

PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

Professional burnout has been a popular research subject among teachers over the last few years. However, there are not many research studies involving teachers of special education there. The results of the study conducted by the European Trade Union Committee for Education show that the teachers surveyed in Latvia are on the verge of burnout (49%) (Moncada, Llorens, 2013). The aim of the study is to research the levels of professional burnout and the differences in special education teachers whose length of employment in education is 10 and 25 years.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, 1986) was used to study professional burnout. The study sample consisted of 106 special education teachers. The results of the study do not confirm the hypothesis that there are statistically significant differences in the levels of professional burnout between special education teachers whose length of employment in education is 10 years and those whose length of employment in education is 25 years. The results of the study reveal that teachers have high and medium levels of emotional exhaustion.

Keywords: *Professional burnout, special education teachers, Maslach Burnout Inventory.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Representatives of the Education and Science Trade Union of Latvia acknowledge that the profession of a teacher is associated with burnout, and the resulting loss of capacity for work cannot be restored by introducing new technologies because the specific nature of the job, i.e., the direct contact with children, cannot be excluded. The effects of various factors cause physiological and psychoemotional changes in the body and lead to loss of the professional skills in such teachers (Grigorjevs, 2014).

Evidence has been obtained in earlier studies that that working in education involves continuous periods of tension and may lead to professional burnout (Antoniou et al., 2013). Environmental diversity, a wide spectrum of communication, emotional and physical loads involved in working with pupils of various ages and levels of development and their parents, and handling complex situations are just a few of the factors which are topical for this profession. Even though the profession of teacher is highly regulated and supervised from the outside, it is not highly appreciated in terms of the salary and respect (Hargreaves et al., 2007; Muller et al., 2007). The research studies conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development also show that most of the countries have very limited possibilities for due appreciation and remuneration of the teachers' job (OECD, 2005).

In their daily job in a classroom, special education teachers meet children who have explicitly different special features of the nervous system function, have attention deficit disorders, hyperactivity, emotional disorders, development disorders, etc. The mission of the special education teacher in the school is to understand the weaknesses of every child, identify their individual strengths, and, accordingly, provide the necessary support and evaluate the performance of the child. Individual approaches in education create favourable conditions for all-round development of each child and acquisition of knowledge and skills (Tomlinson, 2012).

In summary, one can conclude that special education teachers are exposed to various occupational risks, such as environmental diversity, emotional and physical loads involved in working with pupils of different ages and levels of development and their parents, dealing with complex situations, finding individual approaches to each individual, and limited possibilities for due appreciation and remuneration of such teachers, which are all suggestive of potential professional burnout in this profession.

The aim of the study is to research the levels of professional burnout and the differences in special education teachers whose length of employment in education is 10 and 25 years.

The following hypothesis was proposed: There are statistically significant differences in the levels of professional burnout between special education teachers whose length of employment in education is 10 years and those whose length of employment in education is 25 years.

The study was conducted in three special schools in Riga where 187 special education teachers were employed in the academic year 2012/2013, of which 24 either left their jobs themselves or were dismissed during the year. This indicator of 13% of the total number of employees served as a determinant factor to support the significance of the research study.

2.THE JOB OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER AS A PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT FACTOR

After H. Freudenberger first used the term 'burnout' to describe the state of chronic emotional exhaustion, this phenomenon has become the subject of many subsequent studies (Kraft, 2007). Later on, K. Maslach et al. conducted a study into on-job professional burnout among employees and described this phenomenon as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduction of personal accomplishment, which may occur in individuals working with people (Maslach, Jackson, 1997). For a teacher to become a professional in their field, they must work in the sector of education for 5-7 years in order to acquire the necessary skills. K. Maslach emphasises that the first symptoms of professional burnout appear specifically in this period (Maslach, 1998).

