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Social stress in Romanian teachers

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Abstract

Research has suggested that teachers are exposed to different sources of stress. There are reports showing that the main sources of teacher stress are: the lack in motivation of the students; maintaining discipline in the classroom; confrontation between time constraints and workload; multiple changes repeatedly; repeated assessments made by others; challenging relations with colleagues or management; poor working conditions.

The study examines the level of social stress on a sample of Romanian teachers, as an indicator of the subjects mental comfort and, generally, mental health for the studied sample.

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1. Introduction

There is a strong inter-influence between teachers and their educational environment which was analyzed partially over the last decade. Evidence suggests that high teacher stress is associated with psychological distress, which may be mediated through different coping mechanisms and personality traits (Chan, 1998).

Typically, poor coping skills or a high confidence in the own subject capacities of passive coping under high stress can lead to negative emotional reactions and, therefore, teacher burnout syndrome could occur. There are a range of studies about the different sources of stress and their possible consequences on teachers. To explain the

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complex relationships between different sources of stress and psychological correlates of the personality (coping mechanisms, personality traits, emotional responses, cognitive responses, burnout, etc.) different methods were used (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

Some studies underlined the role of positive feelings as coping strategies. Previous research found in the literature on positive emotions related to stress evidenced that positive emotions are adjustments to acute and chronic stress (Anitei & Chraif, 2013).

The relation between psychological distress and security needs is known (Vasile, Margaritoiu, Eftimie, 2011) and there are also studies on the basic psychological needs as mediators of the relationship between attachment and distress (Wei, Shaffer, Young, Zakalik, 2005). Other studies suggest links between insecure attachment and psychological distress, showing that insecure adult attachment is related to negative affect (Simpson, 1990).

1.1. Sources of teacher stress

Different studies have shown that teachers are exposed to several sources of stress. Kyriacou (2001) reports as the main sources of teacher stress:

- students who lack motivation;
- maintaining the discipline in the classroom;
- confrontation between time constraints and workload;
- multiple changes;
- repeated assessments made by others;
- difficult or challenging relationships with colleagues, administration, or management;
- poor working conditions.

All of the above sources of stress are characteristic to the Romanian teachers, but we should add the low economic level of the teachers and the lowering of the social status of this profession.

Montgomery & Rupp (2005) advanced a theoretical-empirical model of teacher stress (see Figure 1).

