

Sources and Manifestations of Stress in the Professional Life of Teachers in Relation to Their Managerial and Key Competencies

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the sources of stress and their manifestations in teachers' professional lives, with particular attention to their managerial and key competencies. Special emphasis is placed on the identification of stressors that teachers encounter on a daily basis and on the impact of these stressors on professional performance. The teaching profession places substantial demands on teachers' personalities, which play a decisive role in managing workload and require a range of key personal attributes and competencies necessary for effectively coping with demanding situations.

In contemporary educational contexts, it is essential to systematically monitor and map the sources and manifestations of stress experienced by teachers. Awareness of stress symptoms is valuable not only for teachers themselves but also for a wider professional and administrative audience, as it enables more effective adaptation to challenging situations and supports the efficient management of teaching activities.

Keywords: Stress, Sources of Stress, Manifestations of Stress, Teacher Work-Related Stress, Key Competencies

1 Introduction

The teaching profession has long been regarded as one of the occupations associated with a high level of psychosocial burden. Teachers are confronted on a daily basis with dynamically changing conditions, increasing societal expectations, and rising performance demands, all of which significantly affect their work-related well-being and professional stability. In addition to their educational responsibilities, teachers are required to possess a wide range of

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managerial, communicative, and social competencies necessary for the effective management of the teaching process, the creation of a stimulating learning environment, and the handling of diverse pedagogical situations. Considerable demands are also placed on their ability to organise time, demonstrate empathy, make decisions, and manage conflicts, each of which may be influenced by prolonged or intense exposure to stress.

Stress, in particular, reduces the effectiveness of key teaching competencies, disrupts pedagogical communication, and may contribute to a decline in the quality of the educational process. It is therefore important to systematically examine the ways in which stress-related factors influence the performance of teachers' professional competencies and affect their ability to adapt to demanding situations. Understanding these relationships represents a significant step towards the development of preventive and intervention strategies aimed at supporting professional satisfaction, mental well-being, and the long-term sustainability of the teaching profession.

The aim of this article is to emphasise the importance of understanding the sources of stress and their manifestations in teachers' professional lives, particularly in relation to their managerial and key competencies.

2 Stress in the Professional Life of Teachers

The theory of stress was first developed by Hans Selye, who defines stress as “a non-specific, stereotypical response of the organism, occurring as a so-called general adaptation syndrome, which is characteristic of the stress reaction regardless of the type of stimulus” (1966, cited in Macháč & Macháčová, 1991, p. 10).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984, in Baumgartner, 2001) created the transactional definition of stress, which is based on the study of interactions between the individual and the environment. Stress is defined as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that the person perceives as taxing or exceeding his or her personal resources and threatening his or her well-being.”

According to Selye, stress can be characterized as negative, i.e., distress, and positive, i.e., eustress. Both eustress and distress manifest physically in similar ways. From a health perspective, the impact of stress depends mainly on its intensity and frequency of occurrence. “The term distress is commonly used today to describe a situation of subjectively experienced threat for an individual, accompanied by often significantly negative emotional symptoms” (Křivohlavý, 2001, p. 171). Eustress, on the other hand, can occur when people voluntarily engage in challenging or risky situations, such as in sports performance (Křivohlavý, 2001).

The teaching profession is one of the most demanding occupations. Teachers must cope with both time-related and psychosocial pressures. Throughout their careers, teachers encounter various stressful situations that can negatively affect their professional life. During their teaching activities, they are exposed to a wide range of stressors, from demanding work tasks

and concerns about poor workplace relationships to fear of job loss and long working hours, which include both classroom teaching in the morning and preparing lessons, correcting didactic tests, and assessing students' mastery of the curriculum in the afternoon.

By its nature, the teaching profession is highly psychologically demanding, and the mental load continues to increase, which can lead to teacher stress and, subsequently, to burnout syndrome (Petlák & Baranovská, 2016, p. 48).

