

ANALYSIS OF DETERMINANTS OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AMONG TEACHERS IN PRE-UNIVERSITY SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Occupational stress is a major challenge for teachers in pre-university education, having a significant impact on their emotional well-being and on the quality of the educational process. In the modern context, characterized by the rapid digitalization of education, high administrative workload and pressure to achieve excellent academic results, the level of stress experienced by teachers has increased considerably. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this problem, forcing teachers to quickly adapt to online teaching, which has amplified the feeling of being overworked. This research aims to identify the main factors that contribute to occupational stress among pre-university teachers in Dâmbovița county. The study has a quantitative character and is based on an opinion survey carried out among pre-university teaching staff, with the aim of identifying and analyzing the determining factors of professional stress. The study highlights the need for support programs for teachers, as well as the importance of implementing organizational measures to reduce stress levels. The results suggest that better stress management can contribute not only to improving teachers' well-being, but also to increasing overall educational performance.

KEYWORDS: *occupational stress, teachers, stressors, pre-university environment.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is a ubiquitous reality in modern society and is even considered to be the "disease of the 21st century" (Stoica & Constantin, 2022, pp. 124-134). Irrespective of the sphere of activity or social environment, every person is confronted with stressful situations, which can originate from the personal or organizational sphere. In this context, the rapid development of society has brought with it significant changes in the field of work, which has put additional pressure on teachers, who are often exposed to constant sources of stress (Stoica & Constantin, 2022).

Stress has negative consequences on professional activity, and teachers often face difficult emotional states, such as emotional instability, anxiety or a sense of threat. This pressure on teachers has increased considerably in recent years as modern challenges in the education system have intensified. These challenges include the rapid digitization of education, high administrative workloads and constant pressure to achieve excellent academic results (Whitaker et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected online teaching have generated new challenges in teachers' careers, amplifying the level of stress felt. Teachers have had to adapt quickly to new methods and new technologies, which has created a sense of overwhelm for many of them. From this perspective, it is clear that teacher stress is a current problem with profound implications for the quality of education (Calvo-Paz et al., 2022).

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Studying this topic is particularly important given the major impact that stress has on teachers' well-being and the educational process. A stressed teacher is less able to provide quality education, which can directly affect student outcomes and school climate. Therefore, identifying and implementing effective strategies to manage stress among teachers can not only improve teachers' well-being, but can also contribute to increased job satisfaction and the quality of the education provided (Agyapong et al, 2022).

Thus, the topic of occupational stress has significant implications both for teachers and for the entire education system, making it a relevant and necessary topic of study in the current context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of stress is a broad topic that has captured the interest of health researchers over the ages, with Selye believing that prehistoric man realized the common features of those feelings of discouragement and exhaustion that came over him after hard work, excessive heat or cold, fear or long periods of illness. Even if he did not realize that similar reactions always occurred when something was beyond his strength, this feeling nevertheless instinctively drew his attention to the fact that the limits of his own capacity were exceeded (Selye & Goupil, 1991).

Stress can be defined as the body's physiological, psychological and behavioral response to challenges or stressful situations. It occurs when changes occur in a person's life that take them out of their comfort zone, and is a complex response of the body to external factors that are perceived by the person as a threat (Bondac, 2023).

It is important to emphasize the difference between the two notions of stress: eustress and distress (Selye & Goupil, 1991). Eustress is experienced as a state of well-being, which motivates and contributes to an individual's personal development. Selye also claimed in 1956 that, in small doses, stress can also have beneficial effects. For example, stress in the workplace helps to increase productivity. A problem arises when stress is experienced over a long period of time, this is where distress arises, which is caused, for example, by the demands of the job that the employee feels he or she cannot fulfill (Stănculescu, 2015). It is characterized by a negative state - the feeling of vitality in the case of eustress turning into exhaustion.

In pre-university education, stress can arise from different sources and can affect both students and teachers.

Acute stress: the most common type of stress, it can be useful in the short term and passes fairly quickly. It is the body's immediate reaction to a specific situation or temporary pressure. It can occur when a person is faced with a one-off challenge, such as an important exam, a tight deadline or an unexpected situation (Coșa, 2011).

