

## STRESSORS IN TEACHER'S WORK

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**Key words:** stress, stressors, teacher stress, stressors in teacher work.

### Summary

Teachers are among the professions which face the highest level of work-related stress. High level of stress has a negative impact on the teacher's physical and emotional health, leads to exhaustion, burnout, dissatisfaction with work, and high turnover rates. It is therefore important to reveal the main sources and risks of stress in the teacher's work. Psychosocial risks are related to the negative psychological, physical and social consequences resulting from inadequate work organization and management at the workplace: too high work requirements and / or short deadlines for fulfilling tasks; conflicting requirements and unclear employee roles; poor use of staff skills and insufficient employees involvement in decision-making on their work; scarce management and co-workers support and poor relationships with colleagues, students and their parents.

A quantitative study conducted in five countries revealed that most teachers experience a high level of stress in their professional activity. Many stressors in professional activity relate to the uncertainty and excessive workload of teachers' functions and roles. The most common organizational factors that cause stress include working conditions, low salary, noisy environment, number of students in the classroom, and external factors such as educational reforms and social status in society. The least stressors identified in the teachers' professional activity relate to relationships and support in the work environment. The study was conducted in the framework of the international project "Preventing Stress in the Teaching Profession-Stress Free Teachers", No. 2016-3715 / 001-001.

### Introduction

Stress refers to the circumstances when a person can not

or does not have the measures to respond appropriately to environmental stimuli, or can react only by harming him/herself, for example. constant weariness, tension, troubles, nervous exhaustion and loss of self-esteem [13]. It is a negative situation or a harmful event in a particular environment that affects humans and causes negative physiological and psychological consequences. This situation or event acts as stressors that affect coercive continued state of mental and physiological tension, the entirety of body's protective reactions [7,8].

Stressors are events or circumstances which create the feeling that physical or psychological demands are approaching the limits of person's abilities to cope with them [4,16]. In research performed by Gostautas et al. (2002), Karkockienė (2011), McGregor et al. (2008), Poon (2010), the relation between stress and changes in physical health is fixed [6,9,10,15]. The research works of Chen H. Et al. (2009), Poon (2010), Prilleltensky (2016) and other authors identify the relationship between the consequences of stress and the mental health of the individual, highlight the tendency that increasing physical and psychological strain leads to stress formation and worsening psychological well-being [3,4,15,16]. It has been identified that stress is related to lifestyle changes, alcohol, tobacco or drug use, sleep disorder, lower physical activity, which in turn affects physical and mental health [7,9,14]. Azaraviciene and others (2008) note that typical diseases caused by various stressors include hypertonic disease, gastric or duodenal ulcer, migraine, myocardial infarction, some immune, allergic diseases, and mental disorders [1].

In the course of rapid social changes and various educational reforms, as the requirements for the quality of the education process and teachers' responsibilities increase, teachers' professional activity is at the heart of the process of continuous change. The influence of stress on the teacher's professional activity was studied by Mérida-López S. et al. (2017), Prilleltensky et al. (2016), Phillips et al. (2008), Poon et al. (2010).

The pressure faced in teacher's everyday professional activity, the attitude of society towards teacher's work and

professional status are referred to as a threatening and aggressive environment that causes a tension and helplessness. All of this has a particularly strong impact on the teacher's physical and mental health and efficiency of work. Stressors appearing in the teacher's professional activities can be divided into four groups: the work content, working conditions, work organization and social relations at work.

The manifestation of stress symptoms is most commonly observed in emotional, thinking, physiological, behavioural reactions, also cognitive and motivational processes [11,13].

**The aim of this article** is to identify teachers' stress level and the stressors that are the most common in their daily professional activity. To reach this aim the scientific literature on the topic has been analysed and the survey was performed.

### Research methods

For the study a quantitative research method was used. The survey was carried out in spring, 2018. Data for the study was obtained from a comprehensive online survey of teachers (n=308) across the following countries: Portugal, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania and Turkey. For this purpose online questionnaires for teachers were prepared and circulated via e-mails to schools in the mentioned countries. Participation in survey was based on volunteering principle. The anonymity of survey participants was ensured.

Data were processed using an SPSS program (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 21.0).

**Logic of questionnaires construction.** The questionnaires include questions related to 2 main areas:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (teachers age, gender, work experience, type of school in which respondents work).

2. Sources of teacher stress/stressors. Stressors listed in questionnaires were identified from literature studies on stress

and relate to five main areas (Table 1).

