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PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT LEVEL AND MENTAL HEALTH OF TEACHERS IN LATVIA

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Abstract

The growing frequency of the negative manifestation of the burnout syndrome in professional activity calls for research into the relationship between professional burnout and mental health of teachers in Latvia. The purpose of the research is to study the relationship between low and high levels of professional burnout and the dimensions of mental health in Latvian teachers. The participants in the study were 100 teachers from general education schools in Latvia. The Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) was used to study the professional burnout syndrome in teachers' professional activity and the Jagdish & Srivastava Mental Health Inventory (MHI) was used to study the teachers' mental health dimensions. At low burnout levels, a significant negative correlation of burnout dimensions Emotional Exhaustion and reduced Personal Accomplishment was found with mental health dimension Positive Self-evaluation. At high burnout levels, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment show a significant negative correlation with mental health. No correlation was found between burnout and Positive Self-evaluation and Autonomy. Low and high levels of professional burnout in teachers indicate a correlation with mental health. Positive self-evaluation is an important indicator of the prevention of professional burnout syndrome, which promotes a decrease in depersonalization and increase in personal accomplishments in Latvian teachers.

Keywords: Mental health, professional burnout, teacher.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' professional activity requires high professional competence and significant physical, intellectual, and mental resources. During the transfer of the Latvian education system to competency-based learning (Fadels, Bialika, & Trilings, 2017), teachers are forced to adapt to the rapidly changing working conditions, which affects their physical and mental health. The teacher's profession requires constant personal and emotional contact (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103). Constant with students, parents, and colleagues causes the accumulation of stress and tension, which can lead to professional burnout (Puertas-Molero, Zurita-Ortega, Ubago-Jiménez, & González-Valero, 2019, p. 1).

Burnout is observed more frequently in teachers who have high stress levels at work (Cezar-Vaz, Bonow, Almeida, Rocha, & Borges, 2015; Wang et al., 2015), and it manifests as a negative emotional reaction to prolonged stress (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The development of burnout can be related to poor mental health because teachers, compared to other professional groups, have higher markers of mental health problems (McLean, Abry, Taylor, Jiménez, & Granger, 2017, p. 231).

According to the research data of the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE), professional stress level at Latvian schools is one of the highest in Europe. From the Latvian teachers surveyed in the study, 49% are on the verge of burnout. The results show that Latvia has the highest emotional demands for teachers (64%) and the highest level of verbal abuse towards teachers at school (56%) (ETUCE, 2011, p. 16-17). To deal with emotional stress, teachers have to constantly improve their level of professional competence, which leads to physical and intellectual overload and emotional exhaustion.

The stressful conditions that teachers face in their professional environment can disturb the balance between their professional performance and mental health (Cezar-Vaz et al., 2015, p. 1). Lack of mental resources and exhaustion can act as a catalyst for the development of professional burnout.

In the context of pedagogical activity, burnout is defined as a three-dimensional psychological syndrome and includes the following dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, which appear as a reaction to chronic stress in the education environment (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996, p. 14). Emotional exhaustion means depletion of one's emotional resources for the fulfilment of professional tasks, followed by physical and emotional exhaustion. Depersonalization manifests as a negative or overly distant reaction, irritability, loss of ideals regarding students, their parents, and colleagues. Whereas the lack of personal accomplishment reflects negative judgement of one's competence and insufficient appreciation of one's work, decrease in abilities, low spirits, and inability to deal with professional situations (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103).

Under chronic stress, burnout acts as a psychological defence mechanism, which, during long-term psychological and emotional stress, affects physical and mental wellbeing, as well as the teacher's attitude to their work. As a psychological defence mechanism, burnout manifests as partial or complete exclusion of emotions in response to a psychologically traumatic effect.

The risk of burnout can be increased by lack of autonomy, worrying about what others think, obsessive thoughts about mistakes made in the teaching process, self-criticism, and low frustration threshold (Larrivee, 2012, p. 9).