Based on the discoveries made by scientists that professional burnout has already been observed in various jobs associated with providing assistance to other people and communication between people, one can identify certain risk groups exposed to the risk of burnout. These include doctors, medical nurses, social workers, pharmacists, psychologists, teachers (Koustelios, 2003; Koustelios, Tsigilis, 2005; Tsigilis et al. 2004) etc., people working in shifts; people whose job involves high degrees of responsibility, but low levels of moral and material appreciation as well as authority (Ancane, 2004).

Very many research studies have been conducted particularly among teachers. For instance, there has been a study involving teachers who have just started their careers and ones whose experience exceeds six years (Goddard et al., 2006), several research studies have been carried out into differences in professional burnout in lower and upper secondary schools (Yavuz, 2009; Tsigilis et al., 2011; Antoniou et al, 2013). These studies do not reveal any statistically significant differences between professional burnout in teachers working in lower or upper secondary schools, but they reveal statistically significant differences between male and female teachers (Yavuz, 2009). Other studies show no statistically significant correlations between professional burnout, stress, and job satisfaction (Reddy, 2007). It was discovered during the studies that workloads and shortage of time are among the most significant factors which affect teachers (Tsiakkios, Piasiardis, 2002). Results were obtained to claim that the causes of emotional exhaustion include excessive workloads of teachers and disruptive behaviours of pupils (Fernet et al., 2012). Burnout is also associated with demographic properties of pupils, such as age, gender, form level, family status, and cultural context (Schwab, et al., 1986). Several studies suggest that the working environment plays a significant role in the burnout of teachers (Friedman, 2000; Goddard, et al., 2006). A. Friedman (2000) writes about the causes of burnout that teachers have a "reality shock". It is a phenomenon which involves inability of teachers to provide the necessary knowledge to their pupils on the one hand and pupil discipline problems and behavioural disorders in the classroom on the other hand.

Research studies have also been conducted specifically among special education teachers, for example, in the United States where differences in burnout have been studied between teachers of regular educational institutions and teachers working at special educational institutions. The results of the study showed higher burnout rates for teachers working in regular schools. No statistically significant differences were found with regard to job satisfaction among regular and special education teachers. A weak correlation was found between job satisfaction and burnout in both study samples (Roach, 2009).

Professional burnout develops in employees gradually and discreetly over several years (Montgomery, Rupp, 2005). Burnout is a process which involves 3 dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduction of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1998).

These three dimensions of professional burnout often overlap and appear to be the cause and consequence of each other, and this is what was researched within this study conducted among the teachers of the three special schools in Latvia.

3.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

According to the information published on the website of Riga City Council Department of Education, Culture, and Sports, there are 12 special schools in Riga (List of special educational schools: <http://dati.e-skola.lv/Katalogs/RigaSkolaSVSpec>). The study was conducted in three special schools of Riga with 187 special education teachers in the academic year 2012/2013. 187 questionnaires were distributed in these schools in total, and 149 questionnaires were received back. The questionnaires were distributed among the respondents in paper format. 106 questionnaires were fully completed and valid for processing, 62 (58%) of them were received from teachers whose length of employment is 25 years, and 44 (42%) were received from teachers whose length of employment is at least 10 years.

The below research methods were used in the study.

1) Data collection method: The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) for detection of professional burnout. The inventory includes 22 statements, and the Likert type scale was used to assess them. The MBI consists of 3 sub-scales: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, 1986 acc. to Dreifelde-Gabruseva, 2009).

The obtained test results identified the level of professional burnout, defined as low, medium, or high (see Table 1) (Vodopjanova, Starchenkova, 2009, 207).

Table 1

Professional burnout level score

Sub-scale	Low level (points)	Medium level (points)	High level (points)
Emotional exhaustion	0-15	16-24	25 or more
Depersonalisation	0-5	6-10	11 or more
Personal Accomplishment	37 or more	31-36	30 or less

Source: Vodopjanova, Starchenkova (2009)

2) Mathematical statistical data processing methods: Cronbach's alpha (data credibility), Kolmogorov Smirnov Z criterion (correspondence of data to normal distribution), the parametric statistics method – the T criterion, and the non-parametric statistics method – the Mann Whitney U criterion (calculation of professional burnout level differences).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine the credibility of the results obtained from the questionnaires used in the study (see Table 1).