**Ethical research principles.** The survey was conducted in accordance with the basic ethical principles. From potential research participants the informed concept was obtained: scope and objectives of the survey, the research methods being used, and possible outcomes of the research as well as future follow-up were explained (in face-to face or/and written form) to research target group members. Participation in survey was based on volunteering principle, teachers took part in study without having been coerced and deceived. The survey was anonymous, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants. These

**Table 1.** Areas of stressors listed in questionnaires for teachers

Area of stressors	Description of stressors in questionnaire
<b>Work content</b> (requirements for teacher competencies, functions, tasks, responsibilities)	Teacher attestation, certification
	Changing requirements for the role and competencies of the teacher (ex. integration of IT into the teaching process, individualization of education, inclusive education)
	Unclear duties and responsibilities
	Filling in documents, abundance of reports and paperwork
	Achieving the goals of the curriculum
	Pressure linked to preparing pupils for exams
	Requirements for the teacher at school
	Inadequate teacher's work assessment at school
	Upgrading qualification
<b>Work conditions</b> (wage, work environment, physical conditions)	Low salary
	Noisy environment
	Permanent changes at work
	Lack of teaching/learning measures and devices
	Many pupils in class
<b>Work organization</b> (workload, time management, control)	The need to work overtime
	Urgent execution of unplanned additional tasks
	Abundance of work roles
	Work check and control
	Lack of time to accomplish all the tasks
<b>Relationships</b> (encouragement, conflicts, support, autonomy)	Authoritarian behavior of management/administration staff
	Problematic relationships with management/administration staff
	Disputes with pupils
	Problematic relationships with pupils' parents
	Pupils' mischievous, disrespectful behavior
	Public critique by colleagues
	Non-constructive feedback on work done
	Gossips among colleagues
	Competitive relationships with colleagues
Lack of communication and cooperation at work	
<b>Other (external) stressors</b> (education policy, professional status, demographic situation, personal situation)	Bad social status of teacher in the society
	Reforms of education system
	Declining demographic indicators. The lack of school-age children
	Personal characteristics (lack of self-confidence, sensitivity, intolerance to criticism, etc.)
	The isolation of the teaching profession

principles helped to ensure the reliability and objectivity of the collected data.

### Results

308 teachers from 5 partner countries (Slovenia, Portugal, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Turkey and Lithuania) participated in the survey. Most of teachers were women (86%). 14% of participants were men. This supports the fact that teaching is strongly feminised profession in many countries. For example, Eurydice report found that in secondary education, teaching is a job largely exercised by women: at EU level, less than a third of the teaching force (32.2%) are men, while in some countries, Lithuania being among them, as few as one in five teachers are men [17].

The statistics show that average age of teachers in Europe is 43–47 years [12]. Most probably this data has led to the fact that majority of survey participants 65% of teachers) belongs to the middle-aged people group (36–55 y, Figure 1). Being this age teachers have considerable teaching experience – more than 70% of teachers have been teaching for more than 10 years (Figure 2).

Most of the survey participants are employed at primary and secondary schools while 8 % of teachers are from VET schools (Figure 3).

**Stressors in teachers' work.** Questionnaires data have indicated that 61 % of teachers reported their work environ-

ment as very stressful or stressful (Figure 4). Survey results show female teachers experience higher level of stress than man teachers.

No significant difference in perceived stress level is found between teachers with different years of teaching experience. Number of pupils in class or education institution in which teachers work also do not have relevant impact on teachers' stress level. However, teachers in Turkey reported to feel significantly lower stress level than those in other partner (Figure 5).

The frequency of various sources of work stress reported by the teachers is shown in Figures 6–10. Approximately 1/3 of teachers reported that filling in documents, abundance of reports and paperwork, low salary, the need to work overtime, abundance of work roles, many pupils in class and noisy environment cause their constant stress every day.

In addition to the mentioned factors, pressure linked to preparing pupils for exams, achieving the goals of the curriculum, lack of time to accomplish all the tasks, inadequate teacher's work assessment at school, changing requirements for the teacher's roles and competencies are the main stressors that most teachers (70–80 %) reported as being faced constantly, very often or often. Also the most frequent stressors in teachers' work include the isolation of teaching profession, bad social status of teacher in the society, unclear duties and responsibilities. Approximately

