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Research Article

The Phenomenon of Burnout of Primary School Teachers

Katarzyna Miłek^{1*}, Magdalena Figaj²

¹Akademia Nauk Stosowanych in Wrocław, Poland

²Gnieźnińska Szkoła Wyższa Milenium in Gniezno, Poland

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*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

katarzynamilek7@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Occupational burnout is a significant threat to the teaching profession, affecting both the quality of education and the mental health of educators. This study explores the phenomenon of burnout among primary school teachers, focusing on the dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Using a quantitative approach, the research examined 31 teachers at Arkady Fiedler Primary School No. 5 in Gniezno. Results indicate that while 66.6% of respondents experience some level of emotional exhaustion, there is a strong correlation between professional experience and burnout severity. Teachers with over 30 years of service and those holding "certified teacher" status are most at risk. The study concludes that enhancing teachers' sense of self-efficacy and providing stress-management training are essential for organizational health.

Keywords: *Occupational Burnout, Primary Education, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, Teacher Well-being.*

Introduction

Professional work is a fundamental human activity accompanying existence in adult life, associated with both material and spiritual effects. It serves as a source for satisfying needs at every level and is key to the realization of personal desires and dreams. Ideally, professional work is accompanied by satisfaction and commitment; from a motivational perspective, success causes further activation to gain recognition and shape a positive image. However, work is not always a source of satisfaction. Factors such as excessive duties, a lack of financial

gratification, or a lack of competent assessments can transform work into a source of tension and self-doubt (Bartkowiak, 1999).

The teaching profession is a particularly high-stress activity. This tension is rooted in contradictory social demands and a perceived lack of teacher authority in modern society, which acts as a demotivator and places a heavy mental burden on the teacher's health, affecting both professional and family life (Korzyński, 2019). Socio-emotional exhaustion syndrome has been studied for a relatively

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short time, with individual predispositions often determining the activation of this phenomenon (Kordziński, 2019).

Herbert Freudenberger originally described burnout as a decrease in energy levels resulting from excessive demands (Wielgus & Tomaszewski, 2013). This condition is frequently observed in "helping" professions—such as doctors and pedagogues—where long-term emotional involvement is required (Fengler, 2000). Burnout concerns otherwise healthy people who experience mental discomfort due to a discrepancy between the reality of the profession and their own intentions (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1989). Today, it is increasingly referred to as psychological emotional exhaustion syndrome (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2020) and is recognized in the ICD-11 as a critical factor contributing to seeking medical assistance (Wentrych, n.d.).

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2. Theoretical Framework

Christina Maslach's conceptualization remains the foundational model for understanding the exhaustion syndrome, defining it through three distinct dimensions (Mańkowska, 2017). The first stage, emotional exhaustion, is characterized by a state of intense fatigue and depleted energy caused by chronic mental overload; this often manifests in psychosomatic symptoms such as sleep disorders (Mańkowska, 2017). The second stage is depersonalization, or "dehumanization," which serves as a defensive withdrawal. In this phase, the educator adopts an attitude of cynicism and indifference toward the needs of students or colleagues (Mańkowska, 2017). Finally, a reduced sense of personal achievement occurs, marked by a declining sense of competence and a perceived lack of effectiveness in one's professional role (Maslach, 2000). Maslach (2000) further argues that educational systems often fail to equip teachers with the necessary emotional resilience to handle these professional pressures.

Burnout is not a static state but develops progressively through specific stages. According to Łuba (2015), the process begins with a "honeymoon phase" of high optimism and enthusiasm, which gradually transitions into an "awakening" to professional reality and "roughness" from overwork. This eventually leads to "full-blown burnout," characterized by physical and emotional collapse. The determinants of this process are categorized into individual personality conditions and organizational irregularities (Janowska et al., 2005). These include demographic factors such as gender and age, as well as workplace stressors like role conflict, heavy administrative record-keeping, and inadequate financial remuneration (Herciński, 2016; Maslach & Leiter, 2011).

