Exploring the burnout experiences of primary school teachers in Ethiopia: A case study

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Abstract

This study explores the complex issue of teacher burnout based on the lived experiences of primary school teachers. The study employed a qualitative approach to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of schoolteachers. 42 teachers from 4 primary schools were purposefully sampled for this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), observations and document reviews. By doing so, the research explores the key contributors to teacher burnout and its implications for teacher retention and the quality of education. The analysis of the data indicated that the main contributing factors to teacher burnout are overwhelming workloads, emotional strain, low compensation amid unprecedented inflation, absence of administrative support, and inadequate instructional resources. This situation in turn appears as a bottleneck to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of teacher burnout is well-documented research topic with teachers often experiencing high levels of burnout due to the inherent challenges of their profession [1-4]. Thus, teacher burnout is a critical issue facing the education systems of several countries. The situation is worse in the context of developing countries. In Ethiopia, although

the education sector has expanded tremendously over the past three decades, teachers in general and primary school teachers in particular often face challenging conditions that can contribute to burnout and high turnover. Studies indicated that factors such as low salaries, lack of teaching resources, large class sizes, and lack of professional support have been associated to teacher stress and burnout in the Ethiopian context [5, 6]. Another study conducted in northwestern Ethiopia, Gonder area, found that over 40% of teachers experienced high levels of work-related burnout [7]. Similarly, a study conducted in West Gojjam, Awi Zones, also found that teachers experienced high levels of burnout with emotional exhaustion being the most pronounced dimension [3]. The consequence of such teacher burnout can be far-reaching, affecting not only teachers' physical, emotional and mental health but also the quality of instruction and the learning environment of their students [8]. This suggests the complex and negative consequences of teacher burnout affect their emotional well-being and job performance ultimately affecting the educational practices and outcomes of students. By the same token, the wider literature on teacher burnout offers valuable insights into the factors that contribute to this issue. For example, a study on job-related burnout among Greek primary school teachers found that the harsh educational reality, characterized by frequent legislative changes, heavy workloads, and various difficulties stemming from students' and parents' demands, meaningfully contributed to the burnout experienced by teachers [4, 9, 10]. Moreover, studies found that requiring teachers to take on extra responsibilities beyond classroom teaching, such as administrative duties and community engagement, further strains their time and energy [9-11]. It is also reported that factors such as low social status and public perceptions of the teaching profession, can exacerbate teacher burnout [11-13]. In contrary, research findings indicated that improving teacher well-being and retention can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes, educational equity, and the overall effectiveness of the education system [7, 14]. Thus, understanding the vital role that teachers play in shaping the future of students, is crucial to develop effective strategies to support teacher well-being and retention in Ethiopia and similar developing country settings [3, 8, 15-17]. The potential benefits of addressing these issues are substantial [6, 18]. While these quantitative studies provide important insights into the prevalence and contributing factors of teacher burnout, there is a need for more in-depth, qualitative exploration of the lived experiences of teachers in developing country contexts. Therefore, this study aims to provide a deeper and qualitative account of the key contributors to teacher burnout based on the lived experiences of Ethiopian primary school teachers. The study is guided by the following research questions: 1) What are the key factors contributing to burnout among Ethiopian primary school teachers? 2) What are the implications of burnout for teacher retention scheme and the quality of education?

