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The teacher in the educational system: Toward an optimal psychological profile

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Abstract

Research objectives (aims) and problem(s): The aims of this article are to analyze the literature on the optimal personality traits and competencies expected of teachers and to examine their potential role as a counterbalance to the external demands of the education system. It also focuses on teachers' mental state, the distinctive features of the educational system as a workplace, and the relationship between teachers' mental state and these features.

Research methods: This article is theoretical in nature and is based on a literature analysis.

Process of argumentation: The well-being of Polish teachers requires greater attention and a more in-depth, comprehensive analysis. It is influenced by the characteristics of the educational system, which represents a distinctive work environment where occupational stress emerges. The line of argument, therefore, begins with a brief overview of three key elements: teachers' mental state, the characteristics of the educational system as a workplace, and contemporary definitions of occupational stress. The nature of these elements creates an urgent need to identify an optimal personality profile for teachers. The article presents existing proposals in this area.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The key findings suggest that the specific nature of teachers' work environment may contribute to occupational stress, while contemporary models of occupational stress emphasize the interaction between external and internal factors. Strengthening teachers' heuristic and developmental personality traits appears to be a promising direction for promoting the well-being of this professional group.

Keywords:

stress,
personality,
creativity,
mental health,
teachers

Conclusions and/or recommendations: To support teachers' well-being, one can modify requirements, increase rewards, or provide external resources. Certain personality traits can be an effective counterbalance to external stresses.

Introduction

The present article explores Polish teachers' mental state within their professional environment to identify stressors unique to the educational system and propose interventions to enhance teacher well-being. To do so, it addresses four questions:

1. What is the level of mental health of Polish teachers?
2. What are the distinctive features of the educational system as a workplace?
3. What is the relationship between teachers' mental state and the idiosyncrasies of the educational system as a workplace?
4. What suggestions exist for the enhancement of teachers' well-being?

The mental state of Polish teachers

The extant literature on the mental condition of Polish teachers indicates the very heterogeneous nature of this phenomenon. Many studies have shown an association between the teaching profession and significant negative psychological consequences.

A review of studies on teacher burnout does not provide clear conclusions regarding the phenomenon's scale. On the one hand, 12% of educators meet the criteria for burnout (Glinski, 2014, p. 37); on the other hand, up to 41% are reported to be burned out or disillusioned (Glinski, 2014, p. 38). A slightly older study by Mandal indicated that professional burnout syndrome affects nearly 53% of teachers in primary and secondary schools (cited in Wilski, 2011, p. 362).

In contrast, more recent research indicates that almost 30% of teachers sometimes experience general symptoms of occupational burnout,

and more than 36% often feel exhaustion as one of the symptoms (Paliga, 2023, p. 14). Another study by Strutyńska revealed that 9.2% of the 21,550 teachers surveyed had been subjected to bullying (response categories ranged from “rarely” to “almost daily”). Of these, 2.8% admitted to being bullied “every now and then,” while 0.4% considered themselves victims of bullying “several times a week” or “almost daily” (Strutyńska, 2014, p. 142). Regarding stress levels, 23% of teachers reported that their professional activity was very stressful, 64% that it was moderately stressful, and 13% that it was not stressful (Wilski, 2011, p. 357). In contrast, Paliga found that nearly 30% of respondents feel stress “quite often” and more than 35% “sometimes” (2023, p. 13).

As Okulicz-Kozaryn (2014) asserted, the mental well-being of teaching professionals in Poland is a matter of concern: 86% of teachers perceive their workload to be greater than that of their counterparts in other professions. Moreover, 34% of these educators report experiencing mental exhaustion following meetings with parents. A substantial majority (70%) think that the educational challenges faced by schools can be attributed to the perceived disproportion in rights afforded to students compared to educators (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2014, pp. 6–7). Furthermore, researchers at the Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine have highlighted the absence of systematic, structured diagnostic research on the health of teachers in Poland (Bortkiewicz et al., 2020). The only information available pertains to the prevalence of occupational diseases associated with excessive vocal exertion.