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative diagnostic survey design to evaluate the prevalence of burnout among primary school staff. The research was conducted at Arkady Fiedler Primary School No. 5 in Gniezno, Poland, with a sample consisting of 31 teachers, including 26 women and 5 men. The participant age distribution was primarily concentrated in the 25–50 age range. Key variables analyzed in the study included gender, age, length of service (seniority), and the level of professional promotion. The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire based on the principles of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). This tool allowed for the measurement of three critical areas: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and the subject's own assessment of their professional capabilities (PA), using a birth certificate to gather essential demographic and career data.

Results and Analysis

1. On the Phenomenon of Burnout

Professional work is a person's activity accompanying his existence in adult life, associated with material and spiritual effects. It is a source of satisfying needs at every appropriate level and the key to the realization of desires and dreams. Ideally, professional work is accompanied by satisfaction and commitment. From the perspective of motivation, success at

work causes further activation to gain recognition and shape one's positive image. However, work is not a source of satisfaction in every life situation. Many factors—such as excessive duties, lack of financial gratification, or lack of competent assessments—can make work a source of tension and self-doubt.

The teaching profession is a high-stress activity. The tension is related to contradictory demands and social disapproval. The lack of teacher authority in modern society is demotivating and may cause a mental burden on the teacher's health, affecting both professional and family life.

Socio-emotional exhaustion syndrome has been studied for a relatively short time. Individual predispositions determine the activation of this phenomenon even in people with short years of service (Kordziński, 2019). Herbert Freudenberger described burnout as a decrease in energy levels due to excessive demands (Wielgus & Tomaszewski, 2013). Elliot Aronson emphasized that this condition is caused by long-term involvement in "help" professions such as doctors and pedagogues (Fengler, 2000). Wilmar Schaufeli added that burnout concerns healthy people who experience mental discomfort due to a discrepancy between the reality of the profession and their own intentions (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1989). Burnout is often referred to as psychological emotional exhaustion syndrome (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2020) and is classified in the ICD-11 as a factor contributing to seeking medical help (Wentrych, n.d.).

2. The Concept of Burnout

Christina Maslach's three-phase concept captures the specificity of the exhaustion syndrome through three dimensions (Mańkowska, 2017):

- Emotional exhaustion: Associated with mental overload and fatigue. It drains the energy to act and is often accompanied by psychosomatic symptoms like sleep disorders (Mańkowska, 2017).
- Depersonalization: Also called dehumanization, this stage involves withdrawing from contacts and distancing oneself. It is characterized by cynicism and indifference

to the problems of others (Mańkowska, 2017).

- Reduced sense of personal achievement: A decrease in effectiveness and a sense of declining competence in one's professional area (Maslach, 2000).

Maslach noted that education often fails to prepare individuals for the emotional impact of their work or teach resilience to the problems of others (Sęk, 2004).

3. Causes and Stages of Burnout

Burnout arises from a permanent burden while working for others (Bartkowiak, 1999). Determinants are categorized into individual personality conditions and organizational irregularities (Janowska et al., 2005). Cary Cherniss identified a broad picture of symptoms, including guilt, anger, stereotyping customers, and frequent absenteeism (Fengler, 2001). Burnout involves three distinct symptoms: loss of faith in abilities, indifference, and negative self-esteem (Janowska et al., 2005).

Demographic factors also play a role: women are prone to more intense emotional exhaustion, while men are more likely to experience depersonalization. Interestingly, older employees and those with families are often less prone to burnout due to experience and support systems (Korczyński, 2013). Low remuneration is a significant exacerbating factor (Maslach & Leiter, 2011).

The American Psychology Association describes burnout as developing in stages (Łuba, 2015):

1. Honeymoon: Optimism and enthusiasm.
2. Awakening: Realization that efforts may not result in intended effects.
3. Roughness: Visible exhaustion from overwork.
4. Full-blown burnout: Physical and emotional collapse; blaming others.
5. Rebirth: Seeking change and regeneration.

