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The Problem of Professional burnout of Post-primary School Teachers on the Basis of a Study of Teachers from West Pomerania Province

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Abstract

Professional burnout syndrome is undoubtedly another civilisation disease that affects modern societies. In May 2021 professional burnout was included within the list of the WHO International Classification of Diseases, however, not as a disease, but as an occupational syndrome significantly affecting health of an employee. However, it is worth noting that it is only from 2022 that professional burnout will have become a disease which will need to be treated. The research presented below shows that there are many factors which cause this new disease, and stress is among the main ones.

Working as a teacher, which is considered one of the professions of supportive nature, means being exposed to various stress factors. One of the most dangerous effects is professional burnout which can lead, among others, to many health disorders, subjective treatment of students, and ultimately, make teachers resign from their job.

Keywords: professional burnout, teacher, stress

Introduction

The problem of stress and professional burnout have been addressed in psychological literature for several decades. It affects employees in various professional fields, but most often, as research indicates, groups working in the so-called assistance segment, devoting themselves to other people at work. In the group studied below and presented, the following elements were analysed: health, psychosocial and socio-demographic elements which affect professional burnout of teachers. The study shows the following predictors of professional burnout and its components: psychophysical exhaustion, lack of commitment to relationships with students, and a sense of professional ineffectiveness and dis-

appointment in relation to post-primary school teachers from West Pomerania Province. The main predictors of professional burnout turned out to be socio-organizational factors as well as stress and emotions experienced in everyday life. The aim of this study was primarily to identify health and psychosocial factors and their influence on the occurrence of professional burnout.

Methodology and the subject matter of the study

It should be assumed that the problem of professional burnout is a widely known and phenomenon experienced by many teachers. A lot of studies conducted all over the world indicate that the problem of professional burnout affects both young, still inexperienced employees and the oldest ones with the greatest professional experience. Professional burnout has negative consequences for an employee and also an employer. A group particularly vulnerable to professional burnout are so-called “supportive professions”, which include teachers. Therefore, it is essential to minimise negative effects of this phenomenon and it seems that it is possible by finding predictors of the phenomenon and getting to know mechanisms for dealing with professional burnout.

In order to achieve the assumed aim, the diagnostic survey method was used, which was realised by means of the questionnaire technique. The questionnaire consisted of 17 closed questions. It contained, among others, questions concerning: age, place of residence, professional career (seniority in teaching, a degree of professional promotion, reasons for choosing the profession, taking satisfaction in the job, a system of work, working overtime, attitude to the job), self-assessment of the level of stress and emotions experienced at work, influence of professional problems on families and social life of the respondents, physical symptoms associated with stress.

The study also made use of Christina Maslach’s professional burnout questionnaire (Maslach Burnout Inventory – MBI), which contained 22 questions in the first part and 2 questions in the second part. This tool allowed to obtain empirical data with regard to three aspects of professional burnout: emotional exhaustion (EW), depersonalization (DP) and decreased satisfaction with personal achievements (ZO). Then, the BDI (Beck’s Depression Inventory) included in the study, was used as a screening tool (it is also commonly referred to as a “depression test”) to assess depressive symptoms which could be found in adults and youth. Thus, the questionnaire ultimately consisted of 21 items.

Having the research tool constructed, the research was conducted at the turn of the year 2019/2020. The health, psychosocial and socio-demographic factors which condition professional burnout of post-primary school teachers in West Pomerania Province were analysed. The survey covered 763 teaching staff (i.e. more than 60% of the teachers) from 25 post-primary schools in West Pomerania Province, i.e. one school from each district and five schools from the city of

Szczecin alone. A complete set of data was obtained from questionnaires completed by 370 respondents who expressed their willingness to participate in the study. Incomplete questionnaires were not included in the analysis due to the impossibility of calculating the necessary indicators of professional burnout and the intensity of depression symptoms.

Within the analysed group of teachers (N = 370), the majority were women (N = 261; 70.54%), living in a city (N = 308; 83.24%). The largest group were teachers with the highest level of professional career, i.e. with a professional degree of a certified teacher (N = 229; 61.89%), and to a lesser extent, there were appointed teachers (N = 93; 25.14%) and contract teachers (N = 37; 10.00%). The least proportion of the respondents were trainee teachers (N = 11; 2.97%). The average age of the analysed group of teachers was 47.46 years. The youngest respondent was 23 years old and the oldest – 73 years old. The average seniority of the analysed group was 22.17 years, while the shortest was 1 year and the longest was 49 years.

