

PSYCHOSOCIAL WORKING CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS (CASE STUDY)

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Abstract: The material environment is an integral part of the working conditions and plays an important role in the life of each employee since it affects their life and professional activity. This is due to the close relationship between the level and quality of work, which is one of the fundamental elements that generate the overall quality of life. The work environment is stimulating because it directs and organizes human activity. It has a relative meaning because it refers to a specific entity. In any working environment, there are a variety of psychosocial factors that determine its level and are constantly changing under the influence of new technologies and changing economic, social, and demographic conditions. The article presents psychosocial working conditions and their influence on its functioning on the basis of a selected occupational group.

Keywords: material environment, psychosocial factors, the phenomenon of mobbing, working conditions, teachers

Kod klasyfikacji JEL: A1, A2, I2

Introduction

The issue of humans in the workplace is of interest to various scientific disciplines, including economics, sociology, and psychology. Each discipline analyzes a different aspect of the human relationship with the work environment, depending on how they define the concepts of work and environment. They use various methods and tools in their research. It is important to note that people try to adapt to their

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environment to favor the achievement of their goals. However, this can be difficult as people may have different correlations with their environment. This may be because individuals often have no control over the conditions in which they work, particularly in relation to the working environment, which is an integral part of working conditions. In this sense, the decisions play a decisive role, unfortunately does not always beneficial for the subordinates.

Ensuring safe and hygienic working conditions is particularly important as appropriate conditions determine to a large extent the efficiency and effectiveness of the employees. This is due to the fact that the work environment stimulates, directs, and organizes the activities of the individual. At the same time, it is relative, as it depends on a specific subject. Therefore, the work environment is part of the human environment. Additionally, it creates a specific system of relationships between people who cooperate to carry out specific tasks resulting from the employment relationship.

The working environment varies depending on the profession, and some may involve significant psychophysical burdens. This can negatively affect the regulatory systems of those performing the work, leading to a decrease in their quality of life, health, and work performance. Human-oriented professions often involve aid workers, such as doctors, teachers, and social workers, whose primary objective is to assist others. These professions are characterized by a significant imbalance between the emotional demands of the job and the compensation received for it. This often results in a higher personal cost for the employee than the financial reward. There is a specific type of responsibility related to both personal standards and high social expectations towards individuals in these professions.

The article presents psychosocial working conditions in relation to the teaching profession. Particular attention was paid to stressors in the teachers' work environment and the effects of working conditions on teachers, both those presented in the literature on the subject and those obtained as a result of conducting own research in this field. The issue of mobbing which is becoming more common in the work environment was also raised.

Characteristics of the teaching profession

In the literature on the subject, teachers as a professional group are classified as human-oriented professions (Pyżalski & Merez, 2010, p. 9), characterized by constant contact with another person, who is not always nice and positively perceived by both the employee and his client or mentee. Work in these professions always places a much greater burden on the individual performing it than in other professions. This profession has enjoyed great social recognition for many years. The modern world poses constant challenges to teachers resulting from the rapid flow of knowledge, its equally rapid obsolescence and changes resulting from technological development (Mamroł, 2021, p. 124).

A teacher's job is not easy because, in addition to transmitting knowledge, it involves the need to frequently take actions to help colleagues and students, initiate improvements at the school, defend the school's good name, self-development, etc. (Bortnowska et al., 2023, p. 291). The task of teachers is to participate in experiences,

stimulate young people to create and develop system values, presence and personality traits (Pyżalski & Merecz, 2010, p. 7). There are various loads in it. The basic ones include various, often difficult interactions with students and their parents. Other negative psychosocial factors occurring in the teacher's work environment include stress, mobbing, constantly changing regulations, changes in the education system, low status of the teaching profession, and few opportunities for promotion after obtaining the degree of a certified teacher, as well as more and more responsibilities not related to teaching but to administrative work.

Determining the psychosocial characteristics of work with particular emphasis on the work of teachers

There are two categories of characteristics of psychosocial work. The first of them are the so-called salutogenic working conditions, i.e. those that can positively affect the health of an individual. The second category consists of the so-called psychosocial risks, which constitute the essence of this article. It is understood as any type of stimulus or situation that, through psychophysiological processes, may cause deterioration of the general condition of the employee and lower his work efficiency.

