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Work-related Stress and Burnout Factors of Principals in Regional Greece: A Historical Perspective

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Dr. Argyrios Argyriou (1957-2017) is sadly no longer with us. He was the Director of the Secondary Education Directorate of Western Attica, Greece, and Adjunct Professor of the tertiary School of Pedagogical and Technological Education and of Athens University of Economics & Business, Greece. Being an eminent Civil Educator, he will be missed by his colleagues and associates.

Keywords

work-related stress, burnout, principals, school leaders, primary education

WORK-RELATED STRESS AND BURNOUT FACTORS OF PRINCIPALS IN REGIONAL GREECE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract



Work-related stress and burnout is a reality in modern society, because the lack of time and the high work demands seem increasingly intensified. Thus, the study of working conditions and the factors that affect the physical and mental health becomes even more imperative. Professions that are particularly stressful are those where there is daily contact with people, for example, doctors, nurses, social workers, or school leaders. Besides administrative and official duties, modern principals perform additional functions such as the organization and management of schools, the

coordination of people who are involved in the teaching and operational process and they intervene to reform and upgrade the work of their schools. In addition, they must have skills like cooperation ability, be knowledgeable in the psychology of individuals and groups, have perceptual and observation ability, administrative imagination and energy, have managerial experience and solid scientific training.

Since burnout is the result of chronic work-related stress, the purpose of this study is to record the specific factors that create professional stress to school leaders and their correlation with burnout and other features, like gender or experience. This study has been conducted in a number of primary-education schools of a central region in Greece, where generally there are no monitoring practices followed, concerning the work stress of educators and their relevant support. Thus, it is perceived as a prerequisite for the designing of any supportive services and activities, if necessary.

Introduction

In modern society, the obligations of school leaders are not confined to handling issues of administrative nature but are urged to work methodically, to support, encourage and facilitate the learning process, to communicate with parents and the local community and to envision a better future (Kruse, 2001). Consequently, the traditional role of the principal as administrator and bureaucrat tends to slowly be diminishing. According to Stravakou (2003) and Athanasoula-Reppa (1999), besides accomplishing administrative and official duties, modern principals perform additional functions such as the organization and management of schools, the coordination of people that are involved in the teaching/operational process and they intervene to reform and upgrade the work of their schools. In addition, they must have skills like: cooperation

ability; be knowledgeable in the psychology of individuals and groups; have perceptual and observation ability, administrative imagination and energy; have managerial experience, and solid scientific training (Anagnostopoulou, 2001; Saitis et al., 1997).

Moreover in Greece, principals have additional educational obligations (exerting educational work in class; teaching duties). The Greek educational system is characterized as centralized, since the central government (Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs) has the decisive authority for most administrative issues (Mavrogiorgos, 2005). In this context, school managers are called both to play an active role in innovations and reforms and, on the other hand, are faced with conditions that reduce their effectiveness and cause feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and confusion (Papanaoum, 2003). Within this framework, it has been argued that school leaders should acquire counseling skills (Papakitsos & Argyriou, 2017), but they also need, potentially, an advisory support mechanism for reducing the degree of work stress and burnout. The first step of establishing such a mechanism is to identify the factors causing burnout herein, after presenting the relevant elementary concepts and definitions (Stress; Work-related Stress; Burnout).

Stress

The term *stress* is used in psychology, physiology, chemistry, neuroscience, social and clinical psychology, in most cases with different reference points (Bezevegkis, 2001). In the 17th century, the English word *stress* denoted the suffering and discomfort, while later, in the late 18th century, this term implied coercion, pressure on the person or on the mental powers of the individual (Cooper et al., 2002).

According to Manos (1997), stress refers to those conditions which include disruptive feelings of anxiety and fear, in response to unrecognized and undetermined threats. Similarly, the majority of the definitions of stress (Lazarus, 1999; Levi, 2001; Fontana, 1989; Seley, 1956) emphasize the interaction of the individual with the environment. In particular, stress is defined as a response of mind and body that exceeds the individual's abilities (Fontana, 1989). If the person is not able to meet the demands of the environment, it then leads to physical and psychological exhaustion. Additionally, it is considered as a mismatch situation between the individual capabilities and the environmental requirements (Kantas, 1995) or as a result of active interaction of the individual with the environment that may have psychological, physiological, and social factors, which are not necessarily independent of each other (Lazarus, 1999). Seley (1956) also defines stress as the body's response to an external pressing situation, while Levi (2001) states that it is the failure to adapt to the requirements of the external environment in relation to the abilities and expectations of the person in the work environment which creates anxiety. When expectations are not verified, the body reacts by creating a state of anxiety and that is when the individual realizes that the demands of a situation are beyond reach (Sarafino (1999).

