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Sources of stress and successes in the work of early school teachers

Submitted: 18.06.2025

Accepted: 08.06.2026

Published: 30.06.2026



Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): This article aims to identify factors contributing to occupational stress and successes based on the opinions of early childhood teachers. It seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the sources of stress for teachers in lower grades when confronted with the realities of school? What is the scope of achievable success?

Research methods: A diagnostic survey was conducted using a questionnaire and written statements about professional successes.

Process of argumentation: The interrelationships involved in participants' engagement in teaching and educational processes are changing and require updating to highlight factors related to teachers' job satisfaction.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The sources of problems include low wages, excessive parental expectations, legal liability, teachers' involvement in their professional role, fatigue, excessive teaching and administrative responsibilities, lack of remuneration for project implementation, extracurricular school competitions, contests and olympiads, bullying, poor working conditions, undesirable behavior among students, professional development obligations, perfectionism, the need to acquire new digital skills, self-presentation, and the idealization of a teacher's socio-professional position. Teachers' satisfaction is driven by student success and a sense of professionalism.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Early childhood teachers find fulfillment in working with children. Despite experiencing many difficulties, they believe their work is important to society and offers

Keywords:

competence,
responsibility,
commitment,
motivation,
remuneration

opportunities for personal and professional development. Teachers' responsibilities include recommending actions to ensure students' active participation in school life.

Introduction

The better the education, the greater the chances for individual and social well-being. However, proposals for improving its quality cannot be universal, as each school, when making an effort for change, adopts a specific educational philosophy (Fullan, 2007). The key to success is a teacher with authority built through active relationships with students seeking role models. Substantive knowledge of the subject taught is not enough; appropriate personality traits, understood as psychological conditioning (Oleśniak, 2010, pp. 70–71), as well as pedagogical competence in the social skills desired by students (Łukasik, 2021a, 2021b), are essential. A professional teacher in grades 1–3 is expected to implement integrated education efficiently to create a comprehensive picture of the world in an engaging and holistic manner. A teacher must select materials to provide students with essential information at the beginning of their education, without overwhelming them with information overload (Strykowski, 2005, p. 20). Teaching is a profession prone to high levels of stress due to its wide range of duties, high responsibility, and social expectations regarding the level of education and upbringing. The social competencies a teacher should possess include ways of coping with stress, which can also have a motivating effect (Tucholska, 2009, p. 49).

Description of the study

The article discusses several sources of problems present in teachers' work. The identified trends are global in nature; no division was made according to the schools in which the respondents worked, as this was not a factor that differentiated the fears and anxieties experienced, nor did it determine the areas of proposed changes in teachers' work. This

study, therefore, identifies factors contributing to occupational stress based on the opinions of teachers of younger grades of primary school regarding their success in teaching and educational work. The aim was to understand the needs and expectations of teachers that contribute to students' spiritual and psychological growth. The research questions addressed were as follows: What are the sources of stress for teachers in lower grades when confronted with the realities of school? What is the scope of achievable success? It was assumed that the main sources of stress for teachers in the younger grades are workload, relationships with parents and teachers, and interactions with children, while success is multidimensional, spanning educational achievements, educational outcomes, and personal professional satisfaction.

Early childhood teachers and part-time students of preschool and early childhood education were asked to complete a survey and provide written statements about potential successes in their professional careers. The research method was a diagnostic survey conducted in 2025, and the preliminary data obtained were both quantitative (numbers and percentages) and qualitative (descriptions of the sources considered). The study was non-reactive, meaning it did not require interaction between the researcher and participants. The opinions presented below were expressed by 100 early childhood teachers from the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship who participated both traditionally (N=50) and online (N=50). Opinions were shared primarily by women aged 25–39 who had worked primarily in public institutions in urban areas for approximately 1–16 years. Analysis of the obtained data allowed leading trends in respondents' self-assessments to be identified; these were then grouped into general categories.

