

Burnout among Nursery School Teachers First Results of an Explorative Questionnaire Survey

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Abstract

Aim This article presents first results from a pilot project of nursery school teachers in Switzerland, investigating their stress in work situations. The aim of this study was to find out which factors at the workplace of teaching professionals result in stress situations and to what extent.

Subjects and Methods In this study, 66 questionnaires from 13 different day care centers in Zurich were descriptively analyzed. To estimate the risk and scope of burnout, the tool "Burnout Screening Scale" (BOSS I to III) was used.

Results The teaching professionals surveyed were only slightly affected by stress factors in their professional and personal lives and only a few developed strong physical, mental or emotional symptoms. On the other hand, the teaching professionals in the study exhibited a satisfactory level of available resources. In addition to staff shortage, the working environment, affected by poor communication patterns, has been identified as the main stress factor.

Keywords risk factors, pressure, work conditions, stress, and nursery school teachers

1. Introduction

Recent studies confirm that members of social professions (for example nurses, teachers, special and social educators) on average experience more occupational stress than workers in other professions (Badura et al. 2012). A recently published study examined educators' occupational stress loads in Germany, and found nearly one-fifth (18.9 %) of the respondents suffering from severe to very severe occupational stress (Jungbauer & Ehlen 2013). According to a study by Seibt et al. (2005), eleven percent of the employees in daycare facilities showed individual burnout symptoms, particularly emotional exhaustion. According to Maslach (1981), additional symptoms include "emotional exhaustion", "depersonalisation" and "reduced performance".

In Switzerland, burnout and the work situation of nursery school teachers is still poorly investigated, with the first publication on these subjects appearing in November 2014. In that study, staff turnover has been excessively emphasized as a factor contributing to work related stress for the daycare staff. The study is based on the model of a healthy organization by Bauer and Jenny (2012). According to this model, work pressures and resources are influenced by features of the day care and of the people. Resources include: control, role clarity, team climate and leadership, where a distinction is drawn between quantitative and qualitative impact. According to the staff study it seems that the rate of non-natural fluctuation among trained staff is higher than among those not yet qualified. The results of the survey show that 35% of the group managers and 45% of the co-teachers have been working less than two years in their present positions, which suggests a high turnover. As another consequence of workplace pressure, fluctuation is introduced, in addition to health and job dissatisfaction. In the Zurich staff study, 30% of (the) nursery school teachers reported the occasional intention to leave their profession. Learners and trainees assess their health at worst. 70% of trainees and interns are under 20 years old, whereas the age of 64% of the skilled workforce ranges from 21 to 30 years old. Compared to Germany, the Swiss nursery school teacher is much younger yet is perpetually feels more exhausted. There are no marked differences shown in mental health (Staff Study 2014).

1.1 Theoretical Background

The term burnout was introduced in 1974 by psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger. He used this term to describe the exhaustion and decline of interest in work, which he observed among employees in social institutions (Freudenberger 1974). The symptoms that are associated with burnout today, are very different and there is no solid diagnosis for it. One can describe burnout as a manifestation of enduring stress on health. Stress situations arise when an imbalance exists between the set requirements and current capabilities to address these requirements (Greif 1991). Hedderich (2009) describes this imbalance mostly as a "non-fitting of the person with their environment". This paper considers burnout from a labor and organizational perspective in order to illustrate more widely the variety of influencing factors.

The investigations of Manlove (1993) showed that caregivers, who reported better cooperation with their colleagues and experienced more autonomy in their workplace, showed a lower degree of depersonalization. A higher level of education and more work experience were associated with a higher personal performance, but not with emotional exhaustion or depersonalization. According to Goelman and Guo (1998), role conflict and role ambiguity are other factors which contribute to a higher risk of burnout. A negative correlation between age and burnout—meaning that younger people are more affected by it—has been noted by both Manlove (1993) and by Boyd and Schneider (1997). One possible explanation for this trend may be that young people do not obtain enough clarity about their job description, which results in higher job dissatisfaction. Thornburg, Townley and Crompton (1998), however, found that age positively correlated with burnout among childcare workers, who supervise children in their own home.

1.2 Objectives and Questions

The studies conducted so far show that nursery school teachers experience many factors contributing to stress in their daily work, which can adversely affect their health. In the present pilot study, the aim was to find out which occupational factors contribute to stressful situations and to what extent. Whether Swiss nursery school teachers are at a higher risk of burning out than other professionals was a question of particular interest, as was the nature of consequences of burnout. In addition, work-related factors that contribute to the work satisfaction of nursery school teachers were investigated.

