

# Primary School Teachers and their Life Satisfaction in Relation to Burnout

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present research was to determine the level of life satisfaction and the prevalence of burnout in teachers. A partial goal was to find out the relation between life satisfaction and burnout in terms of various aspects such as gender, age, and length of teaching experience. The research sample consisted of 136 teachers at elementary schools in the Olomouc Region, of whom 29 were men and 109 were women. The average age of the respondents was 45.12 years, SD 11.44. The data were obtained through the Life Satisfaction Questionnaire and MBI Burnout Inventory. The results showed that one third of teachers were significantly emotionally distressed and showed a low level of personal satisfaction. One fifth of teachers showed a high level of depersonalization. As far as the level of work satisfaction is concerned, a significant negative correlation was observed with the level of emotional exhaustion, while a positive correlation was found with overall life satisfaction and personal satisfaction.

## Keywords

Burnout Syndrome, Life Satisfaction, Stress, Teacher, Quantitative Research Design.

## Introduction

Teachers represent a professional group heavily affected by stress, the long-term effect of which may even lead to the development of the burnout syndrome [1,2]. Recently, this issue has been largely discussed in scholarly literature, particularly in relation to health issues, reconciliation of teachers' personal and professional life, their ability to cope with serious life issues, or the issue of teachers' life satisfaction. In the case of the teaching profession, the risk of the syndrome is likely if the teacher must fight long-term stress and fails. In their daily practice, teachers experience many stressful situations, which relatively quickly lead to a loss of their initial optimism and motivation for the teaching profession and are replaced by frustration and discouragement [2]. Stressful situations include particularly manifestations of students' indiscipline [3], school violence, teaching a difficult subject, teaching in a class with many students, students with behavioral disorders, or students with other special educational needs. In some cases, it is difficult for the teacher to communicate with the parents of a problematic student, other colleagues, the school management or the school

board. As suggested by Sprenger et al. [2] in their research study involving 4,562 teachers from Austrian schools, stress factors also included excessive bureaucracy, increase in organizational-administrative responsibilities, inadequate material resources in schools, and a deficit in psychosocial and support interventions. A study carried out in the Czech Republic suggested a serious fact that 53.2% of teachers from a research sample comprising a total of 2,394 elementary school teachers stated that their work was a source of long-term stress and that they were at risk of the burnout syndrome [4].

Recently, the system of education has been affected by several stress factors that had been insufficiently reflected or had not been reflected at all in previous research. These include numerous reforms such as focusing on competences and standardization, introduction of inclusive education of students with special needs, increasing diversity of the student population, integration of refugees, or challenges represented by the new media [2].

## Literature Review

The term burnout was coined in 1975 by Herbert J. Freudenberger to refer to “...*the state of depletion of all energy sources of an originally hard working person (for example people who try to help others in their difficulty and then feel overwhelmed by their problems).*” The overall mental exhaustion of teachers is manifested in the areas of motivation, emotions, performance, and has a significant impact on their opinions, attitudes, conduct, and behaviour. Initially, burnout manifests in a creeping and inconspicuous way, and therefore the threatened individual including the people around do not notice any symptoms. In the case of the teaching profession this can have a negative effect primarily on the students and the quality of the teaching process.

### Burnout syndrome in the teaching profession

The development of the burnout syndrome is facilitated by individual psychological and physiological factors. The issue is also analysed from a psycho-neuro-immunological perspective, where focus is on the individual's ability to defend against external negative effects, including reactions to stressful stimuli associated with the responses of the nervous system. The overall stability of this complex and homeostasis has a significant effect on the psyche [5-7].

In the teaching profession the risk of the development of the burnout syndrome is relatively high, primarily in relation to the teachers' difficult lifestyle, including the high demands on their personality, professionalism, resilience, problem-solving capacity, and self-efficiency – all their physical, mental, and emotional resources. The depletion of physical and mental resources of a teacher results in a loss of interest in teaching. The teacher's professional attitudes erode and the whole personality collapses. “One thinks of a strong and highly committed, competent, charismatic person, who has set ambitious goals and sacrificed oneself for ideals and other people (including students, patients, employees) and now is afflicted by fatigue and seeks help: bent and broken, with no new purpose in life” [8]. The burnout syndrome is considered an integrated phenomenon, which is the final phase of the GAS process (General Adaptation Syndrome) [9]. In the context of the burnout syndrome in teachers, there are research studies that

deal with the causes of the burnout syndrome, its manifestations, and long-term stress coping strategies that prevent the burnout syndrome [10].

Scientific literature includes several approaches to the onset of the burnout syndrome. Worth mentioning is the four-stage model by Christina Maslach [11], who is the author of the burnout inventory:

- Idealistic enthusiasm and overloading,
- Emotional and physical exhaustion,
- Dehumanization of other people as a defence against burnout,
- Terminal stage: opposing everybody and everything, onset of the burnout syndrome in its full breadth (collapse and burnout of all energy resources).