Among the basic threats occurring in the teacher's work environment, and not mentioned earlier, the following should be distinguished:

- constant changes in the education law,
- not the best physical working conditions,
- improper organization of work,
- lack of social support,
- job stability,
- exposure to aggression from superiors, colleagues, parents, students,
- incorrect or missing relationships with parents.

In general, it can be said that the above-mentioned factors often cause stress of varying intensity. The level is usually determined by the teacher's personality and the situation (e.g., for one teacher, an additional service order may be mobilizing and motivating, while for another teacher it may cause weariness, demotivation, etc.).

The impact of threats in the teacher's work environment

Analyzing the literature on the subject, it can be concluded that burnout is a common negative consequence of increased psychosocial burdens in the teaching profession. Professional burnout is quite widely described in scientific literature in both the humanities and social sciences. It is a consequence of excessive involvement in professional work based on providing help and interactions with other people, which is accompanied by constant stress and frustration (Kocór, 2019, p. 23). The term burnout was first used by psychologist H.J. Freudenberger, who defined it as “the accumulation of several factors of long-term exhaustion, dehumanization of people with whom you are in professional relationships, lack of professional satisfaction, reduced level of commitment to work and chronic physical fatigue” (Chrzanowska, 2004, p. 36).

According to the Three-Dimensional Burnout Theory by Ch. Maslach, burnout includes symptoms such as (Maslach & Leiter, 2011, p. 28):

1. Emotional exhaustion related to high emotional stress associated with work.
2. Lowered sense of personal achievements, understood as a sense of lack of competence and professional success.
3. Depersonalization of clients of the institution where you work, in this case, students or parents.

Teacher burnout is most often the result of many factors, both objective, subjective, individual and environmental (Kocór, 2019, p. 76).

Other consequences of threats occurring in teachers' work environment include:

- frequent interpersonal conflicts,
- problems with sleeping,
- occupational diseases of the voice organ,
- lowering involvement in work,
- circulatory diseases,
- high level of morbidity,
- trouble with high blood pressure.

Mobbing in teacher's work environment

Mobbing is one of the most important stressors in the work environment that has a great impact on the employee's health. It is generally accepted that it relates primarily to persecution and violence related to working and performing one's job. (Król & Ludwiczynski, 2020). The definition of mobbing in Polish legislation, according to Article 94 of the Labor Code, refers to actions or behavior concerning an employee or directed against an employee, consisting in persistent and long-term harassment or intimidation, resulting in an underestimated assessment of professional suitability, or aimed at humiliating or ridiculing the employee, isolating them or eliminating them from their team of colleagues.

The literature on the subject mentions numerous examples of mobbing activities. Among the most common, four basic groups can be distinguished (Pyżalski & Merecz, 2011):

- behavior intended to undermine professional status,
- deliberate work overload,
- actions leading to a lack of career confidence,
- isolation.

One of the professional groups particularly at risk of mobbing in the workplace are employees of the education sector, which is confirmed by multiple surveys. According to information obtained from survey research in 2022 by the National Educational Forum of Teachers and Principals, as many as 76% of teachers have encountered at least once various forms of mobbing from their superiors. Among the respondents, there are many voices that the atmosphere at school, apart from salary demands, nowadays prompts education workers to quit their jobs. Teachers in various ways try to fight the mobbing they experience or witness. One way is to set

up all sorts of support groups. An example is the Facebook group named “Attention, mobber at school”. The group was created due to the large number of reports of teachers being mobbed across the country. Of course, this phenomenon cannot be generalized as not every school principal is a mobber. Often the initiators of such situations are principals unsure of their position. This is because the targets of such behavior are not weak individuals, but rather outstanding people, winners of the Teacher of the Year awards, or people who have completed additional studies, for example, in education management. In short, those who could pose a threat to the principal’s position.

