


**TEACHING WORK INTENSIFICATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DETACHMENT
FROM WORK: THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF ILLEGITIMATE TASKS AND
WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT**

**INTENSIFICAÇÃO DO TRABALHO DOCENTE E DISTANCIAMENTO
PSICOLÓGICO DO TRABALHO: O EFEITO MEDIADOR DAS TAREFAS
ILEGÍTIMAS E DO CONFLITO TRABALHO-FAMÍLIA**

**INTENSIFICACIÓN DEL TRABAJO DOCENTE Y DISTANCIAMIENTO
PSICOLÓGICO DEL TRABAJO: EL EFECTO MEDIADOR DE LAS TAREAS
ILEGÍTIMAS Y EL CONFLICTO TRABAJO-FAMILIA**

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ABSTRACT

The intensification of work translates into an increase in workload and the assignment of new tasks of varying complexity and nature. Both the intensification of teaching work in general, and specifically the performance of tasks considered illegitimate (e.g. tasks asked of teachers that they perceive as unnecessary or unreasonable) are a source of stress for teachers with implications for their well-being, particularly in terms of increasing family conflict. On the other hand, the ability/possibility of recovering from work has been identified as an essential element not only for the effective performance of work tasks, but also for teachers' well-being. Considering the scarcity of studies on this subject in the teaching profession, a quantitative study was carried out on a sample of 131 teachers with the aim of assessing the role of illegitimate tasks and work-family conflict in the relationship between work intensification and psychological detachment from work. The results of the study validated a dual influence model in which work intensification is associated with the performance of illegitimate tasks (unnecessary and unreasonable) and work-family conflict, which in turn negatively influences psychological detachment from work.

Keywords: Teachers. Work Intensification. Illegitimate Tasks. Work-Family Conflict. Psychological Detachment From Work.

RESUMO

A intensificação do trabalho traduz-se num aumento da carga de trabalho e na atribuição de novas tarefas de complexidade e natureza diferenciada. Tanto a intensificação do trabalho docente em geral, como especificamente a realização de tarefas consideradas ilegítimas (e.g. tarefas solicitadas aos docentes que estes percebem como desnecessárias ou pouco razoáveis) constituem uma fonte de stress para os docentes com implicações no seu bem-estar, nomeadamente na potenciação do conflito trabalho família. Por outro lado, a capacidade/possibilidade de recuperação do trabalho tem sido identificada como elemento

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essencial não só para o eficaz desempenho das tarefas laborais, como também para o bem-estar dos docentes. Considerando-se a escassez de estudos que incidem sobre esta temática no âmbito da profissão docente, realizou-se um estudo de natureza quantitativa numa amostra de 131 portugueses com o objetivo de avaliar o papel das tarefas ilegítimas e do conflito trabalho família na relação entre a intensificação do trabalho e a distanciamento psicológico do trabalho. Os resultados do estudo validaram um modelo de dupla influência onde a intensificação do trabalho está associada à realização de tarefas ilegítimas (desnecessárias e pouco razoáveis) e ao conflito trabalho família, que por sua vez influencia negativamente o distanciamento psicológico do trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Docentes. Intensificação do Trabalho. Tarefas Ilegítimas. Conflito Trabalho-Família. Distanciamento Psicológico do Trabalho.

RESUMEN

La intensificación del trabajo se traduce en una mayor carga de trabajo y la asignación de tareas nuevas, complejas y diferenciadas. Tanto la intensificación del trabajo docente en general como, en particular, la realización de tareas consideradas ilegítimas (p. ej., tareas solicitadas a los docentes que perciben como innecesarias o irrazonables) constituyen una fuente de estrés para los docentes, con implicaciones para su bienestar, en particular al aumentar el conflicto entre el trabajo y la familia. Además, la capacidad/posibilidad de recuperación del trabajo se ha identificado como un elemento esencial no solo para el desempeño efectivo de las tareas laborales, sino también para el bienestar de los docentes. Considerando la escasez de estudios centrados en este tema dentro de la profesión docente, se realizó un estudio cuantitativo con una muestra de 131 individuos portugueses para evaluar el papel de las tareas ilegítimas y el conflicto entre el trabajo y la familia en la relación entre la intensificación del trabajo y el desapego psicológico del trabajo. Los resultados del estudio validaron un modelo de doble influencia donde la intensificación del trabajo se asocia al desempeño de tareas ilegítimas (innecesarias e irrazonables) y al conflicto trabajo-familia, lo que a su vez influye negativamente en el desapego psicológico del trabajo.