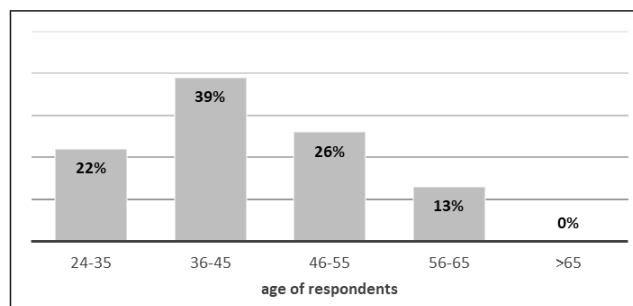


Figure 1. Age of survey participants

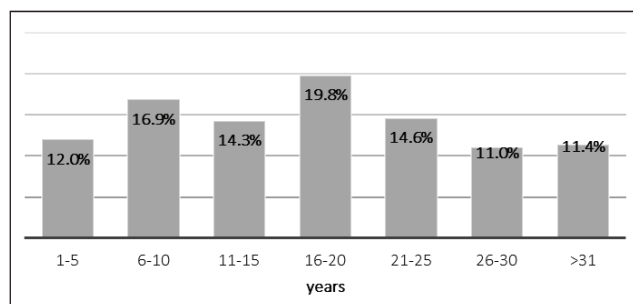


Figure 2. Work experience of survey participants

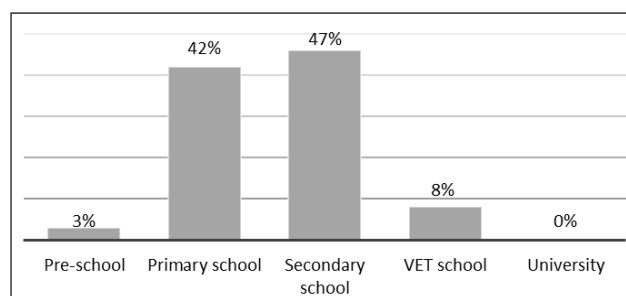


Figure 3. Type of education institution in which survey participants work

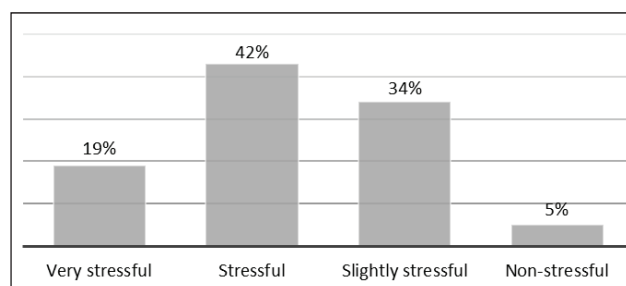


Figure 4. Teachers' work – stress level

half of teachers feel stress rather often because of disputes with pupils and their parents, pupils' disrespectful behavior, work check and control, lack of communication at work. Personal characteristics, competitive relationships with colleagues, gossips among colleagues and some other factors related to social relationships are among the less frequent stressors in teachers' work.

The daily filling in documents as a very frequent stressor is mentioned by respondents from Portugal (55%) and Slovenia (37%). The preparation of students for exams and the attainment of the objectives of the curriculum as significant stressors are usually indicated in the responses of Portuguese respondents (42% and 40%). Respondents who participated in the survey reported the inadequate teacher's work assessment as a frequent stressor as follows: Lithuanian and Slovenian respondents – 14%, Portugal – 20%, Turkish – 23%, Bosnian and Herzegovans – 21%. Teachers' certification as the least stressful factor was indicated by respondents from all countries.

Low salary is referred to as a relevant stressor among respondents from Lithuania and Portugal (45% and 43%). One third of the respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey and Portugal identified a large number of learners in the classroom as a significant stressor in teaching work. The noisy environment as an important stressor is indicated by respondents from Lithuania and Slovenia (37% and 31% respectively). Permanent changes at work are the most significant stressor for Portuguese respondents (26%).

More than half (58%) of Portuguese respondents point out the need to work overtime as a significant stressor in work organization area. The execution of unplanned tasks as a significant stressor is reported by Portuguese and Turkish respondents (38% and 33% respectively). Work control has been reported as the least stressful factor in the responses of all respondents. The most significant stressors in the area of work organization emerged to be overtime, abundance of work roles (21%) and lack of time to accomplish all the tasks (19%).

Pupils' disrespectful behaviour as an important stressor is pointed out by 1/3 of the Turkish respondents. The authoritarian behaviour of the administration staff and the non-constructive feedback on work done as frequent stressors, are common in responses by Turkish respondents (22% and

