Study on the Sources of Stress in the School Organization

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Abstract

Very often called “disease of the century”, stress, whose consequences upon individual life are serious, chiefly affects the professional categories in which interpersonal relations are important, teachers being included herein. The studies show that stress affects not only the physical body, generating professional diseases, but also job satisfaction and the individual well-being within the organization. Undoubtedly, in the school organization, stress represents a complex theme to be analysed and investigated in order to identify the generating causes/sources and the possible directions of intervention in order to ameliorate/diminish their effects upon the individual. Occupational stress is both the cause and effect of professional diseases. Among the factors which affect teacher’s health, we can mention overstress of the nervous system, disappointment, frustration, job insecurity, economic and political decisions, poor status, etc. The impact of professional diseases upon teachers determines routine, lack of initiative, absenteeism, depression, stress and eventually abandon. (Report CE, 2000). The present study proposes to identify the sources of stress perceived by teachers in the school organization. The study has been performed on a sample of 54 teachers, having a didactic experience between 5 and 40 years. The results obtained had been analysed through personal variables such as sex, age, levels of education, didactic experience and types of school, which play an important role in the perception of the different stress sources connected to the didactic profession.

Keywords: occupational stress, stress sources, stress effects, teacher, school organization.

1. Theoretical consideration upon occupational stress at teachers

One of the problems the individual faces in the modern society refers to the modality of adapting successfully to the demands of the social life. Rapid changes generated by the social development determine instabilities between the demands of the external environment and the individual response on a smaller scale or in a big way. This imbalance can have perceived, current or for the most part combined causes (Fimian,

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Present studies on stress are directed not only towards physiological, cognitive and emotional reactions of the individual, but also towards individual adaptation sources and stress management (Sava, 2004). The specialty literature of the last two decades indicates the fact that high levels of stress are associated to psychological distress but can be mediated through different coping mechanisms and personality traits (Chan, 1998). Thus, low active coping abilities or passive adaptation strategies generate negative emotional reactions and breakdown.

Stress is defined by Kyriacou (2001) as an emotional unpleasant condition, full of tension, frustration, anxiety and emotional exhaustion, while HSF (2004) defines stress as excessive pressure or demand of the environment which threatens the well-being of a person; this implies a reaction which includes physiological, emotional and behavioural responses underlining the idea that stress is necessary and beneficial to some extent.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as the cognitive and behavioral effort to control and tolerate external or internal demands that go beyond personal resources. Lazarus (1999) considers that stress is a relation between the individual and the environment which appears when the person considers that the evaluated situation exceeds his adaptive responses.

The approach of the stress issue becomes not only a “fashionable” topic, but also a necessity especially at the practical, interventional level. Stress affects all the levels of an individual’s life – from the personal and social life, to the professional one, sometimes generating dramatic consequences for the mental health.

Occupational stress is generated by the socio-professional life of an individual and by the environment where he develops his professional life (Pitariu, 1996; Pitariu, Miclea & Munteanu 1987; Brate, 1996, 2003). Occupational stress is generally defined as a multidimensional and multi-causal phenomenon reflected in the psycho-physiological responses of the individual in a certain work situation, manifested through the imbalance between the demands imposed by work and the individual’s objective or subjective capacity to cope with these.

Fontana (1989) asserts that occupational stress appears when demands of the work place are concurrent. Also, occupational stress occurs when there is a poor person-environment fit, in that job related factors interact with the worker to change their psychological or physiological condition so that they deviate from normal functioning.

Teachers as any other socio-professional categories are affected by what the specialty literature calls the disease of the century-stress. This acquires specific significances in the educational environment. Specialty literature mentions that during the last years research in the field of
occupational stress had been focused upon the sources and symptoms generating occupational stress to teachers (Kyriacou, 1996). In classifying high-risk occupational injuries due to occupational stress, the teacher stands to the fore (82% of teachers consider that professional activity they develop generates stress and depletion, the representatives of the sales and banking field being on the first place – 86 %, and medical staff on the third – 74%) due to the considerable psychological load, to the high level of social responsibility (generated by both parent’s and children’s expectations), and to job satisfaction which becomes harder and harder to identify. Wilson (2002) affirms that teachers were less satisfied with factors intrinsic to the job, the organisational climate and home/work interface than managers. However, the teachers were more satisfied with their career and achievements, more likely to use social support than the general population or managers, more likely to register lower mental and physical health than managers or the general population but were more prone to Type A behaviours.

General causes which generate stress are commonly valid for most occupations: from problems of organizing activities (long hours, poor status and pay to job uncertainty and job insecurity, volume of work-related responsibilities which results in feeling undervalued, feeling unable to say 'no'), until the activity proper (unclear role specifications, high self-expectation and the inability to influence decision making, to clashes with superiors, isolation, poor communication and role conflict). When employees are not capable to channel their resources to face these types of demands, then their behaviours become choleric and non-functional, accusing demotivation, non-involvement, lack of energy and inability to fulfill the working tasks.

During last years, the increasing and sometimes incongruent attempts to reform the Romanian educational system led not only to positive results but also produced negative effects at the level of human resources. The consequences of the high and disjoint pressures which affected teachers reflect upon their professional activity and upon their mental health, identifying behaviours such as low performance of the didactic act, high rate of fluctuation, professional insatisfaction generated by overwork and also tiredness, irascibility, anxiety and even depression. Teacher’s mental health affects the educational act and implicitly pupils and their personality.

