

SOURCES OF STRESS AND SUPPORT AMONG TEACHERS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS AND ECOMAPS

Janka Liptáková¹, & Oľga Orosová²

¹Department of Psychology, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University (Slovakia)

²Department of Educational Psychology and Psychology of Health,
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University (Slovakia)

Abstract

Background: Teaching is considered one of the most stressful professions due to the number of responsibilities teachers have. Long-term stress often results in feelings of burnout, depersonalization, or exhaustion. Teacher support can have a significant impact on their well-being and performance, but can also impact students' academic development, including their affective and emotional outcomes. Therefore, identifying stressors and sources of support among teachers is essential to foster a healthier educational environment and improve overall educational outcomes. **Aims:** The aim of this study is to explore the main sources of support and stress that teachers experience, analyze the ways in which teachers recognize stress and its symptoms, and examine the quality of teachers' relationships mapped through their ecosystem. **Methods:** The study sample consisted of 25 teachers (mean age 45.5; 84 % female) from the eastern part of Slovakia who participated in four focus group interviews with an ecomap activity, which visually represents important relationships in their lives. The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using a six-step approach to thematic analysis. Ecomap data were evaluated through qualitative categorization of recorded relationships and quantitative assessment of their quality. **Results:** The thematic analysis of teachers' support revealed three main themes: support from the social environment, working conditions and demands, and specific sources as tools of teacher support. Thematic analysis of stress identified four main themes: Covid-19, teacher work, and other factors, including work-life balance, health, and social and political factors. The analysis also distinguished between physical and psychological responses to stress, which affect teachers' well-being and work performance. Furthermore, the results indicate that teachers' ecosystem is primarily formed through supportive relationships, although the work and its parts is the most frequent source of ambivalent or stressful relationships. **Conclusions:** This study highlights the importance of the support of the social environment, especially from school leaders and colleagues. Key stressors, such as time stress, bureaucracy, or student behavior, as the results of which teachers perceive their work as stressful, affect teachers' well-being and work performance. These findings emphasize the need to improve conditions and strengthen support for teachers, especially in the area of schools, which will contribute to their professional development, mental health, and performance in the educational process.

Keywords: Stress, support, teacher, qualitative analysis, ecological system.

1. Introduction

Stress significantly affects teachers' sense of effectiveness, job satisfaction, risk of burnout, attrition, well-being, and student engagement (Shernoff et al., 2011). Compared to professionals in other occupational groups, they report considerably higher rates of both physical and psychological problems (Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2015; Scheuch et al., 2015; Stansfeld et al., 2009), which positions teaching among the most stressful professions (Holmes, 2005). Key stressors include an unsuitable working environment, excessive working hours and workload, limited opportunities for career advancement, workplace conflicts, bureaucracy, poor communication, low workplace morale, resistance to change, and overly frequent changes (Holmes, 2005). In this context, one of the most critical professional competencies for teachers is the ability to cope with the demands and challenges of the teaching profession while maintaining an acceptable level of well-being (Baumert & Kunter, 2013).

A significant role can be played by the support teachers receive in their lives, which is essential to expand research beyond the sources of stress to include the sources of support and the quality of relationships that teachers maintain in their lives. Investigating these aspects in depth can provide valuable insights into how teachers navigate their professional and personal environments to foster resilience and well-being. Furthermore, our review of the literature indicates a notable gap in research focusing on practicing teachers. Most existing studies focus on novice teachers, particularly in considering a career change, leaving the experiences of experienced educators underexplored. Filling this gap is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of teachers' stress, support systems, and overall well-being. By doing so, we can develop targeted strategies to improve their professional and personal lives.

2. Objectives

The aim of this study was: 1) to explore the main sources of stress and support that teachers experience, 2) to analyze the ways in which teachers recognize stress and its symptoms, and 3) to examine the quality of teachers' relationships mapped through their ecosystem.

3. Methods

3.1. Research sample

Four focus groups were formed in response to a request from Pavol Jozef Šafárik University to participate in the research. In total, 25 teachers from two primary and two secondary schools in the Košice region (East of the Slovak Republic) participated. The average age of the teachers was 44.9 years (min. = 25, max. = 67), with an average of 18.4 years of teaching experience (min. = 1, max. = 36). Women were more heavily represented, comprising 84 % (n = 21) of the participants.

