



## TEACHERS OF SECONDARY EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL STRESS WITH STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE: A GEOGRAPHICAL CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

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This paper presents a small-scale empirical qualitative research on school performance, which is a professional stressor for teachers of Western Attica's (Greece), serving in schools of senior Secondary Education, as well as on effective ways of limiting this phenomenon. The sampling, the sample, the tool, and the credibility criteria of this particular survey are determined. The outcomes and the relevant conclusions, resulting from the processing and analysis of primary data, are presented along with a proposal for further research. According to these conclusions, the teachers' stress is increased in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last grade of senior secondary education, because of the national admission examinations to tertiary education that their pupils participate in. The stress-levels are exacerbated by parents and their expectations of their children's success. For reducing professional stress, different strategies are applied by individual teachers, headmasters and Teachers' Associations.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes in the existing literature about teachers' professional stress, by presenting the strategies for reducing the stress of teachers in senior secondary education of Greece, applied by headmasters and Teachers' Associations, along with a few general policy proposals for dealing with this issue.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been reported that teachers experience higher levels of professional stress compared to other professional groups (Kyriacou, 2001). This is an international phenomenon that is caused by organizational, bureaucratic, educational and social factors (Spyromitros and Iordanidis, 2017). The important factors are obviously differentiated from country to country. For example in the case of Greece, such an important factor is the pupils' school performance in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of senior high-school (the last one), because of the national admission examinations to tertiary education that are conducted (Katsioulas and Chatzipanagiotou, 2014). Despite the importance of this factor, only a limited number of related surveys have been conducted in the recent past (Foulidi et al., 2017; Leventis et al., 2017) yet without addressing this specific issue.

### 1.1 Literature Review

The term stress is used in psychology (both social and clinical), neuroscience, physiology and chemistry, with different reference points in each case (Bezevegkis, 2001). It refers to the pressure on a person or on his/her mental

powers and includes several factors that are considered common to all professions (Cooper *et al.*, 2002). Professional stress (alias, *occupational stress*) may cause emotional exhaustion, negative feelings toward others and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Leiter and Maslach, 2001; Leventis *et al.*, 2017). Considering teachers, their professional stress (*teacher stress*) refers to the negative feelings and unpleasant experiences of teachers, due to their working conditions (Pappa, 2006). Teachers experience high levels of professional stress, compared to other professionals (Jesus and Conboy, 2001). The teachers' stress factors have been empirically studied for the last thirty years (Robinson, 1989) since they may cause occupational problems of self-efficacy that lead to resignation (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2016). These factors include:

- an increased workload (Antoniou, 2006);
- a heterogeneity of classes (Forlin, 2001);
- the requirements of an exigent school administration, setting unrealistic goals (Kyriacou, 2001; Katsioulas and Chatzipanagiotou, 2014);
- the behavior problems with particular pupils (Mouzoura, 2005) that additionally have increased educational needs (Davrazos, 2015);
- the negative relations between colleagues and a subsequent lack of cooperation within school (Karaj and Rapti, 2013);
- the difficulty of combining professional and family life, especially for women-teachers (Antoniou *et al.*, 2006) although gender itself does not appear to be a cause of stress (Vasilopoulos, 2012).

In the Greek educational context, a number of relevant studies have been conducted (Foulidi *et al.*, 2017; Leventis *et al.*, 2017) while there are no stress monitoring practices followed, unlike other countries (Antoniou, 2006). Thus, besides the previous factors, there are proposals for studying several stress issues (Flabouras Nietos *et al.*, 2018) including the case of educators that teach courses of the last grade (3<sup>rd</sup>) of senior high-schools (Katsioulas and Chatzipanagiotou, 2014).

### 1.2. Purpose of Study

Therefore, the purpose of the presented research herein was to identify, analyze and interpret the relation between the school performance of pupils of senior secondary education and the professional stress of teachers, as well as to identify effective strategies for limiting it, according to a recently proposed methodology (Foulidi *et al.*, 2018). The purpose was specifically formulated in the four following queries (see Appendix: Q1-Q4):

- What are the views of Secondary Education teachers about their pupils' school performance as a source of occupational stress and about their parents' attitude towards this?
- What individual actions are adopted by Secondary Education teachers for reducing their stress, resulting from the performance of their pupils?
- What strategies do the school managers implement in Secondary Education to reduce the stress of their teachers, which is caused by the school performance of their pupils?
- What strategies do the Teachers' Associations implement in senior Secondary Education schools of Greece to reduce the stress of teachers that is caused by the school performance of their pupils?