Statistical analysis used in the research project is as follows:

- Descriptive statistics (for quantitative variables the average and the standard deviation were determined. In addition, skewness was also taken into consideration as a measure of symmetry of distribution of a variable);
- Statistical inference (tests: Shapiro-Wilk), while for qualitative variables a measure of structure (frequency) was determined. The analysis of the relationship between two metric variables was performed by determining the correlation coefficient r-Pearson or Spearman's rank (rho), and for variables expressed on an ordinal scale – the Goodman-Kruskal γ coefficient;

Analysis of the research results

The problem of stress and professional burnout have been addressed in psychological literature since the 1970s. The term “burnout” captures the essence of the exhaustion experienced by an individual as a result of highly stressful working conditions. It was introduced in the early 1970s in America – simultaneously and independently of each other – by a psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger and a social psychologist Christina Maslach. Freudenberger was the first to describe the burnout syndrome in 1974. Working in the New York City in a juvenile detention centre for drug addicts with a group of volunteers recruited from young Americans, he could observe a gradual loss of energy, motivation and commitment to their charitable activities in many of them and a number of psychosomatic symptoms due to this. Freudenberger worked at the centre for a year and that led to apparent exhaustion of his strength, which he termed “burnout” (Freudenberger, 1974, p. 159–165).

The phenomenon of professional burnout has been brought to light by Maslach in a slightly different way. With her colleagues at University of California, Berkeley, conducting an extensive research with regard to people working in stressful professions (including social workers, psychiatric nurses, lawyers providing advice and legal assistance to poor people, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and prison staff), she tried to determine how they deal with emotional strain experienced at work. She was interested in the type of techniques they use to effectively distance themselves from the problems of their clients or patients and what their personal and social consequences of using such techniques are. The data collected during the research indicated that many of them – when analysing their own professional experiences – spoke of emotional exhaustion and atrophy of emotionality, a negative change in perception and an increase in inappropriate behaviour towards patients, as well as manifestations of a crisis of professional competence as a result of emotional strains. One of the lawyers during the research called this peculiar phenomenon “burnout” and this term was accepted by the team and then – not without difficulty – introduced into the psychological literature (Maslach, 1993, p. 19–32).

Although the causes of professional burnout are related to the nature of a job, employees are often blamed for professional burnout which they experience. This attitude of employers results in inadequate preventive measures against professional burnout. Moreover, the corrective actions initiated in a situation of a crisis and intensification of a professional burnout process are rather aimed at strengthening individual ways of dealing with the problem, without trying to change the reasons of the burnout. As a result, professional burnout affects the most committed employees and has a number of negative consequences in their lives, the institution they work in and the service recipients. Although several decades have passed since then, professional burnout is still a sensitive matter. It is worth noting that when considering the phenomenon of professional burnout from the perspective of a professional group, each professional group strives for balance in order to offset and counteract the risks (Wos, 2018, p. 136).

The analysis of the literature shows that there is still too little research on professional burnout of teachers in Poland and all around the world. Therefore, this was one of the reasons for conducting this study. Teachers, by virtue of their education and profession, may be perceived as those who can deal with professional burnout on their own or even prevent it altogether, however, the research shows that support is necessary. These analyses seem to be important also from a social point of view, because the way in which a teacher deals with their professional burnout affects quality of their work and also support given to their students. Professional burnout, also called emotional burnout, is a state of physi-

cal, mental and emotional exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in emotionally demanding situations (Şek, 2004, p. 149–167).

Taking that into consideration, it should be noted that the average total score of professional burnout of the analysed group of teachers was 5.64 – so the professional burnout syndrome was not high and did not have a negative effect, either individually or collectively. Also the phenomenon of depersonalisation in the studied group occurred to a very low degree. Despite positive results of the research over professional burnout, many of the teachers surveyed felt stressed, overburdened with duties and overworked in their daily work.

According to the obtained results of the research, an important element that may favour the phenomenon of professional burnout is an excessive burden of duties. More than half of the respondents (N = 190; 51.35%) spent more than two hours each day performing professional activities at home. Moreover, as many as 169 respondents (45.68%) permanently exceeded their contractual/full-time working hours. Such heavy workload was reflected in neglecting activities which were considered important to reduce stress and allow them to rest and relax. Most of the respondents indicated that work contributed to negligence of activities such as meeting friends (92.70%), physical activity (92.16%), or recreational outings with family (90.81%).