The following stages of burnout are proposed by Längle&Künz [12], who consider burnout a sign of the fact that the individual no longer lives fully and holistically:

*Stage one (enthusiasm):* the person is enthused for something and has a clear goal ahead. The person's life is meaningful and there is something to live for. The person's work is meaningful because it helps achieve the goal.

*Stage two (utilitarian interest):* the aspect of utilitarianism starts to play a role. The person originally worked for an ideal (goal) but now is working for a by-product, for example money. The basic motivation is frustrated (unsatisfied). The original enthusiasm is fading away, the fire is smouldering. In the third stage these smouldering changes into ash.

*Stage three (ash):* a characteristic feature is the loss of respect for the value of other people, things, and goals. A person affected by burnout sees other people as things or materials. Other manifestations include insensitive and heartless behaviour, disrespect, cynicism, and loss of respect for one's own life and meaning of life. Nothing makes sense; the affected person does not value anything and falls into an existential vacuum. Life becomes mere vegetation.

After the initial enthusiasm at the beginning of the teacher's career, the encounter with the coarse reality of contemporary school brings feelings of disappointment and disillusionment which undermine the teacher's quality of life. This also causes fatigue and the related need for rest and active leisure with family and friends.

In addition to stagnation, which is a response to long-term stress, other psychosomatic problems may occur [cf. 13].

These unpleasant and debilitating conditions experienced by the teacher gradually manifest in the teacher's attitude to the students. Enthusiasm, openness, and empathy turn into resignation, hostility, indifference, and despair. The teacher's activities are limited to what is strictly necessary. Eventually, the organism is completely exhausted, which requires professional help [2, 14].

### **Correlations with stress, health, quality of life, and life satisfaction**

The concept of the quality of life can be defined as another social construct usually based on subjective perception and assessment of one's own life, taking into account the feelings of life satisfaction and feelings of happiness or wellbeing [15, 16]. The quality of life is affected by various factors, including particularly social, health, economic, and environmental. The key aspect in the quality of life definition is the feeling of wellbeing, which is based on physical, mental, and social balance of every individual. This concept includes several dimensions: material, health, social, ethical, aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, etc. By means of self-reflection defined by the physical, mental, and spiritual existence people judge their own personal and social life. In terms of the environmental aspects, the correlation between the quality of the environment and health is more than evident.

The quality of life of an individual is positively affected by an active lifestyle, nutrition, health, nature, leisure, love, trust, self-respect, family, social relations, customs, habits, gender, etc. "From a sociological perspective, the quality of life concept is based on social success attributes such as property, household equipment, education, and marital status" [15]. Regarding the complexity of the issue, research on the quality of life includes two basic approaches – subjective or objective quality of life assessment. Current approaches focus more on the subjective perception, which is affected by mental wellbeing and life satisfaction. The multidimensional model of the subjective perception of the quality of life is based on the holistic concept and includes the following three dimensions: *being* (personal characteristics), *belonging* (belong to a specific environment), and *becoming* (lifestyle, self-realization, achievement).

The complicated and individual perception of the quality of life is closely associated with the fulfillment of human needs and satisfaction of an individual's wishes and desires. Modern quality of life concepts is linked to the concept of sustainable development, which focuses on three areas of sustainability – economic, social, and environmental. The relationships in these areas must be balanced in order to ensure a high level of the quality of life of the contemporary generation and to provide the preconditions for the high-quality life of future generations. However, we should not limit ourselves to the finding that teachers are threatened by the burnout syndrome, but interventions should take place in order for them to get the stress related to their profession under control and learn adequate stress coping techniques.

### **Methods**

The aim of the present research was to determine the level of life satisfaction and the incidence of burnout in teachers. A partial goal was to find out the correlation between life satisfaction and burnout in terms of various aspects such as gender, age, and length of work experience. The objective was detailed by means of 2 research hypotheses, which were subsequently tested.

H1: The length of teachers' work experience is not related to the degree of burnout and overall life satisfaction.

H2: Teachers' gender is not related to the degree of burnout and overall life satisfaction.