Episodic stress: occurs when a person feels constantly pressured by circumstances or responsibilities and is afraid that negative events might occur. When left untreated, this type of stress can lead to changes in behavior, such as irritability, unintentional hostility or relationship problems, and serious illnesses such as heart disease (Drumea, 2022).

Chronic stress: is a persistent form of stress that can affect a person's long-term mental and physical health. It can be the result of continuous exposure to stressful situations, such as a stressful workplace, ongoing relationship conflicts or other circumstances that last over a long period of time. Untreated, it can lead to lung disease, heart disease, cirrhosis or even cancer (Cui, 2022).

The stressors for teachers in pre-university education are numerous and can have a profound impact on their emotional and physical state. One of the most common stressors is the heavy workload, which includes not only the actual teaching, but also administrative tasks, lesson preparation, marking homework and involvement in various extra-curricular activities. This accumulation of responsibilities can lead to burnout and a lack of work-life balance (Drumea, 2022).

Another major stressor is the constant pressure to get good academic results from students. Teachers are often assessed on the performance of their class, which can create anxiety. This pressure becomes even more acute in the context of national examinations, such as the National Assessment or the Bacalaureate, where the stakes are high for both students and teachers.

Interactions with pupils' parents can also be a source of stress. In many cases, parents have high expectations and may put pressure on teachers to achieve certain results or to favor students. Difficult communication with parents, particularly in cases of conflict or disagreement, can create a continuous state of tension for teachers (Hayes, 2006).

On top of these pressures, excessive bureaucracy in the education system adds an extra layer of stress. Teachers are often overwhelmed by administrative demands, such as filling in reports, documents and forms that are not directly related to the teaching process, but are imposed by the institutional system.

Insufficient resources and poor working conditions are another stress factor. In many schools, the lack of teaching materials, technical equipment or adequate space for educational activities negatively affects the quality of teaching and makes teachers feel powerless in situations beyond their control (Belwal et al., 2023).

Adapting to new technologies has become an increasing stress factor, especially after the introduction of online schooling. Teachers who were not familiar with digital platforms had to quickly learn how to integrate technology into their teaching, which increased anxiety and frustration, especially in the absence of adequate training (Rãmureanu, 2008).

The lack of recognition and appreciation for their efforts should not be ignored either. Teachers often feel that their work is not sufficiently valued either by society or by the institutions in which they work. This feeling of under-appreciation can lead to demotivation and, over time, burnout (Selye & Goupil, 1991).

Conflicts with school management or colleagues can be an additional source of stress, particularly in environments where lack of effective communication or authoritarian management policy creates a tense atmosphere. Teachers can feel isolated and unsupportive when there is no collaborative team environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In conclusion, teacher stress is caused by a variety of factors, ranging from heavy workloads and pressures for academic results, to bureaucracy, lack of resources and difficulties in adapting to new technological demands. All of these factors contribute to teachers' physical and emotional exhaustion, making it necessary to implement supportive and stress-reducing strategies to ensure their well-being (Sikora et al., 2004).

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Stress stems from factors such as high workload, lack of resources and managing relationships with students and parents, which emphasizes the need for effective stress management strategies in educational institutions. The aim of this research is to identify the determinants of occupational stress among teachers in pre-university educational institutions.

The research is quantitative, based on an opinion survey conducted among teachers in pre-university education, in order to identify and analyze the determinants of occupational stress. The study was conducted in high schools in Dâmbovița County and aimed to identify the main sources/factors of stress among teachers. The sample consisted of 340 teachers from high schools. This sample is considered representative in order to provide an overview of the level of stress experienced among teachers. The information was collected by means of a structured questionnaire consisting of 14 pre-determined questions, covering issues related to the level of stress and the main sources of stress. The questionnaire was distributed either in physical format or via an online platform (Google Forms), ensuring the confidentiality of the answers provided by the respondents.

A voluntary approach was used. Data processing was carried out using Statistical Package in the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel programs.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The table 1 shows the demographic data of the respondents.