2. Theoretical Framework

In the context of Ethiopia's continued economic hardship and armed conflict, the well-being of teachers has emerged as a critical concern within the educational landscape. Therefore, this study is grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, which posits that burnout arises from extreme stressors and a mismatch between job demands (e.g., workload, emotional demands) and available job resources (e.g., social support, autonomy) [19]. The JD-R framework has been widely applied to understand teacher burnout in various contexts [19-22]. It emphasizes how limited job resources, combined with high job demand and related extreme stressors, contribute to teacher burnout. Economic hardship exacerbates this situation, as teachers face cumulative risks linked to their personal and professional lives, which significantly hinder their motivation and increase feelings of burnout, predominantly among less experienced teachers [23]. Thus, this study categorized stressors into the JD-R model to elucidate excessive demand-like overwhelming workload, but inadequate pay amid an economic hardship can deplete teachers' energy and lead to burnout. According to the JD-R model, the imbalance between job demands and resources significantly contributes to burnout, as teachers are often left without adequate support systems while being pressured to fulfill their roles in challenging environments. The model underscores the importance of resources, such as institutional support and community engagement, which can mitigate burnout symptoms [24]. The relevance of the JD-R model extends to educational policies that fail to address teachers' financial insecurities, ultimately exacerbating feelings of despair and prompting job transfer intentions in response to organizational failures. Thus, the JD-R model not only highlights the interrelated elements contributing to burnout but also points towards essential avenues for intervention in the educational landscape [25]. Figure 1 represents the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model of Bakker and Demerouti [19].
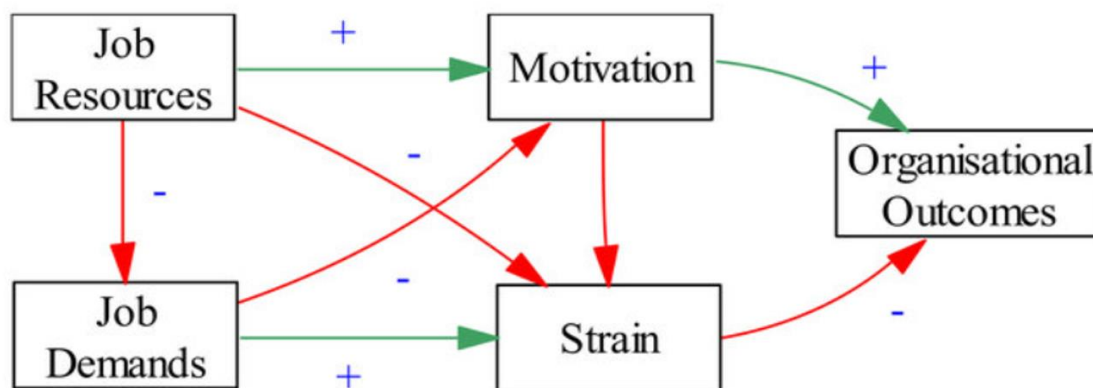

Figure 1.
The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model [19].

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research design. This design was deliberately selected to gather rich, detailed data and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study [26]. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews and FGDs with 42 purposively selected primary school teachers from four schools in southern Ethiopia. The inclusion criteria were: 1) full-time primary school teachers with different experience levels (novice 1–5 years, mid-career 6 –15 years, veteran 16 years and above. This is because teachers could experience burnout based on exposure to stressors at any stage of their career, and 2) teachers from both urban and rural school settings were purposively considered. Encompassing both urban and rural contexts helps to ensure a comprehensive representation of the challenges and experiences faced by primary school teachers in Ethiopia. Substitute or part-time teachers were not included despite their levels of experience as the researchers wanted to focus on the perspectives of regular, full-time primary school teachers.

The interviews and FGDs explored the teachers' perceptions of their working conditions, sources of stress, and factors contributing to teacher burnout. All data were collected in the official language, audio-recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English for analysis [27]. Additionally, the researchers conducted participant observations in the sample schools and reviewed relevant documents to further triangulate the data and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the context. The goal was to observe teachers in their natural work environment, identifying visible stressors, workload pressures, and emotional responses that contribute to burnout. The study also considered reviewing documents involving official records that capture decisions, discussions, and workload policies. This includes official meeting minutes, workload distribution folders and timetables of teacher to extract further information and triangulate the data [28, 29]. In addition to the interviews and FGDs, the researchers conducted observations and document reviews to gather further data on the phenomenon under investigation. They observed factors such as the amount of time teachers spent on lesson preparation, assignment grading, and activity planning. Classroom size was also noted. The availability of educational resources, technology, and other tools that could aid in teaching were examined. Classroom conditions and school facilities were also observed, as comfortable work environments can mitigate stress. Lastly, the researchers documented whether teachers appeared physically or emotionally drained by the end of the workday, exhibiting signs of fatigue, stress, or disengagement. The document review involved examining teacher workload to understand the expected demands and responsibilities placed on teachers, as well as reviewing professional development plans to assess the availability and quality of opportunities for teachers to grow and develop their skills. Additionally, the researchers reviewed school level wellness guidelines that focused on teacher work-life balance and burnout prevention. Finally, they examined teachers' contracts, which define work hours, pay, and benefits packages that can affect burnout and overall well-being of teachers.