Problems identified in the survey

This section describes 17 sources of stress that early childhood teachers rated in terms of frequency. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. What causes stress in the work of early childhood teachers?
(N=100)**

Stress-inducing factors	<i>Often</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>
Low pay	78 (78%)	20 (20%)	2 (2%)
Excessive expectations from parents	75 (75%)	23 (23%)	2 (2%)
Legal responsibility	75 (75%)	22 (22%)	3 (3%)
Commitment to professional role	72 (72%)	23 (23%)	5 (5%)
Mental and physical fatigue	72 (72%)	20 (20%)	8 (8%)
Excessive teaching and administrative duties	72 (72%)	20 (20%)	8 (8%)
Lack of remuneration for developing and implementing projects	68 (68%)	22 (22%)	10 (10%)
Competition subject to specific rules (voluntary participation in competitions, contests)	68 (68%)	30 (30%)	2 (2%)
Mobbing (persistent and long-term intimidation, exerting pressure from superiors, causing a lowered assessment of professional usefulness)	68 (68%)	30 (30%)	2 (2%)
Poor working conditions	68 (68%)	30 (30%)	2 (2%)
Undesirable behavior of pupils	65 (65%)	30 (30%)	5 (5%)
Obligations in the field of professional development	62 (62%)	30 (30%)	8 (8%)
Lack of motivation to work	62 (62%)	33 (33%)	5 (5%)
Perfectionism	57 (57%)	30 (30%)	13 (13%)
Challenges of education of the future	55 (55%)	30 (30%)	15 (15%)
Self-presentation and the need for public speaking	53 (53%)	42 (42%)	5 (5%)
Idealization of the teacher's social and professional position	43 (43%)	40 (40%)	17 (17%)

The primary source of problems in the teaching profession is low wages, which fall into the category of safety needs (Springer, 2011). Four features influence the assessment of wages: the level of wages, the pace

of change, the internal structure, and the external structure (relations), which allows wages to be considered fair (Juchnowicz, 2014, pp. 46, 48). The sense of fair payment for work is determined by the transparency of the remuneration system (Rasch & Szytko, 2013, pp. 65–67). An individual employee takes into account three dimensions in assessing fairness: the ratio of the remuneration received to the effort put in, the ratio of the effort of other employees to the remuneration they receive, and the assessment of one's own effort and the remuneration received for a given job (Borkowska, 2012, p. 32). The present analysis demonstrates that the amount of monthly remuneration does not determine teachers' attitudes toward work and is not related to the assessment of its fairness.

Excessive demands from parents are a significant source of stress for early childhood teachers. A teacher ought to be friendly toward students, conscientious, thoroughly educated (Sosnowska-Bielicz, 2019), patient, hard-working (Parczewska, 2019), decisive and consistent in making decisions, persistent, and ready to take risks (Colker, 2008). The respondents stated that the vast majority of early childhood teachers (75%) often encounter excessive expectations from parents, some rarely (23%), and only two people (2%) never.

Another source of stress for teachers is legal responsibility within the scope of duties and rights specified in regulations (Teacher's Charter, 2023). The teacher's duties include the period of students' stay at school and conducting classes outside of school, e.g., during trips (Kowalski, 2024, p. 96). The teacher is subject to both public law (a set of legal norms relating to the state's interests) and private law (relating to the interests of an individual) (Morawski, 2014). They function in the school community and have a "double" responsibility – for themselves and for others (Kowal, 2004, pp. 106–148). They bear a collective responsibility in relation to their pupils, parents, and teachers, which is why the choices they make must be made with others in mind (Krzywonos-Rynkiewicz, 2007). For the vast majority of early childhood teachers (75%), legal responsibility is a frequent source of stress; for some (22%), it is a rare source of stress; and only three people do not feel stressed by it.