Průcha, Walterová, and Mareš (2003, p. 262) define teacher stress as “stress related to the performance of the teaching profession, the main sources of which, according to empirical research, are: students with poor attitudes toward work and disruptive behaviour, rapid changes in educational projects and school organisation, poor working conditions including limited personal prospects for career advancement, time pressure, conflicts with colleagues, and the perception that society undervalues the teacher’s work. When a teacher is under stress, it reduces the quality of their performance by decreasing job satisfaction and motivation, and it negatively affects relationships with students in the classroom.”

Kyriacou (2001) modifies his definition of teacher stress as a complex of interactions and relationships among personality traits, coping mechanisms, and the environment.

In numerous domestic and international studies on teachers' workload, it has been observed that at least one-third of respondents consider the workload associated with their professional duties to be very high, even extreme, and significantly greater than the demands of their life outside of work.

2.1 Managerial and Key Competencies in the Working Life of a Teacher

The teaching profession places significant demands on the personality of the teacher, who also plays an important role in coping with workload. This fact should be considered already during the selection of candidates for the teaching profession, who should possess personality traits that lead to more effective stress management.

A teacher must be a person who does not immediately succumb to stress, ‘panic’, or react impulsively, but rather searches rationally and meaningfully for optimal solutions, whether in relation to students, parents, colleagues, or school leadership (Petlák & Baranovská, 2016, p. 36).

Holeček (2001) identifies, from dozens of traits, those associated with the work of a teacher, which can also serve as a kind of stress barrier. These include the teacher’s attitude toward themselves, their work, others, values, and willpower traits.

More recent studies identifying characteristics of an effective teacher include the study by Polka (2006), which lists: good prior academic performance, communication skills, creativity, professionalism, pedagogical knowledge, thorough and appropriate assessment of students, self-development and lifelong learning, personality, talent or subject knowledge, and the ability to provide exemplary models.

Holeček (2001) also emphasises special teacher skills, which include didactic skills, pedagogical tact, expressive abilities, organisational skills, and the capacity for reflection.

Professional competencies of teachers include subject-matter expertise, pedagogical-psychological competencies, social and communication competencies, and managerial and organisational competencies.

Key areas of professional competencies include:

- Subject-matter competencies, which generally involve mastery of the curriculum, the ability to plan lessons, prepare appropriate teaching materials, and assess students' performance.
- Pedagogical-psychological competencies, which include understanding students' developmental, motivational, and emotional characteristics, identifying their needs, and adapting teaching to individual abilities.
- Social and communication competencies, which enable effective communication with students, parents, and colleagues, creating a supportive environment, managing conflicts, and building trust-based relationships.
- Managerial and organisational competencies, which involve classroom management, time management, organising teaching and activities, and effectively solving problems and conflicts.

Each country independently determines professional competencies for teachers. In Slovakia, these are defined by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic. Accordingly, pursuant to Section 41, par. 3 of Act No. 138/2019 Coll. on Pedagogical and Professional Employees and on Amendments to Certain Acts, as amended, the Ministry has issued professional standards aligned with the level of education for individual categories, subcategories, career levels, and career positions of pedagogical and professional staff.

A professional standard consists of a set of professional competencies that create the competency profile of a pedagogical employee.

They are organised into three areas and describe the professional activities of the pedagogical employee:

- Student Area – includes professional competencies aimed at understanding the student in the educational process.
- Educational Process Area – includes professional competencies focused on planning, preparation, implementation, and assessment of education, aimed at student development.
- Teacher Area – includes professional competencies related to the teacher's profession, improving their pedagogical and didactic expertise, cooperating with the school community, and contributing to the development of the school or educational institution.

Each professional competency is defined by the required knowledge (a set of information necessary for performing and correctly evaluating tasks within the competency) and skills (abilities acquired through practical experience).

2 Sources and Manifestations of Stress in the Working Life of a Teacher

2.1 Sources of Stress in the Working Life of a Teacher

Stress is not experienced uniformly by all individuals, as the intensity of stress perception depends on a range of factors. Our resilience to stress also fluctuates according to our biological rhythms – daily, monthly, yearly – and variations in performance and endurance. People with low self-esteem and limited social support are more likely to experience both psychological and physical symptoms of stress. Many domestic and international authors have studied the sources of stress in the professional life of teachers.