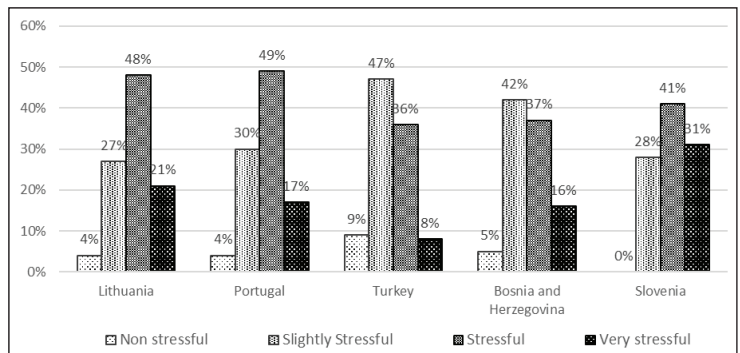


Figure 5. Teachers' work – stress level by countries

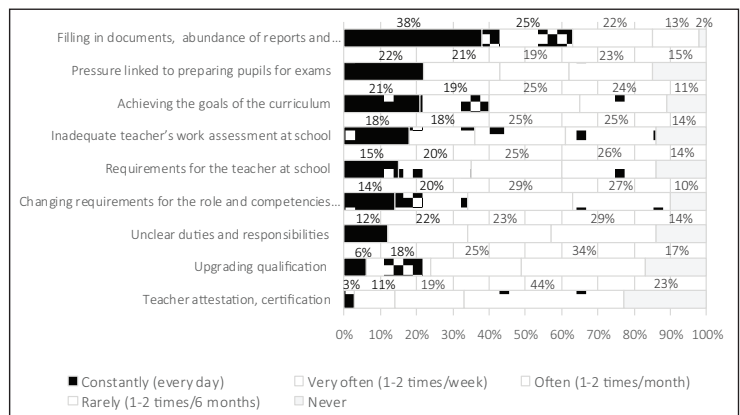


Figure 6. Frequency of stressors of work content area in teachers' work

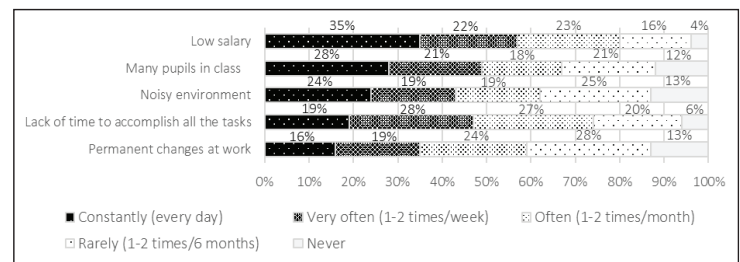


Figure 7. Frequency of stressors of work condition area in teachers' work

25%). Problematic relationship with the administration as a significant stressor is reported by Turkish (22%) and Slovenian respondents (27%). While assessing this group of stressors disrespectful students' behaviour and authoritarian style of administration (12% and 12%, respectively) were most often mentioned by Lithuanian respondents.

Reforms in the education system are referred to as the most significant stressor among the responses of respondents in all countries, however most often this stressor was mentioned by respondents from Portugal (29%), Turkey (20%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (32%) and Lithuania (17%). More than one third of Turkish respondents identify the isolation of teachers' profession as an important stressor in the

