

## MORAL DISTRESS OF SCHOOLTEACHERS (RESEARCH REVIEW)

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### Abstract

Our research review aims to identify areas in which schoolteachers experience moral distress. The research of moral distress in health professions, especially nurses, has been steadily growing in recent years. Teachers and nurses describe moral dilemmas that are similar in nature, and the environment may be considered highly similar in various aspects (Shapira-Lischinsky, 2010, Brüggemann et al., 2019). Social pressures put teachers in front of moral dilemmas, and they must repeatedly choose either to succumb to social pressure and decide with which they disagree internally, or to take a risk, oppose the pressure and do what they consider morally right (Mares, 2017). However, teachers also experience situations of ethical dilemmas involving their colleagues or superiors behaving in an unethical way (Brüggemann et al., 2019; Campbell, 1996; Tirri, 1999). Teachers then experience a moral outrage and face the dilemma of whether and how to intervene. This study is a systematic review of studies selected via keywords, narrowed down to 2010-2021 period. A summary of these studies might contribute to future research as well as to the future development of better measurement of moral distress in schools.

**Keywords:** *Moral distress, teachers, moral stress, teacher's job.*

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### 1. Introduction

Teachers are often faced with the decision of whether to give in to social pressure and accept a decision with which they internally disagree, or whether to take a risk, resist the pressure and do what they themselves consider morally right. Either of these two decisions, made in an ethically difficult situation, causes moral distress for the teacher. Moral distress is an ethical issue which can affect teacher's work life and the quality of teaching. Distress can be viewed as moral because one person's behaviour affects the well-being of others.

The concept of moral distress is associated with Jameton's (1984) study of nursing. The expert on ethics in nursing, American Andrew Jameton defined moral distress as a situation in which 'one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action'. (Jameton, 1984, p.6) His later modification of the definition reads: "An individual experiences moral distress when he comes to a moral conclusion about a case he is handling alone, but institutions or associates make it difficult or outright impossible for him to act on that decision." (Jameton, 1993, p. 542).

In his article, Berger (2014) views moral distress as a silent epidemic that undermines efforts to promote professionalism. He urges health educators to seize the opportunity to influence the education and life-long practice experiences by recognizing the ubiquity and impact of moral distress of medical students and residents; by confronting negative role modelling; and by remediating deficiencies in trainees' ethical analytic skills and knowledge.

### 2. Methods

The aim of this review is to explore moral distress in teachers and thus provide a comprehensive summary. The following criteria were chosen to include individual studies:

- The record of the existence of the study could be searched as of January 10, 2022,
- The keywords for the search were moral distress, teacher/school/teaching/education/professor
- The study focuses on moral distress/moral stress
- The study is aimed at education (teachers, academic, school, school leaders)
- The study was published in English
- Study based on a quantitative / qualitative / mixed approach
- The study is a full peer-reviewed text published in an academic periodical

- All open access

The following criteria were chosen to exclude individual studies:

- Negation of one or more inclusion criteria (above)
- The study does not take the form of a professional article (these are, for example, conference reports, poster presentation reports, articles in popular psychological literature ...)
- This is a book publication or a study protocol

According to these criteria, 8 studies were found and will be discussed below.

The review of the literature related to moral distress in nursing education (Ganske, 2010) illustrated that there is link between moral distress in the nurse education and phenomena such as collective incivility of students, dishonesty, including cheating and plagiarism, grade inflation, colleague incivility, bullying, academic admission standards, standards of the profession, and cultural concerns. An environment that includes academic dishonesty, grade inflation, and/or bullying may lead to moral distress which may impact student learning, faculty job satisfaction.

Colnerud (2015) in his study uses the term moral stress instead of moral distress, but in his view, these are synonymous. In Colnerud's (2015) study, he seeks to determine whether moral distress is a phenomenon that relates to teaching practice. The grading system has been found to be an example where external principles (institutional constraints) conflict with teachers' desire to serve the well-being of students. Teachers' choice of action is externally controlled. According to the study, cases where students need to be protected from harm and where internal moral imperatives of the teacher conflicts with other internal moral imperatives and the teacher is responsible only to himself bring about the greatest risk of experiencing moral distress. The moral distress was also related to time pressure. Stress is not only caused by the number of students, the number of hours or the number of tasks, but also by the weight of unresolved dilemmas that manifest themselves as frustration, ambiguity and guilty conscience, which adds moral stress to the stress of the workload.