Kyriacou (2012, pp. 154–155) identifies the following factors as sources of teacher stress: students with inappropriate attitudes and low motivation for work, disruptive students, general indiscipline in the classroom, inadequate working conditions (school building and classroom facilities, school funding) including personal prospects for career advancement, frequent changes in educational projects and school organization, time pressure, conflicts within the staff, and a sense of being undervalued by society.

Holeček (2001), in his research on stressors in the teaching profession, identified seven factors that most frequently occur in the teaching environment:

1. Work overload of teachers
2. School management by higher authorities
3. Problematic students
4. Unmet need for self-realisation (frustration)
5. Problematic parents
6. Inadequate school-working environment
7. Problematic colleagues

The study by Žitniaková Gurgová and Behúňová (2017) identifies the most frequent teacher stressors using a non-standardized, self-developed questionnaire. Their sample consisted of 50 respondents from seven primary schools in the Považská Bystrica district. The authors found that the most common sources of teacher stress were frequent legislative changes, the presence of students with special educational needs, and the social valuation of the teaching profession. Other frequently mentioned sources of stress included salary conditions, holding multiple roles, and perfectionism. Conversely, the least stressful factors were relationships within the teaching staff, maintaining pedagogical documentation, and the relationship with superiors.

For comparison, Brenneman's research (2015 in Petlák & Baranovská, 2016), conducted in the USA with 30,000 teachers, found that the greatest sources of workplace stress for teachers were:

- Implementation of new procedures without proper training or integration into professional development – 71% of teachers
- Negative portrayal of teachers and school staff in the media – 55% of teachers
- Unclear and unpredictable work expectations – 47% of teachers
- Salary – 46% of teachers
- Lack of decision-making opportunities – 40% of teachers
- Fear of job loss – 32% of teachers
- Lack of opportunities for personal growth and promotion – 28% of teachers
- Physical exertion – 22% of teachers

According to Grečmanová (2007), there are circumstances that make teaching more difficult, including: large class sizes, addressing individual student differences, students with special educational needs, teacher unpreparedness to work with them, pressure to cover the required curriculum, and increasing demands from higher levels of schooling.

Other sources of teacher stress identified by Grečmanová include:

- Teachers do not have time to rest even during breaks (due to supervision duties, preparation of teaching materials),
- Teachers must fulfil tasks related to membership in subject committees, managing classrooms, or maintaining specialized teaching rooms,
- Teachers must cope with extensive administrative work,
- Lack of feedback – feedback is important for teacher motivation and can come from colleagues, management, school inspection, parents, and students,
- Inadequate recognition of teachers' work – sometimes teachers are criticized rather than praised, which can lead to reduced self-confidence,
- Teachers do not have any moments of rest during the school day.

3.2 Manifestations of Stress in the Working Life of a Teacher

Stress manifestations can be observed in three main areas: physiological, psychological, and behavioural. Most people are able to recognise when they are 'under stress', that is, when stress is influencing them. However, determining the intensity of stress is more difficult. The level of stress can be assessed based on the number of stress symptoms and their severity. Insomnia, sudden mood changes, headaches, loss of appetite, alterations in daily routines, restlessness, sadness, depression, irritability, and aggression are all signs of increasing stress and signal the need for teachers to pay greater attention to stress-inducing factors present in the teaching profession (Zelinová – Zelina, 2007, pp. 121–122).

According to Míček and Zeman (1997), the following stress symptoms can be categorized into physiological, emotional, and behavioural domains.