Consequently, this study was structured accordingly, by firstly designing the survey's methodology (see next section). Issues concerning data collection, sample and sampling, interview guiding, preparatory activities, reliability considerations, matters of ethics and data organization procedures had to be defined (see next section). Along these guidelines, individual interviews and observation sessions had been conducted. Finally, the data recorded during the above activities have been analyzed and interpreted, leading to the formulation of the presented herein results.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In this initial study, the dynamic and flexible qualitative method has been used, being suitable both for its goals (Kvale, 1996) and its interdisciplinary character, since its content is a topic of study for different sciences (Banister *et al.*, 1994). This kind of research focuses on “how” and “why” (Iosifidis, 2003) while being naturalistic and authentic, since it is applied in real conditions. It studies what is happening in school reality without trying to control it Isari and Pourkos (2015). It examines the personality of the subjects (teachers) and reveals their experiences (Papaioannou *et al.*, 1996) concerning professional stress without cost. Teachers were counseled about their attitudes and perceptions of the stress that they experience daily, in relation to the school performance of their pupils.

### 2.1. Data Collection

*Place, time and duration of research:* The place of this research was the actual location of the subjects, that is, the schools of Secondary Education Directorate of Western Attica (Greece), but also the premises of the local Directorate itself (Glasser and Strauss, 1967; Papaioannou *et al.*, 1996). Its implementation-time ranged from April to May 2018 and the conducting hours were after school. The multidimensional approach (mixed method) was implemented, as explained below:

- *Semi-structured interviews*, that is, four (4) face-to-face interviews with a selected sample of teachers, based on semi-structured questions. This method is appropriate for the collection of primary data, because the data are collected through personal contact by the same researcher and consider the part of the population to be studied. Flexibility was achieved (Kyriazi, 2001) because the researcher had the opportunity to modify the exploratory direction for enriching the research data, by following interesting responses and exploring the subjects' motivations. This goal cannot be achieved by other qualitative research techniques such as questionnaires. Namely, a semi-structured discussion guide was used (Foulidi *et al.*, 2018) where the researcher added appropriate clarifying questions that had not been determined in advance but were derived from the subjects' responses, in order to extract additional information. In this way, the clarity and breadth of data were ensured. The questions were properly re-expressed to smoothly guide the subjects to a more detailed discussion of the studied issues. At the same time, new issues emerged during this discussion (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989) that were clarified for facilitating the understanding of what the subjects of this research claimed.
- *Observations* were made at two informative meetings of teachers with parents, in senior high-schools of the same area, being both general and vocational ones. The aim was to provide a more complete and accurate description about the causes of teachers' stress, to inform parents about it and to record effective ways of limiting this stress. The main advantage of this method is its immediacy. During the observation for recording the findings, several techniques, such as note-keeping, were used, along with the completion of an observation form (Foulidi *et al.*, 2018). No videotaping or video recording was conducted (Croll, 1986; Cohen and Manion, 1997; Altrichter *et al.*, 2001) because there was no time to get the relevant permission that is required by the educational authorities.
- *Keeping a calendar:* It was used as a complementary method to the previous ones. Short notes have been recorded that have been remarkable sources of primary data (Foulidi, 2015) in predefined categories of the observation data sheet, after the completion of the main survey method. They included reflection and introspection notes, as well as extensive and unorganized references to semi-structured interviews and observations (Altrichter *et al.*, 2001).
- *Field Notes* were recorded, which were additional, complementary and important data. They included everything that happened during the interviews and observations, which were not contained in the text itself.

## 2.2. Sample & Sampling

In this study, deliberate and targeted sampling was carried out, which examined the typical cases of the studied population. It was limited to a small number of teachers who, at the time of this survey, were employed by the Secondary Education Directorate of Western Attica in the two types of schools (general senior high-schools and vocational high-schools), teaching courses of the last grade for the national admitting examinations to tertiary education. The sample included teachers of different gender and different duties (teaching and administrative); so all sub-categories were represented on the basis of the selected characteristics.

