# Sources and Components of Professional Stress from a Teacher's Perspective

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**Abstract** The teaching profession is often associated with stress, which has a negative impact on the individual and can have negative consequences on the academic achievements of students. To determine the components of individual sources of occupational stress on a sample of 538 teachers, qualitative methodology was used, and a thematic analysis was conducted. The research problems were as follows: gaining an insight into the components of the experience of stress in relation to individual sources of stress and gaining an insight into teachers' actual difficulties and their thoughts, which the researchers assumed went beyond the sources of occupational stress in the workplace. Results: the components of individual sources of occupational stress are most often related to students, parents, expert associates and principals, excessive administrative tasks, and to a lack of professional training. The teachers also expressed their dissatisfaction with the social status of their profession and saw it as a significant source of stress.

# 1      Introduction

In general, teachers[1], regardless of the institution where they work (be it kindergartens, primary or secondary schools), regularly experience professional stress in the workplace (Sandilos et al., 2018; Harmsen et al., 2018; Dankade et al., 2016; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007). The sources and intensity of this stress differ considerably, but the vast majority of teachers most often link the cause of professional stress to students and their parents (Randhawa, 2009), working conditions, which have recently been connected to online teaching (Rapanta et al., 2020; Ljubetić, 2020), the non-existence and/or the inefficiency of the institution's expert team, poor interpersonal relationships (Van Thanh, 2016), the principal's incompetence (Blase, 1987), and very often to excessive administration.

Contemporary pedagogical practice expects teachers to have more and more diverse and complex competences in order to respond to their demanding role; this is evident from the fast-changing educational goals that are created in line with the requirements of the contemporary era. This, in turn, requires teachers to have more abilities, knowledge and skills. These requirements also lead to increased professional stress. One of the participants in the study stated the following: "I want to stress that the demands put forward by our profession are increasing and that this is great because we are making progress as a society and as individuals. However, there is less and less training provided to meet these challenges." Since teachers are largely responsible for the functioning and development of the education system, they need strong and effective professional competences. Therefore, Selvi (2010) emphasizes the need to review and redefine teachers' competences depending on the development of overall human life and education. Kress (2000, p. 133) points out that "the previous era had required an education for stability, the coming era requires an education for instability," which is one of the fundamental features of today. Therefore, one seems justified in asking how to remain stable in an unstable world, or more specifically, what destabilizes teachers in their professional life and environment and what kind of support system do they need? Ljubetić and Kostović Vranješ (2008) conducted a study on a sample of 260 teachers in the Split-Dalmatia County, which showed that the teachers were occasionally assessed as being pedagogically incompetent because they felt insecure, did not take responsibility,

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[1] The term teacher refers to kindergarten, class, and subject teachers. It is gender neutral.

were aware of their own mistakes and difficulties in solving disciplinary problems, etc. It is very likely that they experience a higher or lower level of stress and need/expect help and support first and foremost in their professional environment. It is reasonable to expect that timely and appropriate support would also result in reduced levels of stress and eventually in greater efficiency and satisfaction with the teaching profession. Therefore, it seems important to explore the sources of stress in the professional environment (kindergarten/school) and understand them as risk factors that need and can be reduced and/or eliminated. At the same time, it is important to explore and raise awareness on protective factors (support factors) that can significantly reduce the negative impact of risk factors on teachers' success and satisfaction, but it is necessary to create conditions for this to be achieved.

## 2　　　Methodology

### 2.1　　　Research Aims and Problems

The research presented in this paper is part of a broader scientific study conducted by Full Professor Maja Ljubetić, Associate Professor Ina Reić Ercegovac and Toni Maglica, PhD, from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split, on a sample of 538 kindergarten, elementary, and high school teachers to determine the sources of professional stress and support in their work environments. In this study, the respondents completed the Measures of Strengths, Supports, and Stressors for Teachers – MOST (Sandilos & DiPerna, 2021) questionnaire and answered two open-ended questions. The two questions were aimed at investigating the sources of stress in more detail and, based on the answers obtained, and acting at the levels of educational policy and founder to reduce and/or eliminate sources of stress.

In this paper, the focus is on the following two open-ended questions:

1. What specifically causes you the greatest professional stress?
2. What do you want to say/emphasize that was not covered in the questionnaire?

