

## Occupational Stress Felt by Teachers and Students

### **Maria Daniela Pipaş**

Associate Professor, PhD, Faculty of Economics, Management Department, "Bogdan Vodă"  
University of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
dpipas@yahoo.com

### **Janetta Sîrbu**

Professor, PhD, Faculty of Economics, Management Department, "Bogdan Vodă"  
University of Cluj-Napoca, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
sjanetta2002@yahoo.com

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**ABSTRACT:** In fast-paced and demanding work environments such as education, occupational stress is a significant concern for all stakeholders. Occupational stress occurs when the demands of a job or organizational environment exceed an individual's ability to cope, leading to a range of physical, emotional and psychological problems. As the nature of work evolves, understanding the causes, effects, and management strategies of occupational stress becomes increasingly important. Unfortunately, in educational environments, occupational stress affects both teachers and students. This stress can stem from various sources, including workload, expectations, and the emotional demands of the teaching and learning processes. Understanding the nature of this stress and its implications is crucial for fostering a healthier educational atmosphere. On the other hand, confronting stressors can lead to the emergence of adaptive mechanisms that will reduce the state of stress in subsequent interactions with different stressful situations. Although most of the time, stress only causes negative effects, such as reduced availability to communicate and interact with others (which can lead to social isolation and the appearance of negative transformations on an emotional, mental, or behavioral level), stress can also have a positive side, representing a challenge that will lead to personal development.

**KEYWORDS:** occupational stress, coping, self-efficacy, anxiety, performance

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### **Introduction**

Experts in various fields have written about workplace stress and its effects on employees. The one to whom the "paternity" of the concept of stress is attributed is Selye (1984, 8) who stated that: "life itself is a stress." In this sense, Stănculescu (2015, 15) emphasizes: "starting from this conceptualization, we can deduce that stress is not necessarily something negative." Because confronting stressors can

offer the possibility of developing adaptive mechanisms that can later be useful. Thus we can deduce that stress can contribute to the personal development of the individual or, on the contrary, can lead to their isolation when negative transformations occur due to stress. These negative transformations can manifest at different levels: emotional, relational, mental, or behavioral.

Regardless of the form that stress takes (chronic or acute, professional, academic, relational, etc.) the physiological mechanisms and the effects triggered by it are the same, but it depends on how each individual reacts. Stănculescu (2015, 12) shows that: “there is no stress in itself, but a very large variability of manifestations of perceived stress (the actual experience generated by the sources of stress) and anticipated stress (the imagined experience or anticipation of the appearance of stressful factors).”

According to some authors (Quick et al. 2012, 53), for most individuals, the most important stressors are represented by: work, financial situation, interpersonal relationships, children, school, fear of a disaster/terrorist attack, other sources. Recently, researchers have identified the stressors associated with workload: pressure to complete tasks, the urgency of carrying out activities, bureaucracy, the large volume of procedures and methodologies that are applied in the office, confusion about the responsibilities related to work tasks. Stress management is influenced by a number of social or psychological factors, but the most used strategies are coping strategies. Depending on the conditions in which the stressors appear, different coping strategies are used.

### **Stress and coping strategies**

Earnest and Dwyer (2010, 888) define stress as: “an emotional or physical state caused by exposure to a challenging situation. Situations are perceived as threatening depending on the confidence that the individual has in their own ability to cope with difficult situations.”

Taking into account the definition of stress given by Earnest and Dwyer, following some studies, it was concluded that when the adaptation mechanisms (to the challenging situation) fail to maintain the body's equilibrium state, different reactions occur at a psychic, functional or metabolic and neuro-physiological level (Stănculescu 2015, 19-20):

- **Reactions at psychic level:** manifests itself through the appearance of disturbances either of an emotional nature (depressive states, anxiety, neuroses) or of a cognitive nature (irrational cognitions, distorted thoughts);
- **Reactions at functional level:** refer to the way the internal organs work;
- **Reactions at metabolic level:** when the metabolism is disturbed, somatization reactions occur (gastrointestinal disorders);
- **Reactions at neurophysiological level:** they affect the neuro-psychic functionality.

Selye (1978, 22), claims that moderate or low-intensity stress does not have negative effects. On the other hand, prolonged exposure to stressful factors constitutes demands that can exceed the mental and physical resources of the individuals concerned (Zautra 2003, 13) and lead to the appearance of somatic or even socio-emotional reactions (Broman-Fulks and Kelso 2012, 39).