The researchers employed a rigorous thematic analysis approach to analyze the data. The initial analysis began concurrently with data collection. After the data collection phase, the interview and FGD recordings were transcribed in the original language. Then the transcription was compared to the recordings to ensure accuracy and then sent back to the participants for '*respondent validation'* to avoid misinterpretation and ensure the data's validity [28]. The transcripts were subsequently translated into English, with the translation validated by two bilingual colleagues. The researchers then coded the data through an iterative process, assessed the characteristics of each code, reviewed commonalities, and clustered them into categories. These categories were further examined and condensed into abstract themes representing the codes and empirical segments related to the research questions. The data gathered through observations and document review was used to support and triangulate the findings from the interviews. The researchers were able to corroborate the teachers' reported experiences by directly observing classroom conditions, resource availability, and signs of teacher stress or exhaustion. This triangulation of multiple data sources helped the researchers gain a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the challenges facing primary school teachers in Ethiopia. The combination of these data collection methods provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the experiences of Ethiopian primary school teachers.

3.1. Ethical Considerations

The research is conducted with a strong commitment to upholding the highest ethical standards and safeguarding the rights and well-being of all participants. All interviews, FGDs, observations and document reviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. This allowed the participants to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wanted to do so [26, 28]. Thus, participation was entirely voluntary, and care was taken to safeguard the participants' rights. The study did not pose any apparent risks to the participants. In all reports or publications, data is anonymized to protect the confidentiality of personally identifiable information.

4. Findings

This qualitative investigation explored the lived experiences of Ethiopian primary school teachers, illuminating the complex interplay of factors leading to burnout. The detailed background information of the research participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Background of participants.

Category	Sub-Category	Urban (n=20)	Rural (n=22)	Total (N=42)
Gender	Male	12	12	24
	Female	8	10	18
Qualification	Diploma	12	14	26
	Bachelor's Degree	8	8	16
Teaching Experience	Novice (1–5 years)	4	8	12
	Mid-Career (6–15 years)	8	6	14
	Veteran (16+ years)	11	5	16

The data analysis revealed prominent themes surrounding the excessive demands placed on the teachers, including heavy workloads, emotional strain from student behavior issues, insufficient support from administration and parents, limited resources, inadequate compensation, and lack of professional development opportunities. These factors contributed to significant emotional distress, high stress levels, and burnout among the participants. The teachers reported feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, with the responsibilities of their profession adversely impacting their personal well-being and work-life balance. Additionally, the data highlighted a pervasive sense of demoralization and limited professional growth opportunities, as the teaching profession was often undervalued and under resourced within the Ethiopian context. Collectively, these personal, organizational, and contextual factors shaped the experiences of these primary school teachers, posing substantial challenges to their overall well-being and leading to burnout. Table 2 presents details of themes and subthemes related to the factors contributing to teacher burnout.

Table 2.
Factors contributing to teacher burnout.

Themes	Subthemes	Description
Heavy workload	Excessive workload	Long hours, grading, lesson planning, and administrative tasks.
	Large class sizes	Managing too many students reduces individualized attention.
	High student-to-teacher ratio	Increased pressure due to a lack of support.
Emotional strain	Student behavioral issues	Managing disruptive behavior can be exhausting in large class sizes
	Emotional labor	Constantly regulating emotions in the large classroom.
	Lack of student motivation	Frustration from students not engaging or progressing.
Lack of support and resources	Limited administrative support	Feeling unappreciated or unheard by school leadership.
	Poor collegial relationships	Lack of collaboration and professional support.
	Inadequate parental support	Struggles with parents who are disengaged or overly demanding.
	Limited resources	Shortage of teaching materials
Low compensation	Inadequate salary	Low pay compared to workload and responsibilities.
	Insufficient benefits	Lack of healthcare, retirement, or other benefits.
	No financial incentives	Minimal raises or bonuses for performance.
Lack of professional growth	Limited career advancement opportunities	Few chances for promotion or skill enhancement.
	Insufficient training	Lack of professional development or mentorship.
	Stagnation in teaching methods	No encouragement for innovation or creativity.

