



Judyta Pawliszko

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5279-498X>

University of Rzeszów, Poland

jpawliszko@ur.edu.pl

The burnout buffer? Volunteering and resilience in pre-service teacher development

Submitted: 14.04.2025

Accepted: 23.03.2026

Published: 30.06.2026



Keywords:

volunteer teaching,
teacher burnout,
student educators,
teaching identity,
professional development,
early career stress

Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The study investigates whether volunteering in educational settings can reduce burnout among student educators and shape their professional identity. Using a case study of language education students, the research explores how volunteering affects resilience, motivation, and perceptions of teaching.

Research methods: The study employs a mixed-methods approach using psychometric survey data and qualitative interviews. Quantitative instruments measured burnout and life satisfaction, while interviews focused on students' motivation, emotional demands, and institutional support.

Process of argumentation: This study draws on the author's experience as founder of the Study Buddy volunteering programme. Although volunteer teaching is widely recognized as a valued developmental experience, its psychological costs and benefits remain underexplored, mainly in pre-service teacher contexts. This study fills that gap by questioning how structured volunteer programmes can either buffer or exacerbate early career burnout.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: Volunteer teaching enhanced professional confidence and emotional engagement, creating potential for burnout prevention. Participants also reported emotional fatigue and stress related to a lack of institutional support. Strong intrinsic motivation emerged as a protective factor, while institutional gaps intensified strain.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Volunteer teaching should be recognized as a formative phase of teacher growth. Institutions must

offer structured mentoring, reflective supervision, and formal recognition to ensure that such experiences build long-term resilience and reduce the potential for burnout.

Introduction

The Study Buddy Foundation, established in 2022, connects University of Rzeszów students with children in childcare institutions across Podkarpacie, Poland, offering free, tailored English tutoring. What makes the programme particularly valuable is its dual emphasis on language development and emotional support, delivered through consistent, one-on-one sessions. Unlike many short-term or informal volunteering efforts, Study Buddy integrates pedagogical intent with sustained mentoring, making it a potential model for scalable, university-led outreach. Its structure, built on reflective supervision, peer support, and institutional recognition, offers a replicable framework for other teacher education programmes seeking to combine community engagement with professional development.

While volunteer teaching is often fulfilling, it also brings emotional demands that may lead to stress and burnout. Student volunteers face challenges such as forming emotional ties with disadvantaged learners (Kelly, 2023), limited pedagogical preparation (Sanz-Vergel et al., 2010), and balancing studies with volunteer work (Lavy, 2022).

Though volunteering's mental health benefits are well-documented, few studies have examined its impact on early teacher development, especially regarding burnout and identity formation. This study addresses that gap through the lens of the Study Buddy programme, where pedagogy intersects with emotional complexity. As the programme's founder, I approach this research as both investigator and insider. This role provided valuable access and context, while requiring reflexivity to represent participants' voices with integrity.

Framed by this dual perspective, the study explores how volunteering shapes future educators' well-being, resilience, and professional efficacy.

It examines both supports and stressors to answer the guiding question:
Does volunteering reduce burnout?

Theoretical framework

Volunteer teaching in educational contexts

Volunteer teaching significantly contributes to education, particularly in underserved communities, through non-traditional settings such as community centres, orphanages, and refugee camps where university students, retired teachers, and community members volunteer their time and expertise without financial compensation (Locke et al., 2003; Mori, 2025).

García and Weiss (2019) echo the above by arguing that volunteering benefits both students and educators. Students gain improved access to education, academic performance, and social-emotional growth, while volunteer educators develop teaching skills, enhance professional identity, and gain career motivation (Fényes et al., 2021). Forster and colleagues (2015) noted that pre-service teachers in particular acquire practical classroom experience and pedagogical skills.

