

## CAUSES OF STRESS IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY: SCHOOL LEADERS' APPROACH

Lijana Navickienė<sup>1</sup>, Eglė Stasiūnaitienė<sup>2</sup>, Ilona Kupčikienė<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Applied Sciences, Kaunas, Lithuania*

<sup>2</sup>*Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

**Keywords:** stress, stressors, teacher stress, stressors in teacher work.

### Summary

Teachers are among the professions reporting the highest level of work-related stress. This has a great impact on teachers' professional performance, job satisfaction, quality of their work and educational process. High level of stress adversely affects teacher's motivation, social well-being and even physical and mental health.

The causes of teacher stress are related to activity requirements, work organization, working conditions, relationships, etc. Heavy workload, negative attitude towards teacher work in society, education reforms, role conflicts, lack of time, disrespectful behavior of learners, poor working conditions, high demands, hard-to-achieve outcomes - all these factors cause teachers' stress in their professional activity.

In order to investigate the problem of teachers' stress, it is important to identify not only the attitudes of teachers to the stress factors in teachers' professional activity but also those of school leaders. It is interesting to identify what, in school leaders' views, are the main causes of teachers' stress and what stress management measures at the organization level would be the most effective for teachers to cope with their stress.

62 school leaders from Portugal, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Slovenia and Lithuania participated in an international research on the causes of teachers' occupational stress and possible ways of managing it. The results of the study revealed that changing demands for teacher competencies, filling in documentation, low salary, noisy environments, unclear roles, lack of time to fulfill all the tasks, disrespectful learners' behavior, and tensions with colleagues and parents are the major stressors in the teaching profes-

sion. School leaders believe that the most appropriate ways to manage teacher stress include training on stress management techniques and conflict resolution. 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

**The concept of stress in pedagogical practice.** Teachers in the context of long-term educational reform (information technology innovations, reorganization of educational institutions, demographic situation, unclear motivation and reward system, peculiarities of state examinations, etc.) are undergoing constant changes in their professional practice causing professional stress. Occupational stress can be defined as the expression of emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological responses to unpleasant and harmful work content, work organization and work environment factors. It is a state in which a person experiences strong excitement, extreme frustration, and a feeling of being over-demanded or unduly demanded. It is a harmful physical and (or) emotional response resulting from a mismatch between work or professional requirements and the employee's capabilities. The research results show correlation between stress and changes in physical health [4, 5, 10,12]. Chen et al. (2009), Poon (2010), Prilleltensky (2016) and others identify the links between stress-related consequences and a person's mental health and highlight the tendency that increasing physical and psychological load leads to deterioration of psychological and social well-being [8,2,12, 13]. Stress management is defined as the efforts to reduce the effects of internal and external factors that are difficult to deal with.

Stress management strategies may be of two types. The first one are targeted at the source of the stress, i.e. solutions to the problem are sought to overcome stress. The problem is solved by directly changing the stressor, i.e. fighting, eliminating a threat, or running away from a threat. If stressors

are unmanageable, i.e. the behavior of the individual can not have any influence, then a strategy for stabilizing the emotional state is more appropriate. In the case of applying this strategy, the solution to the problem is found by changing the state of mind, focusing on techniques to stabilize the emotional state, and positive thinking. A problem-solving strategy is only effective when stressors can be managed, i.e. the person is capable of changing the stressful situation [1,3,6].

According to Kompier, Cooper, and Geurts (2000), the practice of managing work-related stress in Europe is disappointing, as such stress management measures are mostly responsive and individual-oriented [7]. Workplace stress management is thus a shared responsibility of employers and employees. In order to stop and prevent stress at work, employers and employees should distinguish:

- which stressors are related to professional activities and which are not;
- what workplace requirements are appropriate and which are not;
- which stressors are unavoidable or beyond the control of employers and employees and which can be avoided;
- what is a real stressor to a person and what is just a risk factor;
- What are the healthy and unhealthy characteristics of working life.

There is a widespread debate about the definition of work-related stress and measures to manage work-related stress. It is not entirely clear what should be considered as organizational stress management tools. Matteson and Ivanecich (1989) claim that these include management efforts aimed at reducing stressors and targeted at reducing any negative effects of stress [9]. The definition covers both measures to remove stressors from the work environment and those designed to match the needs, objectives, knowledge and skills of the employees to the tasks and professional environment.