Table 1. Sample of respondents according to demographic data

Variables		Percentages
1. Gender of teachers surveyed	male	32 %
	female	68 %
2. Age of teachers surveyed	under 30 years old	21%
	30-40 years	24%
	41-50 years	30%
	51-60 years	25%
	over 60 years	5%
3. Residence background of teachers surveyed	urban environment	56%
	rural environment	44%
4. Length of service of the teachers interviewed	under 5 years	16%
	5-10 years	22%
	11-20 years	28%
	over 20 years	34%

Source: by author

The analysis of the interviewed teachers provides relevant insights about their distribution according to gender, age, residential environment and professional experience. The majority of teachers are women (68%), while only 32% are men. This reflects the global trend of feminization of the teaching profession, a trend observed in many educational systems. Teachers are relatively evenly distributed among different age groups, but those between 41-50 years old (30%) and 51-60 years old (25%) predominate. This indicates that the main stage of teachers are in the middle of their career, which can bring a balance between accumulated experience and the ability to adapt to no. The distribution of teachers between urban and rural areas is relatively balanced, with 56% of them coming from urban areas and 44% from rural areas. The distribution of professional experience shows that most teachers have considerable experience in the education system. Over a third of teachers (34%) have more than 20 years of experience, suggesting a strong base of experienced teachers who can mentor younger colleagues and help maintain educational standards.

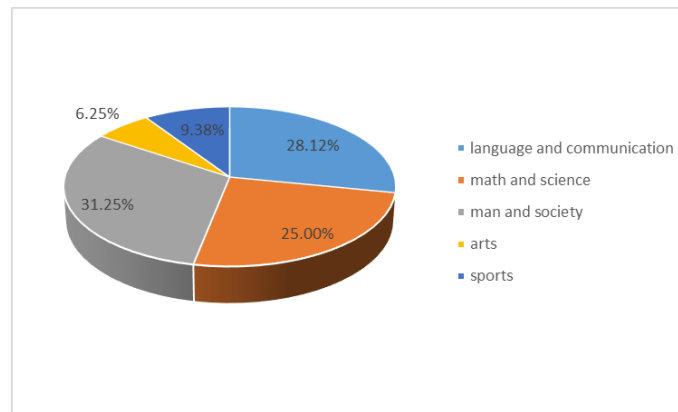


Figure 1. Curriculum areas of the subjects taught by each teacher
Source: by author

After analyzing the responses, it was found that the highest percentage of teachers who teach subjects in the human and society curriculum area, 31.25%, followed by language and communication teachers with 28%, and only 3 percentage points difference between mathematics and science teachers. The smallest share is held by arts and sports teachers, with a total share of 15.63% (Figure 1).

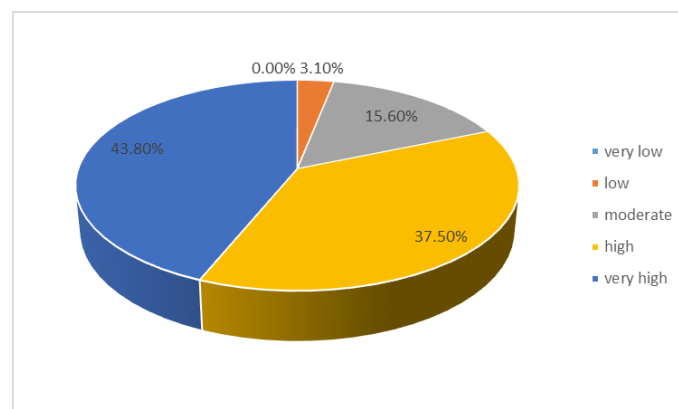


Figure 2. Level of stress experienced by teachers
Source: by author

In question number 6 of the questionnaire, in which teachers were asked "How do you rate the level of stress at work?", an alarming 81.3% rated the level of stress as high or very high (43.8% rated it as very high and the remaining 37.5% as high), while only 18.7% of respondents rated it as moderate or low (15.6% rated it as moderate and 3.1% as low) (Figure 2).