2. Method

2.1 Instruments

To investigate burnout among educators in day care centers, the burnout screening scales (BOSS I to III) of Geuenich and Hagemann (2014) were used. BOSS I and II detect mental, physical and psychosocial symptoms, which typically occur in the context of the burnout syndrome. BOSS I records complaints in four different areas of life: professional, personal, family and friends. BOSS II enquires about the physical, mental and emotional symptoms of a person. BOSS III is used to record satisfaction and resources in the four above mentioned areas of life. In addition to the standardized self-assessment process BOSS I to III, which uses a closed-ended response format to further explore the daily work conditions of educators, open-ended questions were generated and added.

The data was analyzed descriptively using the statistical software package SPSS 22.0. For all scales of BOSS I to III, the standard values (t-values) were determined and the evaluation of the BOSS-scale took place partially in standard levels (categories). The open-ended questions were also analyzed descriptively and were designed to supplement the results of the existing burnout screening scales.

2.2 Study design

For the questionnaire, different children's day cares ("Kita") in the canton of Zurich were chosen at random from the accessible population to be surveyed. A list of all institutions (N = 318) was made available by the Cantonal Education Department of the Canton of Zurich. Management was approached by e-mail, and in the case of interest, we asked them to provide feedback on the number of their staff. These included all the caregivers (management, trained staff, learners and interns). In the case of a cancellation, a new institution was selected from the accessible population. The questionnaires were edited by the teachers in the months of November and December 2014. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each questionnaire was accompanied by a sealable envelope and an instruction. Of the 16 requested institutions, 66 completed questionnaires came back from 13 institutions. The rate of return amounted to 43%.

3. Results

In the written questionnaire, educators from day care centers of the Zurich canton (excluding the city of Zurich, because of a parallel study) took part. In total, we received 69 (completed) questionnaires from 13 institutions. The questionnaires were filled out by the educators during the months of November and December 2014. In total, 66 educators (62 women and 4 men) aged 17 to 61 years old participated (3 missing) in our study (M=30.45 years, SD=13.42).

Approximately half (53.0%) of the respondents admitted to be single, 40% are in a committed relationship (24.2%) or married (16.7 %). Regarding their employment status, 19 people (29.2%) were in training and four were completing internships (6.2%), 21 individuals (32.3%) had a permanent position or management role.

Approximately half of the educators (52.4 %) stated to carrying on a workload of 100 %, the remaining respondents work between 20-90%, of which a larger group of educators (19.0 %) is employed with a workload of 80%. The weekly average working hours of the surveyed educators is 35.38 hours (SD=9.04). The majority of respondents (35.4 %) work on average 42 hours per week. Most of the interviewed educators had a professional experience of one to five years (42.2%), roughly one third has more than 10 years of experience (29.7%). Respondents on average had 7.95 (SD=6.42) years of work experience. Most of the educators (64.8%) have been in their current role for the past one to five years, only a few have been employed in their current role for more than 10 years (11.2%). The average length of service is 5.31 years (SD=4.49). Most of the surveyed educators are satisfied with the health care benefits (76.9%), communication (68.2%) and the organizational structure (e.g. hierarchization) (80.3 %), only a few are barely or not at all satisfied (1.5% - 4.6%). Most educators (84.9%) assessed their jobs as safe or very safe, only 3% consider it as little or partially secure. The organizational structure of the institutions of the surveyed educators is 80.0% integrative and 20.0% is aligned non-integrative. The interpretation of the results of the BOSS I to III is based on the standard values (t-values). The statistical average of the T-score scale is 50 (SD=10), the average range is between 40-60.

The t-values outside this range (≤ 40 or ≥ 60) indicate a clinically relevant difference, values ≥ 60 indicate an increased risk of burnout. The results of the BOSS I (Fig.1) show that our surveyed educators are not affected by increased stress levels, as the average T-scores of four scales are largely below the standard average. A closer look at the standard levels of individual scales (professional, personal, family and friends) confirmed these findings, so are most of the totals insignificant (63.6 to 80.3%).

