

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in critical theory, particularly the work of Freire (1970/2000), who argues that education is shaped by power structures rather than existing as a neutral system.

Critical theory highlights the tension between humanization and dehumanization, suggesting that institutional conditions can limit teachers' autonomy and professional agency.

Critical Theory

- Education systems reflect social and political structures that shape teachers' work and decision-making (Freire, 1970/2000).
- When institutional expectations conflict with teachers' professional values, strain can emerge as burnout.
- Examining burnout through a critical lens shifts attention from individual coping toward the conditions shaping professional practice

Supporting Perspective

- Dewey (2022) emphasizes that education is rooted in lived experiences and community relationships, demonstrating the relational nature of teaching.



Research Topic and Question

Teacher burnout has become an increasing concern within Alberta's public education system, where teachers are navigating rising classroom complexity, emotional labour, and expanding professional demands.

Research Question

How do teachers understand and experience burnout in relation to self-care, professional identity, and institutional responsibility, and what barriers limit teachers' capacity to engage in meaningful self-care?

Context

- Alberta teachers report increasing class size and complexity, staffing shortages, and declining morale (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2026).
- Teachers are increasingly required to manage diverse learning needs, behavioural challenges, and emotional support for students (Kendrick et al., 2025).
- Policy expectations and documentation requirements continue to expand teachers' responsibilities (Government of Alberta, n.d.).

Thesis Statement

Teacher burnout is best understood not as an individual failure of coping, but as a response to emotionally demanding work carried out within complex institutional conditions.

Literature Review

My research consistently showed that teacher burnout develops through the interaction of emotional labour, professional commitment, and systemic pressures within education systems (Gray et al., 2027; Kendrick et al., 2025; Pressley et al., 2026).

Four major themes emerged:

Burnout as a Systemic and Institutional Phenomenon

- Burnout is increasingly understood as a predictable outcome of the way education systems are structured (Gray et al., 2017; Pressley et al., 2026).
- Teachers' well-being is shaped by workload, school climate, and the gap between expectations and available supports (Gray et al., Ha et al., 2025).
- In Alberta, teachers report growing strain linked to class size, complexity, and resource shortage (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2026; Kendrick et al., 2025).

Emotional Labour and Compassion Fatigue

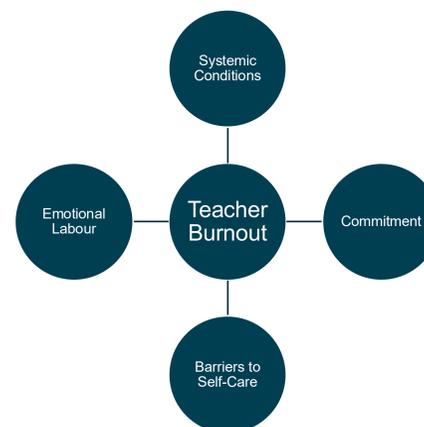
- Teaching requires sustained emotional labour, including managing one's emotions while supporting students' well-being (Kendrick et al., 2022; Molyneux, 2021).
- Compassion fatigue can emerge when teachers are repeatedly exposed to student distress (Yu et al., 2022; Koenig et al., 2018).
- Emotional labour is often invisible but central part of teachers' professional work (Kendrick et al., 2022; Molyneux, 2021).

The Co-Existence of Commitment and Burnout

- Teachers frequently remain deeply committed to their students even while experiencing high levels of stress (Gray et al., 2017; Kendrick, 2022).
- Strong student relationships can increase teachers' sense of accomplishment while also intensifying emotional exhaustion (Oliver et al., 2024).
- Burnout often develops gradually alongside sustained professional commitment (Pressley et al., 2026).

Barriers to Self-Care and the Need for Systemic Responses

- Teachers often struggle to engage in self-care due to workload and organizational pressures (Pressley et al., 2025; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2026).
- Self-care initiatives are limited when systemic conditions remain unchanged (Agyapong et al., 2023; Carroll et al., 2021).
- Research suggests that organizational and leadership responses are necessary to support teacher well-being (Carroll et al., 2021, Pressley et al., 2026).



Recommendations

The literature suggests that teacher burnout should be addressed through organizational and leadership responses, rather than relying solely on individual coping strategies (Carroll et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2026; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2026).

Collaborative Professionalism

- Collaborative professionalism encourages educators to work collectively to address shared challenges and improve professional practice (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).
- Purposeful collaboration can reduce professional isolation and allow teachers to navigate classroom complexity and relational demands together.
- Schools that emphasize learning-oriented goal structures, focused on student growth and improvement, are associated with higher teacher satisfaction and lower burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Practical Strategies

- Protect time within the school schedule for teacher collaboration and professional dialogue.
- Encourage teacher-led discussions focused on classroom complexity, student needs, and shared problem-solving.

Reframing Self-Care as Organizational Accountability

- Teacher burnout is often framed as a problem of individual resilience, even though research shows that working conditions strongly influence teacher well-being (Carroll et al., 2021; Agyapong et al., 2022).
- Self-care initiatives are unlikely to be effective when systemic pressures such as workload, staffing shortages, and classroom complexity remain unchanged (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2026; Kendrick et al., 2025).
- Schools and districts should recognize well-being as an organizational responsibility

Practical Strategies

- Conduct workload reviews to identify sources of professional overload.
- Protect preparation time and clarify expectations around after-hours communication.

Conclusion

- Teacher burnout is often framed as a matter of individual stress or resilience; however, the literature suggests it is more accurately understood as a response to sustained emotional labour carried within constrained institutional environments.
- In Alberta, expanding classroom complexity, increasing workload expectations, and limited supports are shaping teachers' daily work and professional well-being (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2026; Kendrick et al., 2025).
- Addressing burnout requires attention to the institutional conditions that structure teachers' work, shifting the focus from individual coping strategies toward systemic supports that promote the long-term sustainability of the profession.

References