Nevertheless, volunteer teaching presents challenges, including emotional labour and burnout, particularly when working with disadvantaged students (Blackmore et al., 2023). Many volunteers lack formal training, affecting instruction quality and classroom management (Moreno-Jiménez & Villodres, 2010). Additionally, without proper support and supervision, volunteer teachers may struggle with engagement and effectiveness (Resuello et al., 2024). Thus, as pointed out by Lavy (2022), institutional backing, mentoring, and structured frameworks are critical for sustaining these programmes.

In the context of language education, volunteer teaching supports second-language learners by pairing them with fluent speakers to develop speaking, listening, and comprehension skills (Baker, 2018). However, as emphasized by Sowa and Piatak (2024), mismatched expectations, resource limitations, and cultural barriers must be addressed to optimize programme success.

The interplay between student engagement, life satisfaction, and burnout in volunteer teaching

Student engagement (SE) is often defined as a multidimensional construct, combining behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004, 2011). Behavioural parts of engagement are “related to attendance, participation, and positive conduct”, cognitive engagement relates to “students’ level of investment in learning”, and emotional engagement to the “extent of positive (...) and negative (...) reactions to the school, teacher, and activities” (Fredricks, 2011, p. 328). Shaufeli et al. (2002) viewed SE as comprising vigour (commitment to studies and mental flexibility), dedication (enthusiasm and sense of importance), and absorption (full immersion in studies).

Life satisfaction (LS) is a key component of subjective well-being, encompassing positive and negative affect (Diener et al., 1985). Vittersø (2025) defined LS as an individual’s conscious evaluation of life quality based on self-imposed standards, while Schmitter et al. (2003) linked high LS with factors such as finding pleasure in life, a sense of meaning, achievement, positive self-evaluation, physical well-being, quality social relationships, and financial security. Other authors agree; LS has been found to be associated with positive outcomes, including meaningful social relationships, increased commitment (Barger et al., 2009), and career satisfaction (Erdogan et al., 2012).

The connection between SE and LS becomes evident when considering how engagement in meaningful educational activities enhances individuals’ sense of purpose and personal growth. Numerous studies suggest that students who are actively engaged in teaching roles experience greater fulfilment and motivation, which, in turn, contribute to higher LS (Heffner & Antaramian, 2016; Renshaw & Cohen, 2014). Volunteer educators who feel valued in their roles and witness the impact of their work on students’ learning are more likely to report higher LS. This is particularly relevant in volunteer teaching contexts, where educators’ intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in sustaining engagement. However, the relationship between SE and LS is not always linear, as excessive engagement without adequate institutional support may lead to exhaustion and, ultimately, burnout.

Burnout is characterized by depersonalization, cynicism, emotional distancing from work and other people, negative self-appraisal (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 1996). It reflects a state of exhaustion described by Maslach-Pines (2005, p. 78) as “the end result of a process of attrition wherein highly motivated individuals lose their spirit”. Burnout among teachers is associated with several undesirable outcomes, such as counterproductive work behaviours, early retirement, health problems, attrition, and reduced student achievement (Brunsting et al., 2014; Lavy, 2022).

High rates of teacher burnout have been attributed to various factors, including job characteristics and challenging organizational contexts, such as heavy workload, student misbehaviour, and lack of administrative support (Chang, 2013; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Teachers’ low social status may also contribute to their emotional strain (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2019). These conditions decrease teachers’ effectiveness and prevent them from fully experiencing the life satisfaction that should accompany a meaningful career in education.

Volunteer teaching amplifies this interplay between engagement, satisfaction, and burnout because of its unique challenges. While many volunteer educators enter their roles with high intrinsic motivation and a strong sense of purpose, the emotional labour involved in working with disadvantaged students can lead to mental and emotional exhaustion (Kelly, 2023). Sustained engagement in a volunteer teaching role can be fulfilling, but when combined with a lack of pedagogical training, unclear institutional expectations, and emotional distress, it may lead to burnout rather than increased life satisfaction (Lavy, 2022; Sanz-Vergel et al., 2010).

These conceptual frameworks inform the current study’s central aim: to investigate how engagement in volunteer teaching impacts life satisfaction and burnout. By combining established constructs (SE, LS, burnout) with empirical analysis, this research seeks to uncover the emotional and professional dynamics shaping student volunteer educators’ experiences.