Starting from the transactional model of stress proposed by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), Pitariu (2003) develops a stress model adapted to managers from Romania, which implies three major variables: Person - Situation – Results. He considers stress as a variable which intervenes on the
strength of anterior causes, and also as a behavioural consequence associated with psychological and physiological/somatic reactions.

In the transactional model of stress proposed by Lazarus & Folkman (1984) and adapted to socio-economic environment from Romania (Pitariu, 2003), stress is defined as a psychological pressure influenced by environmental factors: economic, political and life conditions (political and economic safety, the insecurity of the future, high delinquency) and situational exigencies of the working environment, namely working instruments and procedures, the social and physical environment of the developed activity; by the demands of the position (overwork, social appreciation of the activity, responsibilities of the working position, professional roles, organizational climate, perception of the balance work-family, etc.); by mediators of personality which include comprised of time pressure, driven behaviour, attitude posture, relaxation potential, and role definition; by emotional responses: comprised of hostility, anxiety, and depression, as well as by demographic characteristics such as age, sex, professional experience, post experience and accumulated service. Obviously, sources of stress are varied. In a study realized by Kyricou (2001) the most frequent sources of stress at teachers are determined by pupils (indiscipline and poor learning motivation), by the large volume of the tasks to be fulfilled correlated with time pressure, working conditions (insufficient didactic materials, educational conditions inadequate for learning), but also by the relation with administration and with co-workers (job insecurity, non-collaboration among co-workers, envy, ambiguous evaluation and promotion criteria). Each teacher will react differently at the stress sources, the reactions being mainly dependent on the interaction between his/her personality assets, values, abilities and circumstances. The above-mentioned author stipulates that the coping mechanisms (social support or control), personality mediators and the environment can influence the degree to which stress situations are perceived and implicitly, its emotional, behavioural and physiological responses.

2. Study aims

The study represents a pilot study which proposes the identification of the perceived stress sources at teachers as well as the relations among them.
3. Method

3.1. Participants

The study had been carried out on a sample of 54 subjects, male and female teachers working in the preschool and primary cycle in the district of Argeș, having a didactic experience ranging between 5 and 40 years, who come from urban and rural environment.

3.2. Instruments

In order to intercept the relations among the variables and to identify the sources of stress, the subjects had been applied an adapted variant of the instrument – The Teacher Stress Questionnaire (Kryiacou & Sutcliffe, 1978). The Questionnaire identifies:

a. The intensity of certain stressors which are grouped into 4 categories: pupil misbehaviour, poor working conditions, time pressures, and poor school ethos on a 5-point Lickert scale (5 - in a very great measure until 1 - to the slightest degree).

b. The stress level a teacher experiences, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (from 5 - very stressed to 1 - no stress);

c. The frequency of occurrence of some symptoms due to stress, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 - never, 5 - few times a day).

4. Results and discussions

The collected data had been submitted to statistical analysis and correlation had been found between the sources of professional stress and teachers’ perceived level of stress from the sample under investigation. The analysis of the stress level declared in the group of teachers shows that 11% of subjects declare that they are stressed, 22% very stressed and 28% subjects extremely stressed.

As concerns the differences between male and female subjects there are no significant differences in the perceived stress level. As to stress factors, female subjects tend to identify stressors from the category pupil misbehaviour and time pressures as being more powerful than male subjects.

The analysis between the level of perceived stress and the variable environment of developed activity shows the fact that there are significant differences between the two groups (t=1,08, p=0,05, df=52). The teachers from rural environment tend to perceive stress not as strongly as teachers from the urban environment. As regards the perception of stressors, the
teachers from urban environment perceive as stressors pupil misbehaviour and time pressures, as compared to the teachers from the rural environment who identify stressors from the category poor working conditions. These aspects can be explained in relation to the environment conditions where they develop their activity, this category including school without didactic materials, agglomeration of schools through retrenchment, long distance to school. In the urban development teachers confront with pupils’ misbehaviour issues, since they have neither instruments nor readiness to manage these and mostly without pupils’ family support.

Significant differences had been registered between the level of perceived stress and the variable didactic experience ($t=1.48, p=0.05, df =52$). The level of stress perceived by the teachers with a didactic experience over 25 years is much higher than the level perceived by those with a didactic experience of 5-10 years. Experienced teachers perceive unscheduled tasks, work volume and pupils’ misbehaviour as factors generating stress while teachers with a reduced didactic experience considers that environmental stringencies, working procedures, the variety of the tasks to be accomplished, time spent to fulfil these tasks are stress factors.

5 Conclusions

The present pilot study intercepts the profile of a teacher who fulfills the specific tasks and attributes with difficulty. A person’s inability to surpass current difficulties leads to a rise in stress level and implicitly to a decrease of well-being.

This is a reality which cannot be denied: teachers are in difficulty, the stress level being high and the coping strategies are dysfunctional. The main causes of stress are related to time pressure and wearisome, irrelevant administrative tasks. Principally, in small schools teachers’ administrative tasks are very demanding, which affects their didactic activities. Other identified causes are competition at the workplace and the interpersonal tensions it generates, insufficient time for professional training and daily didactic activities.

The identification of stress sources at teachers can lead to personalized programs from specialists and career counsellors in which teachers can be trained in stress management techniques. Teachers must become responsible and identify the factors and sources generating stress and learn to develop adapting mechanisms to conflictual situations, to develop awareness competences of their own abilities, to assimilate new cognitive strategies and new social abilities of time management so that
professional activity might generate satisfaction and determine the well-being.

The conclusions of the study cannot be generalized due to the small sample of subjects but it can offer primary elements which can be developed and investigated in further studies.

References


