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**Primary Teachers' Perceived Stress and Indicators of Burnout during
COVID-19 Pandemic**

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Annotation: Studies conducted in various countries indicate that teachers' exposure to high levels of occupational stress makes them vulnerable to burnout syndrome. There are various sources of occupational stress in teaching profession: teaching overload and bureaucratic tasks, students' misbehaviors and lack of motivation, overpopulated classes and lack of didactic resources and materials, time pressure, lack of support from the administrative staff and from other more experienced colleagues, lack of adequate professional training, high expectations from the parents and society etc. The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically changed teachers' professional and personal lives, multiplied and amplified their sources of occupational stress, making them even more vulnerable to burnout. The perceived stress and the indicators of burnout in primary school teachers from Romania during the COVID-19 Pandemic were investigated in this study. The results were discussed in relation with those obtained in similar studies conducted in other countries and cultures.

Keywords: teacher professional stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment

**Воспринимаемый учителями начальных классов стресс и показатели
выгорания во время пандемии COVID-19**

Аннотация. Исследования, проведенные в разных странах, показывают, что подверженность учителей высокому уровню профессионального стресса делает их уязвимыми для синдрома выгорания. Существуют различные источники профессионального стресса в педагогической профессии: перегрузка преподавателя и бюрократические задачи, неправильное поведение студентов и отсутствие мотивации, перенаселенность классов и отсутствие дидактических ресурсов и материалов, нехватка времени, отсутствие поддержки со стороны административного персонала и других более опытных сотрудников. коллег, отсутствие надлежащей профессиональной подготовки, завышенные ожидания со стороны родителей и общества и т. д. Пандемия COVID-19 резко изменила профессиональную и личную жизнь учителей, усилив источники профессионального стресса, сделав педагогов более уязвимыми для выгорания. В нашем исследовании изучались воспринимаемый стресс и показатели выгорания у учителей начальных школ из Румынии во время пандемии COVID-19. Результаты обсуждались в связи с результатами, полученными в аналогичных исследованиях, проведенных в других странах и культурах.

Ключевые слова: профессиональный стресс педагога, выгорание, эмоциональное истощение, деперсонализация, редукция личных достижений.

Introduction

Research conducted in various countries in the last several decades has recognized the teaching profession as being highly stressful (Hartney, 2008). A review of the educational literature reveals that stress among teaches is a well-documented topic for more than half of a century (Smith & Milstein, 1984; Travers & Cooper, 1996). According to a number of studies, teachers experience even higher

levels of stress compared with other employees and client-related professions, such as managers, administrators, medical doctors, nurses or hospital attendants (Travers & Cooper, 1993; Smith et al., 2000; Kalyva, 2013). Studies conducted in various cultural and educational contexts present even more worrying data, indicating that teachers are frequently affected by burnout syndrome (Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011; Kalyva, 2013; Teles et al., 2020; Mota, Lopes & Oliveira, 2021; Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

Kyriacou (2001; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978), the author of an influential model of teacher stress, defined teacher stress as „a response of negative affect, such as anxiety, tension, anger or depression, usually accompanied by potentially pathogenic physiological and biochemical changes [...], resulting from aspects of the teaching job and mediated by the perception that the demands made upon the teacher constitute a threat to his self-esteem or well-being and by coping mechanisms activated to reduce the perceived threat”. The prevalence of occupational stress in teachers of all grades has been about 25% two decades ago, according to Kyriacou (2001) and it has been estimated as being higher in more recent studies (about 30% - 40%; Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011; Kalyva, 2013; Teles et al., 2020).

Burnout syndrome is an extreme consequence of occupational stress and it is usually present in professions where personal engagement with others is high, as in the teaching profession (Vukmirovic, 2020). After a review of the literature, Szigeti, Balázs, Bikfalvi and Urbán (2017) conclude that teacher burnout varies in a large domain, between 5 and 30%, but it is difficult to have a clear and global image of the phenomenon, because of the differences in conceptual models and psychometric measures researchers used in their studies. Burnout syndrome has been defined as „a state of emotional, physical and attitudinal exhaustion which a person may develop if she/he has been unsuccessful in coping effectively with stress over a long period” (Kyriacou, 2001) or „as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