These questions aimed to determine the research participants' free associations. Therefore, qualitative methodology was used, as it provided a better insight into the participants' personal experiences and their subjective perceptions of stress. Insights

into the personal experience of stress or support provide an understanding of the meaning that a particular situation holds for the participant (Maxwell, 1996, according to Milas, 2005). This is a process wherein the subjective dimension of assessment is acknowledged. Thomas (according to Merton 1995, p. 384) emphasizes: "If people define things as real, they are real in their consequences." Thus, an insight into personal experience allows one to understand the meaning that a situation has for an individual (Maxwell 1996, according to Milas 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological systems theory provides a basis for understanding and explaining how professional stress and teacher support are experienced at all levels of the educational system. as it includes multiple and dynamic systems that make up an individual's environment, which can be simultaneously understood as sources of professional stress but also of possible support. Therefore, to analyse the environment (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem), the participants' perceptions of certain relationships (with colleagues, expert team, children, parents, educational policy, principals, etc.) are more important than what they are really like. The participants had the possibility to interpret their reality and to insist on their subjectivity. In line with this premise, Ajduković (2014) stresses that qualitative methodology is aimed at gaining an insight into the whole and providing detailed descriptions of individual situations, processes and events, focusing on the modes of interpretation and of giving meaning to the world and the social context in which the individual exists. The questions focused on the participants' perspectives as well as the way they saw and experienced the sources of stress. The participants were allowed to speak in their own words and from their own perspective, thus leaving the possibility of collecting data not predicted by theory or anticipated by the questions in the questionnaire. Such an approach provided broader and deeper insight into the issues being researched.

## 2.2    Conducting Research and Data Processing

The online study was conducted in February 2021. All research participants received information on the research purpose and goal, the method of implementation, voluntariness and anonymity, and the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time. The study had been reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split (2020).

The results cannot be generalized, but conclusions can be drawn on how most participants perceived reality, i.e., on the most common sources of stress that teachers experience in their institutions and beyond. Given the stated research goal, the following two research problems were set: a) gaining an insight into the components of stress experience in relation to individual sources of stress (children, parents, professional associates, working conditions, etc.), and b) gaining an insight into teachers' real difficulties and their reflections that researchers assume go beyond the sources of professional stress in the workplace.

When analysing the obtained data, all three researchers separately recorded the codes, which they compared after conducting separate analyses. During the process of coding, the codes began to repeat themselves, reaching a point where new codes no longer emerged, which Glaser and Strauss (1967) call saturation.

Thematic analysis, as the basic qualitative method recommended for such research (Braun & Clarke, 2012), was used to analyse the data. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) point out that the goal of thematic analysis is to identify interesting and important themes/patterns that the researchers use to answer the questions asked or address the research problems. Data analysis was conducted following the phases of the thematic analysis as prescribed by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) and Braun and Clarke (2012). The paper cites authentic participant testimonies, because in qualitative research "the report is written primarily in the participants' words" since the researchers' focus is on their perception and experience (Creswell, 2009, p. 195). Themes and codes obtained through thematic analysis are data-driven, according to Joffe (2012), and will be presented in the results, while the patterns, themes and codes will be considered in the discussion section from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological development systems theory (Maglica et al., 2020).

### 2.3    Participants

This paper presents only certain results of the study in which 538 participants (kindergarten, class, and subject teachers) took part. Of the participants, 93.7% were women. The participants were aged between 24 and 63 and had between 1 and 42 years of work experience. Concerning education, 0.6% of the participants had

completed high school, 36.4% had a vocational school degree, and 60% had an undergraduate university degree. A total of 1.5% of the participants had completed graduate university studies, and 1.5% of participants had a master's degree or a PhD. The sample included 46.5% kindergarten teachers, 36.4% subject teachers, and 17.1% class teachers. Their institutions were located in the city (78.4%), municipality (11%), countryside (34%), on the islands (3.3%), or on the mainland (0.9%). A total of 7.8% of the participants expressed their complete satisfaction with their monthly income, while 21.4% were completely dissatisfied. The vast majority of participants expressed satisfaction with their monthly income (70.8%).

## 3 Results and Discussion

The results will be presented in relation to the research problems, with an overview of the codes and the themes that arose (*Table 11*).

**Table 1: Research codes and generalized topics – Sources of stress**

| Theme | Codes |
| --- | --- |
| Children's/Students' parents | "Constant complaints from parents", "Demanding parents (with unrealistic demands)", "Unreasonable attacks by parents", "Unwillingness to cooperate or poor cooperation with teachers", "Parents neglect their children/students", "They talk badly about teachers", "They do not appreciate the teachers' effort and commitment", "Inappropriate reactions in problem situations (e.g., in situations when a child is injured in kindergarten)", "Parents frustrated with their own parenting", "Uncooperative parents of a child with behavioural difficulties", "A minority of parents trying to impose their opinion on the majority", "Parents providing increasingly less support for teachers", "Parents 'interfere' with every segment of learning and assessment." |
| Children/Students | "(Too) many children in classes and in educational groups and the need for a 'third' kindergarten teacher" ("Pedagogical standard! Will we ever meet it?"), "Children's injuries and running away from the group/kindergarten (causes a permanent feeling of fear in kindergarten teachers)", "Children's/students' rude behaviour as a consequence of lacking manners (disrespect for teachers, vulgarity, disrespect for the school environment)", |