The first stage of professional burnout is a warning stage described as emotional exhaustion. It is manifested by disaffection to work, decreasing interest in professional matters, reduced activity, boredom, discouragement, pessimism, irritation, constant psychophysical tension, irritability. The results obtained are in line with the research of Maslach (Schaufeli, Enzmann, Girault, 1993, p. 199–215), there are also somatic changes such as: chronic fatigue, migraine headaches, insomnia, gastric disorders, frequent cold symptoms, etc. Representative symptoms at this stage are: outbursts of irritation, contemptuous reference to others, deterioration in the quality of task performance. According to the author, intervention at this stage requires rest longer than just a few days. Therefore, the interviewed teachers should consider taking a leave of absence to improve their health and to concentrate on something else than work.

According to the literature dealing with the problem, the second stage of professional burnout occurs when the indicated symptoms last longer. Maslach defines this stage as depersonalisation. It is connected with indifference and distancing oneself from other people's problems, superficiality, shortening and formalisation of contacts, cynicism, blaming others for one's own failures at work. Depersonalization, or dehumanization, or objectification, is an attempt to increase psychological distance from the person with whom one works. It can therefore be a conscious or unconscious form of protecting oneself from further exploitation of already severely depleted emotional resources. The third stage of

professional burnout occurs when symptoms become chronic, physical, psychological and psychosomatic symptoms develop. It is representative for the professional burnout syndrome, the symptoms of which are not only connected with the psychic sphere of human functioning. Not only emotional and cognitive processes or personality structures are at risk. The symptoms of the professional burnout syndrome also appear in the somatic sphere and affect the physical functioning of a person. The typical symptoms of this stage include: stomach ulcers, hypertension, depressive attacks, feeling of loneliness and alienation. There are also other crises (in a family, in a marriage, among friends) which are not directly related to work. This situation causes that apart from the person affected by professional burnout its effects are also felt by family members, friends, co-workers (Banka, 2000, p. 321–350).

The study group did not confirm high levels of depression that had negative consequences on an individual or a group collectively. The largest group among the respondents were those without symptoms of depression (N = 295; 79.73%). There were far fewer individuals with mild depression (N = 69; 18.65%) and moderate depression (N = 6; 1.62%). The collected results did not confirm the case with severe form of depression. It is worth noting that Mental Health is considered an important component of health over the course of a person's life. It does not focus only on mental health problems (including mental illness), but also concerns positive aspects of it. This is because the ability of a person to function properly in the emotional, cognitive, and social spheres is a prerequisite for good health and well-being. Considering this information with regard to the obtained results of the study, in the assessment of overall job satisfaction, the respondents indicated that they are generally satisfied with their teaching job (N = 246; 66.49%) and that their job constitutes fulfillment of their professional ambitions (N = 251; 67.84). This is a good sign because, as the literature indicates, this is one of the symptoms of long-term stress and depression.

According to 42.97% of the respondents (N = 159), work-related stress is experienced every day. The respondents most frequently felt fatigue, as well as irritability and bad mood. The least common symptom according to the respondents was lack of appetite (N = 218; 58.92%). According to the general view of scientists, the body's defense response to stress is an increased secretion of those hormones which speed up metabolism. The absorption of nutrients from food is reduced, and the organs then use more energy, often resulting in sudden weight loss. No such phenomenon was observed in the group of the teachers surveyed. The presented conclusions are consistent with the approach presented by Helena Şek, who believes that professional burnout does not always develop at work in unfavourable conditions and thus "is not so much a direct result of chronic stress as of stress unmodified by one's own remedial activity" (Şek, 2011, p. 87–113).

It is worth emphasizing that teaching profession is determined by the need of constant emotional commitment. It requires a broad knowledge of the subject matter supported by high methodical qualifications. Also, it is expected to have the ability to assess situations fairly and reliably, establishing good rapport with parents and students, encouraging the latter to work, as well as giving them a good example. In the surveyed group, only in 9 cases (2.43%) it was indicated that no stress is felt at work, which is a truly small percentage of respondents. Nearly half of the respondents among the stress factors, most often indicated lack of support from their supervisor in solving problems and bullying in the workplace.