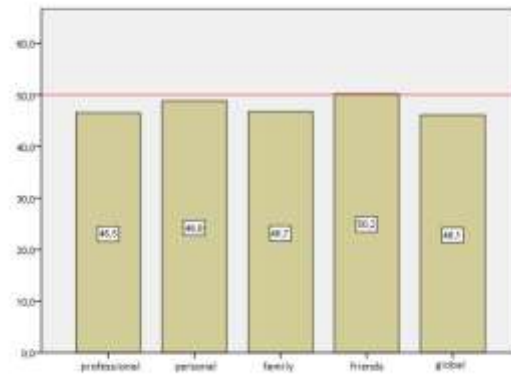


Fig. 1: Mean T-scores (total values) in the four scales of BOSS I in the surveyed sample. The red line represents the standard average of the T-value scale (50).

Among the scale *professional* we can find a 7.5% clinically significant value (T-score > 59), out of which only 1.5% of the surveyed educators suffer under very heavy professional stress loads. The larger part is not affected by significant problems in the field of work. One of the open-ended questions was aimed at finding out what a typical stressful situation in their daily work represents for them. As Table 1 decrypts, the most frequently mentioned response that addresses the structure of their work is staff shortage, whereas poor communication was cited as the second most typical stressful situation at work. In the scale *personal* (of BOSS I 10.6% of the responses are a clinically relevant value (> 59), of which 3% exhibit very strong psychosomatic and psychological symptoms such as sleeping problems, trouble relaxing or concentration difficulties.

In the scale *family*, the results of the surveyed educators show only slightly elevated levels; just 3% of the values are slightly or significantly increased. However, the stress they experienced seems likely to affect their friendships outside of work. The scale *friends* shows a clinically significant value in 9.1% of the cases, 3% have even severe to very severe problems in the area *friends*, such as difficulties with demarcation.

Open-ended question

Subcategories	n	Anchor examples	n
<i>working environment: teamwork</i>	26	Poor communication (indirect communication, lack of communication)	4
		"If you have a conflict with a co-worker"	3
<i>structural conditions</i>	23	Staff shortages: not enough staff in one day, sick days, sole care of 13 children	11
		A lot of responsibility (+ high presence)	3
<i>working environment: with the kids</i>	22	"If you have a conflict with a child"	3
		Volume: "if it is very noisy"	2
<i>except institutional conditions</i>	4	Parents complaints	1
		Poor family relationships	1
total	75	-	-

Table 1: Typical situations at work that are strongly stress inducing

In another open question, which aims to detect possible complaints, the surveyed educators specify how their work impacts their private life (positive, negative, neutral, sometimes). The main preambles and one to two anchor examples of sub-categories are described in Table 2.

Subcategories	Terms	Anchor examples
yes, positive influence	learning listening ideas telling positive emotions	"Yes, I have become social, learning things that I can use for life." "The joy and liveliness with the children and by the children carries over into private life."
yes, negative influence	tiredness disable trouble long working day take work home negative emotions	"Yes, I am often exhausted in the evening, tired, have trouble switching off, feel incapacitated, often irritable, need rest and time for me and my sport, I'm often home after 8 pm." "Yes, when something strongly stress me, I take the emotions home (with me)."
no + reason		"No. I love and appreciate the work with the children." "No, I separate private from professional."
sometimes/ rarely/ partly	disable trouble negative emotions	"Yes, sometimes. If we have shortage of staff (although we are well staffed) I'm stressed out and take that home with me." "Barely. Sometimes (?) I gather material for daycare."
general/ conflicting answers		"Influence I would not say, but for one month I had some sleeping problems, much nausea; I am very tired every night."

Table 2: Impact of work on private life among nursery school teacher

The results of the BOSS II (Fig. 2) show that the mean T-scores of the three scales all deviate from the standard average.

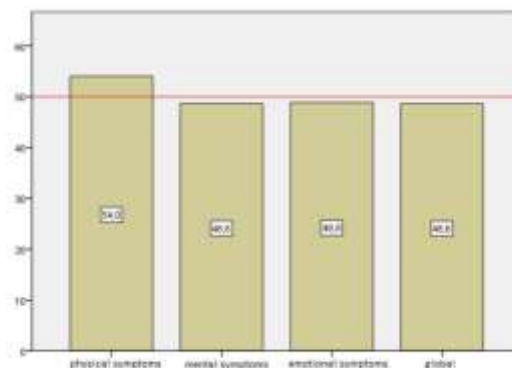


Fig. 2: Mean T-scores (total values) in the three scales of the BOSS II in the surveyed sample.