3.1 Occupational Stress as the Main Cause

Opinions vary on whether stress and burnout are separate phenomena (Grzegorzewska, 2006). Stress is a physiological change in the somatic sphere under threat (Grzegorzewska, 2006). Occupational stress is a mental state

linked to environmental requirements and individual resources (Korczyński, 2014). Stressors include noise, temperature, shift work, and relationship dynamics with co-workers (Korczyński, 2014).

3.2 Determinants of Professional Burnout of Teachers

Risk factors are divided into individual, transactional, and organizational (Herciński, 2016).

- Individual conditions: Gender (women suffer more emotional exhaustion), age (30-40 years are most at risk), and personality traits like neuroticism or extroversion (Herciński, 2016).
- Professional roles: Role conflict, work overload (overtime and record-keeping), and the atmosphere in the classroom (Herciński, 2016).
- Workplace factors: Lack of equipment, lack of professional recognition, and the emotional labor required to adapt to conflicting environments (Herciński, 2016).

Ayala Pines compared teacher well-being to traumatic experiences, noting that the basic source of burnout is the inability to derive spiritual meaning from work (Pines, 2002). Henryka Kwiatkowska highlighted that teaching is poorly recognized and original in its ambiguity, which creates serious challenges (Kwiatkowska, 2008). The social image of teachers, often distorted by the media, further deepens the feeling of misunderstanding (Plichta, 2015).

The points obtained determine the level of depersonalization.

From 0-2 points - low depersonalization

From 3-5 points - high depersonalization

The last area is your own assessment of the possibilities with 8 questions. The points

obtained by the respondent characterize their own assessment of their capabilities.

From 0 to 4 points - low assessment of one's own abilities

From 5-8 points - high assessment of one's own abilities

Each of the results obtained in a given area presents the level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and the subject's own assessment of their abilities.

The questionnaire has been provided with a birth certificate, which allows to obtain basic information concerning: age, gender, length of service, professional promotion of the surveyed teachers. 31 teachers took part in the scientific research. A total of 31 teachers took part in the research, including 26 women and 5 men. The largest group of respondents were people aged 40 to 50 and people in the group of 25 to 40 years of age. On the other hand, a small percentage were people aged 50 to 60, because it was only 9 people.

The analysis of the attached certificate showed the length of service of the respondents. The largest group were 11 teachers with 15 to 25 years of experience. With more than 30 years of experience in the teaching profession, 8 people have come forward. The largest group of teachers in this school are teachers with professional promotion of a certified teacher, i.e. 18 people. The least numerous group are teachers with a professional promotion of an appointed teacher - 2 people.

The analysis of the collected research results began with an attempt to obtain an answer to the first detailed research problem, which was as follows:

Is there emotional exhaustion in teachers on the example of Arkady Fiedler Primary School No. 5 in Gniezno?

Table 1 Emotional exhaustion

Answer Category	Subjects	
	Number	%
None	10	32,26
Low	17	54,84
High	4	11,76

The results of the survey show that emotional exhaustion occurs in 66.6% of respondents, i.e. more than half of teachers have a symptom of emotional exhaustion due to work. They feel like they're working too hard, they feel frustrated with their work. Among the respondents, 32.26% indicated that they do not feel exhaustion, burnout or stress in contact with people, which means that every third teacher does not have symptoms of professional exhaustion. A negligible percentage of the surveyed teachers opted for high emotional

exhaustion. They feel emotionally frustrated and exhausted by their work. In the area of emotional exhaustion, 77.4% of respondents believe that they work too much. The reason may be the multitude of tasks and responsibilities related to the profession.

Another problem was the answer to the question:

Does the phenomenon of depersonalization occur in teachers on the example of the Arkady Fiedler Primary School No. 5 in Gniezno?

Table 2 Depersonalization

Answer Category	Subjects	
	Number	%
High	11	32,26
Low	20	64,52

The results of the research analysis indicate that 32.26%, i.e. every third teacher among the respondents, manifests a high degree of depersonalization. Teachers are empathetic and do not show objectification to people. In 64.52% of the surveyed teachers, the phenomenon of depersonalization is low. The surveyed teachers are indifferent to people's needs and problems.

