

PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT AS A SOURCE OF AN EARLY SCHOOL EDUCATION TEACHERS' CAREER DESTABILIZATION

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Summary. Teacher, profession or mission? Formerly, the teacher often acted as a kind of master or educator, discussing with the student, watching him, teaching him to read, write and also introducing in the arcana of philosophical knowledge and other various fields of sciences. He was ranked among the intellectual elites. Currently, the image of the teacher corresponds with the high level of prestige and social trust, belongs to a group of professions that can be described as difficult, responsible stressful, often leading to job destabilization. This article attempts to depict the phenomenon of occupational burnout, as the source of early school education teacher's career destabilization, the factors affecting its occurrence, symptoms and showing the dependence of professional apathy on the occupational position. Occupational burnout syndrome is a process of the increase and accumulation of burdens and stress resulting from the occupational function, characterized by a decrease in activity not only in the psycho-emotional, social, intellectual or physiological sphere, but also in the spiritual sphere, concerning both the professional and family plane, having a basic impact on satisfaction with life existence.

WYPALENIE ZAWODOWE ASUMPTEM DESTABILIZACJI KARIERY
ZAWODOWEJ NAUCZYCIELA EDUKACJI WCZESNOSZKOLNEJ

Słowa kluczowe: wypalenie zawodowe, nauczyciel, edukacja wczesnoszkolna

Streszczenie. Nauczyciel, zawód czy misja? Dawniej nauczyciel często pełnił rolę kogoś w rodzaju mistrza lub wychowawcy, dyskutując z uczniem, obserwował go, uczył czytać, pisać, a także wprowadzał w arkana wiedzy filozoficznej

i innych dziedzin nauk. Był zaliczany do grona elit intelektualnych. Obecnie również wizerunek nauczyciela koresponduje z wysokim poziomem prestiżu i zaufania społecznego, należy do grupy zawodów, które można opisać jako trudne, odpowiedzialne, stresujące, często prowadzące do destabilizacji zawodowej. W pracy podjęto próbę zobrazowania zjawiska wypalenia zawodowego jako asumptu destabilizacji kariery zawodowej nauczyciela edukacji wczesnoszkolnej, czynników wpływających na jego występowanie, objawów oraz ukazania zależności istnienia apatii zawodowej od posiadanego stopnia zawodowego. Syndrom wypalenia zawodowego jest procesem narastania i kumulowania się obciążeń i stresów wynikających z pełnionej funkcji zawodowej, charakteryzuje się spadkiem aktywności funkcjonowania nie tylko w sferze psychoemocjonalnej, społecznej, intelektualnej czy fizjologicznej, ale również i duchowej, dotyczącej zarówno płaszczyzny zawodowej, jak i rodzinnej, mającej podstawowy wpływ na zadowolenie z egzystencji życiowej

Introduction

The modern world in which social, economic, cultural and political changes take place, where mass access to knowledge and information sets new tasks and development directions, requires constant development, especially in education. Progressive civilization has entered a new phase of its history. Living in times requiring preparation for introducing changes in the global, social and individual dimension requires the preparation of society at the highest level. This task has been entrusted largely to teachers who are expected to prepare students and adults to perform new roles, conduct research, reflection, innovation and other activities in the global society.

These are new challenges that the teacher must meet. This can have a huge impact on a negative attitude to life: lack of patience, work overload and disappointment with its results, anger, stress, frustration, exhaustion, a sense of powerlessness, etc. – these are just some of the symptoms of burnout. Work related to increased interpersonal contacts, and in this case with children, should be enjoyed and performed from the heart's needs, with pure pleasure. However, due to intensive interpersonal contacts, the profession of a teacher, as well as the profession of a doctor or psychologist, is exposed to burnout syndrome¹. Professional burnout is experienced not only by teachers or doctors but also by large numbers of salesmen, corporate, media and services employees or freelancers. This is closely related to the huge changes taking place in the work style, the job

¹ E. Jonakowska, *Jak płonąć aby nie zasnąć? – o wypaleniu zawodowym nauczycieli*, „Życie Szkoły” 2013, nr 6, s. 28.

itself takes more and more time, puts increasing demands, with no support from companies as well as increasingly stringent goals, under the pressure of results, deadlines and stress to meet them.