The mental and emotional symptoms are somewhat below the mean (T-score=48.6 or 48.8), while the physical symptoms with a mean T-score of 54 are well above the average. According to this finding, the experienced stress primarily affects the body. This is also reflected in the fact that in the scale *physical discomfort*, 25.1% had a clinically relevant value (< 59), of which in each case 4.7% have strong to very strong physical symptoms such as muscle tension, pain, headaches or insomnia.

In the scale *mental disorders*, 6.1% exhibit a clinically relevant value, whereas in the scale *emotional problems* there are 14.1%. Common mental symptoms of our surveyed educators were negative reviews, concentration problems and recurring agonizing thoughts, frequent emotional problems included lack of patience, irritability and fear of the future.

The results of the BOSS III, which enquires about the resources and the satisfaction of educators, show that all mean T-score of the scales differ from the standard average.

The scale *professional* (T-score=46.7) and *personal* (T=44.9) are significantly below the average, which means that the surveyed educators have fewer resources and lower satisfaction in this area. The values are still in the average range. The scale *family* (T=52) and *friends* (T=52.7) are slightly above average, suggesting that the educators have more resources available to them to achieve satisfaction in these areas.

The items of the individual scales were relatively highly rated by the subjects in all four scales, the items of the scale *friends* were generally rated the highest. In two of the open-ended questions they were asked about possible resources. When asked about the advantageous characteristics for their profession, the interviewed educators gave the following responses: patience (n=34), empathy (n=21) and creativity (n=17).

Discussion and Limitations

Like in the staff study Zurich (2014), this study also collected a “young-aged” sample. The average age of our sample is 30.45 years. Their age is also reflected in a rather low average length of work experience (M=7.95 years) and a low average length of service (M=5.31 years). This young sample can be explained by an increase of 80% in the number of day care places in canton Zurich in the past ten years. In 30% of the cases, respondents’ length of service was more than 10 years, comparable to the staff study from 2014.

Across all four scales of the BOSS I, the individuals in the sample are fairly unstressed. The mean T-scores of the three scales of the BOSS II are also within the average range. This result indicates that most of the surveyed educators are not affected by mental or psychological discomfort. In addition to the stress situations, the available resources in the fields of professional, personal, family and friends have also been captured with the BOSS III.

From the results of the BOSS III, it can be concluded that the surveyed educators have enough resources, where the resources of the family or friends were judged most significant. Across all three BOSS questionnaires (I to III), our sample is only affected by complaints in the areas professional, personal, family and friends only to some extent, and were affected even to a smaller extent by strong physical, mental or emotional problems. On the other hand, our surveyed educators have enough resources available. To what extent the educators have the qualities they consider advantageous characteristics (patience, empathy, creativity), could not be determined using the chosen method. Our surveyed educators rated health care benefits, communication, operational structures and job security as quite good, suggesting that we have a satisfied sample for the most part. The surveyed educators were least satisfied with workplace communication. Communication in general is an important basis for cooperation in the team of educators. To achieve this, it is essential that educators (have the opportunity to) regularly exchange experiences and learn to reflect on their work and relationships with the children, parents and other professionals as well as on current educational concepts. Relating to the lack of communication, educators with a service time of less than two years mentioned that clear instructions and feedback would be highly appreciated but are missing, which complicates their work and the grasp of their responsibilities.

The educators could not be reached directly for the survey, as the first step of the application for the participation in the study had to be made through the daycare management. As a result, institutions where management felt the current pressure of employees did not allow for participation in the survey were naturally excluded from our study. Therefore, the voices of those that may have been less satisfied were not heard.

The anonymity was guaranteed by closed envelope with the questionnaire sheets. The fact that, there have been no significant cases of burnout in the sample, and that a general satisfaction exists among them does not necessarily mean that the extent of occupational stress and the available resources would balance each other out. Rather, it can be assumed that daycare employees, which are exposed to long-term stress, are no longer active in this professional field. Which motives, personal objectives and values of the educators contribute to staying or leaving the workplace should also be considered. In order to investigate the trend of staff turnover and to obtain information about courses of professional biographies, interruptions and withdrawals from professional life, longitudinal studies are necessary.

4. Conclusion for the practice

The aim of any empirical study on occupational stress situations is to contribute to the improvement of the work situation. Young educators in the present study feel surprisingly small amounts of stress and appreciate both the health care offerings as well as the operational structures. It appears, however, that employees who have not yet obtained lots of work experience consider a feedback culture necessary to feel safe and satisfied in their jobs, for which a sufficient number of personnel is an absolute prerequisite.

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