Palabras clave: Profesores. Intensificación del Trabajo. Tareas Ilegítimas. Conflicto Trabajo-familia. Distanciamiento Psicológico del Trabajo.

1 INTRODUCTION

The growing diversity of educational environments, along with the continuous changes in the educational system resulting from social and political changes, require the teacher to be able to constantly update and adapt. In this process, the resources needed for this to happen are not always available, which generally leads to work contexts in which demands – including the use of communication and information technologies – are perceived as requiring time, effort and new skills (Chesley, 2014), sometimes affecting the well-being of workers (Venz & Boettcher, 2022). It is in this context that the concept of work intensification (IT) arises (Kubicek et al., 2015) which states that time and work pressure are demands that are placed on the worker in the current context, and the need to perform more tasks in less time is growing. This reality has several negative effects, such as, among others, the lack of time and the pressure placed on the worker in his professional context, which is often transported to other areas of his family and personal life, being at the origin of the work-family conflict (Kubicek et al., 2015). In addition, the demands related to the intensification of work may be associated with the request to perform tasks designated by Semmer et al. (2007) as illegitimate, because the workers consider that they do not fit into their professional expectations. These tasks may be unnecessary or unreasonable tasks, as they may be perceived as unnecessary for the individual to perform their work properly, or they may be tasks that are not directly related to their professional activity. In this context, they can be seen by the worker as a waste of time and resources, leading them to feel devalued, which constitutes a threat to professional self-esteem. This threat to self-esteem causes tension and can have negative impacts on the work-family conflict. Work-family conflict, which develops when one's obligations and expectations regarding work conflict with one's ability to meet family or personal obligations, has several negative effects on workers (Allen et al., 2000; Bakker et al., 2014), including difficulty in psychologically distancing oneself from work (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009). The present study explores the relationships between the intensification of work and its influence on the work-family conflict and on the psychological distance from work, considering the mediating effects of illegitimate tasks. Existing studies on the subject are scarce and do not analyze the potential impact of aspects inherent to the work context, such as illegitimate tasks, in the relationship between work intensification, work-conflict and psychological detachment from work. This study is a pioneer in considering the potential effects of these variables on this relationship. In addition, the scarcity of studies on this topic in Portugal, and particularly with this professional group - teachers - highlights the

importance of studies that contribute to the understanding of these relationships by promoting reflection on the intensification of teaching work, and its relationship with aspects of the work context, such as illegitimate tasks and their impacts on the management of life roles and well-being in the teaching profession.

The objective of this study is to evaluate the role of illegitimate tasks and work-family conflict in the relationship between work intensification and psychological detachment from work. Specifically, it is intended to verify whether the fact that teachers perceive the tasks they perform as illegitimate (unnecessary and unreasonable) has a potentiating effect on the work-family conflict and whether this in turn is related to psychological distancing from work.

2 INTENSIFICATION OF WORK

The intensification of work, according to Kubicek et al. (2015), consists of an increase in the pace and volume of work without resources such as time, personal skills or even equipment adequately accompanying the new pace of work. The intensification of work is caused by several variables, including the progressive use of new communication and information technologies, changes in the work structure, the implementation of new management practices that prioritize efficiency, among others (Prem et al., 2018). If work intensification can be motivated by the desire to increase productivity and efficiency in the workplace (Kubicek et al., 2015), it can have negative consequences for individuals such as increased stress, burnout, and physical and mental health problems (Prem et al., 2021). The intensification of work, in the case of teachers, is associated with the complexity and demands of a certain task or set of tasks considered an essential part of a job (Creagh et al., 2023). Beck (2017) argues that teachers' work has become more intense by referring to the feeling of being pulled in multiple directions at the same time due to competing and contradictory demands at a given time. In terms of consequences, Creagh et al. (2023) report that there is considerable concern around the intensification of teachers' work, and this concern is expressed as having a negative impact on job satisfaction, burnout, and the attractiveness of teaching as a career.

