

Anna Malisz
ORCID: 0000-0002-3973-1009
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow

The Teacher and Contemporary Stressful Phenomena in the Workplace – the Multidimensionality of Consequences and Causes

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to show the characteristics of the phenomenon of professional stress in the teaching profession. Professional stress is a phenomenon that is gaining momentum in the modern world, along with economic, demographic or social changes. The profession of a teacher is part of a pool of professions characterized by a very high risk of stress, due to the necessity of working with other people. All the stressful factors that a teacher encounters at school undoubtedly affect their functioning, mental and physical condition and, as a result, the quality of modern education. Therefore, in my considerations I will deal with the subject of the teachers' professional stress as a still-present and growing problem, with particular emphasis on the stressful phenomena that occur in the place of employment of the main character of the article and the reasons for their occurrence. The review of the scientific literature and research reports from this area aided the illustration of a number of consequences that the stress burden in this professional group entails, not only for the teachers themselves, but also for their family, relatives, the students with whom they work, and the functioning of the institution in which they are employed.

KEYWORDS

occupational stress,
teacher, stressful
phenomena, burnout
syndrome, support
factors

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The phenomenon of professional stress in the teacher's work

Taking into account different areas of the person's functioning, professional activity is one of the main activities of their social life. Today's world is full of situations in which professional work becomes the basis of various crises both in the private and professional sphere of the people who experience them.

Pedagogic environments are the places in which the phenomenon of professional stress is increasing, and numerous economic, social, and professional changes result in the fact that such stress constantly takes new forms. Work is not only stressful for experienced employees. Those who analyse the phenomenon of professional burnout pay attention to the phenomenon of professional shock, i. e. stress that appears at the moment of starting work, when the person sees the discrepancy between what they expected and what they actually experience¹. It should be emphasized that a lot of negative consequences, both for the employee and for the institution, result from the situation in which work has a bad influence on the personal resources of the employees.

We may say that there are no jobs lacking any risk factors, in which the burnout process may be activated due to the insufficiency of personal resources. However, there is a pool of professions that are particularly threatened with stress, and teaching is one of such professions.

The beginning of the research on stress in this profession dates back to the 70s of the 20th century, when 1/3 of the teachers who participated in the research declared that they come across numerous kinds of stress while doing their job².

¹ Cf. K. Krasoń, *Kształcenie nauczycieli – pytania niechciane czy konieczne? Reinterpretacja kompetencji pedagogicznych na przykładzie poziomu edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*, in: *Edukacja jutra. Wyzwania współczesności i przyszłości*, ed. A. Kamińska, W. Łuszczuk, P. Oleśniewicz, Sosnowiec 2012, p. 170.

² Cf. Z. Marten, *Stres w pracy nauczyciela*, Sosnowiec 2007, p. 99.

Stressors in education

In 2007, Jacek Pyżalski and Piotr Plichta carried out the research in which, using different scales, they tried to diagnose the most difficult elements related to teaching, as well as their occurrence in the whole population. The cross-sectional tool used in the research was the scale: Organisational Burdens. Questionnaire of Teacher's Burdens. The tool shows to what degree the analysed teachers perceive specific features of their environment. The collected data shows that what is the most difficult for the teachers is the fact that they earn very little money as compared to the huge amount of work they perform. Other stressors included overloaded curricula and educational programs, too many students in the class, the lack of support both from the colleagues and from the directors, as well as improper working conditions. Also, teachers declared that they do not have much influence on the work of the school and important decisions made in the institution are not consulted with them³. In the further part of the article I shall try to discuss selected stressors in the teacher's work that exert a bad influence on his/her frame of mind, both in the place of work and outside.

It should be noted that what teachers find the most burdensome are the elements of their work connected with the organisation of the educational system. According to the report: "Education at a Glance" of 2017, the salaries of Polish teachers are still the lowest in the countries of OECD. Other countries with low teacher salaries include the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. What is more, the average salary of Polish teachers is lower than the average salary of people with a university degree⁴.