Research rationale

While volunteering is widely recognized for its positive effects on mental health and life satisfaction (Kelly, 2023; Metzger et al., 2024), its specific impact on pre-service teachers, particularly in relation to burnout and identity development, remains underexplored. Teaching-based volunteering involves emotional labour and pedagogical challenges that set it apart from general volunteer work (Lavy, 2022; Sanz-Vergel et al., 2010). Moreover, institutional support strategies to prevent burnout in student volunteers have received little attention (Johnston, 2023; Wondimu & Admas, 2024).

This study addresses these gaps through the lens of the Study Buddy programme. It asks: Does volunteering reduce burnout among student educators? To answer this, it addresses the following questions:

1. What sustains engagement and well-being in student volunteers?
2. How do emotional demands and workload impact burnout?
3. How does volunteer teaching shape early professional identity?
4. What institutional supports help prevent burnout?

Methods

Participants and sampling

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants from the University of Rzeszów, Poland. In Phase 1, quantitative data were collected via two online-adapted psychometric tools. Seventy-seven student volunteer teachers were invited to participate (female: 69, 89.61%; male: 8, 10.39%). The participants, aged 20–25 ($M = 22.68$, $SD = 1.6$), provided demographic details including their age, gender, and study year. The sample included 30 freshmen (38.96%), 16 sophomores (20.78%), 16 juniors (20.78%), 4 fourth-year students (5.19%), and 11 final-year students (14.29%). In the qualitative phase, interviews were conducted with six students (female: 3; male: 3).

Tools

To assess participants' burnout and engagement, the Polish adaptation of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) was used (Chirkowska-Smolak & Kleka, 2011). The tool measures two dimensions (exhaustion and disengagement), using 16 positively and negatively worded items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree). Minor wording adaptations were introduced to ensure contextual relevance to volunteer tutoring, while preserving the original construct structure of the OLBI. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89). As the OLBI includes both positively and negatively worded items, negatively keyed items were reverse-coded prior to analysis. Two subscale scores (exhaustion and disengagement) and the overall burnout index were computed as mean values in accordance with standard OLBI scoring procedures, in order to preserve the original 4-point response metric.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), adapted into Polish by Janowski (2015), was used to evaluate overall life satisfaction. It consists of five items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The internal consistency of the scale in this study was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91).

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants. The interviews were based on a custom protocol that explored motivations for volunteering, sources of satisfaction, challenges, emotional fatigue, and perceived support needs. All interviews were conducted in Polish and later translated into English by the author for analysis and reporting.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and how their data would be anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in transcripts, and identifying information was removed during the transcription process.

Data analysis

The study employed a mixed-methods design combining correlational analysis with inductive qualitative interpretation, following Pietluch and Trinder (2024), who advocate integrating statistical trends with participant narratives. This approach aligns with broader calls to balance quantitative scope and qualitative depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Johnson et al., 2007).

Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic and psychometric data. Due to non-normal distribution, Spearman's rank correlation was used to examine relationships between burnout, life satisfaction, and related variables (Field, 2013). Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Interviews (30–45 minutes) were transcribed verbatim and coded for themes such as motivation, emotional strain, satisfaction, and institutional support. Coding was reviewed collaboratively, with peer debriefing to ensure inter-coder agreement. Data saturation was achieved after six interviews. Trustworthiness was enhanced through peer review by an experienced qualitative researcher, who validated the coding and refined theme definitions.

Findings

Quantitative results

This section outlines the main quantitative results, highlighting patterns and correlations that inform the broader research question regarding volunteering and burnout.