4.1. Heavy Workload

The data analysis found that heavy teaching loads, large class sizes, and administrative duties were major sources of stress for the teachers. One of the teachers from school A said, I have to teach four classes a day and twenty classes a week. This workload is okay if the class size is small and manageable. But in my case, I have to teach over 60 students in each classroom. This is extremely difficult logistically and pedagogically. Providing individual attention and meaningful student-teacher interaction is very hard.

Another teacher from school D lamented, "… the workload is overwhelming. I spend hours every night planning lessons, marking assignments and tests. There's no time left for myself or my family." These quotes illustrate the crushing job demands faced by the teachers. This mismatch between high job demands and limited resources can frustrate teachers and negatively impact the learning experience, especially for students who need additional support. In the same vein, a teacher from school B, shared, "The large number of students in my class makes it impossible to give everyone the attention she/he deserves. I feel like I'm constantly struggling, just trying to keep my head above water rather than truly supporting their learning." These sentiments were echoed by many participants, who expressed deep frustration at their inability to provide the individualized support their students needed due to the constraints of large class sizes and heavy

workloads. The review of documents including meeting minutes, workload distribution files, and school timetables further confirmed that teachers were expected to undertake overwhelming loads. In addition to the regular teaching load, teachers take on additional administrative duties and extracurricular activities, leaving them with little time for rest and personal well-being. For instance, the review of workload distribution document stated that "… teachers are required to administer at least two after-school clubs or extracurricular activities per week, in addition to their regular teaching activities." The timetables examined also indicated that teachers had little to no free periods during the school day, with back-to-back classes and minimal breaks. This heavy schedule left teachers feeling overwhelmed and unable to adequately prepare for their lessons or provide individualized attention to students. The data suggests this mismatch between job demands and available resources is a key contributor to teacher burnout and attrition, as outlined in the job demands-resources model. Providing teachers with more manageable class sizes and reducing their administrative burdens could help alleviate the overwhelming workload and allow them to focus more on engaging with students and supporting their learning. Overall, the evidence from the document review points to a significant imbalance between the high demands placed on teachers and the limited resources and time available to them, contributing to the high levels of burnout and turnover observed in the study.

4.2. Emotional Strain

The analysis of the data indicated the significant emotional strain teachers face when dealing with student behavioral issues in large classes. Managing disruptions, regulating emotions, and addressing student disengagement require constant effort, leading to frustration and exhaustion. Disruptive behavior, such as defiance, inattentiveness, and classroom disturbances, which demand constant emotional regulation from teachers, were repeatedly reflected in the data. One of the FGD participants expressed that *"...every day feels like a battle. Some students deliberately push boundaries, and I have to stay calm, even when I feel completely drained. The large class sizes we have here made it more difficult".* This requires emotional labor, where teachers must suppress frustration to maintain professionalism. Another teacher from school A described the hidden toll of managing misbehavior. She said, *"I go home emotionally exhausted. I spend so much energy managing one or two students that I barely have anything left for the rest of the class."* Another participant from school C stated, *"There are days when I want to scream, but I can't. I have to keep my emotions in check, even when students are being disrespectful."* Such experiences highlight how managing behavior consumes the mental and emotional resources of teachers, often leading to stress and burnout. Teachers are expected to remain patient and composed, even when facing continuous challenges. This emotional restraint often results in emotional fatigue. This ongoing self-regulation can lead to teacher burnout, affecting both personal well-being and classroom effectiveness.

4.3. Lack of Support and Resources

The analysis of the data revealed an absence of administrative support and a feeling of being unappreciated and unheard by school leadership. This is exacerbated by a lack of collegial collaboration, insufficient parental support, and a shortage of instructional resources. One participant from school D shared,

I work so hard every day, but no one seems to notice or care about the challenges I face. When teachers complain about the scarcity of instructional resources, the administrators always say- please produce your own instructional materials from locally available resources. No one cares to explain what these locally available resources are. It is something impractical. It is really demoralizing.

