often lead to overlaps or conflicts between professional and private roles, representing a significant source

of professional stress. In addition to organizational factors, high personal expectations and personality traits have been identified as important individual risk factors for the development of burnout (Maćešić-Petrović et al., 2011). Empirical confirmation of these findings comes from research conducted among professional associates in primary and secondary schools, which indicated a high prevalence of burnout symptoms, particularly in the domain of reduced personal accomplishment (76%), emotional exhaustion (63.6%), and depersonalization (62%) (Mihajlović et al., 2023).

In the context of inclusive education, professional stress is further intensified by increased administrative workload, lack of institutional and professional support, unclear professional expectations, and emotionally demanding work with children with multiple needs. According to analyzed studies, these factors directly affect professional motivation, quality of education, and staff turnover (World Health Organization, 2019). A review of international literature shows that burnout rates among educators in certain educational contexts may reach up to 70%, with burnout symptoms strongly associated with a combination of organizational and individual stress factors (Agyapong et al., 2022).

Empirical findings from Bosnia and Herzegovina indicate notable heterogeneity in burnout indicators. A study conducted among 952 teachers in primary and secondary schools in Republika Srpska found a low prevalence of emotional exhaustion (5.1%) and depersonalization (3.8%), but a significant proportion of educators with a pronounced sense of low personal accomplishment (22.3%), which represents a key component of burnout (Marić et al., 2020). The authors note that teachers with Type A personality traits, combined with an impaired balance between professional and private life and cumulative effects of workload over the school year, exhibit higher levels of psychological strain, particularly at the end of the work cycle.

The field of special education appears to be particularly high-risk. Bišćević and Memišević (2012) found that employees of special education institutions show significant susceptibility to professional burnout, with 40% of respondents expressing job dissatisfaction. The results also indicated gender differences, with a higher intensity of symptoms among women, which may be related to increased emotional labor and multiple professional and family roles. At the same time, a negative relationship between length of work experience and burnout was observed, with respondents with longer professional experience exhibiting lower levels of symptoms, suggesting the development of adaptive coping strategies during professional maturation. Previous research also indicates that employees in special education are more likely to leave the profession compared to their colleagues in regular education (Fore III et al., 2002). Although these findings are specific to certain educational contexts, broader research among educators points to a complex and inconsistent relationship between work experience and professional stress. While some studies show that educators in the early stages of their careers experience higher levels of stress due to a mismatch between expectations and actual working conditions (Goddard & O'Brien, 2003), others indicate increased stress among more experienced educators due to prolonged exposure to professional demands (Kokkinos, 2007). The results highlight the need for a systemic approach to maintaining the mental health of teachers and professional associates in inclusive education. While individual protective factors, such as self-reflection and emotion regulation, are clearly recognized, institutional support mechanisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain underdeveloped.

The need for systemic support and global challenges in education

A high-quality inclusive education system requires accessible professional supervision, continuous professional development, clearly defined roles and expectations, adequate institutional support for staff, and the development of a culture of collaboration and mutual respect. In the absence of systemic support, the responsibility for the success of inclusion is often unjustifiably placed on individuals, which can have long-term negative consequences for both professionals and students.

The analyzed literature indicates that global challenges, such as educator overload, lack of supervision, and work with children with multiple disabilities, further increase professional stress. The growing complexity of the educator's role, inclusive demands, and the need for continuous professional adaptation represent structural risk factors for emotional exhaustion and reduced professional satisfaction. The development of institutional support mechanisms has been recognized as crucial for maintaining professionals' psychological well-being, the quality of education, and the long-term improvement of inclusive practices (Memišević et al., 2023). Emotional demands are particularly pronounced in inclusive schools, especially among teachers without formal specialist training. Research shows that a positive school climate and supportive organizational culture significantly reduce the risk of burnout, while unfavorable working conditions and lack of resources have the opposite effect. Emotional labor and the sense of professional isolation mediate the relationship between job demands and professional burnout (Chen et al., 2025).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, educators face additional systemic challenges, including a complex administrative structure, inconsistent legal frameworks, underdeveloped professional teams, reliance on individual engagement, and limited opportunities for supervision and continuous education. These factors, combined with pressures from parents and the local community, further burden professionals and compromise their psychological well-being (Mandarić Vukušić & Krstulović, 2024; Pikić Jugović et al., 2025). Research indicates that social support, professional recognition, and a sense of belonging act as strong protective factors, while professional isolation significantly increases the risk of burnout (Einav et al., 2024). Mentoring programs, professional learning communities, and ongoing professional support are associated with higher job satisfaction and lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Mandarić Vukušić & Krstulović, 2024). A particularly vulnerable group includes early-career educators, for whom socio-emotional competencies and a sense of self-efficacy play a key role in stress resilience (Pikić Jugović et al., 2025). Continuous professional development, supervision, and mentoring programs have proven particularly beneficial for educators in the early stages of their careers (Davis & Park, 2025; Pikić Jugović et al., 2025). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses confirm that the most common predictors of burnout are high job demands, low autonomy, insufficient institutional support, and weaker social connectedness, with an emphasis on the imbalance between professional demands and personal resources (Davis & Park, 2025). Personal resilience, self-efficacy, and social support act protectively, while adaptive coping strategies reduce the risk of professional burnout (Collie et al., 2012; Travers & Cooper, 1996).

In the context of inclusive education, educators are additionally exposed to emotional stress due to the need to adapt to students' diverse educational needs, further highlighting the importance of institutional support and the development of socio-emotional competencies (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The post-COVID period has further intensified professional workload through online teaching and increased attention to students' mental health,

emphasizing the critical need for systemic support, mentoring, and programs for developing emotional regulation (Davis & Park, 2025; Wang et al., 2025). Based on the reviewed research, it can be concluded that high job demands, combined with a lack of personal and institutional resources, increase the risk of burnout, while social support, continuous professional development, and emotional competencies represent key protective factors.