### **Methodology**

The data on the level of the burnout syndrome were collected by means of a self-report inventory called the Maslach Burnout Inventory (hereinafter referred to as MBI) designed by C. Maslach. According to Kebza and Šolcová [17] this is the most frequently used method for measuring the burnout syndrome. The MBI is designed to assess three components of the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA). It consists of 22 questions, of which 9 relate to the area of emotional exhaustion, 5 to depersonalization and 8 to the level of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are negative, while the third area of personal accomplishment is positive. In each item, the respondent considers

two answers, i.e. the frequency and intensity of emotions. The answers are indicated on a 7-point rating scale. The validated Cronbach's alpha is 0.83 for frequency and 0.89 for intensity (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Another method used in the research was the Life Satisfaction Questionnaire [19]. The LSQ is designed for a standardized description of inter-individual and intra-individual life satisfaction variability. The questionnaire aims at the assessment of overall life satisfaction and its individual components: health, work and employment, finance, leisure time, partnership, relationship with own children, own person, sexuality, friends and acquaintances, housing. The socio-demographic questionnaire focuses on the respondents' age, length of teaching experience, place of residence, etc. The research study was conducted between 10/2019 and 12/2019 and was designed as a quantitative survey. Data collection was performed in an electronic way using Google forms, which met the methodological and research criteria of online research relevance (e.g., high degree of security, archiving and encoding during data transfer, access via generated password). The research sample was established by deliberate sampling: from among all elementary schools in the Olomouc Region in the Czech Republic (256), a total of 100 schools were randomly selected (drawing) and asked to participate in the research study. For the purposes of the present research, during the period of data collection, a total of 165 completed questionnaires were returned. 29 questionnaires were excluded due to missing data. The research sample consisted of 136 teachers at elementary schools in the Olomouc Region, of whom 27 were men and 109 were women. The average age of the respondents was 45.12 years, SD 11.44. In terms of respecting the code of ethics, all participants in the survey were fully informed of its purpose and of a possibility to terminate their participation at any time without giving a reason. All participants were informed of further data processing and ensuring anonymity. Each participant

was involved on a voluntary basis and consented to data processing and publication. The data were processed using the STATISTICA programme, StatSoft, Inc. [20] STATISTICA (Data Analysis Software System), version 12. For each variable, the basic statistical quantities were calculated, and distribution of normality was tested. Normality was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. The result of the test did not confirm the normal distribution of the data obtained. Therefore, a non-parametric statistic was used and the Mann-Whitney U-test and Spearman correlation were applied. The level of statistical significance was tested at  $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ;  $\alpha \leq 0.01$ ;  $\alpha \leq 0.001$ .

### Data Analysis and Results

During an analysis of various dimensions of the burnout syndrome it was observed that in the total sample of 136 teachers, in the area of emotional exhaustion 7.4% were in the low degree of burnout, 31.6 were in the medium degree of burnout, and 61% in the high degree of burnout. The sum of the percentages of the medium and high degree of burnout equals 92.6%, which is an extremely high percentage of teachers who have suffered or are about to suffer burnout in the emotional area. Focusing on the area of depersonalization, 47.1% of teachers are in the high degree of depersonalization and 37.5% are in the medium degree. However, in the area of personal accomplishment a total of 61.8% of the respondents achieved the high degree. 25% of the respondents were in the medium degree and 13.2% were in the low degree. Summing up the percentages of the high and medium degree in the area of personal accomplishment, the resulting 86.8% suggests that most of the respondents feel work-related personal accomplishment. The low level of personal accomplishment can also be understood as decreased work performance.



**Table 1.** Individual dimensions of the burnout syndrome, entire sample

Dimensions of MBI	N	Mean	Low degree %	Medium degree %	High degree %
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>	136	31.8	7.4	31.6	<b>61</b>
<i>Depersonalization</i>	136	12.7	15.4	37.5	<b>47.1</b>
<i>Personal accomplishment</i>	136	40.9	<b>13.2</b>	25	61.9

**Table 2.** Spearman correlation coefficients – length of teaching experience and other variables

Variables	EE: Degree of emotional exhaustion	PA: Degree of personal accomplishment	DP: Degree of depersonalization	Overall life satisfaction
<i>Length of experience</i>	0.137	-0.259	0.113	0.030
<i>P-value</i>	0.111	0.002**	0.191	0.727

Table 2 shows a part of the correlation matrix relating to the length of teaching experience and the monitored variables. Based on a comparison of the p-value with the level of significance  $\alpha = 5\%$ , the hypothesis was rejected only for the length of teaching experience and degree of personal accomplishment (p-value lower than  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). This is a negative correlation, which means that with increasing length of teaching experience the degree of personal accomplishment decreases. The length of teaching experience does not affect the remaining variables. A partial objective of this research study was to examine whether there was

a significant difference in the monitored variables in terms of gender. Regarding the fact that gender is a categorical alternative variable, the Mann-Whitney test was used to examine the effect of gender on the monitored variables for the two independent samples. The basic statistical characteristics of the monitored variables for both genders are shown in Table 3. The table shows that men have a higher average degree of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and show lower overall life satisfaction. On average, the degree of personal accomplishment is identical for both genders.