The feeling of being unappreciated, as expressed in the quote, is a powerful indicator of a demoralizing work environment. This lack of recognition and support directly impacts teachers' intrinsic motivation and sense of professional efficacy. When teachers feel their efforts are not valued, it can lead to emotional exhaustion and a sense of futility. Furthermore, the lack of administrative support, coupled with insufficient resources, creates a significant imbalance between job demands and resources. Expecting teachers to produce their own instructional materials from locally available resources without further guidance or provision of actual resources demonstrates a disconnect between administrative expectations and the realities faced by teachers. Besides, the absence of readily available materials often means teachers must spend extra time and effort creating their own resources, adding to their already demanding workload. This can lead to frustration, resentment, and ultimately burnout. A FGD participant from school B added that "There is limited collegial and parental support at our school. Teachers are often left to figure things out on their own, without the benefit of peer mentoring or shared planning time." This opinion was repeated by many of the interviewed teachers. It appears that absence of collegial collaboration and parental support further compounds the issue. A supportive school community, where teachers feel they can rely on their colleagues and receive encouragement from parents, can act as a buffer against the stresses of teaching. Another teacher from school C stated,

The shortage of resources and materials at our school makes it very difficult for us to engage the students and support their learning. We don't have enough textbooks, classroom supplies, and teaching aids to effectively deliver the curriculum. Moreover, the absence of a collaborative culture and parental involvement makes our jobs even more challenging.

Th lack of key resources and lack of collaborative culture could lead to a mismatch between the high job demands and expectations, as posited by the job demands-resources model. Teachers are left to navigate challenges without required resources and in isolation, which can be overwhelming and detrimental to their well-being. The data from the observations of the schools also revealed inadequate teaching facilities including a lack of essential instructional aids such as textbooks, maps, charts, models, and interactive displays. These visual and hands-on tools are crucial for enhancing understanding, particularly in subjects like science and mathematics. The absence of such aids likely limits teachers' ability to effectively convey complex concepts and cater to diverse learning styles. Teaching in an environment with limited support and

resources can be frustrating and *demoralizing for teachers, impacting their job satisfaction and potentially leading to strain and burnout.*

4.4. Low Compensation

The analysis of the data also indicated how low compensation leads to teacher burnout. The data revealed nature of teacher burnout within the context of Ethiopia's enduring low salary and insufficient benefit packages. Teachers operate on fixed salaries. On the contrary, there is unprecedented market inflation in the country. The cost of basic goods like food, rent, and transportation increases squarely, leaving teachers struggling to meet their needs. The financial stress resulting from the mismatch between stagnant salaries and skyrocketing living expenses further exacerbates the already overwhelming pressures and job demands that teachers face. This was found to be one of the main factors contributing to teacher dissatisfaction and burnout. The following excerpt from one of the interviewees is evident in this case.

The ongoing economic reform has led to unprecedented market inflation, making it extremely difficult for us to meet our basic needs. Our salaries have not kept pace with the rising costs of living, and this financial stress adds to the already overwhelming pressures we face. Thus, many of us are looking for another source of income to survive in this situation (Dalgi, from school B).

The excerpt is an illustration of a devastating impact of soaring inflation on the economic situation of teachers. This has made life extremely tough for teachers to meet their basic needs, as their salaries have not kept up with the alarmingly rising cost of living. The financial stress resulting from this mismatch between income and expenses further exacerbates the already overwhelming pressures and job demands teachers face. It also shows how the broader socioeconomic factors impact on the personal and financial well-being of teachers, contributing to burnout and attrition in the education system. The participant's statement highlights the need to address not only the immediate job-related stressors but also the broader contextual challenges that teachers in developing countries navigate through. The quote also supports the argument that teachers' motivations and job satisfaction are deeply affected by economic hardship. Another interviewee lamented, "…many of us are looking for another source of income to survive in this situation," highlighting the teachers' attempts to supplement their meager incomes through other means, often at the expense of their primary teaching responsibilities. This further underscores the inadequacy of the teachers' benefit packages, forcing them to seek additional sources of income just to meet their basic needs and survive. The insufficient compensation and benefits have placed an immense burden on the teachers, both financially and emotionally, as they struggle to balance their teaching duties with the need to secure additional income. A FGD participant in school A further stated that "…teachers have no medical benefits or social security, and they have to use their meager salaries to pay for their own health care and other basic needs." This could force teachers to make difficult choices between basic necessities, impacting their overall well-being and quality of life. They are left struggling to afford medical services and adequate housing leading to stress and burnout. This underscores the urgent need for the Ethiopian government to address the inadequate benefit packages for teachers, which are exacerbating the already challenging working conditions and contributing to the crisis of teacher burnout and retention in the country. Addressing the shortcomings in teacher compensation and benefits is a crucial step in creating a more supportive and sustainable environment for the teaching profession in Ethiopia

4.5. Lack of Professional Growth

Many teachers expressed a profound lack of adequate professional learning and development opportunities. The absence of meaningful professional development programs indicates a concerning disregard for the teachers' genuine needs and professional growth. In relation to this, one participant shared:

… opportunities for genuine professional development are rare. Teachers are mandated to attend occasionally available top-down workshops. These workshops are more theoretical than addressing the practical difficulties of teachers. School leaders consider this as a professional development opportunity. But teachers don't accept this as useful (Tanya, from school D).