Teachers' engagement in their professional role relates to their functioning at school and to their role as a person directing the educational process (Kowalczyk, 2018; Kutrowska, 2008). Their engagement comprises three components: cognitive-evaluative, behavioral, and emotional. Cognitive engagement is expressed by searching for appropriate means and methods of work, selecting information that activates students (Fredricks et al., 2004), positively coping with educational challenges, improving one's own competencies (Newman et al., 1992), and having the appropriate motivation, passion, and creativity (Zeidner et al., 2000). Behavioral engagement is divided into organizational activity (administrative activities and other mandatory tasks) and work engagement (educating and shaping students' personality) (Saks, 2006). Emotional engagement refers to emotional reactions caused by environmental stimuli (Fredricks et al., 2004), which are crucial for shaping students' personalities. Almost all teachers (95%) stated that engagement in their professional role is a source of stress for them; only five (5%) disagreed.

Fatigue is a feeling of physical and mental weakness associated with one's efforts. It occurs when there is a conflict between current and expected demands (Hockey, 2011). The causes of this state are individual characteristics and the conditions in which the work is performed (De Vries et al., 2003). Teachers often feel tired (Bortkiewicz et al., 2020) and stressed (Mojsa-Kaja et al., 2015). This was confirmed in the present sample; 92 people reported feeling tired, while only eight stated that their work never tires them.

An excess of duties results not only from the implementation of the teaching load but also from the obligation to prepare teaching materials, correct papers, examine, and perform numerous administrative formalities, such as entering data into IT systems, preparing reports, and participating in committees. The school reality is increasingly entangled in the virtual space, so knowledge of digital media is becoming crucial (Wrońska, 2020); as such, teachers must acquire new competencies (Gałuszka, 2017). In addition, the structure of the education system puts pressure on test standardization and focuses on exam results (Mazur-Mitrowska, 2021; Sęk, 2004; Stańczyk, 2012). The influx of students from

other countries also leads them into contact with different systems of values and ways of upbringing, which is a problem for Polish education in terms of school practice and courses preparing for the profession (Badowska, 2018). 92% of early school teachers stated that the excess of teaching and administrative duties is a source of stress, and only eight claim that they carry out all their tasks without unnecessary stress.

Another source of stress is the lack of remuneration for the implementation of projects beyond the mandatory tasks. Organizational and relational capital, i.e., the effect of teachers' competence potential, depends on their creativity and innovation, and a sense of fair remuneration is a condition for their willingness to develop and share knowledge (Kulikowski, 2017, p. 227). Remuneration is considered fair if the ratio of the individual's expenditure to the obtained benefits is equivalent to the assessment of such relations in a given professional group. For 90 early school teachers, the lack of remuneration for the work put into the implementation of projects that constitute an additional burden is a source of stress, whereas for the remaining 10, it does not matter.

Extracurricular school competitions, contests, and olympiads are a form of testing students' knowledge and skills. They make school classes more attractive and are initiated by teachers. Students who achieve high results in such tests are rewarded with diplomas, distinctions, and gifts, some of which are monetary. These forms have a school, regional, provincial, national, or international scope. Teachers have an influence on students' achievements (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). For most teachers, educational success is a student who passes an exam well, places high in various competitions, or gets into a prestigious course (Słotwińska, 2021, p.116). Almost all early school teachers (98%) reported that competition subject to specific rules is a source of stress; only two people never feel tension because of it.

A particularly negative phenomenon is mobbing, which occurs when intimidation, harassment, and pressure from superiors persist over a long period. It is commonly assumed that the time threshold is at least six months and that the above-mentioned behaviors occur at least once a week during this period (Einarsen et al., 2003). Teachers exposed

to mobbing at work function poorly in the school environment, are burned out, and have mood disorders, which may manifest in aggressive behaviors toward students. Mobbing practices include excessive control over work, burdening employees with too many responsibilities, assigning tasks below their competence level, or ignoring their opinions and views. The specific nature of the school environment fosters conflicts, toxic relationships, and excessive pressure. Almost all teachers surveyed (98%) had experienced mobbing; only two had never encountered it.