Mobbing situations that occur in education may result from the weakness of the teaching environment, which contributes to the perpetuation of incorrect behavior. First, there are concerns about the use of legal aid, although this does not necessarily mean taking legal action right away. Second, teachers sometimes lack unity and refrain from standing up for someone for fear of their position. Additionally, teachers do not receive the same level of support as those in Finland, where both staff and students have access to psychological assistance. Marek Pleśniar, the director of the National Association of Education Leadership, estimates that the phenomenon of mobbing exists, but its scale is lower than indicated in the above-mentioned survey conducted by the National Educational Forum of Teachers and Directors. However, he is aware that the mood in education is bad, which is conducive to exerting pressure, evaluating each other, and reporting. This affects not only teachers, but also employees at all school levels, from cleaning staff to principals. Unfortunately, the problem of mobbing most often concerns teachers who are under pressure not only by parents but also principals, who expect high standards and high availability in the case of existing staff shortages. This means that the obligations imposed often go beyond the standard. Similar results were also observed by the author of the article in June 2022, who conducted a survey in six primary schools in the Opole district on the occurrence of mobbing activities in school institutions. 100 teachers participated in the study. When asked about hostile behavior at schools, as many as 65% of the respondents gave a positive answer. In 12% of the cases, these behaviors were so long-lasting and burdensome that they met the diagnostic assumptions of mobbing. Every third respondent experienced hostile behavior on the part of his colleagues (e.g., spreading rumors, making false accusations, criticizing ways of working, undermining professional competences), and achievements, setting a minimum motivational allowance, taking hours for another teacher, pointing out how to dress).

The presented data clearly show that the phenomena of mobbing and unfavorable behavior pose significant threats both to the teacher and the school where he works. Therefore, it is very important to take preventive measures to minimize the risk of mobbing and hostile behavior. According to experts, this is possible in two ways. First, through direct activities carried out at school where the problem occurs. An alternative or reassurance is an indirect action undertaken, for example, by cooperating institutions. The common feature of both approaches is that all activities are aimed directly at teachers and the physical and social work environment in which they work.

Research methodology

The Teacher's Occupational Burden Questionnaire (Pyżalski & Plichta, 2007), slightly modified by the author, was used to develop the basic organizational burdens, which made it possible to determine the extent to which the surveyed teachers perceive various features of their work environment as burdensome. In addition, each respondent had to answer three open questions. The first one asked about the effects of professional burdens perceived by the interviewed teachers. The second question asked about the respondent's average weekly working hours. The purpose of the last question was to determine the mental state of the teachers surveyed after meetings with students' parents.

Table 1. Modified occupational burden questionnaire

Specification	Yes	No
My students often ignore my orders.		
My students are not motivated to learn.		
My superiors do not support me.		
My students fight among themselves.		
My students behave inappropriately during lessons, e.g. chewing gum or using the phone.		
My students make a lot of noise.		
I have little influence on what happens at school.		
Constant changes in the education system.		
I earn disproportionately little for the workload.		
Curriculum and plans are overloaded.		
My co-workers don't always compete fairly with me.		
I have to keep too much documentation.		
Little opportunity for advancement.		
My superiors control me excessively.		
My co-workers like to gossip.		
Students' families have unrealistic expectations of school and their children.		
Students' families do not want to be involved in the upbringing and education of their children.		
There is a lack of attention between teachers and parents.		

Source: Own study based on the Teacher's Occupational Burden Questionnaire (Pyżalski & Plichta, 2007)

Risks in the teacher's work environment and their impact (own research)

An extension of the author's research on mobbing activities taking place in schools was to try to determine the basic organizational burdens and those resulting from inappropriate behavior of students and cooperation with their parents. Efforts were also made to determine the consequences of the impact of threats occurring in the teachers' work environment. The research was carried out among 100 teachers in the Opole district in February 2023.

Based on the analysis of the information obtained from the questionnaire and open questions, it can be clearly stated that 95% of the respondents considered the most important burden to be low earnings, which in their opinion are not satisfactory for the work they perform. They are often a demotivating factor in taking up teaching. Such a high percentage of responses should not come as a surprise, as Polish teachers are among the lowest paid in this profession in the European Union.

The majority of respondents (87%) also consider the increasing amount of so-called office work to be a basic burden. In their opinion, didactic work is slowly but steadily receding into the background. Among the other factors, the most frequently mentioned were:

- constant changes in the education system (84%),
- little influence on what is happening in school (41%),
- overloaded curricula (68%),
- little chance of further promotion (72% – most of the respondents are teachers with the highest degree of professional promotion, i.e. certified).

Some teachers consider the inappropriate interpersonal relationships among educators in a given institution to be a significant problem, although not entirely organizational. 61% of the respondents believe that there are people among their colleagues who do the minimum without much commitment and that their charges lose out as a result. On the other hand, every seventh teacher thinks that he works with people who like to spread rumors. The same number of respondents also said that they work with people who use other people's ideas and take them as their own.

