

LABOR et EDUCATIO

nr 6/2018

RESEARCH

Ewa Smak*

ORCID 0000-0001-6469-8688

Opole University, Poland

The Professional Stress of Preschool Education Teachers

Stres zawodowy nauczycieli wychowania przedszkolnego

Introduction

The turn of the 20th and 21st centuries has become a period of drastic changes in the surrounding external world and has accelerated changes taking place in every individual. It can be said that the feature of the perception of the modern world are events that arouse emotions and imply stressful situations. It is worth adding that what is dominant in the “new world” – ambiguity, impreciseness – can cause a feeling of danger, confusion, uncertainty and, therefore, trigger multiple stress spaces, and even more so because the modern world is controlled by rival processes, antagonistic interpersonal relations causing multiplicity and complexity of the situations indicated here (Cywińska, 2017). Everyday rush, tensions, and conflicts make us live

* **EWA SMAK**, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Opole University, Poland; e-mail: smak@uni.opole.pl

in constant tension, which reduces our immunity to diseases. Therefore, it is perfectly understandable to expect to deal with stress. Stress is an “individual phenomenon, revealing different reactions of people to specific events” (Cywińska, 2017).

The profession of a teacher can and should be included in the occupations with a very high risk of health loss in both the physical and mental sense. The phenomenon of teacher stress is now becoming a social problem. There is also a growing tendency to regard teacher stress as a characteristic of that profession and not as an individual feature of a particular person.

Therefore, the problem of teachers’ professional stress was decided to be the subject of the considerations presented here, the content of which focuses on seeking answers to two basic questions. Firstly, what are the causes, symptoms, and ways to deal with stress? And, secondly, what is the level of work-related stress and circumstances conducive to experiencing school stress? Answers to those questions were sought in the results of surveys conducted in the academic year 2016/2017 among 30 full-time teachers working in kindergartens (13) in the rural and urban environment (17) in the Opolskie Voivodeship¹. Only women participated in the study (100%). The education level of the surveyed teachers is very high, as 26 (86.7%) have completed full graduate (masters) studies, and 4 (13.3%) higher professional (bachelor’s degree). In addition to high education rates, teachers also have extensive pedagogical experience. The majority of the participants have close to 30–45 years of work experience. They constitute 16 (53.4%) of the total number of participants. Eight teachers (26.6%) with seniority of 25–30 years form the second largest group. The third group (20%) are teachers with seniority oscillating around 12 years. They are relatively young, but already possessing the necessary practical competences in their profession. In order to collect the necessary diagnostic material, the inventory of occupational stress was used. It contains 30 closed questions. (Korczyński, 2011) The questions concerned teachers’ work and their reaction to possible work-related stress. A four-level scale was used to estimate the occupational stress level intensity: yes (4 points); rather yes (3 points); rather not (2 points); no (1 point). Therefore, it was considered that from 0 to 40% is a low level; 41% to 70% average; and 71%–100% high.

¹ The research was conducted by students as part of the “Diagnostic and experimental research” workshops at the Institute of Educational Studies at Opole University.

The concept of stress, its genesis and ways of coping

There are different views and criteria about stress itself. The concept of stress is difficult to define, despite the widespread use of it, both in colloquial speech and in the terminology of various scientific disciplines. These difficulties result primarily from the fact that this term reflects the issue of disciplines dealing with the individual. Therefore, the division into biological, psychological, medical, and professional stress (work-related) is often made. The first reference about the stress syndrome comes from Austrian endocrinologist Hans Selye in the article "A Syndrome Produced by Diverse Noxious Agents" (1936). The author used the term "stress" to determine the unspecific reaction of the organism resulting from the action of harmful stimuli or stressors. (Heszen-Niejodek, 2000) It is worth mentioning that the essence of Selye's concept is "a set of all non-specific physiological changes, and therefore not directly related to the nature and effect of a harmful stimulus, so-called General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)." (Terelak, 2001) It is also worth noting that Selye is credited with a significant contribution to the study of biological stress, but his definition of stress has been widely criticized due to the underestimation, in the course of the biological stress syndrome, of psychological factors and the "non-specificity" of body changes occurring as a result of stressors. In Polish psychological literature, the phenomenon of stress is widely described by Tadeusz Tomaszewski, Janusz Reykowski, Jan Strelau, Maria Tyszkowa, Józef Kozielecki, etc. Therefore, for example, Janusz Reykowski (1966) created a theory of stress based on the "regulatory role of information that comes to a human being from the environment, which remains in a different relation to his aspirations (aspiration is understood as a form of nervous processes coordination, controlling the organized course of purposeful activity) and expectations (by which he understands the organization of cognitive processes that condition anticipation of the course of events dependent or independent of the subject)" (Terelak, 2001). It is worth noting that the author combines two concepts with psychological stress: load and overload, which are extreme areas of the stress continuum. Thus, when the load is too big for an individual, it causes a normal situation to change into a stressful one. The minimum load is a "stress state," which is also a stress intensity threshold, which is different for each individual at a given time and in relation to a specific stress factor. In turn, Jan Strelau (2000) defines the concept of stress as a state "which is characterized by