Stress is divided into two types: (a) bio-normal and (b) pathological (Manos, 1997); or (a) good stress ("eurostress") and (b) abnormal or bad (distress), according to Seley (1974). The first type of stress is created while the individual is trying to adapt to situations and stimuli that are

considered important and it is necessary for the mobilization of the individual (Seley, 1974). The second type is created when people adaptability to environmental conditions are lost, accompanied by various reactions such as aggression and irritability; this can have harmful effects on health (Seley, 1974). This creates problems in daily operation while the individual is trying to fulfill their objectives (Manos, 1997). In this case, the individual may express disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder.

Regarding stress levels, Fontana (1989) reports that the level of stress that anyone experiences depends on a number of factors such as personality, age, sex, and the importance attributed to the event. Lazarus (1966) reported that stress levels depend on how a person perceives and interprets the environmental conditions from which it receives stimuli.

Stress symptoms are divided into three categories (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003; Kourtesi & Kantas, 2000):

- Psychological and emotional, like embarrassment, confusion, fatigue, etc.
- Physical, like insomnia, headaches, sweating, frequent urination, increased heart rate, etc.
- Behavioral, like anger, loss of control, aggression, substance consumption.

Work-related Stress

The lack of time and the high work demands seem increasingly intensified in the modern labor market, thus the study of working conditions and the factors that affect physical and mental health becomes even more imperative (Hancock & Meshkati, 1988). According to epidemiological studies, stress has a negative impact not only on workers' health but also on the quality of work and productivity (Cox & Ferguson, 1994; Warr & Payne, 1982). In particular, it is clear that stress affects workers both mentally, physically, and behaviorally (Cooper & Payne, 1988), especially when the labor requirements are beyond their means and persons are required to respond because the completion of their work depends entirely on them (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978).

Professions that are particularly stressful are those where: there is human resource management; there is daily contact with people; employees make decisions on health issues, namely, doctors, nurses or social workers (Fontana, 1993). Stress factors are considered common to all professions, but vary in the degree of causal connection (Cooper et al., 2002; Travers & Cooper, 1996). They are:

- Internal factors at work (working conditions; workload; schedules);
- The role of the worker in the organization;
- The employee relations within the company (ambiguity and role conflict);
- The promotion of career (professional development, promotion, expectations); and
- The structure and the climate of the organization (organizational structure).

The long-term effects of occupational stress have three forms of expression: (a) emotional events; (b) behavioral events; and (c) psychosomatic manifestations and disease (Cooper & Payne, 1988). The repeated and prolonged exposure of individuals in situations of emotional requirements and professional stress leads to burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

Burnout

The term *burnout* is attributed to Freudenberger (1974) who studied work-related stress in health occupations (nurses), focusing on physical and mental exhaustion issues, resulting in the inability to practice the occupation. The definition adopted is sufficiently broad, defining burnout as the exhaustion of physical and mental energy of a person who experiences wear and failure, feelings arising from making excessive effort, required by the work.

According to Edelwich & Brodsky (1980), the stress that will become a burnout starts from the time that an employee will start working. In this way they distinguish four stages (excitement; doubt; cancellation and apathy). In the first stage, enthusiasm prevails when the newly-recruited is full of energy, sets high goals and expects to achieve them. Yet as time passes, the employee begins to have several doubts, because the work does not meet their expectations and believes that they must work much more than the reward received. At the same time, doubts are self-created about doing the job properly and therefore they start to work more, hoping to change the situation for the better. In the third phase, the employee feels that their efforts are not always met, feels cancellation and begins to wonder if the job option was correct. The result is to distance themselves from the work. In the fourth stage, the employee is not interested in the working reality, assumes no responsibility and remains at work merely for a livelihood. The employee, without realizing it, has entered the stage of burnout (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980), characterized by feelings of depression, fatigue and intolerance (Maslach & Schaufeli 1993).

Similarly, Schabracq (2001) distinguishes between two kinds of alienation: the “primary” and “secondary”. The former refers to the feeling of the individual that is doing something different than normal, while the latter refers to the absence of a person’s feeling to realize that what is doing is abnormal. Both types of alienation refer to the relationship disorder of a person within the environment, where a part of the self of the person is alienated.

Also according to Cherniss (1993), burnout is more of a process rather than a single event, which follows three phases:

- The phase of *work stress*, where there is a disturbance between the required and the available resources, when the latter are not sufficient to satisfy in an appropriate manner the personal goals and the demands from the work environment. This disruption can happen to any employee without necessarily leading to burnout.
- The *exhaustion* phase, based on the previous imbalance. The workplace is the employee’s exhaustion source and it is manifested as emotional exhaustion, stress, fatigue, boredom, lack of interest and apathy, while the attention is more focused on bureaucratic aspects and is likely to lead to disappointment and resignation.
- The *defense outcome* phase, where changes are made in attitude and behavior of the worker, who gradually dis-invests emotionally from their work and expresses cynicism and apathy for others.