This quote emphasizes the teachers' perception of the workshops mandated for their professional development as being more theoretical than practical, failing to address the actual challenges they face in the classroom. The teachers do not view these top-down workshops as useful or aligned with their professional learning needs. Teachers' experiences also suggest that there is a need to improve the relevance and practicality of the workshops and professional development opportunities provided to them. Another teacher from school C echoed this sentiment, stating,

The government has been pushing these so-called 'professional development' workshops, but they're really useful in addressing the needs of teachers. It's not what teachers need at all. These workshops don't actually help us improve our teaching skills or address the real challenges we face in the classroom. It's a waste of our time and energy. We need training that actually helps us become better educators (Loku, from school C).

The teachers expressed deep frustration at the disconnect between their genuine professional needs and the top-down professional development opportunities provided by the local government and school leaders. Observations and review of the schools' training documents corroborated these accounts, revealing that the majority of workshops run in the name of *professional development* activities were in fact less relevant to enhancing their pedagogical skills and addressing their real classroom challenges. These accounts underscore a profound sense of disillusionment and a perception that the school leaders and education authorities are not committed to supporting the genuine professional growth and development of teachers. The lack of genuine professional development opportunities not only undermines the teachers' sense of fulfillment and autonomy but also has significant implications for the burnout. The prospect for growth and development in their career is limited. This analysis shows a distressing picture of the teachers' working conditions and the challenges they

face in maintaining motivation and morale, which are crucial factors in addressing the crisis of teacher burnout and retention.

Overall, the analysis also revealed notable variations in the teachers' experiences, shaped by factors like teaching experience, gender, location, and qualifications. The interview and FGDs show that veteran teachers grappled with the most severe burnout, reporting heightened emotional exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed by their job demands. In contrast, novice teachers demonstrated more hopeful and optimistic perspectives, despite still grappling with considerable challenges such as large class sizes, heavy workloads, limited resources, unfavorable working environments, and inadequate compensation. This was notable despite the fact that most novice teachers were assigned to rural school settings. It appears these early-career teachers hope for systemic improvements, such as enhanced resources and policy changes, that could potentially ameliorate their working conditions. Both male and female teachers described high stress and burnout levels, but with some subtle differences. Female teachers tended to report more emotional strain from managing student behavior and providing emotional support, while male teachers more often cited frustration with the lack of administrative backing and resources. Urban and rural teachers shared many common concerns, yet rural teachers faced additional hurdles, such as insufficient infrastructure and a severe shortage of teaching materials. Nevertheless, there was no meaningful difference in the responses of teachers based on their qualifications Overall, the data suggests that a range of factors, including teaching experience, gender, and geographic location, can meaningfully influence a teacher's experience of burnout. Addressing these nuanced differences is crucial for developing targeted support strategies to improve teacher well-being and retention.

5. Discussion

The analysis indicates that Ethiopian primary school teachers are grappling with a confluence of factors that contribute to significant levels of burnout. While the experiences of teachers varied to some extent according to their teaching experience, gender, and geographic location (urban/rural), heavy workload, the shortage of fundamental instructional resources like textbooks and teaching materials, combined with large class sizes, inadequate compensation, insufficient administrative support, and the absence of a collaborative school environment, have collectively placed an immense burden on the teaching workforce. These systemic issues undermine teachers' motivation, erode their sense of self-efficacy, and ultimately fuel intentions to leave the profession. These findings are consistent with the existing literature on teacher burnout in developing countries [3, 7, 17]. The study also uncovered the prevalent practice of teachers undertaking second jobs to supplement their poor salaries, a phenomenon that has been well-documented in the context of developing nations. This dual burden of teaching and additional income-generating activities has been found to contribute significantly to increased stress levels, diminished job satisfaction, and a greater likelihood of attrition among educators. The lack of opportunities for professional development and career advancement also emerged as a demotivating factor, undermining teachers' sense of growth and long-term commitment to the profession [10, 30]. Furthermore, the unprecedented market inflation in the country has created a climate of fear and uncertainty that severely undermines the teachers' sense of safety and income security [31, 32]. The experiences shared by the participants underscore the profound emotional distress and job dissatisfaction stemming from the demanding working conditions and their inability to adequately provide for their families' needs [3, 17, 33].

