

# Examining the determinants of teacher (de)motivation in northern Ghana

## Briefing

Jophus Anamuah-Mensah, Britta Augsburg, Nancy Colombe and Sonya Krutikova



## Key messages

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Nearly half of kindergarten teachers in northern Ghana experience signs of emotional exhaustion – our study's proxy measure for demotivation.

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Strain co-exists with commitment: no teacher with high emotional exhaustion reports low professional accomplishment, suggesting that commitment and strain often coexist.

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Emotional exhaustion risk is shaped less by a teacher's personal traits and more by structural conditions: large class sizes and limited parental engagement exacerbate fatigue (or strain), while access to professional development, local community ties, and perceived respect from citizens and leaders seem to provide critical buffers for fatigue.

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## About this briefing

This briefing draws on primary data from public kindergarten classrooms in northern Ghana and applies the new demotivation framework (Colombe and Augsburg 2025) to understand how job demands and job resources interact to shape teacher wellbeing.

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) Ghana team.

## Recommended citation

Anamuah-Mensah, J., Augsburg, B., Colombe, N. and Krutikova, S. (2025). *Examining the determinants of teacher (de)motivation in northern Ghana*. Thrive briefing, Oxford Policy Management. <https://thrivechildevidence.org/resource-centre/examining-the-determinants-of-teacher-demotivation-in-northern-ghana/>

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The Thrive programme is funded by UK International Development from the UK government and by New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). It is managed by Oxford Policy Management in collaboration with the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

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# Introduction

Teacher motivation is central to education quality: motivated teachers plan lessons more effectively, demonstrate stronger pedagogical practices, and create supportive classroom environments that promote learning (Hanushek 2020; Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff 2013; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2007; World Bank 2018). Yet in many low resource countries, including Ghana, teachers often work under difficult conditions – including large class sizes, limited resources and weak institutional support – which heighten the risk of demotivation and burnout (Webb et al. 2004; Buchanan 2010).

These challenges are especially acute for public kindergarten teachers in northern Ghana, who play a foundational role in early childhood education (Gertler et al. 2014; McCoy et al. 2016; Andrew et al. 2024) but operate in some of the most constrained environments in the system.

## About this study

Using detailed primary survey data collected from 330 kindergarten teachers in northern Ghana as part of the evaluation of a large-scale government early childhood education programme (Augsburg et al. 2022), this paper examines the determinants of demotivation with the aim of helping to inform policies that can strengthen teacher motivation, retention, and support in low-resource early childhood education settings.

We apply a new framework (Colombe and Augsburg 2025) that proxies demotivation with emotional exhaustion, measured through an adapted Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al. 1996). The study looks at two of the original three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (broadly the feeling of being drained and depleted of energy) and reduced personal accomplishment (a feeling of inefficacy and a lack of productivity and achievement).<sup>1</sup>

The emotional exhaustion scale consists of 9 items assessing the feeling of being emotionally drained by one's work on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'every day', and generates a score between 0 and 54. Items include statements such as 'I feel used up at the end of the working day,' and 'Working

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<sup>1</sup> Depersonalisation (a sense of cynicism or detachment from one's job, often seen as a coping mechanism for emotional exhaustion) was not considered as previous studies have documented that individuals suffering with burnout in Ghana do not report experiencing depersonalisation towards their students. Lee and Wolf (2019) attributed this to cultural differences or survey enumerator bias. As Ghana is a collectivist society that emphasises the shared responsibility to the community over individualism, teachers may internalise experiences of burnout instead of experiencing depersonalisation towards their student. In addition, teachers may feel uncomfortable admitting to feelings of depersonalisation and may not report them accurately to an enumerator.

with people puts too much stress on me.' The personal accomplishment scale consists of 8 items and generates a score between 0 and 48 using the same Likert scale. Items include 'I deal very effectively with the problems of my schoolchildren', 'I feel I am positively affecting people's lives' and 'I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job'.

We acknowledge that the cross-sectional design limits causal claims; all wellbeing measures are self-reported; and burnout scales developed in high-income settings may not perfectly align with local interpretations. The sample covers only public kindergarten teachers in three northern regions, limiting generalisability, and the career-intention question cannot disentangle preferences from perceived opportunities. Despite these constraints, the study provides valuable, context-specific evidence and a foundation for future longitudinal and experimental work on sustaining teacher motivation and wellbeing.