strong negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, anger, hostility, as well as other emotional states that cause distress and physiological and biochemical changes associated with them, clearly exceeding the basal level of activation.” It should be emphasized that the essence of a stressful situation presented relationally are external and/or internal requirements, which are on the border of human adaptation possibilities or exceeding the mentioned limit. While studying the literature of the subject carefully, many different types of stress classification are encountered. Temporary and long-lasting stress can be distinguished. (Witkin, 2000) Temporary stress reacts to a factor that quickly passes away. An example is a noise in the middle of the night or winning the lottery. Long-term stress is associated, for example, with the fact that one is sentenced to daily contact with a person they do not tolerate. It is worth adding that the same event that will cause stress in one person will not in the other. Therefore, the same situation for some people will be very difficult, but not for others. Anticipated stress that arises as a result of anticipating unpleasant events, imagining the difficulties associated with, for example, social exposure, interpersonal relationships, thoughts about not receiving a promotion, relatives’ illness is also mentioned. Situational stress, on the other hand, reflects unexpected stimulation of the organism as a result of a superior’s reprimand, rude remarks, degrading and ridiculing comments, etc. This type of stress results from a surprising situation difficult for the individual. Expected stress, in turn, concerns situations related to waiting for results, for instance, the result of an exam, a medical examination, or the settlement of an important personal matter. (Korczyński, 2015) There is also another division between positive stress, eustress, and negative stress, distress. The first determines the stimulation of the body without which one could not achieve anything in life. The negative one blocks concentration, adversely affecting endurance and creativity. The most dangerous is chronic stress, leading to the creation of a real spiral of stress, giving the impression that one has already lost control of their own life. This stress is expressed in the long-term mental overload caused by various social situations, occurring in the family, peer, and professional environment. (Cywińska, 2017)

To sum up, it can be said that all aggravating life events are stressful, and a stress-free life is not possible. When discussing stressful situations, it is impossible not to refer to the harmful effects on our body. Currently, everyone is aware of how stress is damaging to our health. The influence of stress on our bodies is worth mentioning here. In the 1930s, Hans Selye noted the

harmful effect of stress on the body's immunity in his research. The results of more recent studies suggest that chronic stress (that is stress persisting longer than a month), more than doubles the risk of the occurrence of respiratory, cardiac, and digestive system diseases. (Witkin, 2000) It ruins the body – it can cause sleep problems, anxiety or even depression. Stress can be induced not only by negative stimuli, such as fear, overwork, worry, disease, death, but also by positive ones, like great joy or love. The issue of occupational stress needs to be discussed separately. Professional stress occurs when a superior's requirements and pressures exerted on an employee are greater than their skills, competences, and knowledge. The employee is not able to meet the expectations of the employer, which generates stress and frustration. Stress can arise in various circumstances, but the risk of its escalation is the greatest when the employee feels that they have little support from their supervisor and colleagues at work, and when they have little control over their work. The most exposed to professional stress are people working with other people, i.e. providing various types of services, such as education, health care, judiciary, social welfare, police, army, etc.

The teaching profession is very susceptible to a high stressful load. It is associated with a high risk of losing health, both in the physical and mental sense. This can be proved by statistics in the health assessment of the teaching population. So, what is stress in the teaching profession? The term "teacher stress" signifies the impact of many factors in the relationship: directorate-teacher-student-parent. It is the body's reaction to all kinds of difficulties, both at work and outside.

The beginnings of diagnostic research on teacher stress date back to the 1970s, when the results of research on professionally active teachers were taken into consideration. These studies showed that about one-third of participants experienced various work-related stress. It was a signal to address this issue in more detail. English psychologists C. Kyriacou and J. Sutcliffe, R. Otto, D. Fontan, and K. Paulinkai and others (Marten, 2007) have made an important contribution to the study of teacher stress. The classical understanding of teachers' professional stress comes from works published by C. Kyriacou and J. Sutcliff. Teacher stress is understood by the authors as "a set, a syndrome of negative emotions which is the result of the performed profession." (Marten, 2007, s.99) In Poland, research on professional stress in teachers' work was

undertaken in the 1990s. On the basis of the research results published by other authors, Maria Grzegorzewska (2003) covered these issues in five groups:

- the first group are works on defining the concept of teacher stress, which are closely related to the works on the general theory of psychological stress;
- the second group concerns the frequency and the intensity level of teacher's stress;
- the third group is devoted to symptomatology, long-term health effects and personal costs resulting from pedagogical work under conditions of chronic stress;
- the fourth thematic group concerns methods and techniques of measuring teacher stress, construction, description, and evaluation of applied research tools and attempts to their improvement in accordance with standards adopted in psychometry;
- the fifth and last area is the study of the main causes of teacher stress.