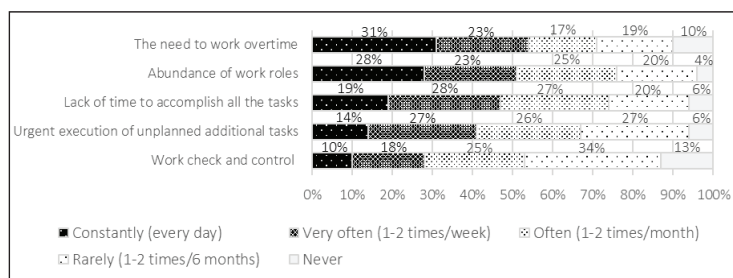


Figure 8. Frequency of stressors of work organization area in teachers' work

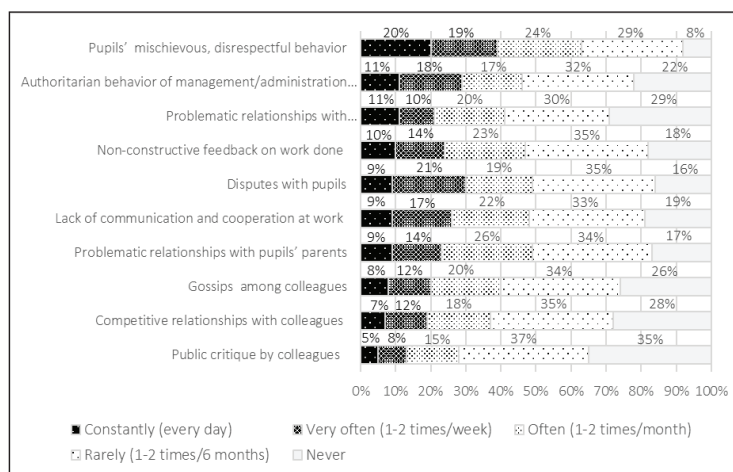


Figure 9. Frequency of stressors of relationship area in teachers' work

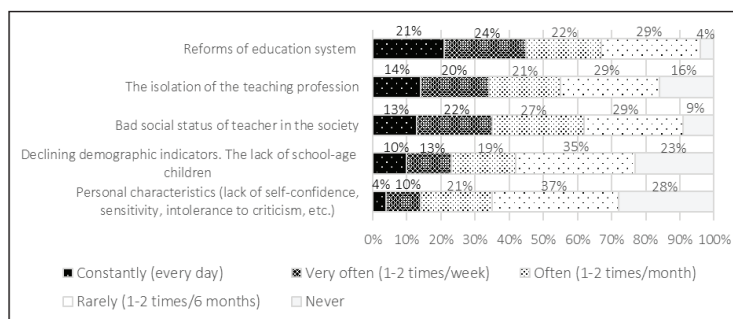


Figure 10. Frequency of other stressors in teachers' work

teacher work. The replies of the Lithuanian respondents regarding frequency of this group of stressors were as follows: the isolation of teaching profession as an frequent stressor in teacher work was reported by 4% of Lithuanian survey participants, the low status of the teacher's profession - by 6% of Lithuanian respondents. Demographic changes and the decline of school-age children causes stress to 10% of survey participants from Lithuania.

## Conclusions

1. Stress is an individual forced mental and physiological state of

a person's tension that occurs as a reaction to the effects of negative factors that can not be avoided subjectively if the person is unable to control the situation. This condition is caused by harmful environmental and internal factors – stressors. In teachers' professional activity stressors fall into 4 groups: the work content, working conditions, work organization, and relationships.

2. Majority of teachers face high level of stress in their work. From the results obtained through the survey it has become evident that some factors are more prone to cause stress amongst teachers than others. The most frequent stressors in teachers' work are linked to their functions and role overload, workload. This highlights how the amount of work together with the multiplications of areas of responsibility and roles constitute the main stressors for teachers.

3. Work conditions – low salary, noisy environment, number of pupils in class as well as external factors, like education reforms, social status in society are among the most frequent stressors as well. The stressors related to relationships and support are found to be less frequent in teachers' work.

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## STRESORIAI MOKYTOJO DARBE

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Raktažodžiai: stresas, stresoriai, mokytojo stresas, stresoriai mokytojo darbe.

Santrauka

Mokytojas yra viena iš profesijų, kurioje patiriamas aukščiausias streso lygis. Aukštas streso lygis turi neigiamą poveikį mokytojo fizinei ir emocinei sveikatai, sąlygoja išsekimą, „perdegimą“, nepasitenkinimą dirbamu darbu, didelę šios profesijos žmonių kaitą. Dėl to svarbu atskleisti svarbiausius mokytojo darbe patiriamą streso šaltinius ir rizikas. Psichosocialinė rizika susijusi su neigiamomis psichologinėmis, fizinėmis ir socialinėmis pasekmėmis, atsirandančiomis dėl netinkamo darbo organizavimo ir vadybos darbo vietoje: per dideli darbo reikalavimai ir (arba) per trumpi terminai užduotims įvykdyti; priešaringi reikalavimai ir neaiškūs darbuotojų vaidmenys; nepakankamas darbuotojų sugebėjimų panaudojimas ir nepakankamas darbuotojų dalyvavimas priimant su jų darbu susijusius sprendimus; per menka vadovų bei kolegų pagalba ir prasti tarpusavio santykiai su kolegomis, mokiniais ir jų tėvais.

Kiekybinis tyrimas, atliktas 5 šalyse, atskleidė, kad dauguma mokytojų patiria aukštą streso lygį savo profesinėje veikloje. Daugelis profesinėje aplinkoje veikiančių stresorių yra susiję su mokytojų funkcijų ir vaidmenų neapibrėžtumu bei per dideliu darbo krūviu. Labiausiai paplitę stresą sukeltantys organizaciniai veiksniai yra darbo sąlygos, mažas atlyginimas, triukšminga aplinka, mokinių skaičius klasėje, taip pat išoriniai veiksniai, tokie kaip švietimo reformos, socialinė padėtis visuomenėje. Mažiausiai mokytojų profesinėje veikloje identifikuota stresorių, susijusių su santykiais ir parama darbo aplinkoje.

Tyrimas atliktas įgyvendinant tarptautinį projektą “Preventing Stress in the Teaching Profession-Stress Free Teachers”, Nr. 2016-3715/001-001.

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