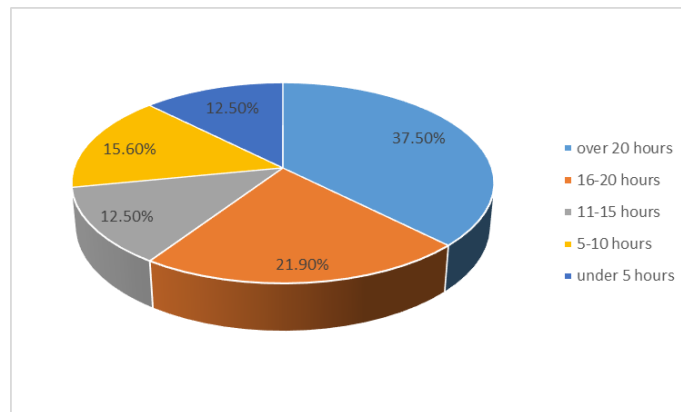


Figure 3. Number of hours devoted by teachers to non-teaching activities
Source: by author

Some 37.50% of teachers spend more than 20 hours of their free time on activities related to marking, planning, etc., and 21.9% of teachers spend between 16-20 hours on these activities. These figures are worrying and emphasize the high level of teachers' stress through overload, as their free time is getting shorter and shorter (Figure 3).

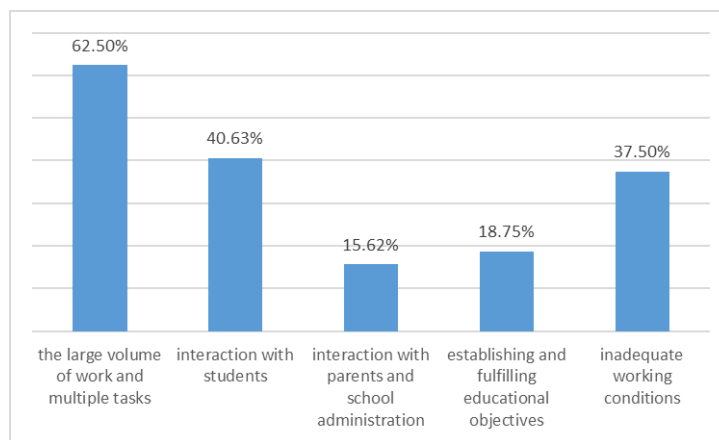


Figure 4. Main sources of stress in teaching
Source: by author

As confirmed in Figure 8, teachers are primarily affected by high workload and multiple tasks. The next source of stress is interaction with students, and then they are dissatisfied with working conditions (Figure 4).

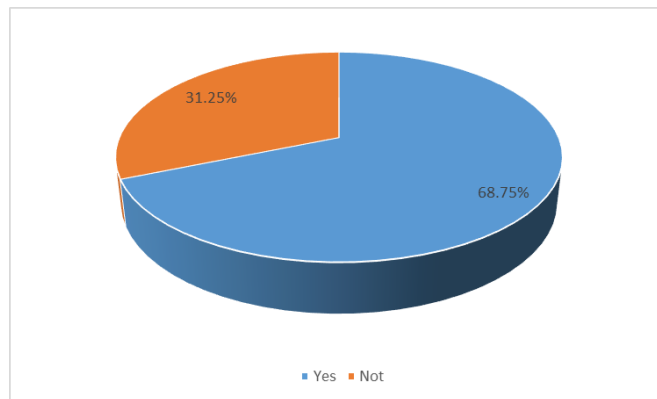


Figure 5. Stress and personal relationships

Source: by author

Question number 9 (Appendix 1) addressed a topic that affects every person, regardless of their field of work: "Do you feel that professional stress affects your personal relationships outside of the work environment?" Almost 70% of the teachers answered in the affirmative, which justifies the need for effective stress management (Figure 5).