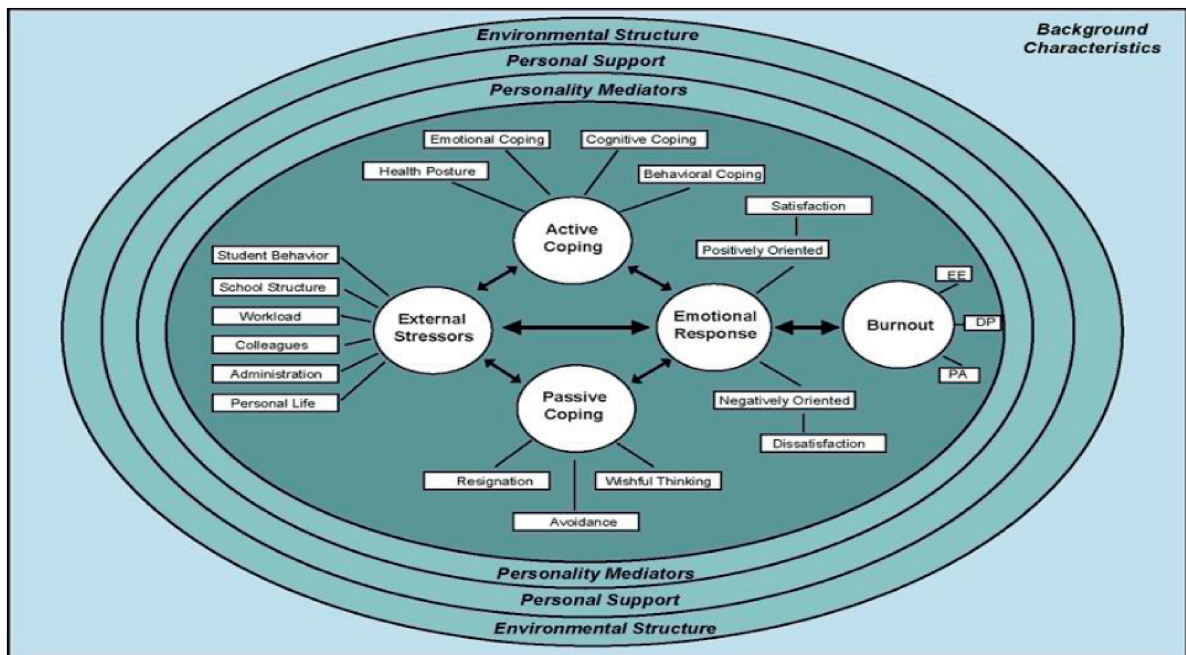


Figure 1. Theoretical-empirical model of construct relationships of teacher stress (from Montgomery & Rupp, 2005)

2. Research method

The study examines the level of social stress on a sample of Romanian teachers, as an indicator of the subjects mental comfort and, generally, mental health for the studied sample.

2.1. Participants

The study sample was formed by 55 school and high-school teachers participating in this research. The sample consisted of 49 females and 6 males aged from 21 to 53 years old ($M=38.2317$). The sample gender distribution is similar to the gender distribution in Romanian teaching system.

2.2. Instruments

Wheatley Stress Profile was administered on a sample of 55 teachers and a clinical short interview was administered in order to collect information about the work-social environment in relation to the mental well-being.

The respondents received the proper instructions for filling in the WSP.

Statistical data were collected and processed.

2.3. Procedure

The instrument was administered by instructed operators, to groups of teachers, according to instructions. The subjects were told about the purpose of the research, and that the information they will provide will be secured and they are free to participate into the research.

2.4. Data analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted by SPSS 16.0 and Excel. Frequencies, descriptive statistics (mean, deviation) and specific correlations were calculated

3. Results

Using statistical processing and graphical representation, the subjects were divided in two major groups: the first group with a low social stress level (below mean) and the second one with a high social stress level. Correlations with other types of stress were found and discussed.

50.9% of the respondents were found having a level of social stress above the mean and over 38% reported symptoms of emotional problems: anxiety, sleep problems etc. Over 56% of the respondents reported they experienced a low self esteem at least for a period of three days in the last six months.

30.9% of the respondents were found having a high level of social stress, 14.54% a major level of social stress and 3.63% were found having a severe level of social stress.

The average score for the entire sample was 2.7 which indicate a high level of the social stress.

Analyzing the social stress level in teachers, we have to take into account the personality profiles, the individual characteristics and coping strategies, but in this study of a major importance is the work environment (a significant item of the social stress field). Therefore the following graphs and the entire research design were focused on this particular aspect – work and social stress in teachers.