D. Maslach and his colleagues (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; 1986; Maslach & Leiter, 2016) characterize the burnout syndrome using three conceptually distinct dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is the central dimension of burnout and it is manifested as the absence of enthusiasm for work, fatigue and irritability. Emotional exhaustion arises in teaching as the teacher's emotional resources are depleted and she/he feels emotionally overextended. An emotionally exhausted teacher appears less sensitive to students needs and unable to respond them with affection. Depersonalization occurs when teachers attempts to separate emotion from rational thinking, as a coping strategy, ignoring students' personal characteristics and treating them with indifference. When depersonalization is high, teachers develop uncaring and negative cynical attitudes toward their students. Reduced personal accomplishment refers to the teachers' negative evaluations of themselves and their work with the students.

The teacher burnout has considerable influence on their future work performance and creativity, career development, well-being and mental health, but also prevent the attainment of educational objectives and dramatically impacts students' learning and emotions, classroom climate and ultimately the whole educational process. A considerable number of variables may have a significant role in the development of burnout syndrome: teaching overload, too many bureaucratic tasks and additional non-educational responsibilities, curricular changes, inappropriate student behaviors and discipline problems, students' lack of motivation, inappropriate teaching logistics, overpopulated classes, lack of support and acknowledgment from leadership and colleagues, lack of authority and social status, work-life conflicts, lack of adequate professional training, pressure from society and parents, individual competencies and abilities, personality traits, coping strategies etc (Yong & Yue, 2007; Kalyva, 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Mota, Lopes & Oliveira, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically changed teachers' and students' professional and personal lives. In March 2020, traditional face-to-face instruction

has been replaced by on-line and blended teaching and learning. During the years 2020 and 2021, socially distanced classrooms, hybrid teaching and on-line instruction were alternatively adopted. Teachers faced with new roles and responsibilities, new requirements for instruction and new classroom environment (Parsley, 2021). They had to learn new on-line instruction pedagogy and new digital learning platforms, and became the main resource of technical and emotional support for the students and their families. In the last year, teachers had to spontaneously switch between face-to-face learning and on-line learning many times, they had to modify the teaching strategies, methods and materials, and their daily work routines were completely changed. A considerable number of teachers had limited experience in digital learning environments and, in rural and isolated schools, students faced additional difficulties (lack of appropriated digital learning technologies, inadequate learning spaces etc). At the same time, teachers and students were deprived of social support and social relations.

Aim and rationale of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived stress and the indicators of burnout in primary school teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study was conducted on primary school teachers because this professional group was considered more vulnerable. On the one hand, the increased needs of the young children of support in learning, in the use of learning materials and on-line instruction technologies are increased, increasing the teachers' work overload. On the other hand, young children have accentuated needs of social interactions and emotional support, and their abilities of behavioral management and self-directed learning are developing, making the teachers' remotely work more difficult.

Participants

100 primary school teachers who had professional activity during the school year 2020-2021 were included in this study. The selection of participants was made on a voluntary basis and they responded anonymously to an on-line questionnaire. Table 1 presents the distribution of the subjects in the study sample according to

demographic variables (sex, age, studies, years of experience in the teaching profession and school location).

Table 1.

Distribution of the sample by demographic variables

	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	3 (these chestionnaire were excluded from the analysis) N = 101	100.0
Female		
Age		
< 30	18	17.8
30 - 40	28	27.7
41 - 50	33	32.7
51 - 60	20	19.8
> 60	2	2.0
Studies		
Pedagogical High School	5	5.0
BSc	45	44.6
MSc	51	50.5
Years of experience in the teaching profession		
< 10	37	36.6
21 - 20	21	20.8
> 20	43	42.6
School location		
Rural	32	31.7

Urban	69	68.3
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Instruments

The instruments used in the study were an adapted form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, 1981; Maslach & Jackson, 1986) and a single item measure of teacher perceived stress (Kyriacou, 2001). Several sociodemographic questions were added to these instruments, investigating sex, age, studies, years of experience in the teaching profession of the respondent and school location (Table 1).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a 22-item questionnaire, divided into three subscales: (1) Emotional Exhaustion (EE—9 items), Depersonalization (DP—5 items) and Personal Accomplishment (PA—8 items). Responses to the items are on a 7-point Likert scale, with 0 = “never”, 1 = “a few times a year or less”, 2 = “once a month or less”, 3 = “a few times a month”, 4 = “once a week”, 5 = “a few times a week” and 6 = “every day”.