Burnout, engagement, and life satisfaction

Students reported moderate burnout ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.17$ on a 4-point scale) and high life satisfaction ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 0.44$ on a 7-point scale), indicating that most volunteers maintained a relatively positive sense of well-being despite the emotional demands of volunteer teaching. These findings suggest that volunteering may help protect against severe burnout, although some emotional strain was evident.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the two OLBI subscales (exhaustion and disengagement), the overall burnout score, and life satisfaction. As the two instruments used different response formats, differences in score ranges reflect the measurement design rather than analytical inconsistencies.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of burnout dimensions and life satisfaction among student volunteers

Measure	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Exhaustion (OLBI, 4-point scale)	2.45	0.24	2.00	2.88
Disengagement (OLBI, 4-point scale)	2.44	0.19	2.12	2.75
Total Burnout (OLBI, mean score)	2.45	0.17	2.12	2.69
Life Satisfaction Score (SWLS, 7-point scale)	5.30	0.44	4.60	6.00

The mean exhaustion score ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.24$) indicates moderate emotional strain among participants. Similarly, the mean disengagement score ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.19$) suggests that while students experienced some emotional distance, their overall involvement in volunteering remained relatively stable. The total burnout score ($M = 2.45$) indicates moderate levels of burnout symptoms rather than severe burnout.

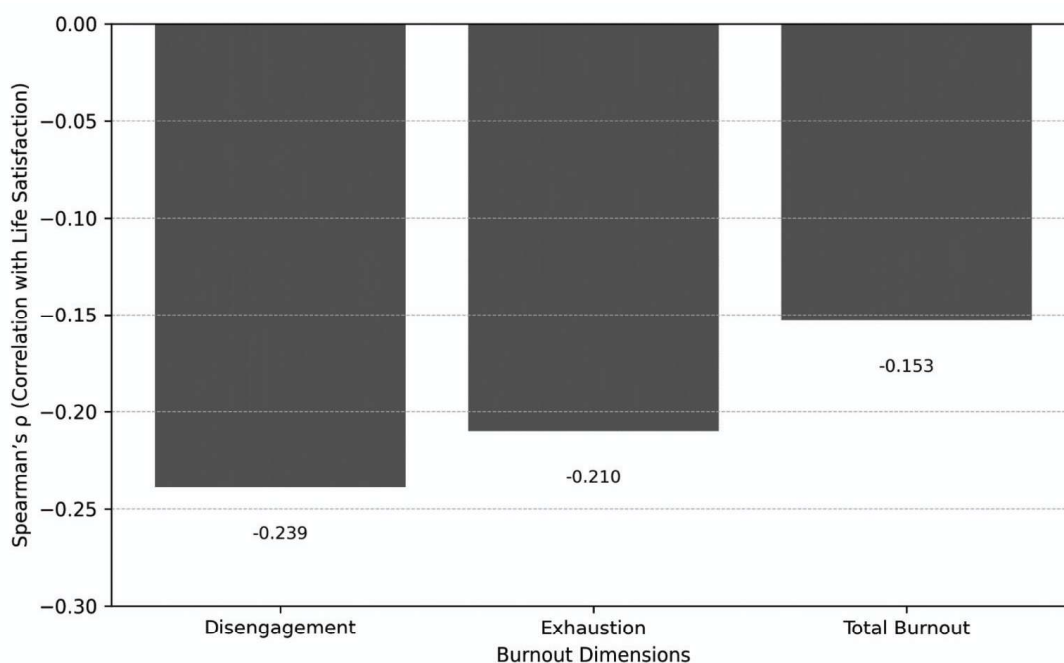
In contrast, the SWLS mean score ($M = 5.30$) remained consistently high, reinforcing the interpretation that participants experienced a generally strong sense of life satisfaction despite engaging in emotionally demanding volunteer work. The relatively low standard deviation for life satisfaction ($SD = 0.44$) indicates a fairly uniform perception of well-being across the sample.

These subscale-level results indicate a balanced pattern: student volunteers exhibited moderate burnout symptoms, particularly in the domain of emotional exhaustion, while simultaneously reporting high levels of life satisfaction, pointing to the coexistence of strain and psychological resilience within the volunteering context.