The teacher in a civilized society is an authority and appears as a competent person with their own opinion and vast knowledge, while constantly undergoing critical evaluation and analysis. On the other hand, the teacher's person is often exposed to enormous stress caused by the mentioned criticism, work in difficult conditions, often too many classes and low salary. Constant control of the teacher's work and setting high demands on them leads in many cases to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and thus to professional burnout². Professional burnout of early school education teachers never appears suddenly, it is a complex process spread over time, which increases with its passage.

Christina Maslach, a psychologist, a teacher at the University of California, one of the most prominent researchers of burnout syndrome, points to three of its causes that can occur in people working with other people:

- exhaustion – occurs with excessive workload, both physical and intellectual.
- cynicism and depersonalization – abandoning ideals, professional duties performed mechanically, carelessly, adopting a cynical attitude towards the work performed.
- lack of efficiency – in the absence of it, the sense of mismatch increases, tasks begin to overwhelm, there is a sense of loneliness and the lack of acceptance³.

Extremely important, closely related to the syndrome of burnout is the stress occurring during the performance of professional work and covering such areas of the teacher's life as: health, social, emotional and others. In many cases, it is a determinant that mobilizes action and allows crossing certain limits, while in others it is said about the negative impact of stress on the human body⁴.

In the case of occupational stress, the following stressors may be specified: working conditions, employment conditions and social working conditions expressed in many categories such as: overload, noise, shift work, social relations, lack of promotion opportunities, mobbing, etc.

² M. Sekułowicz, *Wypalenie zawodowe nauczycieli pracujących z osobami z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną. Przyczyny – symptomy – zapobieganie – przewyciężanie*, Uwr., Wrocław 2002, s. 49.

³ Ch. Maslach, *Wypalenie w perspektywie wielowymiarowej*, [w:] H. Sęk (red.), *Wypalenie zawodowe, mechanizmy, zapobieganie*, Wyd. Nauk. PWN, Warszawa 2000.

⁴ C. Hall, E. Hall, G. Hornby, *Nauczyciel wychowawca*, GWP, Gdańsk 2005, s. 241.

Therefore, the issue of occupational burnout, as an incentive to destabilize the professional career of an early childhood education teacher, was decided to be considered in this paper.

Professional burnout of an early school education teacher

Professional burnout of teachers is the body's response to long-term emotional stress associated with the performance of teaching duties, and not just those at the blackboard. It occurs when work ceases to give satisfaction and contentment, the teacher stops developing professionally, overloaded with duties, too responsible and difficult tasks, they feel overworked and dissatisfied with their work, which once was a spiritual feast for them.

Augustyn Bańka treats professional burnout as an emotional reaction of the body in a stressful situation, which creates a requirement in professional work to constantly focus on heavy professional duties and problems of other people. This syndrome is associated with the extinction of motivation to continue and disorientation of who should be blamed for this state of affairs, means giving up and accepting the adverse situation. Burnout also results in a loss of concern for another person and an excessive distance from their problems⁵.

According to Bańka, occupational burnout, closely related to specific working conditions, which is a response to a person's struggle with threats and responsibility, has the nature of specific occupational stress and is called "Over-involvement disease"⁶.

On the other hand, Helena Sęk, defines the burnout as a set of symptoms occurring in people practising professions in which close, full of commitment interpersonal contact and personality traits of a professional are the basic instruments of professional activities that determine the level of occupation and professional success⁷.

In turn, according to Ewa Kędracka, burnout is a "process of inevitable destruction taking place in the psyche of people who use their powers too much in »giving themselves« to other people"⁸. Occupational burnout is closely related to the commitment and dedication to the work, and to the teacher's work

⁵ A. Bańka, *Psychologia w pracy. Wypalenie zawodowe*, GWP, Gdańsk 2000, s. 307–308.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ H. Sęk, *Wypalenie zawodowe: przyczyny i zapobieganie*, wyd. 2, Wyd. Nauk. PWN, Warszawa 2009, s. 256.