The single-item measure of teacher stress consists in one question (“In general, how stressful do you find being a teacher?”) and asks teachers to rate their overall stress on a 5-points scale (labelled „not at all stressful”, „mildly stressful”, „moderately stressful”, „very stressful” or „extremely stressful”).

Results and Discussions

The teacher profession has been evaluated as „very stressful” by 15.8% of the participants and „extremely stressful” by 11.9%. By contrast, 14.9% of the respondents appreciated that their profession is „not at all stressful” and for 23.8 it is „mildly stressful”. One third of the teachers included in the study sample appreciated their profession as „moderately stressful” (33.7%).

On the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), 14.3% of the participants recorded high scores on the Emotional Exhaustion Scale (EE>26), 23.4% recorded high scores on the Depersonalization Scale (DP>9) and 9.3% recorded low scores on the Personal Accomplishment Scale (PA<33) (reference values from Schaufeli, Hoogduin, K., et al., 2001; Dyrbye, West & Shanafelt, 2009). These values are similar with those

indicated in studies conducted before the COVID-19 crisis (Szigeti, Balázs, Bikfalvi & Urbán, 2017; Vukmirovic, 2020).

The effect of demographic variables on the teacher occupational stress and burnout has been analyzed. The independent samples t-test indicated significant differences in perceived stress and burnout dimensions depending on teacher's experience in the profession, although the effect sizes were small. When teachers with less than 10 years of experience in profession were compared with those with 10-20 years of experience, significant differences in occupational stress, $t(56)=1.782$, $p<0.04$ and significant differences in the Personal Accomplishment (PA) Scale of the Maslach Burnout Questionnaire (MBI), $t(56)=1.522$, $p<0.06$ were obtained. When teachers with more than 20 years of experience in profession were compared with those with 10-20 years of experience, significant differences in occupational stress $t(62)=1.683$, $p<0.049$ and significant differences in the Emotional Exhaustion (EE) $t(62)=1.649$, $p<0.052$ and the Depersonalization (DP) $t(62)=1.882$, $p<0.032$ Scales of the Maslach Burnout Questionnaire (MBI) were obtained. In other words, the young teachers and highly experienced teachers are more vulnerable to occupational stress and burnout. Specifically, in terms of burnout dimensions, the teachers who are at the beginning of their career are more vulnerable to low personal accomplishment, feeling insecure about their skills and competencies, and the highly experienced teachers are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

The independent samples t-test also indicated significant differences in perceived stress and burnout dimensions depending on teacher's level of education. When teachers with BSc were compared with teachers with MSc, significant differences in occupational stress $t(94)=3.078$, $p<0.001$ and significant differences in the Emotional Exhaustion (EE) $t(94)=1.511$, $p < 0.067$ and the the Personal Accomplishment (PA) $t(94)=1.321$, $p<0.095$ Scales of the Maslach Burnout Questionnaire (MBI) were obtained. The number of teachers who finished only Pedagogical High School was too small to be taken into account ($n=5$). Specifically, the teachers with a higher level of education or professional training were less

vulnerable to occupational stress, emotional exhaustion and low personal accomplishment. These results suggest that an increased level of professional training could be a protective factor against occupational stress and burnout. No significant differences generated by the school location (rural vs. urban) were observed.

Conclusions

The present data confirm once again that teaching profession is a highly stressful one and teachers are vulnerable to various forms of burnout, with a potentially negative impact on their personal and professional lives and on students' lives and well-being as well (e.g. Travers & Cooper, 1996, Kyriacou, 2001; Teles et al., 2020). In these difficult times, dedicated training and support programs for this vulnerable professional category are necessary. Teachers at the beginning of their career seems to be particularly vulnerable to professional stress and low personal accomplishment and the highly experienced teachers seems to be more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. No significant differences in terms of teacher professional stress and burnout were observed between rural and urban areas. Along with technical, pedagogical, psychological and community support, an increased level of professional training could be a protective factor against occupational stress and burnout.

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