More than 60% of the teachers surveyed believe that direct contact with students and their parents is an equally important burden. Increasingly, they are confronted with student behavior that violates school rules and creates stressful situations. The most common misbehavior of students included behaving loudly during lessons, ignoring teacher instructions, chewing gum, inactivity, endangering another student, damaging school property, cheating on tests, and using cell phones despite the ban. In such cases, they are simply helpless, and the resulting situations are simply beyond them. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a serious occupational stressor that, if it occurs systematically over a long period, can even lead to occupational burnout.

The respondents also consider contacts with parents or guardians of children, who are a permanent part of their duties in addition to teaching, as a serious threat to their profession. In many situations, in order to properly help the child, they have to cooperate (e.g. in terms of upbringing), which can lead to conflicts because parents often do not want to accept certain obvious things. The majority of teachers surveyed (71%) believe that the following are significant factors contributing to poor contact with parents:

- parents' unrealistic expectations about their children's progress,
- lack of mutual trust,
- lack of sufficient educational and didactic support from parents (this factor, according to the respondents, causes them even more stress, as all the responsibility for the student's achievement falls on them).

Furthermore, the importance of this type of burden is also shown in the answers of teachers to the question about their mental state after the meeting with parents: one in four teachers said that they felt tired. Reactions such as irritation and helplessness were also mentioned more than once.

Taking into account the objective workload of teachers, the respondents were asked how much time they spend on their work per week. More than 85% marked 40 hours on average. This proves that, contrary to the opinion of many people, educators have to devote as much time to their work as specialists in other professions.

The survey also tried to determine the consequences of the professional burdens experienced by the interviewed teachers. Among the most important consequences, respondents mentioned: sleeping disorders, problems with hypertension, neurotic disorders, and frequent misunderstandings among teachers. A large percentage of people also mentioned professional burnout, which was mainly manifested by a feeling of emptiness and a lack of energy for further work, a feeling of impersonality, a cynical approach to the student, and a feeling of wasting time devoted to work. Half of the respondents who had experienced burnout in the past benefited from an annual leave for health reasons.

Conclusions

A modern teacher is a professional, substantively prepared, pedagogically, psychologically and methodologically (Gawęł-Luty, 2021, p. 28).

Based on the analysis of the literature on the subject and on the author's own research on the occurrence of psychosocial risks in the work environment, it can be clearly stated that the work of teachers is burdened with numerous psychosocial stresses. These stresses are not always perceived by employees in other professions. Among them, there are those that are characteristic of all support professions and those that are specific to the work environment of an educator. As a result of these burdens, there are many negative effects both in the area of the personal functioning of teachers and in the social aspect.

The analysis of the author's research shows that for most teachers the working week is not 18 hours, as it is commonly believed in society, but an average of 40 hours. It is known that, as in any other profession, there are individuals whose time and quality of work leave much to be desired. A large group of teachers reports health problems resulting from the stress of their work, which indicates that they need to seek help from specialists in both the medical and psychological fields (e.g., by participating in training in dealing with both colleagues, the principal, students, and their parents).

It should be noted, however, that the research was conducted only on a group of 100 primary school teachers. Therefore, it should be treated as preliminary research. Further research should include a representative group of both primary and secondary school teachers.

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PSYCHOSPOŁECZNE WARUNKI PRACY NAUCZYCIELI W SZKOŁACH PODSTAWOWYCH (STUDIUM PRZYPADKU)

Streszczenie: Materialne środowisko pracy jest integralną częścią warunków pracy i odgrywa ważną rolę w życiu każdego pracownika, ponieważ ma wpływ na jego aktywność życiową i zawodową. W każdym środowisku pracy występują różnorodne czynniki psychospołeczne uwarunkowane postępowaniem technologicznym, warunkami ekonomicznymi, społecznymi oraz demograficznymi. W artykule przedstawiono psychospołeczne warunki pracy w odniesieniu do zawodu nauczyciela. Poruszono także kwestię zjawiska mobbingu, coraz częściej pojawiającego się w środowisku pracy tej grupy zawodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: materialne środowisko pracy, psychospołeczne warunki pracy, mobbing, nauczyciele

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