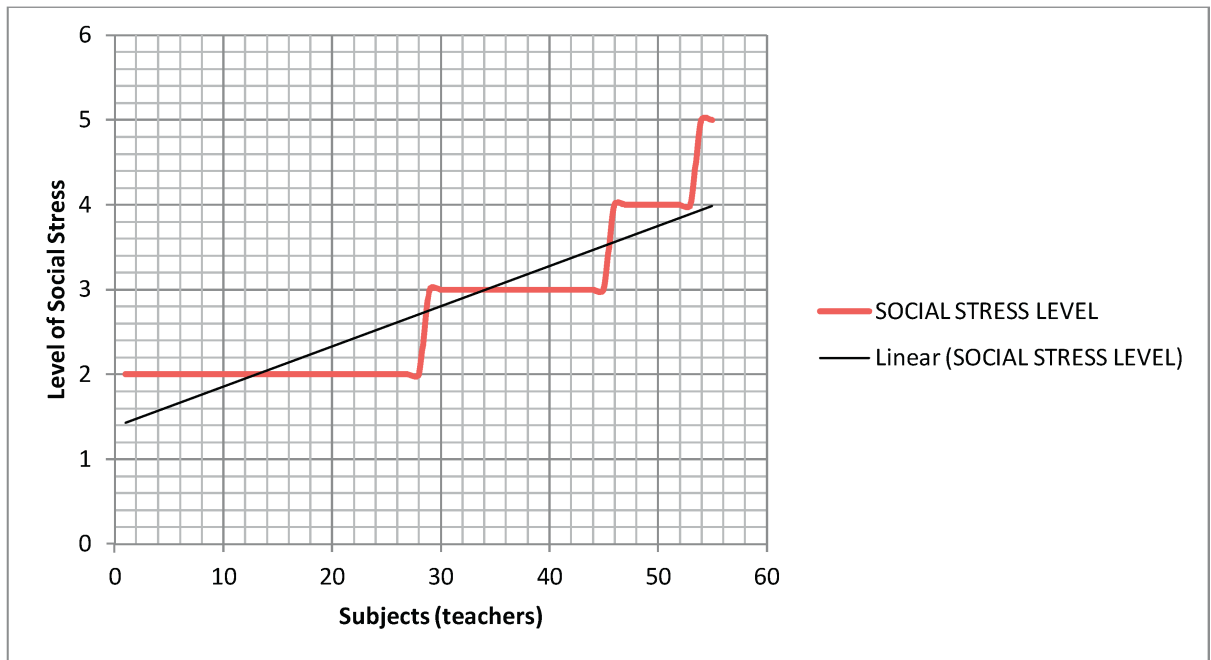


Figure 2. The level of the social stress

The social stress is related mainly to work, free time habits, but also to the relationship (family) issues. The work distress is linked to an unpleasant job, problems with the co-workers.

We also observed differences on the level of social stress related to the teachers' specialization. The codes for the specializations are as follows:

- primary school teacher: 1;
- secondary school – humanities: 2;
- secondary school – math and sciences: 3;
- secondary school – arts: 4;
- special school (for disabled students): 5;
- secondary school/high school - technological: 6;
- physical education: 7.

As it can be observed from the Figure 3, the highest social stress level was registered for the teachers from the humanities field. Also a high social stress level was observed at those subjects teaching physical education. This may be related to the low importance given to humanities and physical education in Romanian education system.

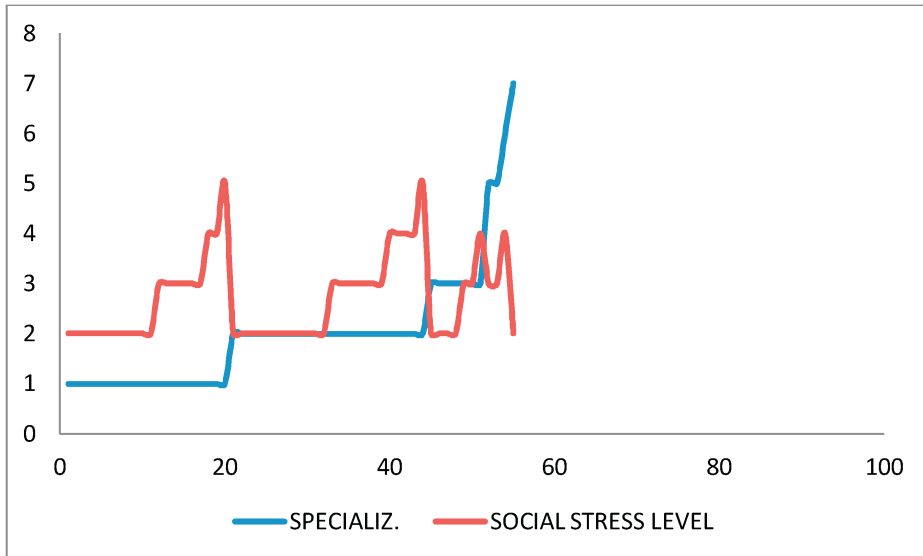


Figure 3. Social stress and specialization

4. Conclusion

The education system in Romania has some particular features, accentuated by our study from the stress perspective. Some of these features of a major importance for the system (and, of course, for the teachers' stress level) are:

- the educational system is underfinanced – this leads to a low motivation and a high stress level in teachers;
- some directions/sectors of study are seen as more important than others (e.g., sciences seems more important than humanities; almost everything is more important than physical education) because these directions should be studied carefully for graduation exams (baccalaureate, for example) – this leads to a lower self esteem and to a higher stress in those teaching “less important” courses.

The results of the study confirm the above mentioned features from the social stress view. Of course, the study has its limits considering the sample size and the complex system of personality which could influence any measurement on social stress.

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