2.1 WORK RECOVERY: PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCING FROM WORK

One of the mechanisms of adaptation of the individual to the different demands was presented by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) who, based on the theory of Conservation of Resources (Hobfoll, 2001), propose that the resources that are consumed during the work

activity can be replaced in the post-work period. For the authors, the so-called recovery experiences, in which the individual is an active agent, can occur due to psychological detachment from work, relaxation, mastery and control. Psychological distancing from work is thus understood as a psychological experience of "disconnecting", that is, moving away from the concerns and tasks of the work context. Several studies have documented the importance of psychological distancing from work, evidencing its relationship with higher levels of well-being (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2017). Another longitudinal study reports the opposite effect, i.e., the individual's difficulty in psychologically distancing himself from work appears as a predictor of increased levels of emotional exhaustion (Sonnentag et al., 2010). The study by Demerouti et al. (2012) also revealed that the positive effects of work only extend at the end of the day if the individual manages to psychologically distance himself from it within the scope of his family/personal life. Psychological detachment from work can become particularly challenging in professions where professional tasks are sometimes carried over beyond school hours.

2.2 ILLEGITIMATE TASKS

Illegitimate tasks (IT) have been studied and understood within the scope of the SOS Theory (stress as an offense to the *Self*) which is based on the premise that maintaining a positive self-image is a basic need, so any threat to self-esteem generates tension (Semmer et al., 2010). IT are tasks formally assigned and performed by workers, but which they consider not to fit their professional expectations (Katz & Kahn, 1966/1978; Semmer et al., 2010). In this sense, the assignment of this type of tasks can be understood as a disrespect and an offense to their professional identity and self (Semmer et al., 2007). Illegitimate tasks can be unnecessary tasks or unreasonable tasks. Unnecessary tasks are redundant tasks that should never be done, or that only exist because the work is poorly organized or because someone has determined it to. Unreasonable tasks are tasks perceived as disconcerting or unfair requests, as they do not fit into professional obligations or put the worker in an embarrassing and difficult situation and, in this context, are felt as a threat to their professional identity and self-esteem (Schulte-Braucks et al., 2019 ; Semmer et al., 2007).

However, the perception of the legitimacy of the tasks depends on the context in which it is inserted. A task is not considered illegitimate if the worker accepts it or if it is performed on his own initiative, that is, illegitimacy is not a characteristic of the task itself, but rather an attribute that is conferred on it by the worker at each specific moment and context. Thus, the

assignment of tasks perceived by workers as illegitimate is felt as disrespect and, as such, constitutes a source of tension in the workplace that can have implications at the individual and organizational level. At the individual level, the research identified a positive relationship between IT, stress and psychological tension (Björk et al., 2013 ; Semmer, et al., 2015) anger (Eatough, et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2018) resentment (Munir et al., 2017; Semmer, et al., 2015) Work-family conflict (Zeng et al., 2021), and a negative relationship with job satisfaction and performance (Björk et al., 2013). At the organizational level, IT is positively related to turnover intention (Bramlage et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021) and negatively with job satisfaction (Björk et al., 2013) and counterproductive behaviors (Semmer et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2018). The concept of illegitimate tasks was initially conceptualized as a latent construct with two related dimensions (unnecessary tasks and unreasonable tasks) (Semmer et al., 2007) and, although most of the research has been done, considering the construct as a whole (Muntz & Dormann, 2020; Semmer, et al., 2015), some studies have considered the dimensions separately and concluded that they have different effects on workers (Muntz & Dormann, 2020; Muntz et al., 2019). For example, unreasonable tasks are more salient and can have more harmful effects on workers than unnecessary tasks (Fila & Eatough, 2020). Unreasonable tasks are more linked to negative emotional reactions (Pindek et al., 2018; Schmitt et al., 2015) such as exhaustion and intention to leave the organization (Bramlage et al., 2021). Unnecessary tasks, because they imply an increased effort considered unnecessary, are elements that generate tension that lead to negative results in terms of well-being and motivation (Eatough, et al., 2016; Muntz & Dormann, 2020).