Analysis of the correlation between age together with the length of seniority of a career and the level of professional burnout in the study group indicated that there was no statistically significant correlation between the studied variables (overall professional burnout of the respondents index r -Pearson/ relative to their age = 0.050, seniority = 0.020). The surveyed teachers in 20% described their professional stress as really severe or extreme. For 37.7% of the teachers, stress was within the average range, 37.7% had a below average score, and 4.7% of the teachers experienced no professional stress. The study did not indicate clear trends in the differentiation of the level of perceived stress according to gender, age, or seniority, but we can venture to say that certain patterns indicate that stress is more frequent in teachers under the age of thirty and with the least seniority (Siwiolek, 2015, p. 125–145).

In the course of research on professional burnout of teachers many researchers have found that the oldest teachers (over 50 years old) and the youngest (up to 30 years old) have the highest rates of professional burnout (Pyżalski, 2002, p. 497–498). As far as seniority is concerned, it was found that both the shortest (Strykowska, Trzeciakowska, 1994, p. 387–393) and the longest seniority are prone to professional burnout of educators (Pyżalski, 2002, p. 497–498). The relationship between age and professional burnout is quite weak, and the direction of the relationship varies depending on which of the dimensions of professional burnout they relate to – disappointment increases with age, while the sense of lack of professional effectiveness and psychophysical exhaustion decreases; however, these relationships are revealed only in some professional groups (Borgogni, Consiglio, 2005, p. 23–57).

The correlation between professional burnout of teachers and the place of residence of the study group appeared not to differentiate professional burnout and its components. City ($N = 308$ /general professional burnout index = 5.72, Rural ($M = 62$ /general professional burnout index = 5.26). The results obtained in the study group are consistent with the previous research results presented in the literature. This is exemplified by Debska, who studied professional burnout

of medical workers. Together with her colleagues in their study, she indicated that in a small town and rural environments, individuals are supported by generational ties that reduce exposure to the occurrence of professional burnout (Debska, Cepuch, 2008, p. 273–279).

Working at home and working overtime also affect teachers' situation on professional burnout. In the society there is a commonly repeated opinion that teachers are the professional group which works the shortest time. According to the law, the number of hours of a teacher working in a Polish school is 18 teaching hours (depending on a position). However, studies in literature indicate that Polish teachers work much more than stipulated by the Teacher's Charter. The basic number of teaching hours (direct work with students), which is included in the research project reported here, was 18 teaching hours a week (plus one hour of additional classes). The research in literature indicates that teaching load of Polish teachers should be considered moderately high. However, there is little reliable information on the actual use of remaining hours (there is a 40-hour working week in accordance with the Teacher's Charter), which are at the disposal of a headmaster and serve such tasks as: preparation for classes, meetings with parents, administrative activities. The results of comparative studies conducted by J. Pyżalski (although on a small unrepresentative group of teachers) suggest that the total working time of Polish teachers compared to some other selected European countries is high and close to the official 40-hour working week. According to his research, working time of Polish teacher does not differ from the working time of most other professional groups, which may be a significant risk factor as far as qualitatively different workloads are concerned (Pyżalski, 2002, p. 497–498). It is worth noting that the measuring real time is not a simple matter. As indicated by some research projects, results obtained within such projects depend on the method used to collect data (e.g. an interview or a survey). Someone focused only on teaching hours might conclude that there is no question of work overload in case of Polish teachers. However, such a view is ill-informed as in reality, duties of teachers go far beyond teaching and include preparatory, administrative and educational tasks. In addition, it happens that some of these tasks, at least administrative ones, are accumulated at certain times, e.g. during exams or at the end of a term or a school year.

In the literature, some studies can be found which say that teachers who work in their profession by vocation, those who care about passing on knowledge and are committed to their work most often suffer from the professional burnout syndrome. Job satisfaction is one of the most frequently described and researched problems by both economic and social sciences. It has become a common belief that taking care of job satisfaction of employees brings tangible benefits to an organization. Leadership motivation may be related to professional burnout it particularly concerns depersonalization or lack of commitment to

relationships, which are manifested by negative or indifferent attitudes towards other people. Teachers are a professional group which is constantly improving their professional qualifications, they take a great number of courses and training courses. In this profession people care about the level of their expertise, and the knowledge they gain contributes to a higher level of teaching, increasing effects of education, and ultimately, this leads to a sense of professional fulfillment, which was proven in this research. According to the definition of Maslach (Maslach, Leiter, 2011), the third dimension of professional burnout, i.e. a feeling of lack of professional satisfaction, does not occur in most of the teachers, which was also demonstrated in the results of this study. Thus, high professional engagement and high emotionality towards work increase a sense of self-satisfaction and its level. Zahorska and Walczak (Zahorska, Walczak, Walczak) provide interesting data which allows deeper interpretation of the results indicating that despite the occurring health problems, most teachers would choose the same profession again (Zahorska, Walczak, 2009; Seidman, Zager, 1991, p. 205–216).