⁸ E. Kędracka, *Wypalenie się zawodowe nauczycieli*, „Szkoła Zawodowa” 1998, nr 4.

in particular. The teacher is fully committed to the work for which they devoted their time, physical and mental health, and often also financial means, in the event of overload and failure they lose motivation to work, become tired, have less energy and a desire to do it. Previously performed works, which are a source of satisfaction and contentment, become the driving force of depression, indifference and, in the final stage, of professional disaster.

Early school education teachers often experience burnout symptoms, they are exhausted by their excessive duties, paying attention to others, showing empathy and they are disappointed with the effects of their work. Limited by dozens of procedures, chasing their own and not only their own goals, they frequently do not see the final result of their own actions, they lose a sense of meaning and influence on their work, as well as on their own lives. It is hard to find joy in life, because what was a success yesterday, is to be the rule from tomorrow.

Any signs of dissatisfaction, frustration leading teachers to burnout may also be a reason for undertaking protest actions aimed at enforcing certain demands, and not only economic, but justified according to the protesters. An example of such an action may be the teacher's uprising in 2019 (started in 2018), which is a form of struggle for the dignity and prestige of Polish education promoters.

The author of this study attempted to find answers to the bothering questions related to the professional burnout of teachers of early school education in Bytom and Zabrze; he decided to obtain information on whether the teachers have burnout syndrome and how they deal with it.

It should be noted that all the surveyed people have been personally known to the author of the work for at least twenty years, they are colleagues, and in some cases they have friendly relations. The writer of these words saw the interviewees during the selection of pedagogical studies, then he met them during studies and finally witnessed their first professional work with young children.

The discussion of the research results

The small research group was selected only from known teachers, because the researcher was counting on obtaining reliable answers. Participation in the study was voluntary, 14 full-time teachers – female, teaching in grades I – III in primary school in Bytom and Zabrze took part. The place of research was not accidentally chosen, because for the author it is an environment of personal and professional life, its ups and downs, and it is also the place with which the author identifies to the greatest extent. The examined persons were in the age

range from 39 to 58 years, 12 of which were employed as certified teachers, while 2 – appointed. Work experience in a primary school exceeded 15 years in most cases. All the examined persons had completed the 2nd degree studies, of which two were not graduates of pedagogical master's studies, however, they had completed post-graduate studies in early school and pre-school education.

Due to the acquaintance of the author with the respondents (the author saw their commitment and satisfaction when they first started working as teachers in elementary school) and a small research group, it was decided to check whether burnout syndrome occurred with the passage of years and work at school, and if so, to what extent and whether it is the reason for the destabilization of the professional career of an early school education teacher.

Answers to these questions were sought in the results of surveys conducted in the academic year 2018/2019 among 14 teachers of the above-mentioned educational institutions. The quantitative method was used to gather the necessary diagnostic material. The selection of quantitative methods was not coincidental since thanks to them “Situations and relationships taking place in the pedagogical environment are shown by symbolic, numerical representations”⁹.

In order to gather the necessary diagnostic material, a research tool was used, constituting an interview questionnaire, supplemented with loose statements of the respondents.

Some results confirming the existence of factors indicating burnout of the examined group have been agreed below.

The author of the thesis was deeply interested in the reason for choosing the teaching profession. The interviewees could mark more than one answer. All respondents declared that the main reason for choosing a profession was the willingness to work with children, then 12 persons indicated the authority, the guarantee of stable income and stable employment, 10 respondents stated that it was also a vocation (diagram 1). Nobody pointed to coincidence and it is justified, because in this profession, especially when working with small children, someone cannot work “accidentally”.

⁹ Quoted from: H.-H. Krüger, *Metody badań w pedagogice*, przekł. D. Sztobryn, GWP, Gdańsk 2007, s. 174. See: U. Kuckartz, *Methoden der erziehungswissenschaftlichen Forschung 2: Empirische Methoden*, [in:] D. Lenzen (ed.), *Erziehungswissenschaft. Ein Grundkurs*, Reinbek 1994, p. 551.