Studies on this topic with Portuguese teachers are scarce. However, it has already been possible to show that teachers have a high perception that they often perform tasks considered unnecessary and unreasonable, and that these influence the Vigor component in *engagement* at work (Neves & Andrade, 2023).

2.3 WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

The work-family conflict stood out, as a research theme, as a consequence of demographic changes in the workforce, namely the increase in dual-income families and the percentage of women in the labor market (Allen & Martin, 2017; Earl et al., 2017). In recent decades, research on work-family issues has produced strong empirical evidence to answer questions related to the impact of stressors on work and family life (Byron, 2005; Pleck et al., 1980; Pluut et al., 2018). If initially each domain of work and family was studied separately,

since the "*myth of separate worlds*" was traditionally believed in the domains of work and family (Kanter, 1977), studies on work-family issues have progressively demonstrated that the relationship between work and family is dynamic and reciprocal (Byron, 2005; Frone et al., 1992;). Work-family conflict (CTF), defined by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), represents an individual experience resulting from the overlapping demands of work and family, which compete with each other, both in terms of time and energy. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) consider the existence of three types of work-family conflict: conflict due to lack of time, conflict originating in tension and originating in the behavior associated with the exercise of each role. These pressures, originating both at work and in the family, hinder the adequate and satisfactory fulfillment of the two roles, giving rise to the work-family conflict which, according to Frone (2003) can take two directions: from work to the family and from the family to work. Despite this bidirectionality of conflict, empirical studies indicate that the negative interference of work in the family (CTF) is more frequent than the interference of the family in work (Geurts & Demerouti, 2003; Andrade, 2015). Similarly, although conflicts can occur in both directions, the influence of work in the family (CTF) is also stronger than the influence of the family in work (CFT), evidencing an asymmetric interference of work for the family (Byron, 2005; Cinamon & Rich, 2005; Geurts & Demerouti, 2003).

The occurrence of high levels of work-family conflict in teachers was identified in the study by Cinamon et al. (2007). Palmer et al. (2012) also highlighted teaching as a profession characterized by several demands, often generating stress that can have implications in the exercise of other life roles, namely in the family. The study by Gomes et al. (2013), carried out with a sample of Portuguese teachers, identified high levels of CTF, especially in public school teachers, compared to private school teachers. The study by Neves and Andrade (2023) also identified, with a sample of Portuguese teachers, a relationship between the exercise of mandatory citizenship behaviors, citizenship fatigue and work-family conflict.

Since the importance of analyzing the CTF in more depth in the context of teaching is notorious, studies that address this theme, as well as the analysis of the factors of the work context that contribute to its intensification or mitigation, are scarce.

The present study aims to contribute to broaden the knowledge about how dimensions of the teaching work context may be at the origin of the difficulty in psychologically distancing oneself from work. Thus, it is considered that the performance of illegitimate tasks may generate both scarcity of time and tension, as well as the experience of individual questioning about the role of the teacher, being, therefore, a potential antecedent of the work-family

conflict. In line with this assumption, it is also assumed, as evidenced by the specialized literature, that the work-family conflict can have an impact on the creation of conditions that enhance the difficulty in disconnecting from work.

3 METHOD

Considering the objective outlined for the study, it was carried out using a questionnaire elaborated within the scope of a broader study that aims to understand how factors in the work context influence the well-being of employees of various professions.

3.1 INSTRUMENTS

In the first part of the questionnaire, information related to the sociodemographic characterization was collected, which included age, sex and number of children under 18 years of age. Three scales were used: the *Intensification of Job Demands Scale* (IDS) (Kubicek, et al., 2015), consisting of 17 items translated into Portuguese. The internal consistency obtained for the global scale was .87. The *Bern Illegitimate Scale* (Semmer et al., 2006, 2015), consisting of 8 items, was also used in the adaptation for the Portuguese population (Neves et al., 2023), revealing an internal consistency of .93. 6 items from the *Work-Family Conflict Scale* (Mathews, et al., 2011) relating to conflict based on time and pressure. For this scale, the internal consistency was .91. Finally, 4 items from the *Recovery Experience Questionnaire* (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007) translated into Portuguese were used. The internal consistency of this subscale was .92. All instruments were answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.2 PROCEDURE

The questionnaire was disseminated by email to teachers from the researchers' network of contacts with the support of students of the Master's Degree in Special Education. To participate in the study, teachers should be working in public or private schools at the basic and/or secondary levels in Portugal. The questionnaire was built using *Google Forms*, and a contact was provided to clarify doubts or obtain additional information about the study, and voluntary participation was guaranteed through informed consent. The study had the favorable opinion of the Ethics Committee of the Polytechnic of Coimbra (No 25_CEIPC_2022).