Correlation analysis

To examine the relationship between burnout and well-being, Spearman's rank-order correlations were conducted between life satisfaction (SWLS) and the two OLBI subscales (exhaustion and disengagement), as well as the overall burnout score (computed as the mean of both subscales). Spearman's rho was selected due to the non-normal distribution of the data. The results are presented graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Spearman's correlations between burnout dimensions and life satisfaction



The strongest negative correlation was found between disengagement and life satisfaction ($\rho = -0.239$, $p = .038$), indicating that students who felt emotionally disconnected from their volunteer roles tended to report lower well-being. This statistically significant result suggests that emotional engagement plays a protective role, supporting the idea that volunteering can reduce burnout when students feel meaningfully involved.

Exhaustion also showed a negative correlation with life satisfaction ($\rho = -0.210$, $p = .066$), though it did not reach conventional significance. Still, this trend is consistent with prior research linking emotional fatigue to decreased well-being (Erdogan et al., 2012; Maslach et al., 1996).

Interestingly, the total burnout score had a weaker, non-significant correlation with life satisfaction ($\rho = -0.153$, $p = .497$), possibly because combining the two subscales masks the distinct influence of disengagement.

Overall, these findings suggest that volunteering may reduce burnout, particularly in the form of disengagement, but only when emotional connection is preserved. This interpretation is echoed in the qualitative data, where students identified emotional detachment and lack of support as key stressors.

Qualitative findings

Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated themes highlighting both protective and risk factors in volunteer teaching. Developed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method, these themes capture the emotional dynamics of volunteering and its influence on student educators' resilience, motivation, and susceptibility to burnout.

Motivation and sense of purpose

Participants consistently described strong intrinsic motivation for joining the Study Buddy programme. Many were driven by a desire to help children and gain teaching experience. For example, one student said, "I just wanted to do something that mattered – to help kids who don't get as many chances." Others were influenced by university encouragement: "I joined because my lecturer mentioned it a few times in class, and it just felt right."

A shared sense of meaning and purpose emerged as a key factor in sustaining engagement and guarding against emotional exhaustion. This theme aligns with previous research showing that early teaching experiences, especially in altruistic contexts, can accelerate professional identity formation (Nickel & Crosby, 2022).

Sources of satisfaction

Volunteers often described their experiences as emotionally fulfilling, particularly when witnessing students' progress or enthusiasm. One participant pointed out: "When I see my student laugh or improve, it gives

me energy for the whole week.” Another student reflected on the value of personal connection by stating: “Knowing they’re waiting for me and that I matter to them – that’s what keeps me going.”

These experiences reflect the motivational process described in the Job Demands-Resources model offered by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), in which emotional feedback from students functions as a resource that promotes engagement and mitigates strain.

Emotional challenges and burnout symptoms

Despite positive sentiments, some participants reported signs of emotional fatigue. Students spoke of difficulty relaxing after sessions or feeling drained by stating: “There are days I feel exhausted after tutoring, especially when I still have assignments waiting for me.”

Others mentioned emotional overload from hearing children’s stories: “Sometimes their situations stay with me for days. It’s hard to switch off.”

This theme resonates with Hochschild’s (1983) concept of “emotional labour” and Maslach et al.’s (1996) model of burnout, particularly the risk of emotional exhaustion when personal boundaries are not maintained.

Institutional support and its gaps

The lack of structured support from the university or programme coordinators was a recurring theme. Students voiced a need for mentoring and emotional guidance: “We need someone to talk to – not just about teaching, but about the feelings that come with it.”

Many also felt their work was not fully recognized within their academic journey: “It felt like extra work. I wish it counted toward something official, like practicum hours.”

These perceptions support findings by Lavy (2022) and O’Donnell and Reschly (2020), who emphasize that institutional support plays a crucial role in determining whether volunteering becomes a protective or harmful experience.

Discussion

This study examined whether volunteer teaching can mitigate burnout among student educators and support the development of their professional identity. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, the findings point to a complex interplay between emotional engagement, life satisfaction, and burnout, which aligns closely with the theoretical constructs of student engagement, life satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion.