Short-term manifestations	Short-term manifestations
Dry mouth	Increased blood pressure
Sweaty palms	Fatigue
Heart palpitations	Exhaustion
Rounded shoulders	Headaches
Muscle cramps in limbs	Stomach aches

Table 1: Physiological Symptoms of Stress.
(Author: Míček, Zeman, 1997, s.16 – adapted by the author)

Acute symptoms	Chronic symptoms
Feeling nervous	Frustration
Negative thoughts	Depression
Self-doubt	Poor concentration
Rapid thinking	Feeling of loneliness
Slow thinking	Feeling of helplessness
Feeling excited	

Table 2: Emotional Symptoms of Stress.
(Author: Míček, Zeman, 1997, p. 18 – adapted by the author)

Impatience
Tearfulness
Forgetfulness
Raising one's voice
Increased restlessness
Frequent urge to smoke
Frequent urge to overeat
Anger

Table 3: Behavioural Symptoms of Stress.
(Author: Míček, Zeman, 1997, p. 18 – adapted by the author)

According to Smetáčková (2020), additional manifestations of stress include cognitive symptoms, which encompass difficulties with concentration, forgetting important tasks, feelings of being overwhelmed, and an inability to solve tasks effectively. Overall, stress in teachers manifests in a complex manner – physically, psychologically, and behaviourally – and these manifestations often overlap. Early recognition of symptoms and the implementation of appropriate stress management strategies are therefore crucial for maintaining work well-being, professional development, and the quality of teaching performance.

4 Sources and Manifestations of Stress in the Working Life of a Secondary School Teacher

Research Aim

Based on the above considerations, we formulated the following research problem:

Which factors and manifestations of stress most affect teachers at selected secondary schools in the Nové Mesto nad Váhom district?

In connection with this research problem, we defined the following objectives:

1. To identify which stressors, affect secondary school teachers in the Nové Mesto nad Váhom district.
2. To determine the most common symptoms of stress and the areas in which these stress manifestations occur.

Subject of the Research

The subject of our research primarily concerns secondary school teachers. From the various categories of pedagogical staff, we included general education teachers, vocational subject teachers, and practical training instructors in the study. The research sample consists of teachers of students from different study and vocational programmes, with varying lengths of teaching experience, ranging from recent graduates to teachers of retirement age.

Research Questions

Based on the research objective, we formulated the following research questions:

1. What stressors most frequently affect the work of secondary school teachers?
2. What are the most common manifestations of stress among secondary school teachers?
3. Which area of stress manifestation occurs most frequently among secondary school teachers?

Characteristics of the Research Sample

To obtain a larger sample for observation, we contacted several secondary schools in the Nové Mesto nad Váhom district. The study included teachers from the Secondary Vocational School of Trade and Services, the M.R. Štefánik Grammar School, the Secondary Industrial School in Nové Mesto nad Váhom, and the Secondary Industrial School in Stará Turá.

The respondents were aged between 25 and 65 years. The sample included teachers with a minimum of one year of teaching experience.

4.1 Results of the study

In total, 86 respondents participated in our study, of whom 65 were women (75.6%) and 21 were men (24.4%). By category of pedagogical staff, the study included 42 (48.8%) teachers

of general education subjects, 33 (38.4%) teachers of specialized subjects, and 11 (12.8%) vocational training instructors.

For the purposes of our research, we divided the sample according to teaching experience into two categories described by J. Průcha (2005): novice teachers ('pedagogical start' – 1 to 5 years of experience) and expert teachers ('pedagogical stabilisation' – more than 5 years of experience). The study included 67 (77.9%) expert teachers and 19 (22.1%) novice teachers.

Length of Teaching Experience	Absolute Frequency (n)	Relative Frequency (%)
Beginner Teacher	19	22.1
Expert Teacher	67	77.9
Total (N)	86	100

Table 4: Respondents by Length of Teaching Experience.

Within the variables, we decided to compare teachers also in terms of the Category of Teaching Staff.

Category of Teaching Staff	Absolute Frequency (n)	Relative Frequency (%)
Teacher of General Education Subjects	42	48.8
Teacher of Specialized Subjects	33	38.4
Vocational Training Instructor	11	12.8
Total (N)	86	100

Table 5: Respondents by Category of Teaching Staff.

Most Common Stressors Affecting Secondary School Teachers

The first research tool, which we used in a modified form in our questionnaire, is the methodology of the Romanian authors O. Clipu and A. Boghean (2015), originally titled '*Occupational Stress Perception Questionnaire*'.