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| | "Children with behavioural difficulties (internal/external difficulties)",<br>"Children's aggressive behaviours towards peers and adults",<br>"A large number of children with special needs",<br>"Children behave in very different ways and have different habits (which the kindergarten teacher detects at the beginning of the pedagogical year, they have little information about the children and are expected to act promptly)",<br>"A large number of students (about 500) and the constant obligation of descriptive monitoring",<br>"Students' lack of interest and apathy (inability to motivate students to work)",<br>"Students' socio-economic and emotional problems". |
| **Expert team at the institution** | "A lack of supervision and professional support and/or weak support",<br>"A lack of support from the management and no expert team",<br>"Expert team's disrespect for practitioners",<br>"Irresponsibility and idleness of the expert team",<br>"A lack of understanding from the experts",<br>"A feeling of helplessness and being left to fend for oneself in all situations that should involve professional associates",<br>"Experts are more focused on meeting parents' needs rather than those of the children." |
| **Principal** | "Poor organization, untimely and nonclear notifications of tasks classified as 'other'",<br>"Changes in operations that are introduced hastily without prior agreement and cooperation with the teacher",<br>"A lack of communication with superiors, not taking into consideration our opinions, belittling teachers",<br>"A lack of support, no reactions to the problems presented",<br>"Principal's inadequate and very unprofessional behaviour",<br>"Giving prominence to individual colleagues at school",<br>"The principal does not provide support and does not protect us (we are always the ones who are the grown-ups, and we have to deal with problems at school on our own)",<br>"Principal's disrespect and non-acceptance of our competence and personal success". |
| **Agency/Ministry/Founder** | "Neglect by the Ministry and the founders",<br>"Founders, principals and professional associates belittle teachers",<br>"Inconsistency of all those responsible for the current situation in the kindergarten (and whose great promises begin and end with political campaigns)",<br>"A system in which rules are not clear and the laws are not respected; a political abuse of power due to which society and even the education system cannot make progress",<br>"Adapting the institution to the expectations of the community (of parents) that do not favour the child's progress",<br>"Practitioners' resilience to changes and poor support of the Education and Teacher Training Agency",<br>"Doubting the success of the implementation of the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education", |

|  | "Curricular reform has been implemented quickly and I am not coping well in implementing the reform." |
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| **Working conditions** | "Paperwork (too demanding, many tasks, short deadlines)", "Cramped and unsafe spaces for kindergarten children", "Lack of equipment and teaching aids (kindergarten)", "Lack of technical equipment (school)", "Obligation to fill in for an absent employee in a kindergarten (frequently, without material remuneration)", "Working conditions are constantly changing because of the current situation (online classes, masks, working in an insecure school following the earthquake)", "I experience a lot less stress at school, online classes are exhausting", "Constant changes within the subject (informatics and technical culture)", "Changing classrooms during the day", "Introduction of new technologies and programs", "Low salary in relation to the level of education", "The same salary regardless of whether the teacher has a bachelor's or a master's degree", "A constant sense of lacking time due to pointless paperwork", "Teachers compensate for (material) things missing at the institution with their own (additional) engagement and resources." |
| **Personal** | "A subjective feeling that I don't know something; I'm not prepared enough, etc.", "No possibilities for training", "A sense of incompetence to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to children's special needs." |
| **Relationships** | "Evil people, individuals who constantly cause discomfort, and because of whom there is a negative atmosphere in the team", "Lack of socializing with colleagues (due to the pandemic)". |

In general, the results could be explained by a quote from a participant who stated the following in relation to the research aim: "*Increasing administrative requirements, increasing effort to motivate students to work, less support from parents and the community. There is a lack of teams of psychologists and social workers who will enter the classrooms and talk to children who are having a hard time dealing with problems, and we are finding it increasingly difficult to deal with them. A school psychologist and pedagogue are no longer enough. The school can no longer solve the accumulated problems on its own.*"

As can be seen from the results, the majority of the teachers' sources of stress come from parents and students. Teachers perceive parents as demanding and accusatory, and their cooperation poor, even offensive. This is not surprising, since many international studies indicate the same sources of stress among teachers (Brady & Wilson, 2021; Aydin & Kaya, 2016; Randhawa, 2009). When examining the results

concerning the students as sources of stress, most of the statements deal with the high number of children (in a kindergarten setting) and their behavioural problems (running away, disrespect, vulgarity, aggressive behaviour) and how to deal with them. It is not surprising that the preschool teachers who consider it very important have the knowledge and competences to work with children with behavioural problems, evaluate their personal competences as mediocre and are highly motivated to improve in this field (Maglica & Tomić Kaselj, 2021).