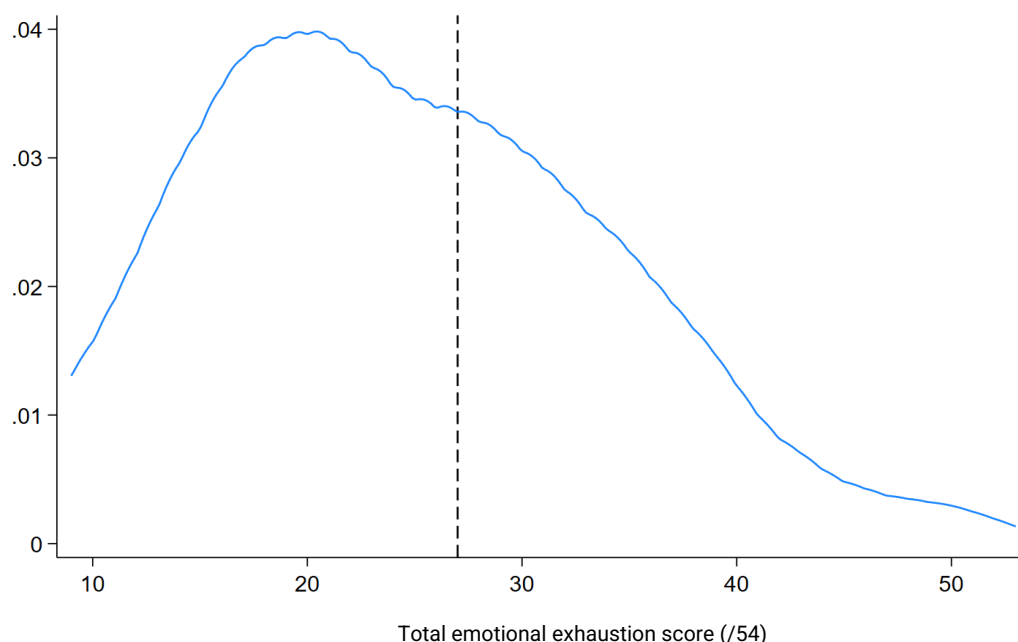
# Key findings

## Nearly half of the kindergarten teachers in our study showed signs of emotional exhaustion

The incidence of emotional exhaustion among the kindergarten teachers in our study was high: about one in three teachers showed clear signs of emotional exhaustion, and nearly 10% reported levels of exhaustion that could be considered severe. These rates are slightly higher than those documented for early childhood teachers in urban Ghana (Lee and Wolf 2019), indicating heightened strain in the low resource northern context.

High exhaustion signals that persistent job demands – such as large classes, limited resources and high caregiving expectations – are undermining teacher motivation.

Figure 1: Distribution of emotional exhaustion score

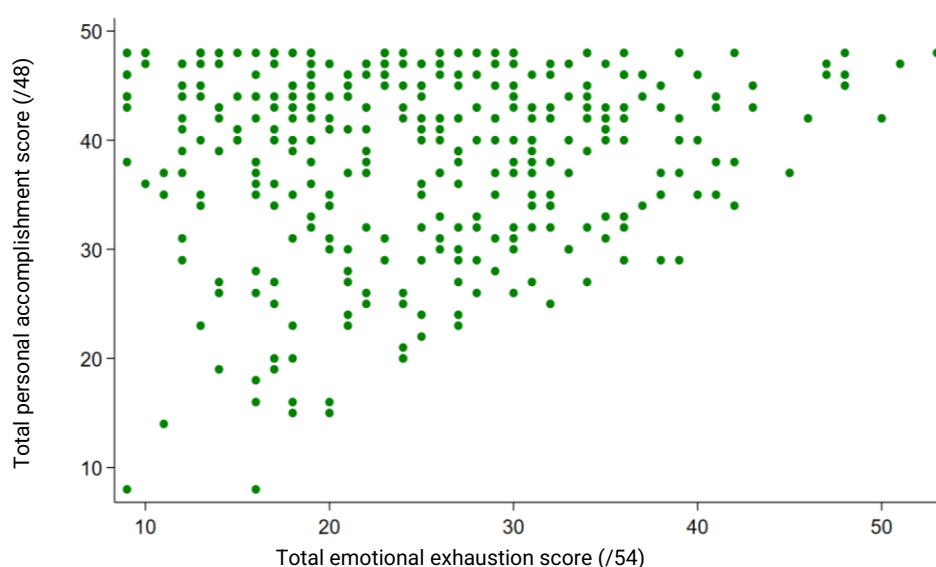


Notes: The x-axis is the total emotional exhaustion score, measured using an adaptation of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al. 1996). The vertical line marks the convention threshold beyond which someone is considered to exhibit high emotional exhaustion, or burnout. The average score is 24.7 (SD=9.4).