The work of a teacher requires an appropriate environment. The basic material requirements are the local conditions and the number and quality of teaching resources, without which it is difficult to operate effectively in the classroom to meet students' needs. Factors that facilitate work include a permanent, well-equipped classroom with multimedia equipment, access to the materials necessary for the implementation of the program, and the possibility of storing teaching resources (Józwiak, 2010). Almost all early school teachers (98%) rated their working conditions as poor and a source of professional stress; only two people had never encountered it.

Undesirable behaviors of pupils toward teachers are a common phenomenon (Stańkowski, 2009), which includes cheating, obstructing the lessons, using vulgar words, making threats, and destroying and hitting things (Ostrowska, 2008, pp. 18–20), as well as aggression carried out via the Internet or mobile phones (Pyżalski, 2012). Such behaviors must be corrected even in the youngest children, because emotional habits, codes of conduct, and basic knowledge about the world are formed in the early period of life (Surzykiewicz, 2008, pp. 189–190). The vast majority of early school teachers surveyed (95%) encounter this problem in their work and find it a source of professional stress; only five believe that they do not experience undesirable behaviors from pupils.

Professional development obligations stem from the rapid and diverse changes of contemporary life. Knowledge is the most important value, so a teacher must have constant access to information and be able to process and apply it (Toffler, 2001, p. 222). Education requires inspiration and support from many sciences; knowledge of the processes and directions

changing our lives will facilitate conscious entry into the information reality (Banach, 2015, p. 119). Research participants realize that wisdom means knowing and doubting, while being aware of its limitations (Fazlagć, 2005, p. 13). Early childhood teachers play a significant role in shaping the way we perceive the world, teaching children to use knowledge and skills rationally and practically, which makes this aspect of their professional work a source of stress for most (92%). A few (eight respondents) stated that professional development obligations do not pose any problem.

Teachers' motivation to work depends on both internal and external factors. Internal factors result from such values as satisfaction with the achieved results, a friendly atmosphere at school, prestige, good working conditions, and a sense of responsibility (Gawrecki, 2003, p. 89). External motivation refers to involvement in activities as a result of external pressures or for benefits (Aronson et al., 1997, p. 235). While a salary should provide a decent living, this is not the case, since the most common source of stress is low pay. Only five people stated that they never lack motivation to work, and 95% believe that this is a reason they feel stressed.

Perfectionism is characterized by striving for flawless performance in one's assigned tasks, a strong focus on order, competition, achieving only professional successes, and intolerance of failures (Hornowska & Paluchowski, 2007). A perfectionist work style can lead to professional burnout, manifested as exhaustion of emotional resources, indifference to others, and a low assessment of personal achievements and professional effectiveness (Stoeber & Damian, 2016). Most early school teachers (87%) stated that perfectionist concerns expose an individual to severe stress, but for 13 respondents, perfectionism promotes perseverance and concentration, thereby strengthening self-confidence.

The rapid pace of technological change necessitates continuous learning (Kwiatkowski, 2016, p. 81), and the use of digital media in the educational process requires the creation of a new methodology (Tanaś, 2015, p. 14). Digital media increasingly cause axiological chaos, globalization, uncertainty, rapid information penetration, and difficulties in adapting to new challenges and coping with threats (Bednarek & Andrzejewska, 2017, p. 25). The aforementioned challenges are a source

of stress for 85% of early school teachers, while 15% of the respondents do not see any problems in this area.

Self-presentation is an important factor in the teacher-student relationship because it is about effective communication. Social psychologists emphasize that striving to be accepted and liked by others and being a competent, controlling, and respected person are two separate and independent features of the minds of social actors (Forgas et al., 2005, p. 27). Therefore, there is no connection between subjective self-assessment and the actual implementation of communicative acts (Tokarz, 2006, p. 314). The teacher conveys information to a group of people, and the necessity of such forms of presentation is a cause for anxiety. Time must be devoted to preparing and practicing lessons in order to build good relationships with students, convey an orderly structure, and control the non-verbal messages sent (Pearson et al., 2006). Almost all teachers (95%) stated that self-presentation is a source of stress for them, and only 5% reported no problem with it.