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Teachers with burnout syndrome are characterised by poor mental health, high levels of depression, anxiety, high psychological and emotional strain. High burnout scores are accompanied by problems with managing and controlling emotions in front of students (Fiorelli, Albanese, Gabola, & Pepe, 2016, p. 2), which leads to decrease in motivation and a negative attitude to the teaching process. Teachers also report psychological and physical health problems more frequently, including anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and memory impairment.

Teacher burnout also affects the psychological climate in the classroom, which leads to negative academic and behavioral performance of students (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014, p. 683). Burnout poses a threat to the teacher's adaptive function and prevents them from maintaining supportive emotional relationships with learners, which are required for successful teaching. Teachers with poor mental health demonstrate irritability and poor classroom management skills (Gibbs & Miller, 2014, p. 10).

Mojsa-Kaja, Golonka, and Marek (2015, p. 112) note that the appearance of burnout symptoms is a result of the disparity between the teachers' expectations and the actual situation. High burnout levels are more frequently observed in professions with high demand for work and low resources (Bakker & Costa, 2014, p. 114). Role conflicts and lack of administrative support are also risk factors for burnout (Brunsting et al., 2014, p. 683). Whereas Cezar-Vaz et al. (2015, p. 5) emphasise the importance of improving the conditions in the education environment, providing adequate resources and support to teachers from the school, which could act as preventive factors for mental health and burnout.

Mental health of teachers is an indicator of stress tolerance in everyday and professional life (Singh & Tiwari, 2016, p. 2109), which is why it is a factor that decreases stress related to the performance of professional duties (McLean, Abry, Taylor, Jiménez, & Granger, 2017, p. 231). Good mental health increases job satisfaction and improves relationships with colleagues, and stress tolerance improves the teacher's work performance, which is a factor for the decrease of burnout symptoms.

The relationship of burnout with mental health was only studied in the context of mental disorders and such symptoms as depression, anxiety, nervousness, and anger, or in relation to stress factors in the professional environment. In several studies, a significant negative correlation was found between burnout and mental health of teachers. Thus, teachers with poor mental health are more susceptible to burnout (Ahola & Hakanen, 2014; González-Morales, Rodríguez, & Peiró, 2010; Farsani, Aroufzad, & Farsani, 2012; Llorens-Gumbau & Salanova-Soria, 2014; Zhang, Zhao, Xiao, Zheng, Xiao, Chen, & Chen, 2014; McLean et al., 2017); whereas burnout symptoms have a negative impact on mental health of teachers.

The relationship between burnout and mental health as a complex phenomenon was reviewed in this study (Jagdish & Srivastava, 1996). Mental health is defined as psychological wellbeing in different spheres of life, including positive self-evaluation, perception of reality, integration of personality, autonomy, group-oriented attitude, environmental mastery.

Discovering burnout dimensions and improving mental health of teachers is especially important for teaching and the development of learners, as well as for creating a healthy psychological climate in the education environment.

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2. Problem Statement

Teachers' professional performance is affected by burnout and their mental health. An attempt was made in this study to define burnout as depletion of mental resources. The results allow defining mental health factors that affect burnout symptoms at different levels.

3. Research Questions

Is there a relationship between professional burnout levels and mental health of teachers?

4. Purpose of the Study

To study the relationship of low and high levels of professional burnout with mental health dimensions of teachers in Latvia.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 100 teachers aged 25-64 (*Mdn* = 43 years) representing general education schools in Latvia. 59 of them were women and 41 were men. 10 participants had the professional work experience of less than 5 years; 18 participants – from 5 to 10 years; 30 participants – from 11 to 20 years; 42 participants – more than 20 years. As for the level of education, all participants had higher education; 32 participants had a Master's degree; 4 participants had a Doctoral degree. According to the subjects taught, 35 participants teach exact sciences; 39 participants teach humanities; 18 participants teach arts. Participation of all teachers was voluntary.

5.2. Methods

To study professional burnout of teachers, Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) developed by Maslach, Jackson, and Schwab (1996) was used. The inventory consists of 22 statements to assess the three dimensions of the burnout: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and reduced Personal Accomplishment (PA). The items were scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day), and the participants were required to evaluate each item in terms of how often they experience the feelings described. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients for the three dimensions were .94, .87, and .81 respectively. The total Cronbach's Alpha coefficient .90 shows reliability of the results, and the inventory can be used as a valid instrument in this study.