A limited autonomy of teachers in their places of work is another problem with which Polish teachers have to cope. Public schooling, as a part of the budget sphere, is founded on a large number of legal

³ J. Pyżalski, P. Plichta, *Kwestionariusz Obciążeń Zawodowych Pedagoga (KOZP)*. Podręcznik, Łódź 2007; J. Pyżalski, *Stresory w środowisku pracy nauczyciela*, in: *Psychospołeczne warunki pracy polskich nauczycieli. Pomędzy wypaleniem zawodowym a zaangażowaniem*, ed. J. Pyżalski, D. Merecz, Kraków 2010, p. 53.

⁴ Cf. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2017-eag-2017-en> [access: 12.09.2018].

regulations imposed both on the school and on the teacher. Frequent changes resulting from educational reforms are another element of the professional stress in this occupational group. We can look at the example of the research carried out in the 20s of the 20th century in Texas, when an educational reform came into force there. The reform was related to the creation of the standards of the teacher's work and the external evaluation of the results of his/her work. Political actions related to the teachers' work were reflected in the strong sense of insecurity and instability noted in this professional group⁵.

In many countries, the law reduces the teacher's autonomy in many different aspects, such as the individual choice of forms, contents or methods of teaching. It is related to the general unification of educational solutions and to the external evaluation of educational results. Another aspect which is strongly criticised by the teachers is the formal system of education which does not prepare them well for working at school. The teachers emphasize that they are not prepared for the fundamental activities performed in their work, such as maintaining discipline, contact with the parents, or adjusting the methods, forms and contents of the work to a particular student⁶.

Improper relations among the teachers and the lack of support from the director are other aspects mentioned by the teachers in the report on professional difficulties. According to the research, the employee's efficiency is strictly related to his/her relations with their colleagues and with their supervisor⁷.

The problem of relations among the teaching staff was discussed by Joanna M. Łukasik who analysed the teachers' everyday life. She initiated the competition entitled: "A month from the teacher's life", and she analysed letters sent to the "Gazeta Szkolna" magazine, as well as various blog comments and Internet posts. She came to the conclusion that young teachers with short working experience are

⁵ Cf. V. Brenninkmeijer, N. van Yperen, B. Buunk, *I Am Not a Better Teacher, but Others Are Doing Worse: Burnout and Perceptions of Superiority Among Teachers*, "Social Psychology of Education" 2001, no. 4, cit. after: J. Pyżalski, *Stresory w środowisku pracy nauczyciela*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁶ Cf. J. Prucha, *Pedeutologia*, in: *Pedagogika*, ed. B. Śliwerski, vol. 2: *Pedagogika wobec edukacji, polityki oświatowej i badań naukowych*, Gdańsk 2006, pp. 293–316.

⁷ Cf. E. Maslyk-Musiał, *Spoleczeństwo i organizacje*, Lublin 1999, p. 82.

very often mistreated by elder colleagues. Such situation makes it difficult for them to build good relations with other teachers. It probably results from the older teachers' fear of losing their position that had been built for many years. Dialogue is replaced by force and authoritarian commands. Older teachers often give their young colleagues extra tasks, such as preparing reports from teaching staff meetings, additional duties, or checking the students' essays, and they justify their behaviour with longer teaching experience. In the long term, such situation leads to weakening the motivation to work among young employees, the lack of trust and sense of community among the teachers, and the lack of their professional cooperation⁸.

The report from the International Research on Teaching and Studying of 2013 shows that the relations among the teachers in Polish schools are not necessarily shaped the way they should be. Although 93% school directors declare that their employees openly and freely discuss the problems they come across at school, aiming at working out common solutions, only 18% of them chose the answer: "definitely yes" in the survey. Comparing with other countries, e. g. Slovakia, it makes a 23% difference.

The report also shows that in Poland there are huge discrepancies as for the intensity of using different forms of cooperation of teachers, such as the exchange of didactic materials, watching lessons conducted by colleagues or participation in group activities aimed at professional improvement⁹.