The authors examined stressors among 150 Romanian kindergarten teachers. From the original 25-item scale, Žitniaková, Gurgová, and Behúňová (2017) selected fifteen items and retained the 5-point rating scale (1 = 'not stressful' to 5 = 'extremely stressful').

In our study, we adapted this methodology to allow us to investigate the frequency of individual stressors among secondary school teachers. Five items were replaced with new ones to better reflect the topic and the specifics of the sample under study.

The final set of stressors was created based on theoretical knowledge of stress and stressors from the professional literature, while also being adapted to the specifics of researching stressors among secondary school teachers.

In terms of frequency, the stress factors most commonly reported by teachers in their work are:

1. Low student motivation – 52% of teachers
2. Lack of interest from students – 51% of teachers
3. Student indiscipline – 49% of teachers
4. Inadequate financial recognition of teachers’ work – 47% of teachers
5. Increasing number of students with special educational needs – 46% of teachers
6. Low social status of the teaching profession – 44% of teachers
7. High administrative workload – 42% of teachers

Questionnaire Item	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
A lot of administrative work	4	4	3.57	0.95
Increasing number of students with special educational needs	4	4	3.53	0.96
Low social status of the teaching profession	4	4	3.73	0.97
Increasing number of students in the classroom	3	3	2.87	0.96
Relationships within the teaching staff	3	3	2.64	1.01
Problematic parents	3	3	2.91	0.97
Low student motivation	4	4	3.70	0.82
Psychological demands (constant monitoring, evaluation)	4	4	3.64	0.89
Insufficient material equipment and resources for teaching	3	3	3.17	0.95
Time pressure	3	4	3.60	0.92
Inadequate financial recognition of teachers’ work	4	4	4.05	0.78
Frequent changes in the State Educational Programmes	4	4	3.72	0.82
Responsibility for the safety and health of others	5	4	3.84	1.03
Lack of interest from students	4	4	3.60	0.77
Student indiscipline	4	4	3.37	0.82
Teaching in classes with very diverse levels of student knowledge	3	3	3.28	0.84
Low opportunities for professional growth	2	2.5	2.65	0.94
Lack of support from school management	2	2	2.08	0.89

Table 6: Statistical Differences in the Frequency of Stressor Occurrence.

Given the values of the statistical parameters (see table 6), we can conclude that the responses are fairly consistent across the entire sample of respondents and there are few so-called outliers.

Most Common Signs of Stress in Secondary School Teachers

As another research tool, we used the standardised questionnaire by C. Hennig and G. Keller (1996) with 24 statements covering physical, emotional, psychological, and social symptoms of stress, measured on an interval scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). This questionnaire also provides the option to determine the overall level of stress susceptibility.

By summing the values across all four areas of stress symptoms, a number corresponding to a certain stress profile is obtained.

Rank	Questionnaire Item	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
1	I have trouble concentrating. (P)	2	2	2.36	0.79
2	I have no joy in my work. (E)	2	2	2.48	0.99
3	I feel discouraged. (E)	2	2	2.17	0.99
4	I feel physically exhausted. (F)	3,5	3	3.20	1.04
5	I lack the desire to help problematic students. (S)	2	2	2.14	0.88
6	I have problems with my heart, breathing, digestion. (F)	3	2	2.36	0.98
7	I doubt my professional abilities. (P)	2	2	2.22	0.95
8	I am prone to illnesses. (F)	2	2	2.45	0.96
9	I avoid professional conversations with colleagues. (S)	1	2	1.62	0.68
10	I make mocking remarks about students and their parents. (P)	1	1	1.30	0.59
11	I feel helpless in conflict situations. (E)	3	2	2.35	0.90
12	Frustration from schoolwork disrupts my private relationships. (S)	2	2	2.16	0.96
13	My professional growth and interest in the field are lagging behind. (P)	2	2	2.19	0.97
14	I am internally dissatisfied and nervous. (E)	2	2	2.48	1.06
15	I feel tense. (F)	2	2	2.60	1.10
16	I limit teaching only to conveying the curriculum. (S)	2	2	1.91	0.84
17	I am thinking about leaving the teaching profession. (P)	1	2	2.31	1.14
18	I suffer from a lack of recognition and appreciation. (E)	2	2	2.50	1.06
19	I sleep poorly. (F)	3	3	2.67	1.08
20	I avoid participating in further education. (S)	1	2	1.86	0.95
21	I fear losing track of developments in my field. (P)	2	2	1.72	0.71
22	I feel scared. (E)	1	2	1.79	0.97
23	I suffer from headaches. (F)	2	2	2.26	1.20
24	Whenever possible, I avoid conversations with students. (S)	1	1	1.48	0.68