## 2.3. The Interview Guide

For this survey an “interview guide” was designed (Foulidi *et al.*, 2018). At the beginning, there was a brief introductory note, through which the subjects understood the main topic of the interview and the main ethical rules. Then, there were mainly open questions, questions of opinion and “structural” questions. The first section included questions about the causes of the phenomenon and the second section about how to deal with it. The series of questions ensured a smooth and reasonable transition from one issue to another, without creating the slightest confusion among the subjects of this survey (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Content validity has been achieved, since the measurement tool fully and equally covered all the dimensions of the phenomenon under consideration.

## 2.4. Preparation of Survey

Before the interviews were conducted, practical issues had been settled, such as the exact date and time of the interview, according to the preferences of the subjects of this survey. Access permissions to the schools or to the local educational Directorate had been already ensured. An informing consent-form had been handed out by the researcher and signed by the subjects of this survey before the interviews began.

## 2.5. Reliability & Validity of Procedures & Methods

The credibility of this qualitative survey is ensured in terms of methodological design and data quality, since it is proven that the scientific findings are true and trustworthy.

In particular, the following techniques were applied:

- *Triangulation of methods and data* (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Vitsilaki-Soroniat, 1998). The interview data were triangulated with the observations data. Thus, each data source contributed to the final analysis of data in such a way that each conclusion of this survey resulted as an outcome of confirmation by at least one different data source. This form of triangulation has given credibility to the findings and ensured the adequacy and relevance of the interpretations resulting from the findings.
- *The adherence to the long-term engagement with the research field*: The researcher had enough educational experience, having devoted sufficient time to the topic under investigation.
- *Verification of data*: The primary data, as well as their interpretation after the completion of their collection, were given to the subjects of the investigation, in order to have their reliability verified.
- The detailed validation of the research methodology, the interview guide and the protocol of observation were inspected by a teacher of increased formal qualifications, experienced in the implementation of educational research. This has improved the above-mentioned elements before applying them.
- The continuous *Feedback Loop* between research data and the bibliographic review eventually contributed to enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

## 2.6. Ethics

In the present study, a collection of personal data was carried out, so the surveyed subjects had been informed prior to the start of the interview that they may not answer a question. The principle “No one will respond if he/she

does not want to” had been abided by. In addition, they had been informed about the topic of the interview and about the applicable ethical rules (anonymity, confidentiality, respect). The names of the subjects of this survey were not recorded, either in the field notes or in the interview guide, except from a serial number of the interview. The collected data were used for the purposes of this research and not for other purposes.

### 2.7. Data Organizing

No speech-recognition software has been used for the data collection. Transcripts and analysis of quality data were carried out by hand. Initially, a preliminary exploratory analysis had been performed and then the data were encoded, identified, stratified and interlinked. The thematic analysis identified issues that focused not only on the superficial meaning of the data but also on the interpretive level, which approaches the latent meanings and presupposes a fuller understanding / interpretation of the content of this research (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). These issues came from a combination of inductive and productive analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) while their original structure was re-examined and improved to form a suitable and coherent pattern and set.

## 3. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

All the surveyed subjects agreed that the profession of teacher is stressful in modern times. They find that the pupils’ school performance is undoubtedly one of the most important causes. They didn’t correlate though stress with gender, as reported in other studies (Kantas, 2001; Antoniou *et al.*, 2006) but with the personality of a teacher (Mouzoura, 2005) and with the general educational policy. They focused on the shortcomings that exist in modern times’ schools and not on the evaluation of teachers or the educational work that had been noted in other surveys (Kantas, 2001; Kyriacou, 2001). Parents exacerbate the stress of pupils and their teachers. The teachers’ stress is Katsioulas and Chatzipanagiotou (2014) creased when they teach courses for admission to tertiary education. The parents’ expectations of admission in tertiary education are pressing their children. In these courses, stress is transferred both to students and teachers, since the preparation cost for parents is high. The parents believe that the national examinations determine the course of their children for lifetime. The results of this survey are summarized in Table-1 and discussed below.

Teachers adopt individual actions to reduce the stress that comes from the school performance of their pupils, which are:

- The creation of a pleasant atmosphere in teaching,
- The existence of relationships of trust and mutual co-operation with students and their guardians,
- The adoption of teaching techniques that promote active and cooperative learning.