Taking into account the stressors in the teacher's work from the perspective of his/her relation with colleagues and director, we can also mention what world analyses show – the fact that the employees of the education sector are a professional group which is particularly threatened with the phenomenon of mobbing in the place of work. The frequency of this phenomenon was also analysed in Poland. According to the research, almost 10% of the teachers (from the group of 1098 surveyed teachers) have been mistreated at school by their directors. Such mistreatment includes being given extra tasks, being

⁸ Cf. J. M. Łukasik, *Komunikacja a relacje w gronie nauczycieli. O rzeczywistości wykorzystanej z ideału*, "Debata Edukacyjna" 2011, no. 4, pp. 54–58.

⁹ Cf. *Polscy nauczyciele i dyrektorzy w Międzynarodowym Badaniu Nauczania i Ucznienia się TALIS 2013*, Warszawa 2015, pp. 50–63.

forced to perform work which is below their competences, or the director's ignorance of their views and beliefs¹⁰.

Being overloaded with work is an important stressor, which is confirmed both by Polish and foreign (e.g. Finnish or Australian) analyses. According to Finnish teachers, a large number of obligations is one of the main burdens a teacher has to cope with¹¹. Teachers in Australia say they cannot cope with all the obligations - both in terms of time and the quality of fulfilling them¹².

Polish teachers indicated the problem of increasing amounts of didactic contents which, due to time limitations, are not taught to children, as well as the fact that they have to spend a lot of time for preparing for the lessons. Especially women were worried about this, as many of them felt it was difficult to be a mother and a teacher at the same time, as a result of which they felt they did not perform either of the two roles properly¹³.

It might seem that the labour market, which is constantly undergoing transformations, tries to cope with the problems and worries of a contemporary employee. However, this impression is superficial, and the opportunity to be an employee and a family member at the same time is still very difficult for most people¹⁴.

According to the research, a teacher who is, at the same time, a wife or a mother, always bears numerous psychological costs, which affect both her family and professional sphere¹⁵. Apart from physical and psychological exhaustion, her social contacts become weakened,

¹⁰ Cf. M. Warszevska-Makuch, *Zjawisko mobbingu wśród nauczycieli*, "Bezpieczeństwo Pracy" 2008, no. 5, pp. 6–9.

¹¹ N. Santavirta, S. Solovieva, S. Theorell, *The Association Between Job Strain and Emotional Exhaustion in a Cohort of 1,028 Finnish Teachers*, „British Journal of Educational Psychology” 2007, vol. 77, no 1, cit. after: J. Pyżalski, *Skutki oddziaływania warunków pracy na polskich nauczycieli*, in: *Psychospołeczne warunki pracy polskich nauczycieli*, op. cit., p. 31.

¹² Cf. Australian Council for Educational Research, *Report on Secondary Teacher Workload Study*, 2004, <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/11853> [access: 12. 07. 2018].

¹³ Cf. F. Adamski, *Rodzina. Wymiar społeczno-kulturowy*, Kraków 2002, p. 207.

¹⁴ Cf. E. Mandal, *Kobiecość i męskość. Popularne opinie a badania naukowe*, Warszawa 2003, p. 38.

¹⁵ Cf. I. Chmura-Rutkowska, *Getto nauczycielek – w pułapce stereotypu*, in: *Płeć i rodzaj w edukacji*, ed. M. Chomczyńska-Rubacha, Łódź 2004, p. 115.

she feels guilty because of insufficient performance of her tasks, and the aspect of loyalty in the context of the fulfilment of her obligations appears¹⁶.

A woman-teacher, who works at school and performs family obligations, often lacks the partner's help, which means that she has no social support that is so important in preventing the professional burnout. At the same time, the research shows that women's involvement in the fulfilment of house obligations is thrice more intensive than men's¹⁷.