**Table 3.** Basic statistical characteristics of monitored variables by gender

Variables	N-female	Mean	Median	SD	N-male	Mean	Median	SD
<i>Emotional exhaustion</i>	109	31.7	30.0	12.4	27	32.1	30.0	9.9
<i>Personal accomplishment</i>	109	40.9	42.0	9.2	27	40.9	42.0	6.5
<i>Depersonalization</i>	109	12.3	11.0	5.5	27	14.5	14.0	5.6
<i>Life satisfaction</i>	109	244	234	58	27	253	244	61

**Table 4.** Mann-Whitney test

Variables	EE: Degree of emotional exhaustion	PA: Degree of personal accomplishment	DP: Degree of depersonalization	Overall life satisfaction
<i>Mann-Whitney U</i>	1380.000	1423.500	1102.000	1345.500
<i>P-value</i>	0.617	0.793	0.042*	0.492

The evaluation of the Mann-Whitney test is shown in Table 4. At the level of significance  $\alpha = 5\%$  the hypothesis concerning the non-existence of the effect of gender on the monitored variables was rejected only in the case of depersonalization (p-value lower than the level of significance  $\alpha = 0.05$ ), where statistically significant differences were observed between men and women. Table 3 shows that men have a higher degree of depersonalization. In the remaining variables no statistically significant differences were observed between men and women. The results suggest that hypothesis H1 was rejected which means that the existence of a significant correlation between the length of teaching experience and the degree of burnout and overall life satisfaction was not confirmed. Hypothesis H2 was also rejected because men have significantly higher results in the area of depersonalization compared with women.

### Discussions

The results of the research suggest that in the area of personal accomplishment a total of 61.8% of the respondents achieved the high degree. 25% of the respondents were in the medium degree and 13.2% were in the low degree. Summing up the percentages of the high and medium degree in the area of personal accomplishment, the resulting 86.8% suggests that most of the respondents feel work-related personal accomplishment. The area of personal accomplishment was correlated with the length of teaching experience, where longer experience was associated with lower accomplishment. Both men and women achieved similar values in this area. The low level of personal accomplishment can also be understood as decreased work performance. According to Křivohlavý [21], low values in this area are achieved by individuals with a low degree of healthy self-confidence. However, in the area of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization such positive results were not achieved. The results suggested that in the area of emotional exhaustion 7.4% were in the low degree

of burnout, 31.6 were in the medium degree of burnout, and 61% in the high degree of burnout. The sum of the percentages of the medium and high degree of burnout equals 92.6%, which suggests an extremely high percentage of teachers who have suffered or are about to suffer burnout in the emotional area. The research also suggests that men have a higher degree of emotional exhaustion, which is also confirmed by Ptáček et al. [4]. According to Křivohlavý [21], the degree of emotional exhaustion is the most authoritative indicator of the presence of the burnout syndrome because it is characterized by a loss of appetite for life, lack of power for any activity, and emotional exhaustion.

High percentages were also scored in the area of depersonalization. A total of 47.1% of the respondents are in the high degree of burnout, 37.5% are in the medium degree of burnout, and 15.4% are in the low degree of burnout. The sum of the medium and high degree of burnout suggests that 84.6% of teachers have suffered or are about to suffer burnout in this area. Compared with the aggregate percentage for emotional exhaustion this is by 8% less, but still the numbers are high. It was also observed that men were again more affected by burnout in the area of depersonalization, which is also confirmed by Vercambre et al. [22]. According to Křivohlavý [21], depersonalization is a manifestation of mental exhaustion, which is often observed in people who have a great need for a positive feedback from those people who they focus on. If there is no feedback, these individuals will get bitter and will start to behave cynically to other people, which may be a serious problem in helping professions, in this case the teaching profession.

### Conclusion

The research also showed that 72.8% of the total number of 136 teachers were at risk of the burnout syndrome. This research sample showed high values in the areas of depersonalization and emotio-

nal exhaustion and at the same time low values in the area of personal accomplishment.

The overall score in all the areas also suggests that although the burnout syndrome affects all spheres of human psyche, the most significant effect is on the emotional and physical areas. The Life Satisfaction Questionnaire focused on teachers' life satisfaction in the most significant areas. According to the authors of the questionnaire Fahrenberg et al. [23], the areas that have the greatest effect on satisfaction include *Own person, Friends and relatives, Financial situation, and Health*. The present study suggests that life satisfaction is significantly affected by *Relationship to one's own children, Financial situation, Health, and Leisure*. The results suggest an agreement in two areas. The research also shows that with a higher number of positive responses in the area of Leisure, the overall life satisfaction increases and the degree of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion decreases. Similarly, a study by Ptáček et al. [4] suggests that the amount of free time and the way it is spent have a significant effect on the overall life satisfaction and the degree of the burnout syndrome.

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