They feel responsible for the problems of others.

Another analyzed research problem allowed to answer the question:

What are the individual psychophysical capabilities of teachers on the example of Arkady Fiedler Primary School No. 5 in Gniezno?

Table 3 Self-assessment of one's capabilities

Answer Category	Subjects	
	Number	%
High	17	54,84
Low	14	45,16

As a result of the analysis of the data presented above in the table, it appears that 45.16% are a group of respondents who have a low assessment of their psychophysical capabilities. They do not feel large amounts of energy and do not treat emotional problems very calmly. On the other hand, their individual psychophysical capabilities are high in 54.84% of the surveyed teachers. They feel empowered, that they influence the lives of others through work, they easily understand the thoughts of their students in a specific thematic area. They also have a sense of achieving many important goals of their professional work.

The analysis of the data contained in Table 2 and Table 3 shows a correlation between the level of depersonalization and one's own assessment of one's capabilities. It is noted that the higher the occurrence of the sense of one's own psychophysical capabilities, the lower the phenomenon of depersonalization is noticeable. The conclusion is that the main cause of professional burnout is the feeling of ineffectiveness and efficiency of their work in the respondents (25.8%).

Summary and Conclusions

The main research problem posed in the research was the answer to the question:

Do teachers, on the example of Arkady Fiedler Primary School No. 5 in Gniezno, show signs of professional burnout?

The data collected during the empirical research showed the occurrence of burnout in teachers. The greatest was noticed in the area of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Emotional exhaustion refers to increased frustration and exhaustion with tasks performed at work, feeling worn out and tired, and excessive responsibilities resulting from the teaching profession. Low depersonalization of teachers has been demonstrated. From the moment they practice their profession, they feel the burden of taking responsibility for the problems of others.

It should be concluded that teachers show symptoms of burnout. It mainly occurs in the group of women with 15-25 years of experience, and in particular over 30 years of work in the profession. Another conclusion closely related to the years of work of teachers is the correlation between the length of service in the teaching profession and the phenomenon of professional burnout. Teachers with less professional experience are not characterized by symptoms of work fatigue and burnout. On the other hand, in a group with several years of experience in the work of a teacher, they feel tired of work, they feel "worn out", they have the impression that they work too hard and they feel frustrated. Another conclusion is that teachers with a professional promotion of a certified teacher are more likely to suffer from burnout. This may be related to seniority and excess of responsibilities.

In the next conclusion, I state that despite the phenomenon of burnout, teachers enjoy their jobs. They have the impression that through work they have a positive impact on life, they easily understand the thoughts of their students.

During the research, it is observed that there is a correlation between the level of depersonalization and one's own assessment of one's capabilities. The higher the teacher's sense of psychophysical capabilities, the lower the phenomenon of depersonalization is noticeable. Perhaps one of the main causes of burnout is the feeling of ineffectiveness of their work in every fourth of the surveyed people,

they claim that they do not help students in solving their problems.

The conclusions presented confirm the existing knowledge regarding the occurrence of burnout in teachers. The causes of burnout in teachers are mainly visible in the area of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This is confirmed by the concept of professional burnout according to Christina Maslach, where emotional exhaustion is accompanied by a feeling of general fatigue, impulsiveness and exhaustion due to an excess of responsibilities. The state of depersonalization is a derivative of excessive emotional exhaustion and building one's own attitude towards people.

Knowledge about teachers' burnout and the presented research results should be used in aid and remedial activities. Teachers should be trained in the proper organization of the day at work, not performing an excessive number of tasks, and using relaxation techniques. The use of appropriate relaxation techniques would help teachers achieve a higher level of depersonalization, which affects the level of burnout. On a larger scale, future teachers should be introduced to ways of coping with stress. This is an extremely important issue not only in the teaching profession, but also in everyday life.

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