To begin with, it is essential to establish a clear theoretical framework for the concept of coping. Thus we can say that there are two visions that define coping:

1. Coping is a “personality trait” - for the followers of this vision, coping represents: “a set of adaptive, unconscious defense mechanisms” (Vaillant 1998, 62), i.e., an important tool for controlling instinct;
2. The second view focuses on the process element of coping: followers of this view claim that coping represents: “the totality of stress control efforts. These efforts change over time, being shaped by the adaptive context that generates them” (Lazarus and DeLongis 1983, 246). This approach is contextual in nature and refers to the person-external environment relationship.

There is a multitude of opinions issued in order to define and/or establish the nature of coping, but most specialists agree that the following types of coping are the most effective:

1. Emotion-focused coping – “People use emotion-focused coping to prevent negative emotions from overwhelming them and hindering them in their problem-solving efforts” (Atkinson et al. 2000, 703-704);
2. Problem-centered coping – Considering the person-external environment relationship, problem-solving in this situation focuses on accumulating information to define the problem, finding alternative solutions and choosing the most suitable solution, making decisions and resolving the conflictual situation.

Regarding the relationship between stress and age, experts in the field show that adolescence is a rather difficult period. This period involves changes both from a psychosocial point of view and from an emotional and physiological point of view. Because of this, teenagers are more vulnerable and require coping strategies. Cunningham et al. (2002, 216) argue that in the short term, these changes in adolescents have a negative effect on academic performance. Carlton et al. (2006, 302) concluded that adolescents who achieve good academic results have much better mental health than students who perform poorly. In the long term, stress can lead to (Grant et al. 2004, 415): “increased adolescent vulnerability to neurotic (anxiety and depression) and behavioral disorders.”

Piko (2001, 223) carried out a study on a group of teenagers, after which she came to the conclusion that girls apply passive coping strategies, they orient themselves towards seeking support from those around them, and boys apply active coping strategies, focusing on the problem. The final conclusion was that the type of socialization of emotions in childhood induces gender differences, with

boys being taught not to externalize their fear, or emotional and physical distress, displaying a stronger front, while girls are used to receiving more attention and emotional support, especially from family.

In the specialized literature, a new term appeared, that of “burnout”, which designates the syndrome of emotional and physical exhaustion, which sometimes sets in over time, as a result of professional overload, role conflict: “excessive demands from superiors, the pressure and urgency of carrying out activities in a fixed period of time, which lead to the draining of the resources of the individual concerned.” Legeron (2003, 182), describes four stages of the “burnout” syndrome:

1. Emotional and physical exhaustion;
2. High level of stress, due to professional demands that exceed the individual’s resources;
3. Aversion to oneself, with self-blame and the appearance of the feeling of uselessness, sometimes the emergence of aversion to other peers;
4. Cynical attitude towards the workplace and the activity itself, as well as low effectiveness.

Considering the demands of the teaching profession, it is understood that professional stress can turn into “burnout” syndrome at any time, in conditions where the pressures for performance and quality increase, or in the absence of organizational support and positive feedback.

If this syndrome occurs, teachers no longer have the physical and emotional energy needed to overcome the problems they face every day. In such situations, individuals present somatic manifestations that affect the internal organs and even emotional level manifestations that can lead to depression (Hakanen, Bakker and Schaufeli 2006, 498).

### **Self-efficacy and school stress**

Bandura et al. (1996, 1206) studied this relationship, first defining self-efficacy and demonstrating the importance of the beliefs that the individual has in connection with “his ability to exercise control over his own functionality and the demands of the environment.” Self-efficacy influences the level of motivation of the individual, the attitude towards the difficulties that arise, the aspirations and perseverance with which the individual pursues the fulfillment of the objectives, the attributions of failure and success as well as the way of managing stress.

School self-efficacy represents the set of beliefs that the student has in relation to their ability to learn, master the contents of various subjects and, last but not least, achieve their own expectations, the expectations of parents and teachers. In 1996, Bandura built an explanatory model of self-efficacy, starting from social cognitive theory, to demonstrate school performance, including several predictors: parental school efficacy and aspirations, as well as students’ socio-economic status. At the end of the research, a direct link between socio-economic

status and parental aspirations was observed: the higher the socio-economic status of the student's family, the higher the parental aspirations related to the evolution and cognitive development of their own children.

Furthermore, parents' self-efficacy and aspirations contribute to building the child's self-efficacy and aspirations. It can be inferred that there is a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and aspirations. In this sense, it has been observed that students whose parents have high expectations develop over time the ability to self-regulate, thus resisting group pressures to engage in undesirable activities. In these cases, the teaching staff has the role of mediator between parents and students, because parents give an important role to teachers in the development of their children. The involvement of parents in the relationship between teachers and students leads to the valorization of the role of the school, to the increase of commitment of teachers and students towards achieving school performance.