The essence of individual stress management measures is related to individual changes, that is, what the employee can change in himself to overcome or avoid stress. Meanwhile, the core of organizational stress management measures lies in organizational change. Pikunas and Palujanskiene (2005) advise managers of organizations to: review work tasks, their complexity and intensity; reassess the work environment; spare no rewards; make teams of matching people; compose flexible work schedules; encourage collaboration; discuss with the employee his / her career development; analyze working relationships [11]. The survey of the scientific literature and practice of educators' professional activity shows that educational institutions focus mostly on individual stress management measures.

### Survey instrument

For the survey the questionnaire was developed composing of questions related to two main aspects:

1. Causes of teacher stress - in order to find out school leaders' views on the most stressful factors in teacher professional activity.

2. Organizational stress management measures - aiming at finding out what support could be offered and promoted at organization level to help teachers to reduce their stress.

**Table 1.** Areas of stressors

Area of stressors	Description of stressors
<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
<b>Work conditions</b> (wage, work environment, physical conditions)	Upgrading qualification
	Low salary
	Noisy environment
	Permanent changes at work
	Lack of teaching/learning measures and devices
<b>Work organization</b> (workload, time management, control).	Many pupils in class
	The need to work overtime
	Urgent execution of unplanned additional tasks
	Abundance of work roles
<b>Relationships</b> (encouragement, conflicts, support, autonomy)	Work check and control
	Lack of time to accomplish all the tasks
	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

Stressors listed in the questionnaire relate to five main areas: work content, work conditions, work organization, relationships and other stressors (external) (Table 1).

**The article is aimed** at identifying the main causes of stress in teachers' professional activity from the school leaders' point of view. For this a quantitative international research was performed in which 62 school leaders from Portugal, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lithuania and Turkey participated. The survey was anonymous, ensuring the confidentiality of the participants.

**Research results**

**Stressors in teacher's work.** School leaders from different countries who participated in the study presented their views on the impact of the school environment on teachers' well-being. Survey data shows that 79% of the Lithuanian schools managers who took part in the survey regard school environment as stressful for teachers. About half of respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina (58%) and Slovenia (50%) also think that teachers are stressed at school. Portuguese and Turkish schools are the least stressful according to school managers of these countries (see Figure 1).

From the point of view of school leaders, filling in documents and reports, changing requirements for the role and competences of teachers, and meeting the curriculum goals are the most stressful factors in teacher work-content area (see Figure 2).

When evaluating the working conditions of the teachers, the survey participants emphasized that low salaries, noisy environment and constant changes in work are the most stressful factors for teachers (Figure 3).

Analysis of work organization aspects revealed that stress at school is caused by the uncertainty of job roles, lack of time to complete all the tasks in high quality, and continuous overtime work (Figure 4).

Most studies reveal that interpersonal relationships cause stress. Respondents of the research emphasize that teachers are usually stressed by disrespectful, obtrusive learners' behavior, non-constructive feedback, peer-to-peer relationships, and relationships with lear-

ners' parents. The survey participants do not point out that authoritarian management and relations with administration and management staff can be a factor that can stress the professional performance of a teacher (Figure 5).

The survey participants also highlight that teachers are stressed by education system reforms, low teacher status in the society, isolation of the teaching profession (Figure 6).

**Stress management measures.** The survey was aimed to clarify the attitudes of school managers on what measures could be most appropriate to help teachers cope with professional stress. 77% of respondents think that training on stress coping techniques and 66% of school managers state that training on conflict resolution techniques would be most helpful for teachers. Half of the respondents think that support