However, the main element of the teacher's work is contact with the student. There is no doubt that the way the students behave influences the psychological condition of the teacher. The fact that stress has a bad influence on the teacher's attitude was confirmed by the Polish research in which the author analysed the frequency of the teachers' reactions to negative behaviours of students against the background of the teachers' socio-demographic features. Also, the research assumed checking which of the features in question constitute an element of defence in the burnout process. The sample of more than 400 teachers whose average working experience was 14 years – apart from the trainee teachers due to their short professional experience – was subject to two-week analyses. The research indicated that the teachers mainly suffer due to those student behaviours which are of lower importance but higher frequency. Such behaviours include: being late for the lesson, cheating during tests, making noise during the lessons and breaks, and interrupting the teacher's utterance during the classes.

More serious behaviours (verbal and physical aggression, vulgar words) did not occur often during the research. However, the researchers emphasize that the duration of the research was quite short, as a result of which we cannot omit these factors or qualify them as unimportant for the development of professional stress among the teachers. As a result, the teachers who indicated relatively frequent appearance of bad behaviour among their students were ranked higher on the scales of professional burnout. Interestingly, improper

¹⁶ Cf. F. R. Elliot, *The Family: Change or Continuity?*, Basingstoke–London 1986, p. 68.

¹⁷ Cf. I. Chmura-Rutkowska, *Getto nauczycielek – w pułapce stereotypu*, op. cit., pp. 116–118.

behaviour of students was something that male – not female – teachers had to face more frequently¹⁸.

The teacher's work also includes contacts with the parents. The research shows that teachers treat it as a kind of inconvenience, which is another stressor related to their place of work. According to the teachers themselves, the necessity to contact the parents is nothing more than an obligation for them¹⁹.

The relations parents-teacher are often full of hostility, uncertainty and mistrust. There is no sense of partnership in them, and neither the teachers nor the parents are aware of the fact that their contacts are to serve the common goal – the good of the child. The teachers complain about the parents' demanding attitude and, at the same time, accuse the parents of being passive and indifferent to the school issues. As an example, the teachers show low attendance of parents in the meetings organised for them, and their unwillingness to get involved in the life of the class, e. g. participation in the so-called "class three" (three parents who are to deal with different organisational issues related to the class)²⁰.

Another research has shown that many teachers declare that after the meetings with the parents they are mentally exhausted. Also, most teachers indicated the problem of the lack of parental support in the context of the upbringing work with the child, and the fact that the parents blame them for the child's failures at school²¹.

Summary

As we can see, on the basis of the above examples, in their everyday life teachers have to face a lot of professional stressors. Their

¹⁸ Cf. M. L. Lanza, *Nurses as Patient Assault Victims: An Update, Synthesis and Recommendations*, "Archives of Psychiatric Nursing" 1992, no. 6, cit. after: M. Drabek, D. Merecz, A. Mościcka, *Mobbing w środowisku pracy. Charakterystyka zjawiska, jego konsekwencje, aspekty prawne i sposoby przeciwdziałania*, Łódź 2005, p. 11.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Żłobicki, *Rodzice i nauczyciele w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej*, Kraków 2000; M. Babiuch, *Jak pracować z rodzicami "trudnych" uczniów?*, Warszawa 2002, p. 12.

²⁰ Cf. ibidem.

²¹ Cf. J. Pyżalski, *Stresory w środowisku pracy nauczyciela*, op. cit., p. 69.

individual resources and social support are the factors that determine whether they shall manage to protect themselves against the negative results of stressful situations. Both the directors and their employees should remember that mutual kindness, respect, and support in everyday professional problems are the first preventive factors protecting them against the negative consequences of stress in the place of work. Also, each teacher should try to obtain support from people who are not connected with his/her workplace. The support from family and friends is crucial for minimizing the negative factors resulting in professional burnout.

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CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

Anna Malisz
 Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow
 Faculty of Pedagogy
 Institute of Educational Sciences
 e-mail: aniam170@gmail.com