Some people think that teachers' stressors cannot become their part because they have full control over their lives and their work. In practice, however, it turns out that even those aware of the risks of stress are at risk. This is because the influence on the appearance of this syndrome is exerted by both dependent factors and those independent of the individual. In diagnosing teacher stress level, stressful situations become helpful. An important stressor is the current legal and organizational status of the Ministry of Education. Teachers often feel unappreciated, severely criticized, and complain about lack of respect and prestige. Other factors include: lack of security at work and constant responsibility for everything and everyone, that is the nervous and highly stressful nature of work, large number of classes/children in the preschool group, noise, poor cooperation with parents, school management, fatigue and responsibility, etc. At the same time, strong psychiatric stressors also include inappropriate student behavior, teacher relations full of tensions and rivalry, overloaded content and constantly modified curricula, a rigid system of teacher work requirements and assessments, school architectural deficiencies, insufficient equipment in aids and didactic means, poor functioning of the school as an organization, etc. An important stressful factor is the conflict of values. Any pressure from the management and constant stress often make teachers act in contradiction to their system of values. The necessity of

accepting orders has a discouraging and frustrating effect on the individual, especially in the case of talented and creative teachers, leading to the relatively short time of appearance of the first stress symptoms.

At this point, we do not have to convince anyone of the motivating role of the salary. Insufficient salary certainly does not arouse teachers' enthusiasm and energy to work, it does not motivate to raise qualifications, to make extra effort to better and more efficiently perform tasks. Contracts for a definite period, the risk of losing a job, freezing wages and the continuous assurance of politicians about raising teachers' salaries (which have not been implemented so far) are factors that also seriously contribute to experiencing professional stress. Also, the lack of control over performed work has a frustrating effect and discourages from demonstrating initiative. In many kindergartens, strict procedures are currently in force, which limit the freedom of teachers to make decisions and ways to perform the tasks entrusted to them to a great extent. Control and close monitoring of work results in a demonstration of distrust of teachers and, like overwork, does not trigger innovative ideas. In this case, it is difficult to meet the expectations that teachers will demonstrate creativity and innovation.

As a result of these observations, the problem of teacher stress is inextricably linked with the changes that occur in the work itself and the ways in which it is performed. It is extremely important, however, what methods are used to handle a stressful situation. The coping process refers to all activities undertaken by a human being in a stressful situation. "This way of dealing with stress is complex and dynamic, sometimes takes a long time and affects the original situation, sometimes changing it in a radical way." (Heszen-Niejodek, 2000) The earliest and easiest form of behaviour is changing the situation and alleviating its unpleasant emotional effects. There are many tips in the subject literature regarding various forms of behaviour used by people in stressful situations. For example, Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman offered different ways of behaving. They are: confrontational coping, distancing oneself, self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planned problem solving, and positive reevaluation. (Cywińska, 2017) It should be noted that the ability to tolerate stress has an individual dimension because in certain people, stress disorganizes the level of activities performed by them while in others, it increases the efficiency of their performance. Therefore, it is possible to state, with all responsibility, that people differ in resistance to

stress, which is related to certain elements of the personality of an individual shaped as a result of interaction with the environment. In conclusion, persons endowed with a strong nervous system have greater resistance to stress than those with a weak system. Some tips to prevent stress from prevailing and ruining our health: Firstly, stress cannot be avoided, that is why you should accept the situation. Awareness of the situation that occurred makes it easier to learn how to control stress. Secondly, try to recognize the stressful situation in which you do not cope well with stress. There is no universal method of controlling emotional tension, though some tips that can help in everyday coping can be given. Think positively and rationally (analyze the stressful situations that have already happened). It is worth thinking that we are ready to meet the tasks waiting for us. Thanks to this behaviour, we will eliminate the lack of self-confidence, which is often responsible for stress. It is good to practise sport because physical activity helps to eliminate some symptoms of stress (the brain oxygenates thanks to physical activity; the body is relaxed). We should cultivate family ties and friendships (the awareness of the fact that we are not alone and have support in our relatives makes it easier to cope with troubles). If the problem is beyond us, we should not be ashamed and should seek a specialist's help, a psychologist or psychotherapist.