Undoubtedly, the interviews and observation have shown that experience contributes to effective stress management. The experienced teachers try to exploit new technologies and respond to the needs of their pupils (Davrazos, 2015). They are used to discuss pupils’ school performance with other colleagues, who teach another course in the same class and/or with colleagues of the same specialty who teach in other classes (Katsioulas and Chatzipanagiotou, 2014). They admit that they are attending training sessions on classroom management problems and innovative teaching methods, but also that they prepare and plan the syllabus (Katsioulas and Chatzipanagiotou, 2014). All the subjects, both of the interviews and the observation survey, emphasize the need for all teachers to cooperate with their pupils’ family and to provide objective information.

An additional innovation of this research is the recording of strategies applied by the schools’ headmasters, because they cover an existing bibliographic gap. Most of the responses focused on the fact that the headmasters mainly adopt the active listening of teachers, pupils and parents and the support of the school’s teachers. It was found that they usually do not take initiatives on the issue of stress and school performance. They act only whenever a guardian complains about his/her child’s low-grade performance.

Another additional innovation of this research is the recording of strategies applied by the Teachers' Associations for reducing teachers' stress that comes from the school performance of their pupils. The review of the bibliography has identified solutions more individualized rather than collective. In this research, effective collective strategies have been revealed. The substantive discussion during the pedagogical meeting for the assessment of the classes was characterized as the "appropriate opportunity" for a teacher to express his/her concerns about the school performance of a particular class or a specific pupil. At the same time, it is accepted that a meaningful communication and frank dialogue with other colleagues reinforce collegiality and solidarity that restrict teachers' stress.

**Table-1.** Summary of the survey's results.

Target Group	Stress-reducing actions & proposals
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pleasant atmosphere in teaching;</li> <li>• trust and mutual co-operation with students and guardians;</li> <li>• innovative teaching techniques for active/cooperative learning;</li> <li>• discussing pupils' school performance with other colleagues;</li> <li>• attending training sessions on classroom management problems;</li> <li>• preparing and planning the syllabus.</li> </ul>
Headmasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• active listening of teachers, pupils and parents;</li> <li>• supporting school's teachers;</li> <li>• acting only whenever guardians complain.</li> </ul>
Teachers' Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pedagogical meetings for the assessment of classes/pupils;</li> <li>• reinforcing collegiality and solidarity.</li> </ul>
General Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• staffing schools with psychologists;</li> <li>• implementation of training visits and events;</li> <li>• implementation of health counseling/education programmes;</li> <li>• upgrading of school libraries;</li> <li>• usage of technology for networking.</li> </ul>

Source: The survey documentation

Finally, general policy proposals were formulated in this research, such as the necessity of staffing schools with psychologists, for the mental empowerment of both pupils and teachers. Proposals not mentioned in the related bibliography were also supported, such as the need to implement extroversion actions in schools that reduce the stress of teachers. Such actions are the implementation of training visits, as well as health counseling and education programmes, training events, upgrading of school libraries and the usage of technology for networking.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The aforementioned empirical survey has shown that teachers who teach admission courses for tertiary education are experiencing stress that is caused by their pupils' school performance. This cause is exacerbated by parents. What is reported in the relevant bibliography for individualized stress-reducing strategies has been confirmed. However, the thorough and in-depth approach of the topic in this research has highlighted innovative proposals for an effective limitation of stress by schools' headmasters, but also through collective actions at the level of teachers/colleagues, such as collaborations and school extroversion. Future surveys can focus on assessing the effectiveness of each of the above-mentioned innovative proposals. In addition, the suitability of the qualitative research method has been demonstrated, for collecting primary data about a topic that there are no previous reports. In this respect, the implemented herein methodology could be proved useful for educational research in topics of similar features to the presented one.

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APPENDIX

The survey/interview questionnaire

Serial Number	Gender	Educational level
Interview Date	Age	Teaching experience
Interview Location	Marital status	Task/Duties
Based on your personal experience and according to your opinion, describe the most important problems and possible solutions in the following issues, regarding the performance of your pupils:		
Q1. Do you believe that this is a source of professional stress for you and your colleagues?		
Q2. What individual actions do you take to reduce your stress that comes from it?		
Q3. What strategies do your school administrators implement to reduce your stress from it?		
Q4. What strategies do the Teachers' Associations implement to reduce your stress that comes from it?		
Q5. Is there something else you would like to add?		

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