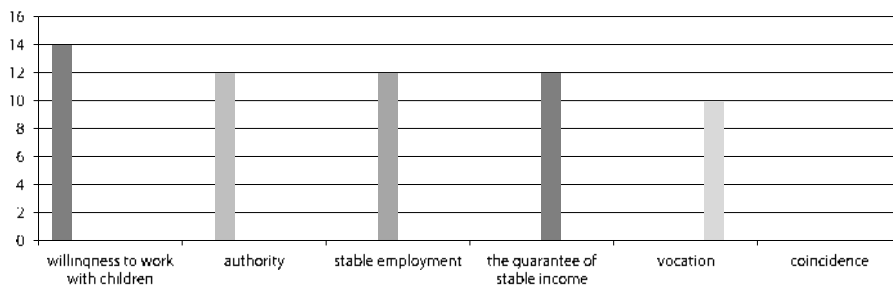


Diagram 1. Reasons for choosing the teaching profession

Source: Own research. The number of responses given by respondents is different from 14 because respondents could give more than one answer.

The obtained results are in line with the author's expectations, because he knew the respondents personally and saw their emotions during the first job; anxiety can only be aroused by the declared guarantee of stable income and stability of employment, although today it can be considered legitimate because of the job insecurity and constant changes on the labour market. Another issue concerned the characteristics of occupational burnout syndrome. Unanimously, they considered fatigue and excessive competition as the main reason for burnout; reluctance to work and physical and mental weakness were indicated by 11 respondents, then loss of motivation – 10 and difficulties in controlling emotions – 7. Lack of indications for: loss of self-confidence, unflattering self-criticism and helplessness (diagram 2).

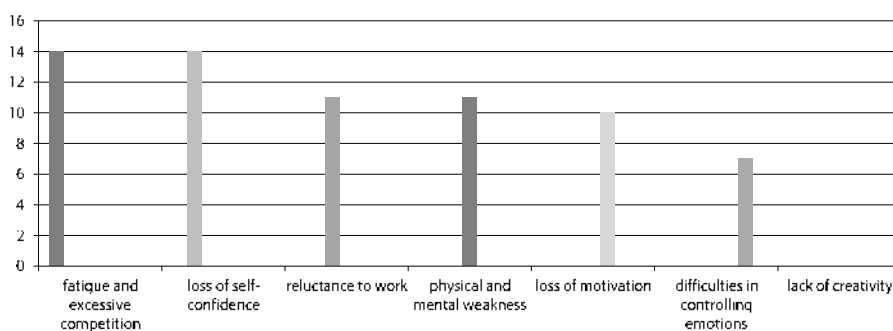


Diagram 2. Factors characterizing the teachers' burnout

Source: Own research. The number of responses given by respondents is different from 14 because respondents could give more than one answer.

Respondents also observed other teachers who had symptoms of burnout, in their workplace. Half of the respondents declared that they often see burned teachers at work, very often 2, rarely 3 and only 2 people did not notice these symptoms in their work colleagues. In a loose conversation on the question about the symptoms observed in teachers which may indicate burnout, they pointed to conflicts with colleagues, mechanical approach to work, nervousness, depression, lack of commitment, frequent absenteeism, negative attitude towards the surrounding world.

It also seems interesting to note the fact of emotional exhaustion of the respondents working in the teaching profession. Ten respondents marked the answer – often, very often 3. and only one person indicated – rarely (Table 1). This is, according to the author, too large a number, because choosing a profession you love (and that was before you started studying) should not be an emotional exhaustion.

Table 1. Emotional exhaustion of the respondents.

	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Often	Very often
Research group	0	0	1	10	3

Source: Own research.

Emotional exhaustion is closely related to fatigue before going to work. Ten respondents experience this condition often, 3 – very often and one person rarely. This is a very disturbing fact, because there is nothing worse than going to forced labour and doing the job which is no longer pleasant. It may be comforting that in loose conversations the respondents confessed that this state was “wave-like”.

When a teacher goes to work with fatigue, it causes a sense of exhaustion after finishing the work: often – 9 persons declared, 2 people declared very often, while 3 persons indicated rarely. When work ceases to give the expected satisfaction, the teacher begins to feel tired and feels that not all hopes related to work can be fulfilled, disappointment creeps. They decide to take more care of they own comfort of work and non-work-related needs, they give up some of the matters related to professional teaching. This stage can be called stagnation.

Tiredness, frustration, dissatisfaction may result from shifting problems and difficult situations of cooperating people to others. This fact was revealed “very often” by 8 respondents, “often” by 4, while “rarely” by 2 teachers.