In summary, the phenomenon of stress has become so significant that more and more attention has been devoted to it, which is reflected in numerous scientific studies and was a premise to take up this issue in the conducted research among preschool teachers. The aim of the research presented below is to diagnose circumstances leading to the occurrence of teacher stress, and to indicate, on this basis, the number of teachers struggling with professional stress.

The level and circumstances of teachers' stress occurrence

By selecting an option (yes, rather yes, rather not, or no), teachers were to determine the degree of stress associated with their work. Detailed data on the occupational stress of the examined teachers are included in the table below.

Table 1. Inventory of professional stress of preschool teachers – stress-related situations ordered by obtained %.

Specification	Yes (4 points)	Rather yes (3 points)	Rather not (2 points)	No (1 point)	“Yes” and “rather yes” responses	
					the sum	%
The work performed is the cause of many unpleasant experiences	16	13	1	0	29	96.6
The work performed negatively affects my personal/family life	15	14	1	0	29	96.6
I notice that I am becoming increasingly nervous and I reveal impatience	16	13	0	1	29	96.6
At the end of holidays, I get nervous and anxiety overwhelms me	8	16	4	2	24	80.0
It irritates me that sometimes I have to do tasks that are contrary to the values I profess	10	13	5	2	23	76.6
I feel a clear exhaustion in my professional work	13	10	6	1	23	76.6
Before entering work, I am anxious	15	7	7	1	22	73.3
I feel overwhelmed by the excess of duties I have	14	8	2	6	22	73.3
More and more often it seems to me that I cannot cope with many problems related to work	16	5	5	4	21	70.0
The work I do does not give me satisfaction	14	6	6	4	20	66.6
I am overloaded with the pace and amount of work	12	8	5	5	20	66.6
I am irritated by the lack of work security	13	7	5	5	20	66.6
I have the impression that I am less and less efficient at work	16	2	12	0	18	60.0
It is difficult for me to relax during a break at work and after finishing it	9	9	2	10	18	60.0
I have a feeling of insufficient appreciation for my own work	12	6	4	8	18	60.0

If only an opportunity arises, I make use of sick leave	10	8	10	2	18	60.0
At work, I live in constant tension	13	4	3	10	17	56.6
At work, I have no way of expressing my opinion	15	2	0	13	17	56.6
My joy of home life is decreased by the awareness of work-related problems	10	7	13	0	17	56.6
Because of work, I am often close to a breakdown	10	6	4	10	16	53.3
It's hard for me to relax after difficult work-related experiences	12	4	8	6	16	53.3
I ponder over resentment and failures at work for a long time	10	5	10	5	15	50.0
When I think what can happen at work, I lose a good mood	12	1	1	16	13	43.3
I am irritated not only by the salary but also by its discrepancies, even in comparable positions	9	4	4	13	13	43.3
I often get the impression that I cannot overcome many difficulties related to work	11	1	17	1	12	40.0
Coworkers often make me angry	10	1	1	18	11	36.6
I am often irritated by the superiors' command of unconditional obedience	2	7	9	12	9	30.0
I feel the threat of self-esteem caused by the behaviour of some workmates	0	8	0	22	8	26.6
Activities performed at work are boring and exhausting for me	0	2	14	14	2	6.6
I often feel a lack of self-confidence at work	2	0	4	24	2	6.6

The analysis of the data contained in the table shows that for 30 participants, 6 teachers can be classified as low stress, ranging from 0 to 40%; 16 average (41%–70%), and 8 high (71%–100%).

For the vast majority of teachers (29), performed work is the cause of many unpleasant experiences. This accounts for 96.6% of the total number of responses. The same number of teachers (96.6%) claim that the work done adversely affects their personal and family life. Also, 29 (96.6%) participants declare that they notice their nervousness and impatience more and more, both at work and outside, and 24 (80%) get into a state of nervousness and anxiety at the end of the holidays. The above statements are not a surprise because these responses are very similar to those found in other researchers' publications in the pedagogical and psychological literature. For the vast majority of teachers, these are stressful situations related to the workplace. This situation, in combination with other factors adversely affecting the professional work of the surveyed teachers can lead to burnout.

In second place were teachers (16), who declared the scope and type of situations most often occurring in their work at the average level. The biggest sources of stress were, among others, statements like: "More and more often it seems to me that I cannot cope with many problems related to work" (70%); "Work does not give me satisfaction" (66.6%); "I get the impression that I am less and less efficient at work" (60%); "If only an opportunity arises, I make use of sick leave" (60%); "At work I do not have the opportunity to express my opinion" (56.6%), etc.