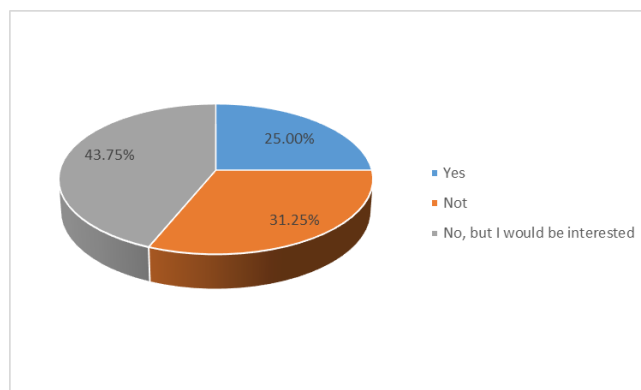


Figure 6. Participation in stress management training programs

Source: by author

The 75% negative responses to the question "Have you ever participated in training or coaching programs on stress management?" reveal that teachers do not know how to manage their stress effectively, justifying why it also affects them in their personal relationships. However, they responded 43.75% that they would be interested in participating in stress management training programs, which highlights their desire to address stress-related problems (Figure 6).

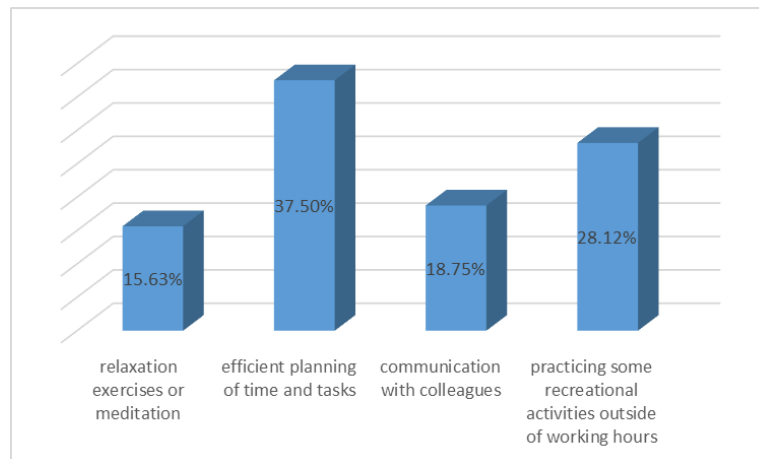


Figure 7. Stress management methods used by teachers
Source: by author

The top preferences of teachers when it comes to stress management methods are: effective time planning, preferred by 37.5% of them, practicing recreational activities outside working hours, in a percentage of 28.12% and communicating with colleagues, in a percentage of 18.75% (Figure 7).

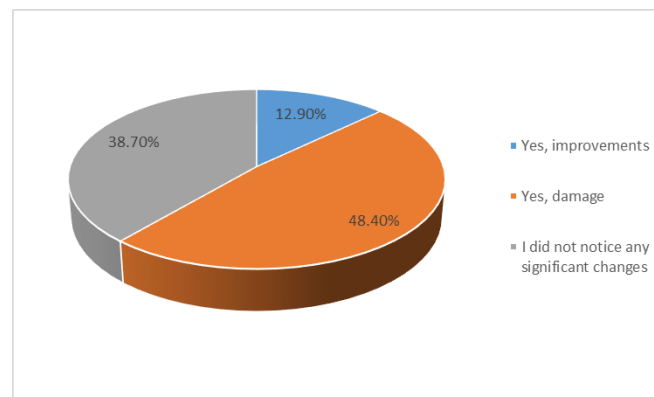


Figure 8. Changes in teaching performance during periods of high stress
Source: by author

As shown in graph 10, in which we specified that 75% of the teachers have not benefited from training programs on stress management, the situation is not too good in the case of teaching performance in periods of high stress. Thus, almost half of the teachers experience a deterioration in their teaching performance, a sign that they do not know how to manage their stress, which becomes overwhelming for them (Figure 8).