3.2. Research design

Data collection was carried out as part of the international research project 'Global perspectives on teacher well-being and mental health following the COVID-19 pandemic' (<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/current/globalteachermentalhealthcovid19/>), organized by the International School Psychology Association (ISPA). Participants participated in the research on a voluntary basis, from April to May 2023, and all collected data were anonymized. During the focus group interviews, the ISPA international study research protocol was strictly followed, including 15 questions in three areas: general questions, questions about stressors and support (analyzed in this study), and questions about challenges in teaching and students' discipline. After interviews, the ecomap activity followed and included drawing an ecomap (in the middle of the paper was depicted the teacher, and around them they noted important people and events from their lives) and marking supportive, stressful, and both (supportive and stressful) relationships with suggestions from the ecomap. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice.

3.3. Data analysis

3.3.1. Analysis of focus group interviews. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013), the six-step approach to thematic analysis was applied. First, each focus group interview was transcribed. This step involved an active engagement with the data, taking notes and identifying preliminary concepts. Second, an inductive-deductive approach to coding was used, using ATLAS.ti software. After that, the data were grouped into possible themes (the third step). These initial themes were examined and refined in the fourth step of the analysis, which included that each theme represented the coded extracts and the overall data. In the fifth step, we created subthemes and expressed each theme in detail. The final step, the sixth step, involved selecting data extracts, connecting data, themes, and subthemes to research questions, and discussing their implications in a broader context. Data were analyzed without the use of false, incorrect statements, or erroneous interpretations.

3.3.2. Analysis of ecomaps. The ecomap was a self-created diagram that illustrates a teacher's social network, highlighting the types and quality of relationships, and serving as an assessment of teacher's perceived supports and stressors in their environment (Nastasi et al., 2018). Ecomaps were first qualitatively analyzed and then quantified. The size of the network was determined by the total number of relationships. For each participant, we also calculated the number of (i) types of relationships, (ii) support sources, (iii) stress sources, and (iv) ambivalent relationships. The stress-support index (SSI) was calculated by assigning numerical values to each relationship: 1 for support, 1.5 for ambivalence, and 2 for stress.

These values were summed and divided by the total number of sources in the ecomap (Nastasi et al., 2018). The qualitative themes were then identified based on the responses provided by the teachers and the consensus of three assessors specializing in psychology. The relationships represented in the ecomap were classified into the following categories: people, places, activities, things, living sentient beings, events, beliefs, and others (e.g., Ukraine, personal life, expectations) (Tennant et al., 2018).

4. Results

4.1. Sources of stress and support for teachers

Thematic analysis of stress identified three main themes: *work and working conditions*, *the COVID-19 pandemic*, and *others*. Thematic analysis of teacher support revealed three main themes: *support from teachers' interpersonal relationships*, *specific sources*, and *work and working conditions*. The analysis also distinguished between *physical* and *psychological* manifestations of stress, which affect teachers' well-being and work performance.

4.1.1. Sources of stress. *Theme 1: Work and working conditions* are the main source of stress for teachers. As part of their work, they experience time pressure related to administrative work and extracurricular activities (participation in student competitions), which represents an increased burden for teachers. Furthermore, challenges such as student behavior and motivation, as well as difficult relationships with colleagues and parents, contribute significantly to the stress faced by teachers.

Theme 2: The COVID-19 pandemic represents a specific period during which the level of stress and workload have increased for teachers. Although the pandemic has ended, teachers continue to reflect on the challenges they faced during this period, such as technical difficulties and confusion caused by constantly changing rules. The stress associated with online teaching and the ambiguity of pandemic-related guidelines left teachers feeling uncertain and overwhelmed.

Theme 3: Other sources of stress described factors such as work-life balance, health problems, and social and political pressures. Although these were perceived as less significant sources of stress, they still contributed to the general levels of stress of teachers. The challenges of balancing professional and personal responsibilities, dealing with health-related concerns, and managing external pressures from social and political factors added to the stress of teachers.