Discussion

The literature review indicates that professional stress and burnout are common and long-lasting issues in the education profession. These phenomena are associated with emotion regulation, social support, work environment, and individual psychological resources. Difficulties in emotion regulation significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion, particularly in secondary education (Brandão et al., 2025; Yang & Du, 2024). In contrast, adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as deep emotional processing, are linked to higher levels of professional well-being, while surface-level strategies increase the risk of burnout (Wang et al., 2025).

These findings are consistent with empirical studies conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which indicate that prolonged exposure to professional stress, without adequate coping strategies, leads to increased emotional exhaustion and reduced professional satisfaction among teachers (Marić et al., 2020; Miljenović, 2022). Social support within the school, a sense of belonging to the community, professional recognition, and a supportive organizational culture represent significant protective factors. They reduce emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while professional isolation acts as a strong predictor of burnout (Mandarić Vukušić & Krstulović, 2024; Davis & Park, 2025; Pikić Jugović et al., 2025). Studies in primary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina further confirm that educators who perceive weaker organizational support and a higher sense of professional isolation show higher levels of burnout (Miljenović, 2022). The importance of institutional support and mentoring is particularly emphasized in the early stages of the career, when the risk of professional burnout is higher (Pikić Jugović et al., 2025). Kyriacou (2001) notes that approximately one-quarter of educators experience their job as highly stressful, with higher stress levels observed in urban environments (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa & Reinke, 2018).

In the context of inclusive education, emotional demands are further intensified due to the need to adapt work to students with various types of disabilities (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Research shows that emotional labor and professional isolation mediate the relationship between job demands and burnout, highlighting the importance of a positive school climate and organizational support (Chen et al., 2025). Local findings confirm that complex administrative demands, inconsistent inclusive practices, and reliance on individual educator engagement further increase emotional burden in inclusive classrooms in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Marić et al., 2020; Miljenović, 2022). Fore III et al. (2002) emphasize that high job demands and lack of institutional support are key causes of burnout in special and inclusive education, while mentoring programs play a significant preventive role.

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses confirm that high job demands, low levels of autonomy, insufficient institutional support, and difficulties in balancing professional and personal resources are key predictors of burnout, especially in the post-COVID period (Davis & Park, 2025). At the same time, personal resilience, self-efficacy, and social support act as important protective factors that can mitigate emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, even under conditions of high professional demands (Collie et al., 2012; Travers & Cooper, 1996).

The long-term consequences of chronic stress, including leaving the profession, are confirmed by research conducted by Ryan et al. (2017), which found that 40–50% of teachers leave their job within the first five years of their career. These findings support the fundamental assumptions of the burnout theory by Maslach and Leiter (2016), while simultaneously expanding them to include contemporary challenges, such as digital burnout, online teaching, and post-pandemic changes in education.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, additional systemic challenges, such as a complex administrative structure, inconsistent inclusive practices, and a lack of institutional support, further intensify the negative psychological effects of professional stress. The results point to a clear and urgent need for long-term, systematically organized support measures for educators at all levels, with particular emphasis on inclusive and special education contexts.

Conclusion

The professional challenges faced by educators represent a key factor in the sustainability and quality of modern education systems. The literature review shows that professional stress, emotional labor, and burnout are common challenges in the education profession, and prolonged exposure to these factors can reduce motivation, professional effectiveness, and the overall quality of the educational process. Maintaining teachers' mental health requires an integrated, systemic approach based on institutional support, the development of emotional and professional competencies, strengthening professional networks, and preventive interventions. Particular attention should be given to educators in the early stages of their careers, for whom a lack of adequate support, mentoring, and supervision increases the risk of emotional exhaustion and burnout. Educators involved in inclusive educational processes are additionally exposed to emotional challenges due to the need to adapt to diverse educational and developmental needs of students, emphasizing the importance of continuous institutional support and the development of socio-emotional competencies.

The literature confirms that professional stress can be effectively reduced through comprehensive measures, including educational workshops, continuous professional development programs, stress management and coping strategy training, and the creation of a supportive and safe work environment (Greenberg et al., 2003; Beltman et al., 2011). In addition to educational interventions, accessible psychological support within schools, such as counseling or employee assistance programs, has been shown to have a significant protective effect in reducing stress and the risk of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The development of a positive organizational climate, where educators feel valued and resource-empowered, contributes to higher job satisfaction, professional stability, and teacher retention. The role of educational policies is also crucial in ensuring adequate funding for mental health programs, reducing administrative workload, and supporting professional well-being (Ingersoll, 2001). Enhancing educators' mental health is not an individual responsibility but a collective task for schools, educational institutions, and the broader community, with a direct impact on the quality of education and the long-term sustainability of the system.

Recommendations

- Implement systemic supervision and mentoring programs, particularly for early-career educators, to reduce the risk of burnout and enhance professional resilience.
- Develop programs for emotion regulation, self-compassion, and professional resilience that support educators' mental health and emotional stability.

- Improve school climate by strengthening collegial and institutional support, including team collaboration programs and shared professional development initiatives.
- Reduce administrative workload for educators through clear organizational structures, streamlining bureaucratic tasks, and digitizing processes.
- Provide targeted support for novice educators and those working in inclusive education through the development of socio-emotional competencies, training for adapting to individual student needs, and continuous mentoring.

Sustainable education requires that attention to mental health and professional well-being of educators be systematically integrated into educational policies and practices, creating a work environment in which professionals can perform effectively, remain motivated, and maintain high levels of emotional competence.

Conflict of interest

None.

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