Some sources of stress are more related to working conditions, which depend on the following decision-makers: the Ministry, the education agency, and principals themselves. Too much administrative work, low salaries, deadlines, a lack of technical equipment, as well as objective circumstances, such as the pandemic and online teaching, cause the teachers to feel stressed. Regarding principals, their role in forming institutional culture is crucial but they also report high levels of stress caused not only by parents (their indifference) and their indecisive behaviours, but also by teachers' undocumented behaviours, and unnecessary reports by and permissions for teachers and staff (Cevik et al., 2022).

The participants also covered the perception of their status in society. The teachers were united in their assessment that they are insufficiently recognized and appreciated in society, which can be deduced from the following statements: *"Negative opinion of the environment on the teaching vocation that parents often pass on to their children. It takes a lot of effort and work to alleviate and/or correct such a distorted opinion step by step"; "The demands on us teachers are great, and the state invests in education modestly"; "Being a teacher is an honourable and responsible job, but unfortunately underestimated in our society"; "My job is extremely important for the development of young people into healthy people and should be more recognized in society as such"; "Education policy in the city. That is the only thing that frustrates me at the moment, and that no one appreciates our many years of systematic effort and work"; "I think that many teachers are frustrated by the fact that our profession is totally marginalized and very often ranked as a service activity"; "It is often difficult to work with high school students who have difficulty concentrating and are unmotivated, but there are days that undo all of the above and this forces us to remain optimistic and enthusiastic in the classroom despite the weak support from and demeaning by the Ministry, pedagogical services and society."*

It is clear that the participants were dissatisfied with their treatment and status both in their own institutions and in society in general, and although most often they are considered underpaid, this reason does not stand in the forefront of their dissatisfaction. The results obtained are in line with the results of studies by Mutluer & Yüksel, (2019), Aydin et al. (2015), and Van Laar & Sidanius (2001). In considering the obtained answers in the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development, it is clear that if a kindergarten/school is understood as a microsystem, its survival, quality, health and functionality depend on the support network of all other systems (meso, egzo and macro), which is, as assessed by the teachers, lacking.

## 4    Conclusion

The participants' free associations (second question) most often focused on the following specific **proposals for the researchers**: "The attitude of the competent Ministry and the Agency towards us should be investigated. How much do they help or hinder?", "Investigate the relationship between the legal department and the school administration and how much they are of use to the teacher", "Talk more about teaching in combined classes, level of school equipment, working in one shift", "Children's and teachers' mental health should be dealt with. In fact, from the very beginning, we should work more with parents and raise their awareness of their mistakes in the educational process that they are not aware of"; **for the creators of educational policies**: "Let us be more of an educational institution. Education is more talked about", "I think that professors (mentor, advisor) should be ranked differently, because it is not the same whether vocational or general education subjects are taught. Everything is available for general education subjects (literature, preparation, training), and for the vocational subjects, there is often no literature, there is no preparation at all, almost no training. The profession should be addressed once and for all."; **for the founders and principals**: "Training is available to us if we have the initiative ourselves to attend a training course, if we want to improve our work and our practice on our own […] sometimes we finance our own training", "Reducing administrative work would significantly contribute to our job satisfaction and greater commitment to children. We are dealing more and more with papers (plans, programs, reports, minutes, consent, etc.), and less and less with children."

A kind of resignation can be felt when reading one participant's comment: "In the beginning, I was very enthusiastic in my work, and I wanted to complete everything the best I knew how. As the years go by, I try to stick solely to teaching lessons rather than waste my time and energy on other people's ideas and problems." Another participant concludes: "My answers would be much more positive if the school building was safe, if I was not worried about the pandemic and if there was less corruption and crime that have almost been legalized. All this is related to education and upbringing because it is difficult to be satisfied and full of enthusiasm when a parent from a position of power violates the teacher's integrity or when the education authorities grope in the dark and do not adopt a quality curriculum, but it is instead being written for a political period of 4 years."

One of the participants' comments, in a way, concludes all of the above: "No matter how much of an intrinsic motivation educators, teachers and professors have, it is difficult not to break down physically and mentally when you are constantly hitting a wall. And yes, it is very stressful to meet all the needs of children, parents, expert team, and the principal, and finally the founder, when you do not have the basic conditions for work."

In the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development, this participant's comment clearly reflects the impact of a chronosystem that reflects changes over time within an individual. Some of the changes can be predicted (maturation, experience) but others are also unexpected (resignation, giving up, apathy), which is not acceptable in the teaching profession. However, teachers remain true to themselves, and as one participant stated: "I am proud to be a teacher. Well done to all the colleagues who bravely deal with the difficulties of our profession and do not give up on trying to improve it."

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