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Factors Causing Professional Stress to Teachers of Secondary Education in Greece: Comparative presentation of three empirical studies

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Abstract

In this work, the stress factors of secondary education teachers in Greece are studied. This specific problem is part of the research theme, called professional anxiety of teachers, since it focuses on the causes of this problem at the specific level of education. It is particularly important to explore this phenomenon in order to clarify which factors are causing it, to design effective strategies for tackling it, to enhance the effectiveness of teachers and to improve the quality of educational work. In addition, for managing the stress of teachers, it is necessary to further develop the relevant research in the educational institutions and enrich the existing theory.

Keywords: professional stress, teacher stress, secondary education, stress factors

Introduction

The term teacher stress refers to negative feelings and unpleasant experiences that are experienced by teachers ^[1]. It is a reaction to the negative impact of job issues, usually accompanied by harmful psychological changes ^[2, 3]. This is a sub-category of occupational stress. In this paper, three relevant empirical studies will be presented ^[4, 5, 6], developing a theoretical framework and denoting that stress deteriorates not just the physical and mental health of teachers, but also their professional efficiency and effectiveness, thus making the study of this phenomenon imperative. They briefly present the most important researches, recently recorded in Greek and international bibliography, but they don't directly predict what they expect to find. Their bibliographic survey includes the main stress factors, classified in two main categories.

External factors related to school, its modern functioning and the overall socio-economic climate, that include:

- the existence of inappropriate working conditions;
- the lack of cooperation within school;
- the increased educational needs of children;
- the behavior problems with particular pupils;
- the difficulty of interacting with parents;
- the heterogeneity of the classes;
- the teachers' workload;
- the exigent requirements of the educational administration;
- the limited government support;
- the inadequate training, lack of information on modern educational issues and constant changes in curricula;
- the economic crisis, low wages, limited social status of the profession and multiple professional obligations;
- The difficulty of combining professional and family life.

External factors, related to the individual characteristics of teachers and their demographics, such as age and gender:

- In relation to their personality, it is highlighted that stress appears strongly in teachers experiencing competitiveness, ambition, control and enforcement, unrealistic expectations. Contrariwise, stress is limited when teachers have self-esteem, internal control and psychological endurance.
- Age, associated with years of service, is a major cause of anxiety, since younger educators haven't activated appropriate coping strategies to reduce the work-related stress caused by the difficulties of their profession.
- Gender is a key stress factor, since women show higher levels of anxiety and higher job dissatisfaction, because they experience negative conditions in the classroom, are negatively treated by the pupils and suffer the consequences of mismatching professional-family life.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is defined in the aforementioned empirical studies and is linked to the appropriate research questions. The importance of conducting them is highlighted as a prerequisite for the planning and implementation of effective teacher prevention programmes and management strategies. The central research question is related to the identification of specific sources of work anxiety experienced by teachers serving in Greek Secondary Education. There are also sub-questions that correlate the factors of creating teachers' anxiety with gender and age, in order to draw clearer conclusions about the general population and its management strategies.

These empirical studies are quantitative, considering theories, assumptions are used and their researchers want to measure variables. Their impact is assessed, as their effects affect a large number of people. The size of the target population in each survey is considered adequate, nationwide. They accurately record their main demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, educational level, years of service, marital status. Simple random sampling has been applied. The questionnaires, which didn't change during the surveys, focused on questions about the factors, namely, the sources of stress as well as other relevant issues. Queries are clear and specific, mostly of closed type. The six-point Likert scale was used to record the answers. For the analysis of the data collected, specialized statistical software programs were utilized, such as the SPSS 20.

Results & Discussion

Through a sufficient data analysis and the documented interpretation of the findings, the conclusions, described by graphical representations, tables and figures, generally confirm what is stated in the theoretical framework. In particular, in all three surveys regarding the demographic characteristics of participating teachers, it is noted that most of those who accepted to respond were women, aged between 41 to 50 years. Most of them have taken a postgraduate degree (fewer a PhD). The majority of the sample had been teaching for less than 10 years.