3.3 PARTICIPANTS

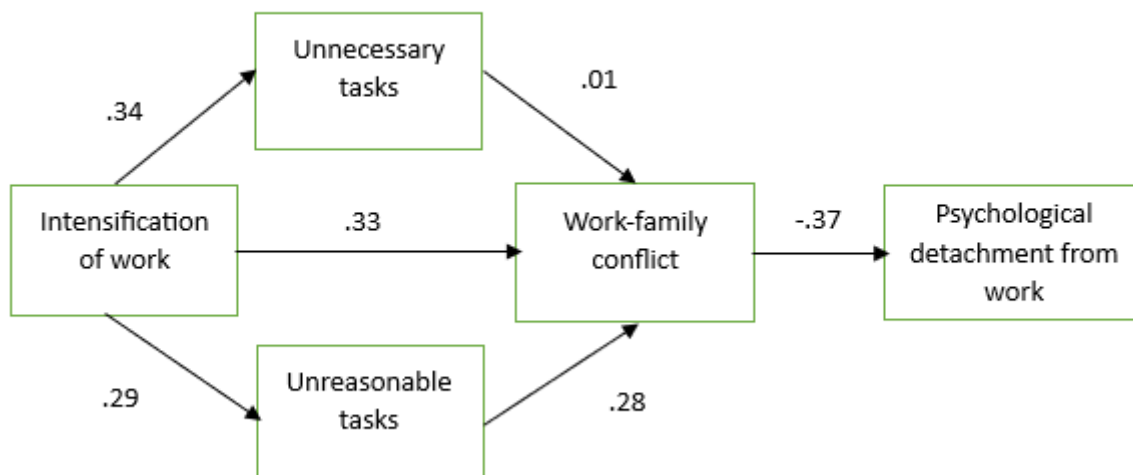
The sample of this study consists of 131 teachers aged between 23 and 69 years, with a mean age of 48.77 (SD = 9.46), 74% of whom are female. Regarding parenting, 60% have children under 18 years of age and 17% have a coordination/leadership position.

4 FINDINGS

In order to ascertain the nature of the relationship between the variables, according to the objectives set out for the study, the structural model was constructed and validated, based on the structural equation modeling (SEM) methodology, using the AMOS software (v. 28, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The method used to estimate the different trajectories of the model was the maximum *likelihood*, which allows obtaining estimates of the standardized coefficients of the trajectories and the *p-value* (p-values < .05 were considered as indicative of significant trajectories).

Figure 1

Path analysis model



The fit of the model was evaluated through comparative indices of adjustment, specifically χ^2/df , RMSEA and CFI (Arbuckle, 1996; Marôco, 2014). The global model obtained shows an adjustment value $\chi^2/df = 5.56$, $p < .001$, RSMEA=.07, CFI=.94) (see Figure 1). The total variance explained by the model was 23%. The analysis of this study indicated that the intensification of work influences unnecessary tasks ($\beta=.34$, $p < .001$),

unreasonable tasks ($\beta=.29$, $p < .001$) and work-family conflict ($\beta= .33$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, unnecessary tasks do not influence work-family conflict ($\beta=.01$, $p=.136$) while unreasonable tasks influence work-family conflict ($\beta=.28$, $p < .001$). Finally, there is a negative influence of the work-family conflict on the psychological distance from work ($\beta=-.37$, $p < .001$).

5 DISCUSSION

The objective of the present study was to verify the relationship between work intensification and psychological detachment from work, considering the memorative effects of work-family conflict and illegitimate tasks.

The results point to the existence of a relationship between the intensification of work and the psychological detachment from work, mediated by the work-family conflict, and also to a mediating effect of the performance of a type of illegitimate tasks (unreasonable tasks) in the relationship between the intensification of work and the work-family conflict.