Table 2

Cronbach's alpha coefficient

	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Personal accomplishment
Cronbach's alpha coefficient	0.859	0.559	0.737

Table 2 shows that the Cronbach's alpha obtained for the results on the emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment reduction scales are higher by 0.6, which indicates a sufficient level of credibility for the results obtained on these scales. The Cronbach's alpha obtained for the result on the depersonalisation scale is equal to 0.6 only after decimal approximation, and this means a sufficient level of credibility of the results.

The next step in the study was determination of whether the empirical distributions of the obtained results correspond to the normal distribution, and calculation of Kolmogorov Smirnov Z criterion (see Table 3).

Table 3

The results of Kolmogorov – Smirnov Z test for selection of special education teachers with 25 years of experience

	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Personal accomplishment
N	62	62	62
Kolmogorov – Smirnov Z test	1.002	1.054	0.815
Significance	0.268	0.217	0.520

Table 3 shows that the significance score for the results on all scales is above 0.05, and this shows that the results are representable.

Table 4

The results of Kolmogorov – Smirnov Z test for selection of special education teachers with 10 years of experience

	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Personal accomplishment
N	44	44	44
Kolmogorov – Smirnov Z test	1.212	0.697	1.447
Significance	0.106	0.716	0.030

For the special education teachers with 10 years of job experience, the significance score is by 0.05 higher for the results on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation scales (see Table 4), and this shows that the results are representable. The Kolmogorov Smirnov Z criterion score for the results on the personal accomplishment reduction scale are lower by 0.05, which indicates that the results are not representable.

The next step was the descriptive statistics calculations – the mean arithmetic median mode is the central tendency indicators. If the central tendency indicators are close according to their values, this means that the sample size is sufficient.

The central tendency indicators for the emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment reduction scale scores are close according to their values, and this shows that the sample size is sufficient for these measurements. The depersonalisation scale central tendency mode value is explicitly lower, and this shows that the sample size is small (see Table 5).

Table 5

The results of Kolmogorov – Smirnov Z test for selection of special education teachers with 25 years of experience

		Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Personal accomplishment
N	valid	62	62	62
	missing	0	0	0
Arithmetic mean		25.0323	6.3548	33.7581
Median		24.0000	6.0000	34.0000
Mode		26.00	3.00	34.00
Standard deviation		9.45909	4.06947	8.32276
Coefficient of skewness		0.439	1.098	-0.252
Standard error of the coefficient of skewness		0.304	0.304	0.304
Excess		-0.999	1.099	0.132
Standard deviation of excess		0.599	0.599	0.599

A review of the skewness coefficient values shows that the coefficient of skewness for the results on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation scales is positive, and this indicates that the results have a tendency towards lower values. The skewness coefficient is negative for the results on the personal accomplishment reduction scale, and this indicates that the results have a tendency towards higher values (see Table 5).

Table 6

The results of Kolmogorov – Smirnov Z test for selection of special education teachers with 10 years of experience

		Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalisation	Personal accomplishment
N	valid	44	44	44
	missing	0	0	0
Arithmetic mean		22.8409	5.2500	32.5227
Median		21.0000	5.0000	37.0000
Mode		16.00 ^a	5.00	40.00
Standard deviation		7.92389	3.18518	9.02835
Coefficient of skewness		1.230	0.358	-0.629
Standard error of the coefficient of skewness		0.357	0.357	0.357
Excess		0.539	0.038	-0.983
Standard deviation of excess		0.702	0.702	0.702

The excess values show that the value is negative for the results obtained on the emotional exhaustion scale, and this indicates that the results tend to spread along the X axis. The excess value is positive for the results on the depersonalisation and personal accomplishment reduction scales, and this indicates that the results have a tendency to cluster around the arithmetic mean (see Table 6).