The study of Vehviläinen et al. (2017) looks at plagiarism as a source of emotional and moral distress, and as a situation calling for collegiality and reflection. For the analysis of moral distress in teachers job resources-demands model was chosen (Bakker and Demerouti,2007). The study identified the following job demands associated with plagiarism: 1. Rupture in the personal pedagogical relationship 2. Challenge to the supervisory, gate-keeping responsibility 3. A breach in everyday normality 4. Ambivalence in the explanations of plagiarism 5. The burden of accusation, verifying and disciplining.

Teachers in the study of Vehviläinen et al. (2017) discussed 3 resources that helped them manage the moral distress associated with plagiarism: 1. Conversations with colleagues and other reflective spaces 2. Support from superiors and administrative personnel 3. Shared playing rules, procedures, and plagiarism-detection programmes

In the qualitative study of Pejmankhah et al. (2018) the aim was to describe the experiences of 13 nursing teachers in the form of semi-structured interviews. The results of current study showed that classes and subclasses shown in Figure 1 are among the characteristics of moral distress in nursing teachers.

Figure 1. Characteristics of moral distress in nursing teachers.

Class	Subclass
Valuation of situation	Mindfulness of unethical situation
	Difficulty of correct ethical judgement
	Concern of undesirable consequences of the adopted measures
Getting entangled in the situation	Being involved in inappropriate task
	Forcing into agreement with other people
	Threat to occupational security
Mental involvement	Cyclic and repetitive mental involvement
	Uncontrollable mental involvement in the situation
Unavoidability	Repetition of the bothering experience in occupational and inter-professional interactions
	Necessity of encountering with the situation

Brüggenmann et al. (2019) aimed to explore bystander passivity in the context of school settings and to contribute to theoretical development by connecting bystander passivity to moral disengagement and moral distress. According to Jameton's (1993) definition dividing moral distress into initial and reactive distress, we can infer that bystander passivity could evoke moral distress of the reactive type, where one sees some form of intervention as the right course of action but does not make that intervention because of external constraints. Brüggenmann et al. (2019) also distinguished different types of passivity in school settings.

In her article, Váchová (2019) describes the process of creating a questionnaire of moral distress focused on the teacher environment. Based on 20 interviews, she created 4 categories of situations causing moral distress. Teachers felt moral dilemmas especially in their working relationships.

Toescher et al. (2020) identified the profile of professors of nursing experiencing moral distress from different perspectives. Using cluster analysis, they found that professors working in Brazilian federal public universities experience from mild to moderate intensity of moral distress and the profile with the greatest number of participants (136 participants) is composed of less experienced (worked in their respective institutions for approximately 5 years) and younger female professors (aged 37 years old on average) working in graduate programs, experiencing moderate intensity of moral distress.

Stelmach et al. (2021) aimed to understand the extent to which moral distress affects a school leader's role, and the key sources of moral distress. His study shows how moral distress in school leaders affects who they are and how they perform as leaders. The study confirmed that 51% of the 954 participants had experienced moral distress. Of those experiencing moral distress, 45% reported experiencing it several times a week or month and 41% experienced it several times a year. Moral distress emerged from expectations from school district leaders and parents. In his article, he also discusses 3 sources of the limitations of school leaders feeling unable to do the right thing: the increasing complexity of classrooms, the deterioration of working relationships with parents, and the increase in directives that forced school leaders to meet district expectations.

### 3. Conclusions

Research on moral distress among teachers is an important but under-researched area. The studies found differ in their methodology, sample size and sample composition. Still, they conclude to similar findings – teachers often face ethical decisions whether to give in to social pressure and decide whether they internally disagree or to take the risk of standing up to social pressure and do what they themselves believe is morally right. Whatever they decide, they are unlikely to avoid moral distress. The topic of moral distress is important to explore further because of teacher common dissatisfaction and teacher's attrition from education caused by burnout, among other things.

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