Thus, and in line with the results of previous studies (Kubicek et al., 2015; Andrade & Neves, 2024) We can verify that the intensification of work has a direct relationship with the work-family conflict and that, in the context of this relationship, the tasks of the work context perceived as illegitimate can play a mediating role in this relationship. However, the characteristic of the relationship depends on the type of tasks, i.e., only unreasonable tasks have a mediating effect between the intensification of work and the work-family conflict, thus confirming the relevance of the suggestion of Muntz and Dormann (2020), who suggest that each of the dimensions of IT should be considered and studied separately since they have different effects.

Unreasonable tasks are perceived as activities that exceed the expected domain of the responsibilities of their professional activity, and, therefore, can be perceived as unfair, or, in line with the SOS Theory (Semmer et al., 2010) as an offense to their professional identity, thus generating an additional load of tension. The exhaustion resulting from these situations can thus exacerbate the work-family conflict, since the tension generated can compromise energy and/or time to dedicate to personal life, amplifying the work-family conflict.

On the other hand, the data also indicate that the performance of unnecessary tasks does not have the same effect in potentiating work-family conflict. Unnecessary tasks are those that, although they may be within the scope of the employee's responsibility, they

consider that they should not be performed at all, because they do not add any value to the work itself or to the objectives of the organization. These are activities that often result from poor management or redundant or inefficient bureaucratic processes, and that require time and effort that could be directed to other activities. The frustration generated by the perception of the ineffectiveness of the tasks performed and the waste of resources such as time can increase stress in the work environment, which can translate into less availability for work. However, in the present study, these tasks are not related to the work-family conflict. In this regard, the results seem to indicate that the performance of unnecessary tasks, although it may contribute to the malaise in the work context, is limited to this context, not contributing to influence the levels of work-family conflict. This result is of added interest, as it highlights the different effects of the two types of illegitimate tasks on work-family conflict, so future studies should consider separately each of the dimensions of illegitimate tasks to deepen these relationships. It is crucial that in work contexts the importance of properly managing demands is recognized, avoiding unnecessary and unreasonable tasks, since the elimination or reevaluation of tasks that do not contribute to organizational objectives can help reduce work-family conflict.

In the present study, a relationship between work-family conflict and the ability to psychologically distance oneself from work-related issues was also identified. Knowing that psychological distancing from work is crucial for the recovery from work and for the general well-being of workers, when they are unable to psychologically distance themselves from work concerns, their well-being can be compromised. In addition, work-family conflict can lead to a feeling of guilt or inadequacy, both professionally and personally. When workers fail to meet expectations in both domains, they may experience a form of emotional strain that perpetuates a lack of psychological detachment from work. Constant worry about failing to fulfill your responsibilities can lead to a continuous state of alertness, making it difficult to relax and disconnect from work. This lack of psychological distancing from work can have negative consequences for the mental and physical health of workers. Prolonged stress and the inability to disconnect from work can result in *burnout*, anxiety, and other health problems. In addition, the inability to fully engage with family and leisure activities can damage personal relationships, leading to a vicious circle of dissatisfaction and stress.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated, in the teaching population, the relationship between the intensification of work and the psychological detachment from work, considering each of the dimensions of illegitimate tasks and work-family conflict as mediating variables. The data showed that the intensification of work has a direct relationship with the work-family conflict and that the latter has a mediating effect between the intensification of work and the psychological distancing from work. In addition, the study also showed that only one of the dimensions of illegitimate tasks, unreasonable tasks, exert a mediating effect between the intensification of work and work-family conflict. Unnecessary tasks do not show this mediating effect. These data confirm that teachers who reported that their work has been intensified also reported performing tasks perceived as illegitimate, both tasks considered unreasonable and unnecessary tasks. However, only the unreasonable tasks showed a relevant effect on the work-family conflict, that is, these data seem to indicate that it is not the amount of work itself that increases the work-family conflict, but the nature of the tasks that teachers now have to perform.

These data have implications for understanding the implications of the intensification of teachers' work, that is, teachers' work overload has more pernicious effects on their well-being when the tasks asked of them are considered unreasonable by them because they are perceived as being outside their professional scope and, as such, can be seen as a threat to your self-concept.

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