Considering the fact that the empirical distribution of the results obtained on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation scales corresponds to the normal distribution in both samples, the parametric statistics method - the T criterion was used to calculate the differences in the levels of professional burnout (see Table 7).

Table 7

T test for special education teachers with 10 and 25 years work experience

	T	Significance
Emotional exhaustion	-1.255	0.212
Depersonalisation	-1.503	0.136

The T criterion significance values, which are above 0.05, allow concluding that the special education teachers with 10 years of job experience and the special education teachers with 25 years of job experience do not have statistically significant differences in the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation scores (see Table 7).

Since the empirical distribution of the results obtained on the personal accomplishment reduction scale for the teachers with 25 years of job experience in the samples do not correspond to the normal distribution, and the results for the teachers with 10 years of job experience do not correspond to the normal distribution, the calculations were based on the use of the non-parametric statistics method - the Mann Whitney U criterion (see Table 8).

Table 8

Mann Whitney U test for special education teachers with 10 and 25 years work experience

	Personal accomplishment
Mann Whitney U test	1333.500
Significance	0.845

The Mann Whitney U criterion significance values, which are above 0.05, allow concluding that there are no statistically significant differences also in the personal accomplishment reduction scores for the special education teachers with 10 years of job experience and the special education teachers with 25 years of job experience (see Table 8).

Further below is a description of the burnout scores obtained for the special education teachers on the three scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and personal accomplishment reduction (see Fig. 1 to Fig 4).

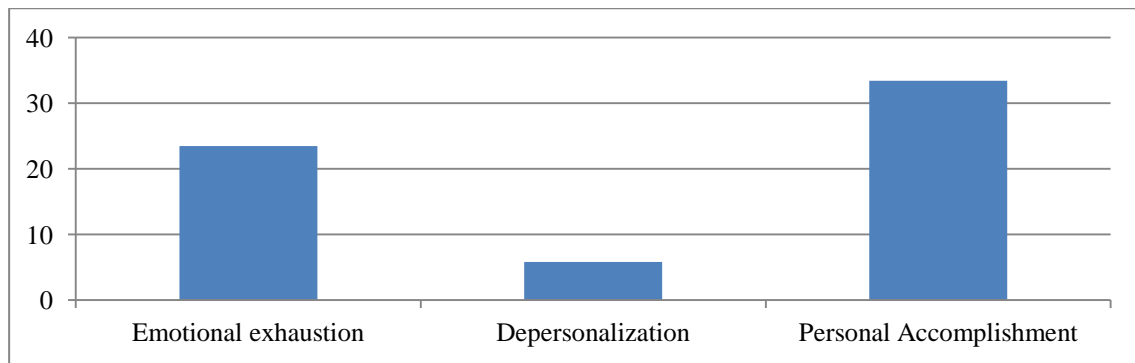


Figure 1: Special education teachers' overall mean scores for professional burnout levels

A summary of the scores obtained on all the professional burnout scales allows to conclude that special education teachers have a medium (23.44 points) level of professional burnout in the mean scores for emotional exhaustion, a low level of professional burnout in the mean scores for depersonalisation (5.8 points), and a medium level of professional burnout in the scores for personal accomplishment (33.14 points) (see Fig. 1).