In this case, the lack of professional solidarity of teachers, rarely jointly solving difficulties, is visible, and the difficult situations they prefer to cede quietly to others. Usually, teachers appear as freelancers, self-acting, rarely speaking in one voice, locking themselves in “their safe places” and not allowing people who often want to help them. It is known that without consolidation and without defining goals jointly, without determining the means to achieve them, without rethinking the strategy of action, the chances of success are unlikely.

Only some of the feelings resulting from teaching work, indicated by the respondents, may inform about some symptoms related to the burnout of an early school teacher and constitute an inclination to destabilize their professional career. To prevent this fact, the respondents also pointed to factors that inhibit or exclude occupational burnout.

During the interviews, they unanimously pointed to a significant strengthening of the teacher’s position as a well-paid specialist with great social confidence. The prestige of the teaching profession is gradually decreasing, an example of which is the teachers’ strike (suspended until September 2019). In the survey, they highlighted: avoiding stressful situations (14.), strengthening cooperation with school management (10.), with parents (12.), taking the sick leave (10.), earnings raise (14.), less bureaucracy (14.), proper sleep (13.), new challenges (12.), as well as organizing integration meetings outside the school (11.), aimed at better getting to know each other (diagram 4).

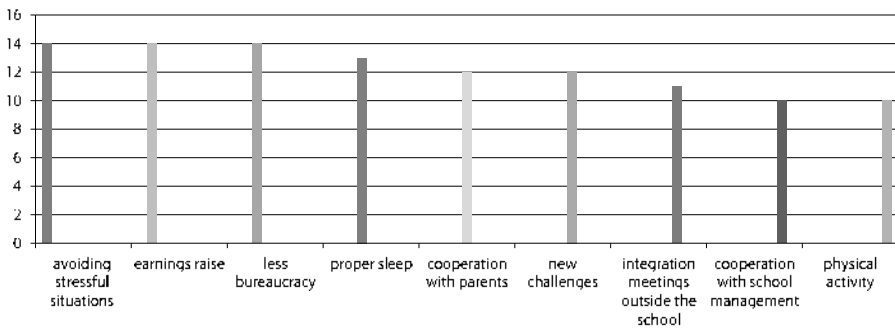


Diagram 4. Ways to prevent the professional burnout

Source: Own research. The number of responses given by respondents is different from 14 because respondents could give more than one answer.

The last question posed was the question about the re-selection of the profession of early school education teacher, if it was possible. The results surprised the author of the text since despite so many unflattering statements, noticeable

symptoms of burnout, stressful situations, only two out of 14 respondents would not choose the same profession again. The answers may suggest that this work is their challenge, they do not want to do something different, and to the question why the answers in the research tool were different, they could not find a definite answer.

Conclusions

Early school education teacher is one of the professions of public trust, it is a profession which requires appropriate qualifications and competences, allowing to conduct didactic and educational classes, and finally it is a profession for people who have a good approach to children, who love children; someone who does not like children should avoid the teaching profession.

The teacher should be a warm person, patient and forgiving, a person who can help their pupils in the event of even the simplest difficulties; should inspire respect, not fear. Stimulating children, giving them the opportunity to express their opinions freely, cordial attitude and empathy are decisive factors determining the personality of an early school education teacher.

Unfortunately, constant stress, ubiquitous bureaucracy, constant pursuit of “paperwork” for documentation of the teacher’s personal folder, conflicts with parents and school management mean that the work ceases to be the dream one or to meet the expectations of a young person, it becomes a source of apathy, malaise and sometimes depression.

Therefore, what should be done, how to proceed, what to pay attention to in order to avoid the burnout in the profession of early school teacher. The ideal, that many of us strive for, is balance between work and personal life. Therefore, it becomes ideal to use, among others, the concept of Work-life balance, which aims to find balance between work and private life¹⁰. In a teacher’s work it is very difficult because teachers base their self-esteem mainly on professional work. They are very emotionally and psychophysically involved in what they do, take up many difficult and new challenges, constantly improve their teaching skills, they open to children, their parents and colleagues; in that case it is hard to leave “professional matters’ in the workplace and move to private life without “looking back”.

¹⁰ https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Work-life_balance.

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