## But exhaustion does not imply disengagement —teachers still felt a degree of accomplishment

In our sample, every highly exhausted kindergarten teacher also maintained at least a moderate – and often high – sense of personal accomplishment (see Figure 2). This suggests that, even when emotionally depleted, many teachers still see themselves as capable and committed, echoing findings from other contexts that highly engaged and conscientious teachers – those who work the hardest and care most – are often at greatest risk of burnout (Kieschke and Schaarschmidt 2008; Wolf et al. 2015). The finding challenges assumptions that demotivation is simply 'low effort' and instead highlights the cumulative strain on dedicated kindergarten teachers.

Figure 2: Emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment



Notes: The figure plots each teacher's emotional exhaustion score against their personal accomplishment score.

## Considering personal characteristics, work environment and wider characteristics jointly we find that ...

### Emotional exhaustion risk is driven more by working conditions than a teacher's personal characteristics

Within the school environment, large class size, more time spent with children, limited professional development, and limited parental interest or are significantly associated with emotional exhaustion.

These patterns align with a job demands–job resources model: exhaustion rises when demands increases and available supports are inadequate.

### Teaching in their home community and undertaking professional development were associated with lower emotional strain among teachers facing high job demands

Consistent with the demotivation framework, teachers who worked in their home community and had undertaken professional development in the past 12 months reported lower emotional exhaustion. Social support is considered a critical job resource and appears to reduce the stress felt by kindergarten teachers in their home communities. Professional development equips teachers with additional skills to achieve their teaching goals and enhances self-efficacy beliefs, which supports their motivation. The data supports the positive theoretical connection between professional development and motivation.

### External factors such as perceived respect from stakeholders and citizens are associated with higher teacher motivation

Teachers suffering from emotional exhaustion were more likely to perceive a lack of respect from stakeholders and citizens. Kindergarten teachers receive less respect than their colleagues teaching at the primary level or above. The social status of teachers is considered a significant determinant of their motivation to initiate and remain in their role. A lack of respect at the kindergarten level also creates an incentive to move into teaching higher grades whenever possible, likely contributing to the high attrition rate of kindergarten teachers seen in this context.

# Conclusion

These results echo the findings of the demotivation framework, which views exhaustion or burnout as the result of sustained mismatches between what the job demands and the resources available to meet those demands (Colombe and Augsburg 2025). In northern Ghana, larger class sizes and weak parental engagement amplify teachers' workload and stress, especially among kindergarten teachers who manage young children's social, emotional and academic needs. In addition, professional development, community connectedness and recognition from citizens and leaders help buffer these pressures by sustaining teachers' sense of purpose and effectiveness. The fact that a higher sense of personal accomplishment is linked to greater exhaustion shows that even committed teachers are vulnerable to emotional fatigue, underscoring how prolonged strain can wear down motivation over time. Evidence suggests that such exhaustion increases the likelihood of attrition. And indeed, a substantial share of kindergarten teachers expressed a desire to move into teaching at the primary or secondary school level, consistent with the idea that continued emotional strain, limited recognition, and few advancement opportunities can push teachers to seek alternative roles.

Taken together, the results illustrate how teacher demotivation is not an isolated, short-term psychological outcome but part of a longer professional trajectory shaped by structural working conditions and social valuation of early childhood educators. Short-term motivation can be supported by reducing workload and strengthening professional resources, but lasting retention will require reducing structural pressures on teachers, which could be achieved through increasing parental engagement, expanding professional development opportunities, institutionalising recognition mechanisms, strengthening community-school linkages and elevating the status of kindergarten teachers.

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# Thrive

Thrive is a multi-country research programme that aims to support countries to turn what we know about positive early childhood development into practical, scalable, low-cost programmes, able to transform societies over multiple generations. Working closely with policymakers and other stakeholders, Thrive aims to build understanding of early childhood development service delivery models and how they can be provided cost effectively and at scale, and how these systems can innovate, improve, and better serve children and communities in low- and middle-income countries.

Our five focus countries are Bangladesh, Ghana, Kiribati, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

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