The most comprehensive approach to burnout is delivered by Christina Maslach (1982), characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion and lack of positive feelings of sympathy or

respect for the recipients of services (e.g., clients/students). In this case, the person is experiencing emotionally demanding interpersonal relationships in the workplace and has a low perception of themselves. Then, the worker loses interest, is not satisfied with their performance and generally develops a negative image of themselves (Papadatou & Anagnostopoulos, 1997).

According to Maslach & Jackson (1986), burnout consists of three dimensions: (a) emotional exhaustion; (b) depersonalization; and (c) reduced sense of personal accomplishment.

Emotional exhaustion is the first and fundamental dimension of burnout (Leiter & Maslach, 2001) due to stress. It is characterized by reduction of energy and emotional reserves, in general. The employee believes that fatigue is caused by the demands of others, there is no willingness to work and feels tension and aggression. This dimension is also characterized by anxiety and awe for the next day at work. Depersonalization indicates the distance between interpersonal relations. Employees have negative feelings toward others, keep their distances and their entire behavior is governed by cynicism. Teachers are more likely to develop this dimension. In the dimension of reduced sense of personal accomplishment, workers evaluate themselves and the results of their work negatively (Leiter & Maslach, 2001), they have reduced efficiency and a sense of inadequacy about their work, failing to provide what is necessary. In this case, many teachers are turning to other activities having the aim only to increase their salary (Kantas, 1995).

Research Goals

It should be noted that in Greece there are no monitoring practices followed, concerning the work stress of educators and their relevant support, unlike other countries like UK, where, e.g., a dedicated phone line is available for teachers (“Teachersline”) to obtain information and help (Antoniou, 2006). Since burnout is the result of chronic work-related stress, the purpose of this study is to record the specific factors that create professional stress to school leaders and their correlation with burnout and other features, like gender or experience. This goal is perceived as a prerequisite for the designing of any supportive services and activities.

Methodology

This research has been conducted at the elementary schools in a central region of Greece (Thessaly), where 116 Principals have answered an anonymous questionnaire (Leventis, 2008). From this sample, 18.1% (21) were women. During the collection of data, a defensive attitude had been observed by some respondents, who feared that they could be characterized as vulnerable to work-related stress or had hesitation and seemed reluctant to fill in the questionnaires, fearing that personal data can be disclosed. In addition, it was observed that some respondents could not distinguish whether the symptoms that they experienced were due to stress or other causes.

The structure of the questionnaire was based on internationally recognized questionnaires (Maslach & Jackson, 1986), tested as well in other studies (Fontana & Abouserie, 1993), which has been adapted to the Greek educational system (Leontari et al., 2000; Kantas, 1996). At the same time, an internal consistency check was conducted between the various parts of the questionnaire satisfactorily, where the coefficient of Cronbach’s Alpha ranges between 0.6 and

0.934. Besides the questions regarding personal and demographic data (gender, experience, further education, size of school, etc.), the main related part consisted of 23 questions that referred to factors and situations, which may create work-related stress to Principals and contribute to burnout (see next section).

Results and Discussion

The equivalent factors are enumerated below, from the most to the least stressful ones, according to the collected data:

1. The lack of additional teacher to cover vacancies in case of absence.
2. The poor working and teaching conditions, like inappropriate classrooms, small school yard, lack of infrastructures.
3. The limited financial resources of the school.
4. The design of the weekly schedule in relation to the satisfaction of my colleagues.
5. The simultaneous teaching and administrative duties.
6. The lack of secretarial staff and the corresponding assignments to teachers.
7. The frequent changes and reforms in education and the lack of awareness and training of principals.
8. The lack of proper pupils' behavior, the imposition of discipline and the lack of educational measures on related matters.
9. The low level of my financial gains compared to the laborious work that I offer.
10. The disagreements of teachers in school council, the lack of team spirit regarding decision-making and the non-acceptance of the majority principle.
11. The poor interpersonal relationships with other teachers, the lack of support and assistance from colleagues and non-recognition of my contribution.
12. The excessive expectations of society from school to address the problems of pupils that derive from their family and social environment.
13. The tight time schedule for the transaction of works.
14. The lack of information and training on management issues of schools.
15. The lack of time to monitor the developments in pedagogical sciences.
16. The additional obligations outside working hours (due to the position as principal), which make difficult my personal, family and social life.
17. The centralized administration of educational system and the constraints of the institutional framework for the planning and decision making.
18. The loss of time in endless discussions during the meetings of teachers.
19. The interventions of parents in my work, the lack of support by them, particularly in relation to pupils' behavioral problems and their high expectations.
20. The recognition of my skills on management issues and the lack of meaningful perspective for my professional development and promotion.
21. The friendly/family relationships with members of the teachers' council and the requirements of them.
22. The cooperation with the local Parents' Association and the school committee.