4.1.2. Sources of support. *Theme 1: Supporting teachers' well-being* from their interpersonal relationships is a crucial source of support for them, particularly those within the school, family and teacher-student interactions. Relationships within the school provide emotional and professional support, especially during challenging times. In addition, family relationships provide emotional relief and guidance, while teacher-student relationships can also provide motivation and fulfillment through personal connections.

Theme 2: Specific sources as tools for teachers' well-being support represent a teacher's hobbies which provide a mental break from their daily routines, helping them recharge and reduce stress. In addition, inner resources, including personal reflection, connection with nature, and spiritual support, offer teachers the strength to cope with challenges and maintain a sense of balance during difficult times.

Theme 3: Work and working conditions were also identified as a theme of teachers' support. For some of them, their work is more than just a job, it is a source of personal fulfillment. The sense of purpose is derived from teaching and interactions with students and colleagues, even during challenging moments. Despite physical exhaustion or stress, teachers find that being in the classroom energizes them and helps them overcome personal difficulties or pains.

4.2. Manifestations of teachers' stress

Theme 1: Physical manifestations of stress among teachers are reflected in health problems such as psoriasis, digestive problems, and heart palpitations, illustrating the direct link between stress and physical well-being. Stress also disrupts sleep patterns, further contributing to general physical discomfort and health problems.

Theme 2: Physiological manifestations of stress represent feelings of restlessness, tension, and irritability, often leading to heightened emotional reactions such as anger or frustration. Teachers also report a loss of positive energy and emotional expression, highlighting the impact of stress on their emotional well-being.

4.3. Quality of teachers' relationships

In general, teachers reported the highest number of supportive relationship sources (60.4%), a lower number of ambivalent relationship sources (29.6%) and the lowest number of sources (10%), resulting in a stress-support index value of 1.24. After categorizing the sources into different categories, the highest frequency of supportive relationships was found in the "people" category (subcategories: friends, family members) and the "place" category (subcategory: nature). The main source of stress for teachers was the category of "activity", particularly related to bureaucracy, statistics, and administration. The highest frequency of ambivalent relationships was found in the "people" category (subcategories: family members, students) and the "place" category (subcategory: school).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The study analyzes the sources of stress and support among teachers in the Eastern Slovakia region and provides valuable insights into working conditions, interpersonal relationships, and their impact on their professional and personal lives. The results highlight the complexity of stressors, but also reveal the potential of a support system that can reduce the level of stress which teachers perceive.

Our findings confirm that work and working conditions are a major source of stress for teachers, which is consistent with previous results by Shernoff et al. (2011) and Holmes (2005), which highlight the importance of workload, administration, and interpersonal conflicts. The unique contribution of this study is to highlight the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including technical challenges, ever-changing rules, and emotional uncertainty. These results are in agreement with Kidger et al. (2015), who identified an increased psychological strain on teachers during crisis periods. As teachers reported, stress manifests itself through physical and psychological symptoms, which was also highlighted by the research of Johnson et al. (2005) or Stansfeld et al. (2009). On the other hand, there is the fundamental importance of interpersonal relationships, especially support from colleagues, family, and students. These findings are consistent with those of Nastasi et al. (2018), which confirms that positive relationships can serve as a protective factor against stress. Specific resources such as hobbies, connection to nature, and internal resources are important coping mechanisms for stress, which is consistent with Scheuch et al. (2015) who found that there is an importance of activities that promote mental health. Ecomap analysis showed that teachers have the highest proportion of supportive relationships (60.4 %), indicating their ability to create positive social networks. However, at the same time, ambivalent (29.6 %) and stressful relationships (10 %) highlight the need to improve the quality of interactions, especially in the workplace. We consider the sample size as a limitation of this study, which was relatively small and regionally specific and can limit the generalizability of the findings. However, the strengths of the study lie in its in-depth exploration of both sources of stress and support through qualitative methods, providing nuanced insights into teachers' lived experiences. This research has practical significance for educators, policymakers, and psychologists by shedding light on the critical stressors teachers face and identifying effective sources of support.

The findings can guide the development of targeted interventions and policies to improve teachers' well-being, ensuring a healthier and more supportive school work environment. Improving the conditions for teachers is essential not only for their personal well-being, but also for the quality of the education system as a whole.

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