The findings regarding the lack of genuine professional development opportunities for Ethiopian primary school teachers are deeply concerning and align with existing research on the importance of effective teacher professional development programs. Studies have shown that high-quality professional development is a critical factor in reducing teacher burnout and improving job satisfaction and retention [21, 34, 35]. The teachers' accounts highlight how the mismatch between the top-down continuous professional development programs and their actual classroom needs exacerbates burnout. They feel that the mandatory workshops they are forced to attend are irrelevant and a waste of time, rather than providing the practical support they require [36, 37]. The imposition of top-down training agendas can undermine the professional autonomy and growth of teachers, contributing to burnout and disengagement [38]. This issue is further compounded by the lack of effective monitoring and feedback mechanisms, leaving teachers feeling unsupported and unable to assess the impact of such professional development. The lack of opportunities for collaboration, peer learning, and mentorship that the teachers describe are also concerning, as these factors have been shown to be key in supporting teacher development and resilience [39]. The teachers' desire for more practical, hands-on training and support aligns with earlier research findings emphasizing the importance of contextually relevant, job-embedded professional learning for early career and experienced teachers alike [38, 40-43]. Moreover, the disconnect between the rhetoric around continuous professional development at the national level and the realities on the ground in Ethiopian schools aligns with critiques of educational reform efforts in low-income countries [7, 10, 17, 44].

The analysis of the data also underscores the significant emotional strain that teachers face when dealing with student behavioral issues in large classes. Managing disruptions, regulating emotions, and addressing student disengagement require constant effort, leading to frustration and exhaustion. The teachers' accounts of dealing with disruptive behaviors, such as defiance, inattentiveness, and classroom disturbances, reveal the emotional labor required to maintain professionalism and composure, even in the face of continuous challenges [45-47]. The expectation for teachers to remain patient and composed, even when facing disrespectful behavior from students, can result in emotional fatigue. This ongoing self-regulation and suppression of frustration can ultimately contribute to teacher burnout, affecting both their personal well-being and classroom effectiveness [48, 49]. The data reflects the significant emotional strain that teachers face in navigating these challenging classroom dynamics, underscoring the need for additional support and strategies to help them manage these demands [31].

Collectively, the findings implies that the current education system in Ethiopia is being challenged to effectively support and retain its primary school teaching force [50, 51]. To address the issue of teacher burnout and retention, a multifaceted approach that encompasses improving the availability of instructional resources and materials, ensuring timely adjustment of teacher salaries, creating a safe and supportive work environment and providing counseling services to help teachers cope with the emotional and psychological toll of their work is necessary. This could help to address the systemic issues contributing to teacher burnout and attrition which in turn is crucial to ensuring the delivery of high-quality education for all children [34, 52]. The findings also call attention to the broader socioeconomic landscape that is shaping the financial hardship that teachers experience in Ethiopia. Besides, the study implies the importance of conducting more research on teacher well-being and retention in developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where data on these issues is often scarce. By deepening our understanding of the unique challenges faced by teachers in these contexts, we can inform the development of more targeted and effective interventions to support the teaching profession and ensure the delivery of quality education that could take use one step towards achieving the SDG 4 goal [42, 53-55].

6. Limitations

The study was conducted based on purposively sampled participants from four primary schools in Ethiopia. Thus, the findings might not be generalized. The limited sample size and dependence on subjective viewpoints of selected participants restrict the generalizability of the findings; thus, future research should aim to broaden the scope by including a wider array of participants and integrating more objective metrics to substantiate the reported burnout experiences and contributing factors. The study also failed to examine the viewpoints of administrators and policymakers who could offer essential insights from their perspectives for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of teacher burnout and contributing factors.

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