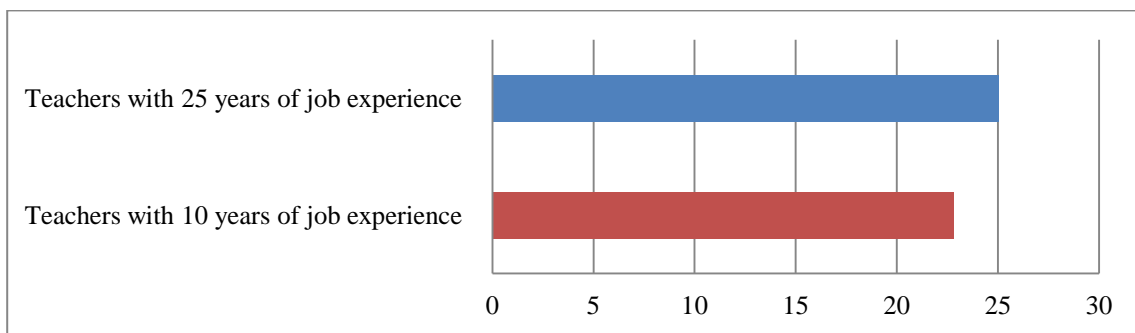


Figure 2: Mean scores on the emotional exhaustion scale

The mean scores on the emotional exhaustion scale for the level of professional burnout are high in the teachers with 25 years of job experience (25.03 points), whereas the means scores are medium with a tendency towards high (22.85 points) in the teachers with 10 years of job experience (see Fig. 2), as, according to the Professional Burnout Level Assessment Table by K. Maslach and S. Jackson (see Table 1), a high level of burnout is at 25 or more points.

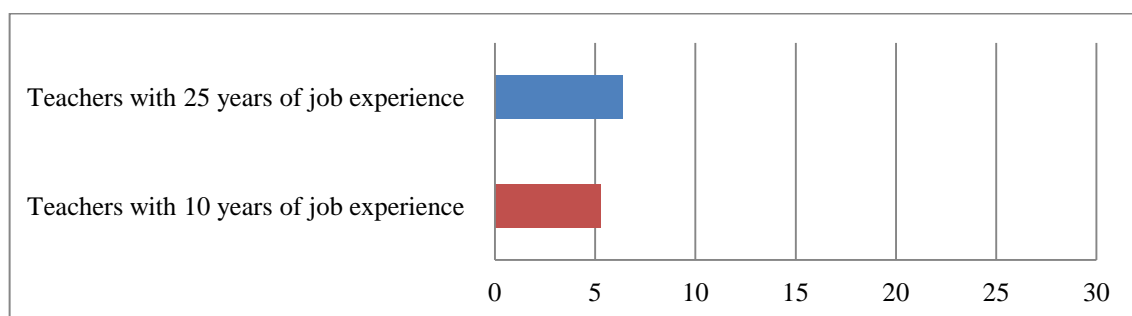


Figure 3: Mean scores on the depersonalisation scale

The means scores on the depersonalisation scale for the level of professional burnout are low with a tendency towards medium (5.25 points) professional burnout level for the teachers with 10 years of job experience, and medium (6.35 points) for the teachers with 25 years of job experience (see Fig 3).

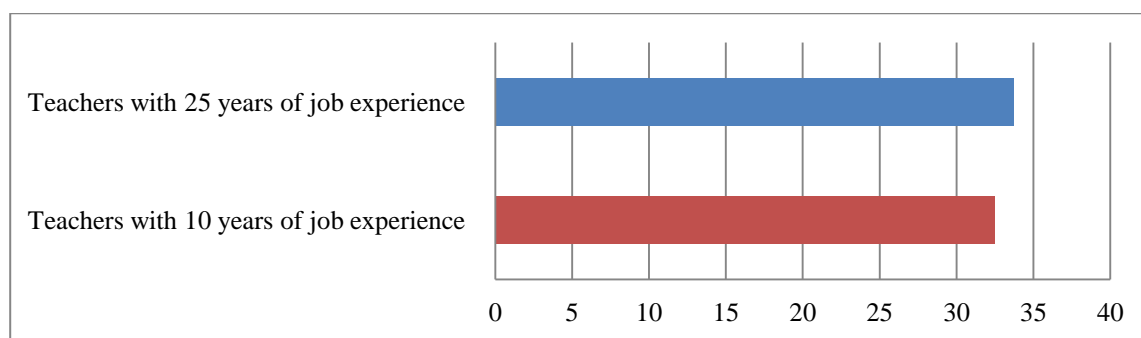


Figure 4: Mean scores on the personal accomplishment reduction scale

The mean scores on the personal accomplishment scale for the level of professional burnout are medium for the teachers with 25 years of job experience and the teachers with 10 years of job experience, i.e., 33.75 and 32.52 points respectively (see Fig. 4).