In the study group, the level of financial satisfaction of teachers is not satisfactory. More than 86% of the respondents (N = 321) indicated that their salary is not adequate for the work they do. Only 12.70% of the respondents (N = 47) indicated that their salary is adequate for the type of work they do. Also, in terms of the importance of the financial component as to an overall sense of satisfaction with the job, more than half of the respondents indicated that it is important to them (N = 202, 54.59%).

The problem of remuneration in this occupational group has been recognized for many years. In 1996 Sęk (2011, p. 87–113) studied a subjective feeling of occupational stress burden in 119 teachers. In the conclusions of this study we can find out that the highest level of stress was felt by teachers due to inadequate salaries and low social prestige of their profession. There is no doubt that the salary and working hours of teachers arouse emotions not only in this professional group itself, but also in the public opinion. Teachers claim that their salaries are still insufficient in relation to the workload and the constant requirement for further education. Unfortunately, they are confronted with a rather critical social opinion, especially in the context of a low salary, number of free days, long holidays and other professional privileges. It is worth noting that these privileges are of a provisional nature, since working time of teachers (as the respondents themselves demonstrated) often exceeds the one indicated in the Teacher's Charter. The dissonance between teachers' involvement in the process of education and upbringing and remuneration they receive and the public opinion may be a stress factor leading to professional burnout.

In conclusion, in the conducted research the overall index of professional burnout was close to zero, with a very low level of depersonalization, and a very

low level of emotional exhaustion. Satisfaction with the profession was at a higher level than other results, but the level of financial satisfaction of the surveyed teachers was not satisfactory and affected the perception of symptoms of professional burnout. With regard to the presented results it should be remembered that professional burnout can be said to occur when an individual engaged in a particular undertaking experiences a feeling of exhaustion at the psychological, emotional and physical level and loses motivation to act. Nowadays, it is recognized that all professionally active people, regardless of their occupation and a place of work, may experience the professional burnout syndrome themselves. However, the most vulnerable group of people includes those whose work requires deep personal involvement and cooperation with others. The source of professional burnout can be too strong commitment to a job, which is also often observed in young people (Plichta, 2015, p. 93). Research shows that professional burnout can be accompanied by the appearance of symptoms of a value crisis, failure to realize important values in life activities, and a decrease in the meaning of life. The mentioned processes may develop in parallel. Professional burnout causes a decrease in the meaning in life and a person with such reduced meaning of life works worse, experiencing even greater professional burnout as a result (Kędracka, 1999). Professional burnout among teachers is a significant social and pedagogical problem because, as school employees, they are primarily predisposed to support parents in raising their children (Woś, 2020, p. 74), requiring ongoing research, understanding, and support.

In the context of the conducted and presented research, it is also important to pay attention to the situation of teachers after the lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon returning to schools, teachers will not only have to switch from remote teaching, but also face new problems which their students will bring to schools when they come back. Will teachers once again get out of the usual patterns and start, through planned and well-thought-out actions, working from the ground up to rebuild the expected attitudes among their students which will contribute to their proper functioning in small and large groups in the near future? Everyone is convinced that they will. But won't they be professionally burned out after the pandemic too? (Woś, 2021, p. 167–168).

Results

1. Teachers as a professional group are particularly exposed to stress due to the supportive nature of their profession.
2. The research has shown that the professional burnout rate of the teachers was at a low level and their satisfaction with the chosen profession was at a high level.
3. The important element which may contribute to the phenomenon of professional burnout is excessive workload. It has been shown that there is a correlation between doing professional work at home and neglecting other activities.

4. The most common symptoms of overwork among teachers are fatigue, irritability and bad mood.

5. The correlation between emotions experienced at work and the level of professional burnout was found, with nervousness and fear being the most frequently indicated emotions.

6. There was no correlation between professional burnout and sociodemographic factors with regard to teachers or the presence of depressive symptoms.

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