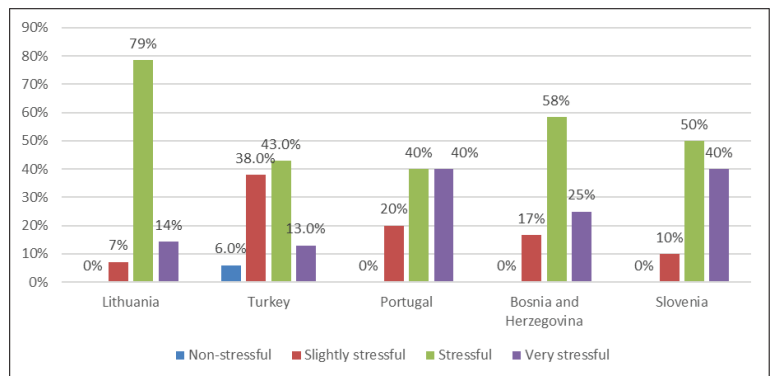


Figure 1. Teacher's work-related stress level

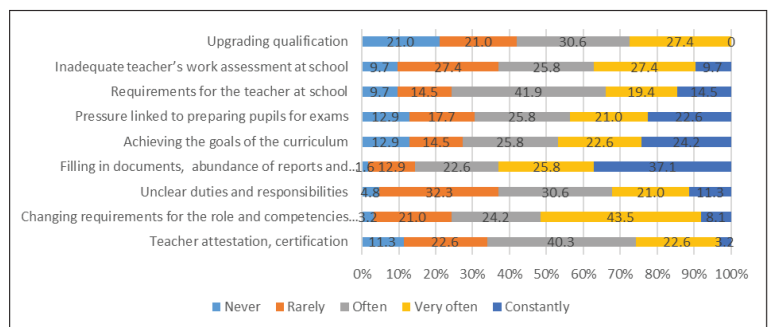


Figure 2. Stressors of teacher's work content area

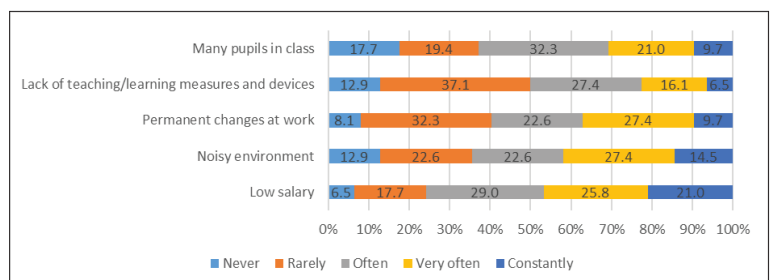


Figure 3. Stressors of teacher's work conditions area

of management and administration staff as well as regular reflection groups at school would be important for ensuring positive school's microclimate. However, it is important to note that study results reveal more emphasis on developing personal stress management skills than on organizational aspects (supervision of a school as an organization).

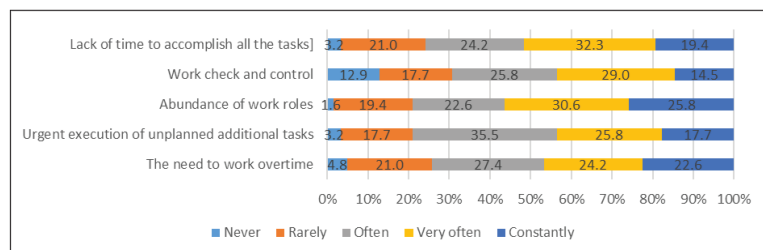


Figure 4. Stressors of teacher's work organization area

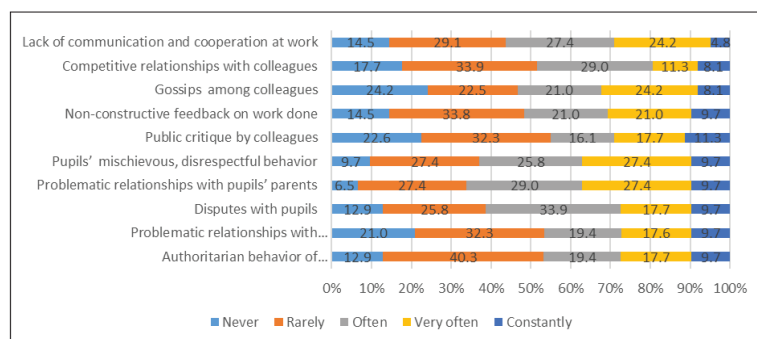


Figure 5. Stressors of relationships area in teacher's work

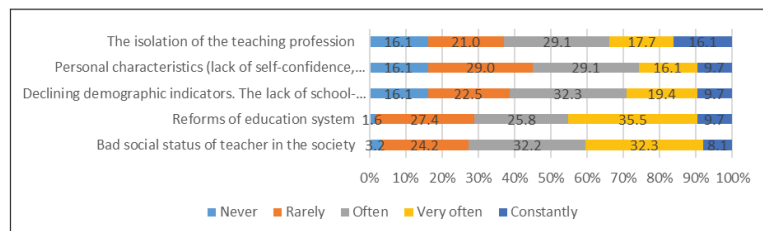


Figure 6. Other stressors in teacher's work

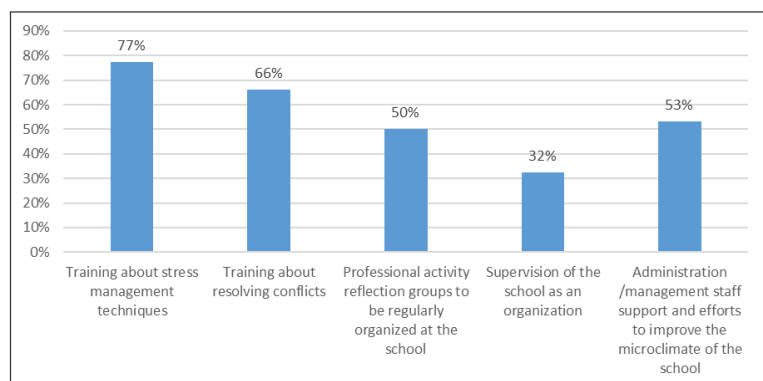


Figure 7. Teachers' stress management measures

It can be assumed that school managers do not identify the systemic organizational dimension and their role as leaders in ensuring teachers' stress management processes (Figure 7).