Table 7: Stress Manifestations among Secondary School Teachers by Frequency of Occurrence of Individual Manifestations.

Based on the calculated average values of individual stress manifestation items, the most frequently reported manifestation among secondary school teachers is physical exhaustion. The least frequently reported stress manifestations were avoiding conversations with students and making mocking remarks about students and their parents. The statistical parameters again indicate good consistency in the respondents' answers.

Explanations:

F = Physical domain of stress impact

E = Emotional domain of stress impact

P = Psychological domain of stress impact

S = Social domain of stress impact

Rank	Area of Stress Impact	Mean
1	Physical Domain	2.59
2	Emotional Domain	2.29
3	Psychological Domain	2.02
4	Social Domain	1.86

Table 8: Stress Symptoms among Secondary School Teachers by Specific Areas of Impact.

Based on the average values obtained from respondents for the different areas of stress impact, it appears that the overall level of stress manifestations among secondary school teachers is relatively balanced. The values suggest that, despite the presence of stressors, most teachers exhibit good overall bodily equilibrium and the ability to recover, indicating their relative resilience to the negative effects of stress and their capacity to cope with daily work demands.

5 Conclusion

In the first research question, we found that secondary school teachers consider the most frequent stress factors in their work to be low student motivation, lack of interest and indiscipline on the part of students, inadequate financial recognition of teachers’ work, the increasing number of students with special educational needs (SEN), low social status of the teaching profession, and a high administrative workload. These factors collectively create significant psychological pressure on teachers and negatively affect their well-being, motivation, and teaching effectiveness.

Students with low motivation and lack of interest often disrupt the educational process, requiring teachers to exercise greater patience, flexibility, and the application of individualized approaches or creative teaching methods. The growing number of students with SEN further increases demands on teaching, as it requires differentiated approaches, careful activity planning, and often the presence of an assistant to ensure quality education for all students. Inadequate financial recognition, low social status of the teaching profession, and high administrative workload additionally contribute to feelings of frustration and demotivation, draining energy that could otherwise be devoted to direct teaching and student support. The combination of these factors thus significantly contributes to occupational stress and increases the risk of burnout among secondary school teachers.

Within the framework of the second research question, secondary school teachers identified the most frequent manifestations of stress as physical and psychological exhaustion, increased susceptibility to illnesses, headaches, and inner tension. These manifestations are closely linked to the demands of teaching, the high responsibility for the educational process, and the strain resulting from administrative duties, working with problematic students, and constantly adapting to legislative or organizational changes.

Based on the calculated average values of individual items, physical exhaustion emerged as the most pronounced manifestation of stress among secondary school teachers. This result indicates that occupational stress often affects teachers not only psychologically but also physically, potentially impacting their overall well-being and ability to effectively conduct teaching. Conversely, the lowest-rated stress manifestations included avoiding conversations with students and making mocking remarks about students or their parents, suggesting that teachers generally maintain professional behaviour and strive not to express negative emotions toward either students or parents.

Overall, the results highlight physical and psychological strain as the main indicators of occupational stress, while also considering broader implications for teachers' health and the quality of the educational process.

Based on our research findings, we can confirm the conclusions of several authors that the teaching profession is among the highly stressful occupations. Secondary school teachers face a combination of psychological, physical, and administrative burdens that may lead to occupational burnout, decreased work motivation, and negative effects on teaching quality. These findings emphasise the need for systematic support for teachers from schools, society, and relevant state institutions to minimise the negative impact of stress on teachers and promote their well-being and the effective education of students.

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