Quantitative results revealed that while average burnout levels were moderate, the dimension of disengagement was significantly and negatively correlated with life satisfaction ($\rho = -0.239$, $p = .038$). This finding underscores the protective role of emotional connection, a component of both Fredricks' (2011) framework on SE and Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) triad of vigour, dedication, and absorption. When students were meaningfully engaged in their teaching roles, they were more likely to report higher well-being, suggesting that purpose-driven service strengthens psychological resilience.

The qualitative findings reinforced this interpretation, revealing how intrinsic motivation and perceived impact on learners sustained emotional energy. This reflects Diener et al.'s (1985) conceptualization of life satisfaction as a subjective, meaning-driven evaluation of one's life. In this study, helping children and witnessing progress served as a critical source of fulfilment, positioning volunteer teaching as a potentially restorative practice, especially when integrated with positive feedback loops and personal growth.

However, not all engagement was protective. Some participants reported emotional fatigue, particularly during exam periods or when exposed to children's traumatic backgrounds, indicating the risks associated with emotional overinvolvement, a key aspect of burnout theory (Maslach et al., 1996). The presence of such symptoms echoes Pines and Aronson's (1988) view of burnout as "the attrition of spirit", highlighting how even high intrinsic motivation can deteriorate under unmanaged emotional demands.

Furthermore, the absence of institutional scaffolding, such as mentoring, emotional debriefing, and formal recognition, emerged as a critical mediating factor. This supports Lavy's (2022) argument that institutional environments either amplify or buffer burnout risk depending on the level of emotional and pedagogical support provided. In line with Sanz-Vergel et al. (2010), the study confirms that burnout in volunteer educators is not merely an individual response but a structural outcome shaped by programme design and institutional responsiveness.

As the founder of the Study Buddy programme, I acknowledge my insider positionality; therefore, reflexive practices were systematically applied during qualitative analysis, including peer debriefing, collaborative coding validation, and ongoing critical reflection to reduce interpretative bias and enhance analytical transparency.

Overall, this research contributes to an emerging understanding of volunteering as a developmental space for pre-service teachers. It positions emotionally engaged service not only as a buffer against early burnout but as a space where professional identity, emotional stamina, and vocational clarity begin to crystallize. However, it also cautions against assuming that volunteer work is inherently protective. Without adequate institutional support, meaningful engagement can tip into emotional depletion, making the difference between burnout prevention and burnout production.

Concluding remarks and limitations

To fully realize the developmental value of volunteer teaching, institutions should offer resilience and emotional literacy training, mentoring, and structured reflective supervision. Based on the interview data, a hybrid model combining peer-led reflective meetings (focused on emotional sharing and mutual support) and faculty-led supervision (focused on pedagogical guidance and boundary-setting) appears to be the most effective. Additionally, formal recognition of volunteer hours and peer support networks can further enhance volunteering's protective effects while reducing emotional fatigue.

This study has several limitations. First, the small, single-institution sample limits the generalizability of the findings, and self-reported measures may be subject to response bias. The cross-sectional design also prevents the assessment of long-term burnout trajectories and professional identity development. An additional limitation concerns the use of convenience sampling, which may introduce selection bias, as participants were recruited from one university and were already engaged in a structured volunteering initiative. Consequently, the sample may overrepresent students with higher intrinsic motivation and prosocial engagement than the broader population of pre-service teachers. Furthermore, the specific socio-cultural context of Poland should be considered when interpreting the relatively high life satisfaction scores. Engagement in community-oriented and prosocial activities within this context may be associated with enhanced perceived meaning and well-being, which could influence SWLS outcomes. Therefore, caution is warranted when generalizing the results to different cultural, institutional, or educational settings.

Future research should adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to explore how programme structures and cultural factors shape burnout, engagement, and identity. Identifying institutional best practices can support volunteer teaching as a formative professional experience.

Funding: This research was supported by the University of Rzeszów

Conflict of interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all Study Buddy volunteers who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences.

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