Unfortunately, reality has shown that there are also situations that lead to negative results, such as parents having a hostile position toward their children and criticizing the work of teachers. In such cases, students can take over the parents' expectations and attitudes, ending up being hostile towards teachers and their interventions, or they will face ambivalent experiences that can be generated by their positive perception in relation to the teaching staff and the parents' negative perception towards teaching staff. In this situation, students cannot manage the stressful impact and become demotivated due to the tensions that affect the teacher-student relationship, as well as school performance.

To avoid such situations, Bandura et al. (1996, 1209) state: "it is much easier for parents to influence the school system, giving a high value to their children's education rather than trying to change instructional practices used by teachers."

Another study, conducted by Suh and Suh (2006, 16), demonstrated the importance of creating a strong bond between students and the school, respectively between teachers and their colleagues. Following this study, it was observed that students who had positive attitudes towards peers, teachers, school and the learning activity, could face stressors more easily, having a stronger motivation for learning.

Students who have behavioral problems as well as low social skills will not be accepted by their peers, and their own perception of inefficiency in establishing supportive and satisfying interpersonal relationships will lead to the appearance and accentuation of negative emotions, which may induce a depressive state. At the same time, students who consider school tasks as a burden that far exceeds their ability to solve them, will be more affected by stressors than students who have increased self-efficacy. On the other hand, when the student perceives a task as challenging, there is a much greater chance that he will use coping strategies to help them accomplish that task.

Another stressful factor for the student is exams. Thus, it was observed that nerves have a predictive factor for school performance. Optimistic students who have high self-esteem may use positive coping strategies to cope with academic stress more easily, compared to distrustful, pessimistic students who may develop negative coping strategies. The latter were found to have a higher dropout rate.

### **Stress in examination situations**

All situations in which students are checked to determine their learning progress (current, summative, continuous assessment, formal and informal assessment, tests, theses, aptitude test and baccalaureate exam), represent a whole list of academic stress situations. Some of the students perceive these types of assessments as threatening.

Von der Embse and Hasson (2012, 184), showed that when anxiety is high, in evaluation situations, unwanted effects on the results can very easily appear. Anxiety is considered the biggest disruptive factor in school performance.

In situations of anxiety, generated by assessments of school progress, teachers must understand the nature of these reactions and be concerned with establishing a climate of stimulation of the need for affirmation as well as elimination of fears related to failure. In this sense, Woolfolk (2012, 342) recommends teachers to:

- Creating learning situations through cooperation methods;
- Avoiding situations in which students who show anxiety answer in front of the class. Using some strategies to eliminate excessive competition between students;
- Avoiding time pressures;
- Clearly formulating the tasks that the students have to fulfill;
- Decreasing and even eliminating nervousness before important assessments;
- Development of alternatives to written tests, such as reports, essays, portfolios, etc.;
- Carefully reading the requirements of the evaluation tests;
- After testing – analytical approach to good parts and parts that can be improved.

The practice found in the school environment of motivating students to achieve performance, by creating a tense environmental environment before the assessment and using messages that appeal to the fear of not passing the respective exam, are totally ineffective. Such practices have the opposite effect of the intended one and lead to a decrease in school performance due to the emergence of a high level of anxiety.

## Occupational stress factors

Not only students can feel academic stress factors, but also teachers, only that the latter feel so-called occupational stress that appears at work. Occupational stress in the case of teachers is quite widespread and appears against the background of excessive demands that often exceed their resources and coping strategies.

Levy et al. (2017, 29) define occupational stress as: “a state of perceived imbalance between demands and the individual’s ability to respond to them, in conditions where the impossibility of meeting these demands has important consequences.”

In specialized literature, occupational stress is seen as a dependent variable (a person’s response to negative stimuli coming from the environment), an independent variable and a transactional process (demonstrating the mismatch between the environment and the person in question).

Regarding occupational stress factors, researchers in the field have concluded that there are both beneficial stressors and negative stressors. Among the most well-known occupational stressors we can mention:

- Factors related to the individual (biological factors, type of behavior, personality, developed coping mechanisms, etc.);
- Factors related to the physical environment of the workplace;
- Factors related to the profession and the activity performed (Ursu 2017, 20);
- Time pressure, lack of time management;
- Factors related to the organization’s structure and climate;
- Students’ lack of motivation;
- Discipline problems in the classroom that, in order to be managed, involve using higher amounts of teaching-learning time;
- Purely theoretical and very loaded didactic programs;
- Role ambiguity generated by the conflict between the didactic conception of the teaching staff and the conception promoted by the school in which they work;
- Relations with colleagues and school management that promote an authoritarian leadership style (lack of organizational support);
- Frequent changes in the system, changes of educational policies, the impossibility of attending continuing professional training courses, etc.;
- Lack of support from students’ parents;
- Increasingly higher standards for evaluating the performance achieved in working with students.