Only a part of the surveyed population (6 teachers) declared that this occupation is only slightly stressful, justifying that opinion, among others, in the following way: bad relations between the teacher and kindergarten directorate (30%); interpersonal relations (46.6%); and lack of self-confidence (6.6%).

In conclusion, the declarations of teachers working in rural and urban kindergartens regarding the subject of stress in the teaching profession do not indicate quite a large diversity. According to the participants, the most common stressful situations are: feeling of exhaustion and frustration, nervousness, reduced professional skills, interpersonal contacts, and helplessness with which every teacher is coping today. Stress, as shown by the research, can affect any teacher, although the risk of its occurrence is particularly high because 24 participants are exposed to a high and average level. It is dangerous not only for the individual, causing devastation of personality, but also has a very negative impact on the environment, atmosphere at work and family environment.

Abstract: The teacher profession can be rated among professions with high risk of health loss both in the physical (somatic) and mental sense. This is evidenced by statistics on the health assessment of a fairly large teaching community. Numerous structural changes (educational reforms) and an increase in professional expectations towards teachers, especially preschool teachers, have caused a significant increase in the stress experienced by them. This article is devoted to the problem of stress in the professional work of a preschool teacher. The most important factors causing stress reactions, as well as pressures that are the source of stress are identified and discussed in this paper. On their basis, the level of occurrence and circumstances of experiencing school stress are determined. Thirty full-time teachers working in kindergartens in rural and urban environments in the Opolskie Voivodeship were surveyed.

Keywords: professional stress; stress level; teacher stressors

Streszczenie: Zawód nauczyciela można chyba zaliczyć do profesji o dużym ryzyku utraty zdrowia – zarówno w sensie fizycznym (sfera somatyczna), jak i psychicznym. Świadczą o tym statystyki dotyczące oceny zdrowotności dość dużej zbiorowości nauczycieli. Liczne zmiany strukturalne (reformy oświaty) oraz wzrost oczekiwań zawodowych wobec nauczycieli – zwłaszcza wychowania przedszkolnego – spowodowały wyraźne nasilenie doświadczanego przez nauczycieli stresu. Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest problemowi stresu w pracy zawodowej nauczyciela wychowania przedszkolnego. Omówiono i wyodrębniono w nim najważniejsze czynniki wywołujące reakcje stresowe, jak również zidentyfikowano presje będące źródłem stresu. Na ich podstawie określono poziom występowania oraz okoliczności przeżywania stresu szkolnego. Badaniami sondażowymi objęto 30 nauczycieli etatowych, pracujących w przedszkolach w środowisku wiejskim i miejskim na terenie województwa opolskiego.

Słowa klucz: stres zawodowy; poziom stresu; nauczycielskie stresory

References

- Cywińska, M. (2017). *Stres dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym. Objawy, przyczyny, możliwe ście przeciwdziałania*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- Grzegorzewska, M.K. (2003). *Stres w pracy nauczyciela. Kurier Pedagogiczny, (grudzień)*, Wydawnictwo Edu-Press.

- Heszen-Niejodek, I. (2000). Teoria stresu psychologicznego i radzenia sobie. In: J. Strelau (ed.), *Psychologia. Podręcznik akademicki*, T 3, Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Korczyński, S. (2011). *Diagnozowanie funkcjonowania ucznia i nauczyciela w ramach przygotowania prac dyplomowych z pedagogiki*. Wodzisław Śląski.
- Korczyński, S. (2015). *Stres w środowisku edukacyjnym młodzieży*. Warszawa: Difin.
- Marten, Z. (2007). Stres w pracy nauczyciela. *Pedagogika. Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Humanitas* 2/2007, 99–110.
- Reykowski, J. (1966). *Funkcjonowanie osobowości w warunkach stresu psychologicznego*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Strelau, J. (2000). Temperament a stres: Temperament jako czynnik moderujący stresory, stan i skutki oraz radzenie sobie ze stresem. In: I. Heszen-Niejodek, Z. Ratajczak (eds.), *Człowiek w sytuacji stresu. Problemy teoretyczne i metodologiczne*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ.
- Terelak, J.F. (2001) *Psychologia stresu*. Bydgoszcz: Oficyna Wydawnicza Branta.
- Witkin, G. (2000). *Stres dziecięcy*. Poznań: Dom wydawniczy REBIS.

Date of the submission of article to the Editor: 27.07.2018

Date of acceptance of the article: 21.12.2018