Finally, most participants (83%) considered the idealization of the teacher's social and professional position and the expectation that they will be a role model a source of stress, but 17 did not share this opinion. Pedagogues are aware that each student needs a guide and guardian in their activities, an organizer of collective life, capable of authentic cooperation in an atmosphere of kindness and creativity and, at the same time, equipped with management skills (Skonieczka, 2006, p. 44). An excellent teacher lives in accordance with the truth, imparts knowledge impartially, and does not impose their own opinion on students. A teacher's personality is revealed in their behavior when they represent a high ethical level both at work and in their private life.

Success in the work of an early childhood teacher

Success means achieving a successful outcome in an undertaking, reaching an intended goal, or gaining fame, wealth, or a high position (Bralczyk, 2007, p. 800). In each case, it can be analyzed objectively and

subjectively. The objective dimension concerns achievements above the norm relative to those of others in the successful person's social environment (Byłok, 2005), while the subjective dimension results from potential, commitment, perseverance, empathy, self-confidence, ambition, drive, optimism, or a sense of self-efficacy.

The early school teacher motivates children to act in ways that ensure their success in learning. The proper process of growing up requires the opportunity to experience success related to intellectual challenges, the need to belong to a group, and life skills acquired during this time, which largely depend on the nature of the situation and the competencies offered by the group (Witkowski, 2000, pp. 48–49). Students' success is measured by their school achievements, such as grades, recognition from both teachers and peers, and awards won in various types of competitions or contests (Sękowski, 2000, p. 89). In the early school period, education creates opportunities to practice and experiment with the development of creative and social skills. At this stage of education, teachers are particularly important because, thanks to them, students undertake increasingly difficult and new tasks (Czykwin, 2017, p. 12).

If work meets one's expectations, gives one a sense of self-fulfillment, brings satisfaction, and is a source of personal satisfaction, then it can be considered a hobby or passion (Madalińska-Michalak, 2016, p. 14). A teacher influences students with his or her example, conversation, experience, and personality, which is particularly important at the initial stage of education. The basic criteria of professionalism for every teacher are continuous development, having a genuine interest in other people, and noticing and stimulating students' abilities, talents, and development potential.

The statements of the study participants indicate that early school teachers are fulfilled in their professional work, believe that what they do is important, and see the effects of their actions both in the educational process and in the sphere of educational influence. Below are the answers to the question: What constitutes a teacher's professional success?

- Observing students' development, their achievement of better and better results in learning. If all my charges complete the first stage of education and move on to the fourth grade of primary school, then I consider myself successful.
- Noticing the improvement in the behavior of students who require an individual approach and systemic solutions.
- Experiencing kindness and gratitude from students, which indicates their positive attitudes toward other people.
- The need to focus on tasks that lead to achieving specific results.
- Increased motivation and commitment in order to track students' progress in learning.
- Building relationships with students that require openness and transparency, mutual care, and dependence.
- A sense of mission, i.e., an awareness that pedagogical work makes sense because it contributes to students' development.
- The dynamic nature of the work – a teacher's tasks and professional requirements change quickly and frequently, which requires flexibility and continuous adaptation to new conditions.

Summary

The survey identified the most troubling sources of stress affecting early childhood teachers and outlined the extent to which they find them stressful. Respondents' statements, observations, and comments paint a picture of a teacher fulfilling their profession despite the many significant sources of stress associated with their work. While the surveys were collected from teachers in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, which limits the generalizability of the results, the research goal was achieved by identifying specific stress-inducing factors. The surveys combine cognitive and practical functions, enabling effective action in the participants' immediate environments and thereby improving educational quality and social support. Based on this, educational strategies tailored to the teaching profession can be developed. Future research should integrate

a larger body of international research on teacher burnout to compare it with the Polish context. The value of such research is significant for the development of the pedagogical discipline and, above all, for educational practice in early childhood education.

Funding: This research was supported by the Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

Conflict of interest: The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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