The most devastating effects of occupational stress are those related to job satisfaction and the individual’s health.

Job satisfaction was defined by Locke (1969, 312), as: “the positive and pleasant emotional state resulting from the evaluation of one’s job or one’s work experiences.” From this point of view, we can argue that job satisfaction has an

extremely important role, especially in its relationship with professional performance. A low satisfaction will be associated with the emergence of organizational problems (absenteeism, non-fulfilment of professional duties, staff turnover, sometimes even sabotage), while a high satisfaction will lead to the achievement of beneficial results for the organization.

In cases where employees present a state of dissatisfaction at work, their state of mental health will be a precarious one. These individuals will avoid interaction with co-workers and organizational leadership, become isolated, uncommunicative, and eventually experience anxiety and depression.

Taking into account the multitude of stress factors that are specific to the teaching profession, McIntyre, McIntyre and Francis (2017, 42), came to the conclusion that teachers who have deficient coping strategies, eventually end up facing relational and even emotional difficulties or, in worst cases, burnout syndrome.

In a study by Kyriacou and Chien (2004, 89), several ways to cope with stress were listed:

- Maintaining a harmonious family life;
- Deep understanding and mastery of the material to be taught to students;
- The existence of a supportive person, who empathizes with the difficult emotional experiences that the teaching staff goes through;
- Relaxation after the completion of a working day;
- Emotional self-regulation capacity (controlling negative emotions and finding solutions to manage emotional suffering).

Stress-resistant teachers are in control in challenging situations and overcome negative emotions, use active coping and have confidence in their own strength, have a healthy lifestyle, accept and consider the advantages of peer support. For teachers, occupational stress often arises from a combination of factors. High workloads, including lesson planning, grading, and administrative duties, can lead to feelings of overwhelm. Additionally, teachers face the pressure of meeting diverse student needs, managing classroom behavior, and adhering to curriculum standards. The emotional labor involved in supporting students - especially those facing personal challenges - can further exacerbate stress levels. Furthermore, the lack of resources and support from administration can leave teachers feeling isolated and undervalued.

Students, on the other hand, experience stress from different angles. Academic pressures, such as the need to perform well on exams and maintain high grades, can create a significant burden. The competitive nature of educational environments often leads to anxiety and fear of failure. Additionally, social dynamics, including peer relationships and extracurricular commitments, can contribute to students' stress levels. The increasing prevalence of technology and social media also adds a layer of complexity, as students navigate online interactions and the pressure to maintain a certain image.



## **Impact of Occupational Stress**

The impact of occupational stress on teachers and students can be profound. For teachers, chronic stress can lead to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and even physical health issues. This not only affects their well-being but also their effectiveness in the classroom. Stressed teachers may struggle to engage students, leading to a less dynamic learning environment. For students, the consequences of stress can manifest in various ways, including decreased academic performance, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and difficulties in social interactions. The pressure to succeed can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as procrastination or substance use. Moreover, the stress experienced by students can create a cycle that affects their future educational pursuits and career choices.

## **Strategies for Mitigating Occupational Stress**

Addressing occupational stress requires a multifaceted approach. For teachers, schools can implement support systems, such as mentorship programs, professional development opportunities, and access to mental health resources. Encouraging a collaborative environment where teachers can share experiences and strategies can also alleviate feelings of isolation.

For students, fostering a supportive school culture is essential. Schools can provide resources for stress management, such as counseling services and workshops on coping strategies. Encouraging open communication about mental health and creating an environment where students feel safe to express their concerns can significantly reduce stress levels.

Additionally, promoting a balanced approach to academics, where the emphasis is not solely on grades but also on personal growth and well-being, can help alleviate pressure. Schools can also encourage extracurricular activities that allow students to explore interests outside of academics, providing a necessary outlet for stress relief.

## **Conclusions**

Occupational stress is a pervasive issue that affects both teachers and students within educational settings. By recognizing the sources and impacts of this stress, educational institutions can take proactive steps to create a healthier environment.

Through support systems, effective communication, and a focus on well-being, schools can help mitigate the effects of stress, ultimately leading to a more positive and productive educational experience for all factors involved.

Addressing occupational stress is not just beneficial for individual well-being; it is essential for fostering a thriving educational community.

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