Mental health inventory (MHI) developed by Jagdish and Srivastava (1996) was applied to measure the teachers' mental health in various life spheres. The inventory consists of 56 statements to assess the six dimensions of mental health: Positive Self-evaluation (PSE), Perception of Reality (PR), Integration of Personality (IP), Autonomy (AU), Group-oriented Attitude (GOA), and Environmental Mastery (EM). The items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always). The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients for each dimension ranged from .76 to .89. The total reliability coefficient was 0.92.

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5.3. Procedure

The study was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved determining statistically significant burnout and mental health dimensions and the correlation analysis of the relationship between burnout and mental health in the total sample of teachers. During the second stage, the sample was divided into two groups according to the median of total burnout score and participants with low and high levels of burnout were singled out. Then a correlation analysis was performed on the relationship between burnout and mental health in groups of participants. Nonparametric data processing methods were used.

6. Findings

According to the research plan, the comparative analysis of burnout and mental health scores in teachers involved dividing the sample into groups according to low and high burnout level and singling out the participants with such scores. Burnout and mental health results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 01. Descriptive statistics for burnout and mental health in teachers' sample

Dimensions	Total sample	Teachers with low burnout	Teachers with high burnout
Burnout	70.2 ± 14.46	53.5 ± 6.19	78.2 ± 9.60
Emotional exhaustion	26.8 ± 11.05	14.5 ± 6.63	32.7 ± 7.27
Depersonalization	10.4 ± 6.28	3.58 ± 3.18	13.7 ± 4.51
Reduced personal accomplishment	32.9 ± 4.85	35.4 ± 4.31	31.9 ± 4.70
Mental health	163.8 ± 16.61	177.8 ± 12.55	157.1 ± 13.96
Positive self-evaluation	31.3 ± 3.29	33.9 ± 2.20	30.1 ± 3.02
Perception of reality	22.5 ± 2.16	23.6 ± 2.11	22.0 ± 1.99
Integration of personality	33.4 ± 4.75	36.9 ± 4.26	31.7 ± 4.02
Autonomy	18.5 ± 2.30	20.0 ± 2.05	17.8 ± 2.08
Group-oriented attitude	29.5 ± 3.20	31.9 ± 3.02	28.4 ± 2.62
Environmental mastery	28.5 ± 4.16	31.5 ± 3.40	27.1 ± 3.76

The burnout results in the total sample of teachers show great decrease in personal accomplishment with rather high emotional exhaustion and low depersonalization. While experiencing the feeling of emotional overload at work with insufficient appreciation of their competence, the teachers are able to maintain trusting and warm relationships with students, parents, and colleagues. Because the profession of a teacher requires exemplary behaviour and high erudition, the fear of not meeting others' demands can lead to burnout. The results show that too high performance requirements and low mental resources are risk factors for burnout (Capone & Petrillo, 2018). Mental resources of teachers include the capacity for personality integration, positive self-evaluation and group relationships, which indicate a good balance of mental strength in the teachers' personality, self-confidence, ability to communicate with others, take responsibility and adapt. The teachers with low levels of burnout are dissatisfied with their professional accomplishments, and under high emotional pressure they rely on their internal resources. With high level of burnout, the teachers suffer from emotional exhaustion and low performance, and as a resource they can

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use the ability to integrate and adapt to the changing circumstances of their professional activity. Lack of autonomy can act as a burnout factor (Larrivee, 2012).

Besides, the correlation analysis shows that burnout dimensions are related to mental health. This means that mental health is an important resource for successful professional activity of a teacher and promotes the decrease of burnout. It can be assumed that professional burnout is a logical consequence of mental health decline.