Reviewing the views of research participants' on how to cope with teacher stress, Lithuanian and Turkish respondents highlight the importance of administration and management staff in improving school microclimate as well as supervisions as effective measures of managing stress. Portuguese respondents pay particular attention to the regular organization of professional activity reflection groups, while respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Portugal and Lithuania find it effective to learn ways to resolve conflicts. Interestingly, respondents from all countries except Turkey find it effective to train teachers in coping with stress. The survey data reveal that a small minority of respondents (only Lithuanian respondents) focused on the managers' role in reducing the stress experienced by teachers in their professional activities. Respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and Portugal do not give importance to the role of the administration in improving the microclimate of the school. The survey data revealed that a small minority (only Lithuanian respondents) focused on the role of management in reducing the stress experienced by teachers in their professional activities. Respondents in Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Portugal did not attach importance to the role of the administration in improving the microclimate of the school, and school leaders in Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina do not believe that organizational oversight can play a significant role in reducing professional stress. School leaders from Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina do not believe that supervision of a school as an organization can play a significant role in reducing teacher professional stress (Figure 8).

## Conclusions

1. Survey results revealed that school managers find teachers' work as stressful, however, they do not rate the school environment as a highly stressful environment for the teacher. The main stressful factors for teachers, in school managers' opinion, include changing



requirements for teacher competencies, filing in documentation, low salary, noisy environment, unclear roles and tasks, disrespectful behavior of learners, and tensions with colleagues and parents.

2. From the perspective of the survey participants, the most appropriate ways to deal with teachers' stress are training on stress management techniques and conflict resolution. Respondents do not give much importance to the organizational aspects of stress management in the teaching profession. Management staff efforts to improve the microclimate of the school and organization of supervision of the school as an organization are treated to be the least significant measures to reduce teachers' professional stress.

## References

- Almonaitienė J., Lekavičienė R., Antinienė D. Žmonių santykiai organizacijoje. Vadovėlis. Kaunas. Technologija, 2010.
- Chen H, Wong Y, Ran M.S, Gilson Ch. Stress among Shanghai university students. The need for social work support. *Journal of Social Work* 2009; 9:323-344. <http://jsw.sagepub.com/content/9/3/323.full.pdf+html>
- Cowley S. Mokymo klinika. Vilnius. Tyto alba, 2006.
- Goštautas A, Gustainienė L, Perminas A, Šinkariova L, Ausmanienė N, Statkevičienė A. Kraujospūdžio kitimai taikant ankstyvosios psichologines reabilitacijos priemones stacionaro sąlygomis. *Medicinos teorija ir praktika*, 2002; 31(3):188-192.
- Karkockienė D. Medicinos ir sveikatos mokslų studentų patiriamo streso ypatumai ir jo įtaka miego kokybei. *Visuomenės sveikata*, 2011; 2(53):83-92.
- Keith CH, Wendy MR. Stress management for teachers: a Proactive guide (The Guilford practical intervention in the schools series). The Guilford Press; Lay-Flat Paperback edition 2014.
- Kompier MAJ, Cooper CL, Geurts SAE. A multiple case study approach to work stress prevention in Europe. *Europe Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 2000; 9(3).
- Mahan PL, Mahan MP, Park NJ, Shelton C, Brown KC, Weaver MT. Work environment stressors, social support, anxiety, and depression among secondary school teachers. *Workplace*