The most important results of the descriptive and inductive statistical analysis are related to the identification of the most important stress factors. Initially, moderate to high levels of anxiety are observed on average, ranging from 3

and above (3 - moderate anxiety, 4 - high stress levels) on the six-point scale. Then, the main stress factors are the problems faced nowadays, such as the economic and social degradation of the teacher's profession, having average values (AV) 3.67 and 3.59 respectively. Moreover, in one of the three surveys, it is noted that stress causes the economic problems that they face (AV=3.47), as well as their fear about a future salary reduction (AV=3.33). Other important sources of anxiety are the following:

- the possible abolition of their positions (AV=3.84);
- the change in working relations (AV=3.47);
- the merging of schools (AV=3.37);
- The linking of performance evaluation to dismissal (AV=3.72), while they consider as very important the linking of this evaluation to wage promotion (AV=3.30).

The answers also revealed that teachers consider as quite aggravating factors the impact of economic crisis on teaching, such as:

- the large number of pupils in the same classroom;
- the lack of interest on the part of pupils;
- the lack of resources and equipment;
- the lack of specialists in schools (psychologists, social workers);
- The lack of discipline by particular pupils and the slow progress of some of them.

Indicatively, in one of the three surveys it was observed that teachers consider the previous difficult working conditions at school to be an important factor in creating stress (AV=3.16), including the large number of pupils in classroom (AV=3.34). Other duties, such as the administrative work, on-call duty or homework, does not seem to be a particular source of stress.

The demographic characteristics of teachers are correlated with stress levels, since teachers have widely agreed both in the fact that more educational/professional experience reduces stress levels (AV=3.62) and that less experience increases stress levels (AV=3.45). It has also emerged that the profile of a democratic Principal reduces stress levels (AV=3.59), while an authoritarian profile increases the levels of anxiety (AV=3.54). Another notable finding is that the good performance of pupils reduces stress levels (AV=3.37).

Only one of the aforementioned surveys is complemented by anxiety management strategies. They are categorized on a personal level by recognizing early symptoms and adopting personal choices, such as: daily physical exercise; adequate rest; balanced and healthy eating; the usage of leisure time with enjoyable activities; as well as strengthening strategies for enhancing their qualifications and acquiring personal assets, such as: teaching experience; training and lifelong learning; updating in new teaching methods. On a second level, teachers consider it less important to have effective collaboration with the school Principal or school counselor and more important to adopt a climate of cooperation in the school environment, through:

- "exchange of views and advice",
- jointly seeking solutions to the problems that arise through discussion,
- "rationalization of situations",
- Equality and cooperation.

Finally, important factors for limiting the stress of teachers are the family life, the wider social environment, friendly relations, the cooperation with parents, honest relationships with their pupils.

Conclusions

The three examined empirical studies lead to remarkable conclusions about the main factors that cause the stress of secondary education teachers in modern times. In particular, the related average values and significance levels are determined. No contradictory findings or ambiguities regarding the purpose and wording of the problem were identified, although in none of the three surveys their quality has been assessed based on recognized standards. It is also a positive fact that the three surveys take into account previous studies and choose different participants in different environments at a later time. Although in Greece, in the last decade, educational research has been limited due to the economic crisis, since it is mainly carried out in the framework of postgraduate dissertations and doctoral theses, the specific empirical surveys extend the themes of previous research and focus on aspects related to contemporary issues, such as the effect of economic crisis. One of the surveys is well correlated, albeit partially, with stress management techniques in general, since the overarching purpose of research is to contribute to educational practice.

Interesting issues that require additional research^[7] are further statistical processing, the determination of independent and dependent variables, volatility measurements, case control, the correlations between factors such as the existence of a modernized school library, the working time of teachers, the number of courses, the diversity management, the number of students per class, the position of a teacher at school and the association of all these factors. Particularly useful would be if relevant proposals were made not only for personal stress management techniques but also for effective governmental interventions to prevent work-related stress, so that the state may proceed to their institutionalization. In addition, references could be added to all inquiries regarding the ethics of research. Regarding the utilization of information technology in conducting these surveys, although negative elements are the lack of personal contact with the respondents and the difficulty of controlling the sample, significant advantages are found in ensuring anonymity and resources savings. Finally, it is suggested that the sample should also include teachers of private and special education, in order to study comparative questions.

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