23. The inspections of the superior administrative school officers.

These factors have been correlated to the three dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion; depersonalization; reduced sense of personal accomplishment). The results of correlation are briefly discussed below:

- Most of the factors (15 out of 23) are associated more with emotional exhaustion and less with depersonalization and reduced sense of personal accomplishment. They can be grouped in three classes, regarding interpersonal relations and conflicts, working conditions (lack of resources, time and personnel) and pupils' behavior.
- Factors [5], [22] and [23] are associated with all three dimensions of burnout.
- Factor [10] is especially important regarding depersonalization.

There is a significant variation in the factors that cause stress, depending on gender. In particular, men feel that factors [1]-[4], denoting practical issues, are more important. Equivalently, women pay more attention to factors [11], [10], [5], [3] and [1], in order of significance, denoting issues of interpersonal relations and training. Generally, women experience greater stress than their male colleagues (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978; Alexopoulos, 1990a,b; Leontari et al., 2000). Similarly, regarding the dimensions of burnout, men stated that they experience a greater degree of personal accomplishment but also of depersonalization, unlike women where a greater degree of emotional exhaustion is observed. This variation implies the different socialization and the different social roles of genders (Papastylianou, 1997). Women are also likely, even if they experience more stress at work, not to externalize it (Leontari et al., 1997), possibly due to the multiple roles and obligations undertaken (business/family responsibilities).

Regarding experience, principals with many years of service (over 30) reported lower stress levels, while those with fewer years of service (21-30 years) reported moderate stress levels. These results are consistent with those of other surveys in elementary schools of England (Trendall, 1989), where fewer years of service lead to higher stress levels. Regarding education, principals who have dedicated time to acquire additional skills (e.g., postgraduate diplomas) feel frustration when their expectations are not verified, resulting to greater stress and burnout (Pines, 1993).

Regarding the size of school (i.e., number of classes and pupils), factors [5] and [2] are more stressful in small schools, while factors [1] and [4] are more important for large schools. Factor [3] is equally significant, regardless of size. In relation to the dimensions of burnout, it is observed that the Principals of larger schools have reported greater emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. It is possible that in large schools, due to the large number of parties involved in the educational process, Principals choose a more distant attitude, resulting in feelings of depersonalization.

Regarding the work stress levels and burnout dimensions, Principals reported low values of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and very high personal accomplishment levels, indicating that in general they are happy with their career development. Principals with low levels of stress experience less emotional exhaustion, less depersonalization and felt greater

personal accomplishment levels. On the contrary, principals with higher stress levels reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and smaller personal accomplishment levels.

To summarize the factors that cause stress in general, key sources of stress are the pressure of time, unsatisfactory working conditions, and the school environment (Alexopoulos, 1990a,b). Long working hours and time pressure inevitably cause tensions and lead to stress (Day et al., 2000). Another important source of stress is the poor interpersonal relationships. A relevant survey has revealed that teachers who had received support and positive feedback were less vulnerable to fatigue (Russell et al., 1987). On the contrary, feelings of disrespect may contribute to a negative work environment (Horn et al., 1999). The lack of opportunities for social interaction and the lack of social and emotional support increase the activity of some stressful factors, such as the workload (Smyle, 1999). Another survey has pointed out that the organizational demands and the anticipated success of planned projects are the main factors of work stress (Tsiakkiros & Pasiardis, 2002). Chan (2000) also mentions the relationships with colleagues and the wider community as a cause for the creation of burnout. Finally, important stress factors are the infrastructure failure, the workload, and the ambiguity of the roles of principals. As a result, there are conflicts and disagreements (Kantas, 2001).

Conclusions

The work-related stress of principals is lower compared to other professional groups that come into contact with people, such as nurses, doctors, social workers and military professionals (Cooper et al., 2002). The present study demonstrates that the factors causing work-related stress are socially and temporally determined. In particular, although stress is a reality in modern society, principals tended to suffer from limited to minimum levels of stress, which is far from being classified as burnout. This means that in their majority, they experience positive personal achievement feelings, based on the role they perform. On the other hand, attention should be given to the prevention of the factors that cause stress, in order to improve the effectiveness of principals, both on professional and personal levels (Tsiakkiros & Pasiardis, 2002). In this respect, 23 factors that cause stress and potentially burnout effects have been determined, along with the contribution and significance of each one to this phenomenon. In this context, the European Union's policies to reduce work-related stress through the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work may constitute the basis for taking relevant initiatives.

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