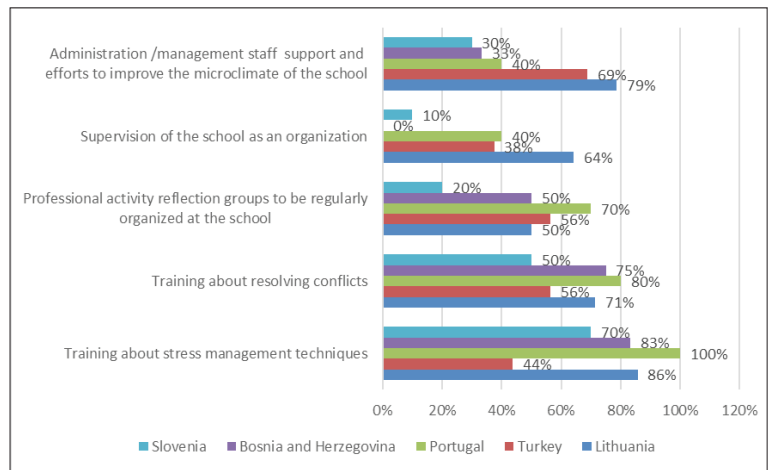


Figure 8. Teachers' stress management measures by countries

Health and Safety 2010; 58, 5:197-205. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2165079910058005044>

- Matteson MT, Ivancevich JM. Controlling work stress: effective human resource and management strategies. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers 1989.
- McGregor BA, Antoni MH, Ceballos R, Blomberg BB. Short communication: very low CD19+ B-lymphocyte percentage is associated with high levels of academic stress among healthy graduate students. *Stress and Health* 2008; 24: 413–418. <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=22&hid=105&sid=52c0e842-56dc-40e2-a0a3-37c4d7cdac43%40sessionmgr114>
- Pikūnas J., Palujanskienė A. Stresas. Atpažinimas ir įveikimas. Pasaulio lietuvių kultūros, mokslo ir švietimo centras, 2005.
- Poon WC, Yap SF, Ong TP. Academic stress and health outcomes: evidence from undergraduate students. IATED digital library. ICERI Proceedings 2010; 6890-6901. <https://library.iated.org/publications/ICERI2010>
- Prilleltensky I, Neff M, Bessell A. Teacher stress: what it is, why it's important, how it can be alleviated. *Theory into Practice* 2016; 55:104-111. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs>

## MOKYTOJŲ PROFESINĖJE VEIKLOJE PATIRIAMOS STRESO PRIEŽASTYS: VADOVŲ POŽIŪRIS

L.Navickienė, E.Stasiūnaitienė, I.Kupčikienė

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

Mokytojo profesija yra viena tų, kurioje patiriamas didžiausias su darbu susijęs stresas. Tai daro didelę įtaką mokytojų profesinei veiklai, pasitenkinimui darbu, darbo kokybei ir visam ugdymo procesui. Aukštas streso lygis neigiamai veikia mokytojo motyvaciją, socialinį gyvenimą, fizinę bei psichinę sveikatą.

Mokytojų streso priežastys susijusios su profesinei veiklai keliamais reikalavimais, darbo organizavimu, darbo sąlygomis, santykiais ir kt. Didelis darbo krūvis, neigiamas visuomenės požiūris, švietimo pokyčiai, vaidmenų konfliktai, laiko stoka, nepagarbus besimokančiųjų elgesys, prastos darbo sąlygos, aukšti

---

reikalavimai, sunkiai pasiekiami rezultatai – visi šie faktoriai didina stresą mokytojo profesinėje veikloje.

Streso problematikai mokytojų profesinėje veikloje tyrinėti aktualu identifikuoti ne tik mokytojų, bet ir mokyklų vadovų poziciją į stresą keliančius veiksnius. Įdomu nustatyti, kokios, mokyklų vadovų nuomone, pagrindinės mokytojo streso priežastys bei kokios organizacijos lygmeniu būtų efektyviausi streso, patiriamo mokytojų profesinėje veikloje, įveikos būdai.

Atliktame tarptautiniame tyrime apie mokytojų profesinio streso priežastis ir galimus streso valdymo būdus dalyvavo 62 mokyklų vadovai iš Portugalijos, Bosnijos ir Hercegovinos, Turkijos, Slovėnijos ir Lietuvos. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad kintantys reikalavimai mokytojo kompetencijoms, dokumentacijos

pildymas, žemas atlygis, triukšminga aplinka, vaidmenų neaiškumas, laiko stoka atliekant užduotis, nepagarbus mokinių elgesys, įtampa bendraujant su kolegomis ir tėvais yra pagrindiniai mokytojo profesinės veiklos stresoriai. Mokyklų vadovų nuomone, tinkamiausi būdai valdyti mokytojų stresą yra mokymai apie streso įveikos technikas bei konfliktų sprendimą.

Tyrimas atliktas įgyvendinant tarptautinį projektą “Preventing stress in the teaching profession-stress free teachers“, Nr. 2016-3715/001-001.

Adresas susirašinėti: [lijana.navickiene@go.kauko.lt](mailto:lijana.navickiene@go.kauko.lt)

Gauta 2019-11-11

---