5.CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study do not confirm the hypothesis that there are statistically significant differences in the levels of professional burnout between special education teachers whose length of employment in education is 10 years and those whose length of employment in education is 25 years. There are no statistically significant differences in the levels of professional burnout between the teachers with 10 or 25 years of job experience in education.

A summary of the scores obtained on all the professional burnout scales allows to conclude that special education teachers have a medium (23.44 points) level of professional burnout in the mean scores for emotional exhaustion, have a low level of professional burnout in the mean scores for depersonalisation (5.8 points), and have a medium level of professional burnout in the scores for personal accomplishment (33.14 points), and these are signals of professional burnout among the special education teachers. The results of the research study are similar to those described in the theory (Maslach, 1998; Montgomery, Rupp, 2005) or obtained in the studies conducted elsewhere (Skoryk, 2013).

This suggests that further research should be targeted at studying the factors which influence professional burnout, such as working conditions and remuneration, working environment, conflicts

2014; Maslach, 2011; Hakanen, et al., 2006; Jackson, 2004).

The mean scores on the emotional exhaustion scale for the level of professional burnout are high (25.03 points) among the teachers with 25 years of job experience and medium with a tendency towards high (22.85 points) among the teachers with 10 years of job experience. Emotional exhaustion is the main component of professional burnout, characterised by a feeling of depletion of the emotional resources, presence of anxiety, feeling insulted, sense of emptiness, occurrence of the wish to isolate in order to get protection. The person realises that they are not able to feel as they felt at the place of their employment before, the first symptoms of depression and emotional breakdown occur (Maslach, 1998). The results of the study show that already now the special education teachers might have all or some of these symptoms.

The means scores on the depersonalisation scale for the level of professional burnout are low with a tendency towards medium (5.25 points) professional burnout level for the teachers with 10 years of job experience, and medium (6.35 points) for the teachers with 25 years of job experience. Depersonalisation involves negative, cynical reactions to the work performed by other people, the individual is not able to feel free, relax, develops additions to various substances. This is suggestive of potential indifference in communication with other people and pupils in the future and perception of the pupils as work objects. Emotional disassociation from the hardships and problems of the pupils may occur. Thus, the job becomes a formal duty and does not bring the previous enjoyment and satisfaction with the performance. This causes self-dissatisfaction and the results of the work, and potentially higher demands towards the individual himself/herself (Maslach, 1998).

The mean scores on the personal accomplishment scale for the level of professional burnout are medium for the teachers with 25 years of job experience and the teachers with 10 years of job experience, i.e., 33.75 and 32.52 points respectively. This suggests that already now the special education teachers are not willing to succeed in life and have reduced levels of capacity for work. Worsening of the quality of relationships,

and hostile attitudes towards the colleagues may occur in the future and, potentially, already now. Reduced levels of the sense of job competence, self-dissatisfaction, feeling of being nothing, negative self-perception from the professional point of view may occur (Maslach, 1998).

The results are suggestive of the necessity for preventive measures. To preclude further development of professional burnout in the teachers, the management and the employees of the educational institutions should evaluate and consider all the factors which influence professional burnout, i.e., not only the length of employment, but also age, level of education, gender, working environment, professional relationships, salary, personal factors, with no particular emphasis on any single influencing factor.

At policy level regular, paid supervision sessions should be held in order to control the symptoms of professional burnout among the special education teachers, during which it is necessary to discuss any issues the teachers find significant, to provide support in handling complex situations, to suggest alternative ways of dealing with various situations in order to assure that the teachers have clearly defined individual roles and limits of their competence, are encouraged to evaluate and analyse their performance and emotions, understand the targets of their activities, and to achieve them sooner. At school management level alternative stress control measures should also be facilitated, such as mutual consultations and support among the colleagues, informal team-building events (e.g., various field trips, competitions, and joint celebrations).

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