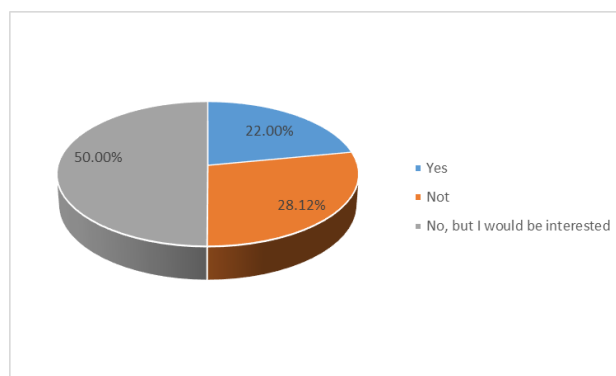


Figure 9. Need for psychological support to manage work-related stress

Source: by author

Once again the lack of specialized help for stress management is highlighted. Some 50% of the teachers surveyed have not had psychological support for this problem, but would be interested (Figure 9).

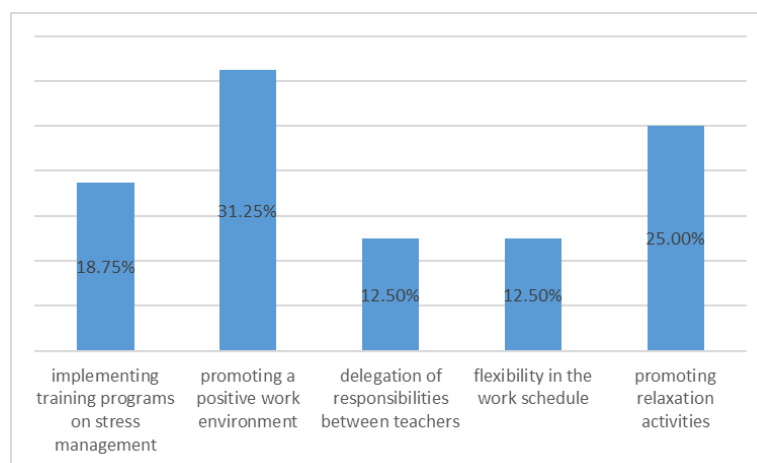


Figure 10. Strategies considered appropriate to improve stress management in the educational institution

Source: by author

The last question aimed to find out which methods of stress management teachers think should be implemented in the educational institution where they teach. Thus, they need, first and foremost, to promote a positive working environment, to promote relaxation activities and to implement training programs on stress management (Figure 10).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The teaching profession is a field that has always attracted the interest of health researchers, and research has shown that stress among teachers is a palpable reality. Factors such as high workload, interaction with students, multiple tasks and working conditions are sources that can generate considerable stress.

This stress is not just a theoretical problem, but has a profound impact on teachers' physical and mental health, manifesting in symptoms such as burnout, anxiety, depression, negatively influencing performance at work and personal relationships outside the work environment.

Because of these consequences for teachers and the people around them, there is a clear need for effective strategies to manage stress.

On an individual level, it is recommended that teachers use solution-oriented and emotion-oriented coping methods, such as seeking psychological support, exercising, taking up a hobby, adopting a positive attitude.

Educational institutions should also take into account the specific needs of teachers in terms of stress management. The implementation of support programs and changes in the institutional framework could be key solutions to help teachers manage the pressures and stress in their working lives more effectively.

The answers collected in the questionnaires provide a clear insight into the strategies that could be implemented to mitigate these negative effects and create a more favorable and healthy educational environment.

One of the basic strategies proposed for managing stress is to create a positive work environment, in caring for relationships between colleagues to be built on mutual support, understanding and collaboration. In such a climate, teachers can feel supported and encouraged, which reduces tensions and contributes to a more relaxed and pleasant atmosphere within the institution. Organization of social activity and team-building events, specific ways to strengthen team spirit and create opportunities for socializing in an informal setting. Such initiatives not only help reduce stress, but also increase group cohesion, making the teaching team more efficient and resilient. It is necessary to implement stress management training programs. Training programs should include training sessions in practical techniques for stress reduction, effective time management and developing emotional resilience. Thus, teachers can acquire useful skills not only to cope with professional pressures, but also to increase their work-life balance.

In conclusion, stress is a present and significant reality in the lives of secondary school teachers. There is a need to find effective solutions to address this problem and to provide teachers with a healthier and more supportive working environment that enables them to perform their work properly and to feel well both within the institution and in their personal lives.

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