Table 02. Spearman's rank correlation between burnout and mental health in teachers' sample (n=100)

Dimensions	Professional burnout	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Reduced personal accomplishment
Mental health	-.64**	-.71**	-.70**	-.64**
Positive self-evaluation	-.45**	-.54**	-.54**	-.59**
Perception of reality	-.40**	-.44**	-.43**	-.26**
Integration of personality	-.59**	-.65**	-.63**	-.53**
Autonomy	-.44**	-.49**	-.59**	-.56**
Group-oriented attitude	-.67**	-.70**	-.67**	-.44**
Environmental mastery	-.56**	-.66**	-.62**	-.56**

Note: **p< .01

As can be seen from Table 2, negative significant correlations of burnout in teachers were found at the level p<.01 according to all mental health dimensions. The correlations found indicate the tendency for a decline in mental health with the increase of mental overload, stress at work, and negative attitude of others (Zhang et al., 2014). Unfavourable work environment affects teachers' physical and mental health. However, favorable psychological climate and accomplishments of teachers have a positive effect on mental health and reduce burnout.

The results obtained show a significant correlation of burnout with mental health. This correlation can vary depending on the burnout level of the teacher. The result analysis is presented in Tables 3-4.

Table 03. Spearman's rank correlation between burnout and mental health in teachers with low level of burnout (n=47)

Dimensions	Professional burnout	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Reduced personal accomplishment
Mental health	-.05	-.16	-.17	-.24
Positive self-evaluation	-.22	-.36*	-.14	-.35*
Perception of reality	-.27	-.26	-.18	-.15
Integration of personality	-.04	-.24	-.19	-.29
Autonomy	-.10	-.09	-.18	-.33
Group-oriented attitude	-.10	-.22	-.30	-.31
Environmental mastery	-.05	-.02	-.15	-.07

Note: *p< .05

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For the teachers with a low level of burnout, a significant dimension correlating with burnout is positive self-evaluation. The significant negative correlations of positive self-evaluation with emotional exhaustion and decrease of personal accomplishment can indicate a decrease in exhaustion symptoms with the increase of self-confidence, self-acceptance, self-worth and fulfillment of one's opportunities. One's own too high expectations and demands for oneself resulting from emotional stress and anxiety at work are risk factors for burnout (Dombrovskis, Guseva, & Murasovs, 2011; Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017).

Table 04. Spearman's rank correlation between burnout and mental health in teachers with high level of burnout (n=53)

Dimensions	Professional burnout	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Reduced personal accomplishment
Mental health	-.37**	-.55**	-.60**	-.60**
Positive self-evaluation	.06	-.16	-.25**	-.56**
Perception of reality	-.27*	-.42**	-.39**	-.34**
Integration of personality	-.42**	-.56**	-.56**	-.48**
Autonomy	-.18	-.29*	-.49**	-.55**
Group-oriented attitude	-.49**	-.58**	-.57**	-.31**
Environmental mastery	-.37**	-.54**	-.53**	-.56**

Note: **p< .01, *p< .05

In the group of teachers with high levels of professional burnout, it was found that all the variables of mental health are related to burnout dimensions. The results obtained indicate the susceptibility of teachers in this sample to negative evaluation of their work, lack of desire to cooperate with colleagues and management, and maladaptive behaviour. The significant negative correlations found can mean an increase of burnout risk with a decrease of mental health scores, which can lead to negative attitude to work, decrease in one's professional performance, and affects student performance. Positive self-evaluation and autonomy have not shown significant correlation with professional burnout because with high levels of burnout these factors have little effect. Favourable social and psychological climate at school and support from colleagues, parents, and administration improve mental health and reduce burnout (Lim & Eo, 2014; Yu, Wang, Zhai, Dai, & Yang, 2015).

7. Conclusion

This study involved the exploration of the effect of mental health on burnout in Latvian teachers. Understanding the problems of professional burnout in teachers, it is important to provide a scientific basis for improving mental health and finding ways to overcome burnout in the education system of Latvia. The research results show that current prognosis for mental health and burnout in teachers is unsatisfactory. Improving mental health is important for preventing burnout.

Although many teachers love their work and it gives them satisfaction, many of them consider it stressful. To deal with professional requirements and ensure their wellbeing, teachers require emotional competence, as well as effective social support.

The study has shown that teachers need support in solving the issues of mental wellbeing, reducing stress levels, burnout, and exhaustion in order to promote sustainable development of the education system in the best way possible.

7.1. Limitations

Gender differences are not accentuated in the study, and urban and rural school teachers are not differentiated.

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