An analysis of foreign literature and regional studies reveals that mental disorders in teachers resulting from occupational stress are a significant factor affecting their functionality (Bortkiewicz et al., 2020). However, in the TALIS survey, over 10,000 respondents reported high job satisfaction: 93% of middle school teachers declared overall satisfaction (TALIS average: 91%), 90% liked working at their school, 85% would recommend it as a good workplace, 93% were satisfied with the quality of their work, and only 17% would consider changing schools (Hernik, 2014, pp. 35–38).

The specificity of the educational work environment

Quantitative statistical surveys are an undoubted source of information on the specifics of teaching. At the same time, however, when analyzing the psychosocial characteristics of this professional group, qualitative aspects should be taken into account. Researchers in the teaching profession identify several interesting aspects of teaching, leading to conclusions about the profession's extraordinary complexity and dynamics.

Teachers are subject to expectations formulated by multiple sources, including school management, parents, students, government, and local government institutions. These expectations are often different and sometimes even divergent (Kutrowska, 2008, pp. 49–60). Moreover, a plethora of disparate, often arduous criteria are used to evaluate a teacher's work. A proportion of the community endeavors to quantify the evaluation of the effectiveness of teaching work, reducing it to an analysis of test results. However, this approach is arguably overly simplistic (Kutrowska, 2008, pp. 49–60).

Furthermore, teachers are expected to demonstrate a broad and complex set of competencies, encompassing personal, technical, creative, and moral and ethical dimensions (Lorek, 2011, pp. 25–37). Teaching also involves a significant degree of ambivalence and contradiction, as teachers are required to operate within rigid organizational structures while simultaneously remaining creative, reflective, and autonomous; to define rules and enforce discipline and boundaries while also building empathetic, partnership-based relationships with students that respect their subjectivity; and to balance individualized support with the demands of working with entire groups (Kozubska, 2013, pp. 4–16).

Consequently, those engaged in the teaching profession are confronted with many divergent and frequently discordant expectations from many stakeholders and a wide array of expected competencies. It is imperative to ascertain whether educators are cognisant of the intricacies inherent in their professional milieu. As awareness of their professional situation grows, they will be able to identify more effective solutions

to support their well-being. Therefore, the question that arises is: What solutions might these factors provide?

The foundation of this article is the firm belief, grounded in cognitive-behavioral psychology, that the driving force behind an individual's actions is emotions, originating in their thoughts about different life situations. A direct implication of this assumption is that effective teaching of others (understood as a process and a specific catalog of behaviors) requires the development of a specific profile of emotionality in the teaching person. This statement is of particular significance, especially in the context of the aforementioned teacher requirements.

Acknowledging the numerous stakeholders who formulate expectations of teachers through their behavior is imperative. However, with the adept utilization of communication skills and the cultivation of optimal levels of stress resistance, teachers can effectively function constructively within such contexts. Moreover, the circumstance in which disparate stakeholders delineate the criteria for evaluating teacher effectiveness in divergent manners is not subject to alteration. Conversely, if the teacher has confidence in their effectiveness, competence, and a sense of control over the teaching process, this variety of evaluations will not cause frustration. Finally, since a teacher is required to acquire a wide variety of skills, and this process takes time and many inputs, it is necessary to develop and nurture in teachers such qualities as openness, flexibility, cognitive curiosity, a focus on the process, life optimism, and creativity.

Contemporary models of occupational stress

The literature points to several basic models of stress related to work. The most popular today are the Demands-Control-Support (DCS) model, the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model, and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Widerszal-Bazyl, 2009, p. 7). In the DCS model, tension at work results from the interaction of three factors: demands, control, and social support. Challenging working conditions are those dominated by high demands, a low sense of control, and low levels of social support

(Widerszal-Bazyl, 2003, p. 94). In the ERI model, the balance between an employee's effort and the rewards they receive (salary, opportunities for recognition, being a member of a work-related social group, and opportunities to raise self-esteem) is crucial. The model is based on reciprocity: the employee "invests" effort and expects benefits in return. In situations the employee defines as imbalances, stress arises, which, as a rule, is actively minimized by reducing work effort and/or earning more rewards (van Vegchel et al., 2005). The JD-R model assumes that any structure contains two categories: requirements and employee resources. Requirements may refer to a job's physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects. Resources include social support, a sense of autonomy, and constructive feedback. Occupational stress results from the interaction between the categories (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Heuristic and developmental personality of teachers as a response to the challenges of occupational stress

Krzysztof Rubacha is the author of one of the most important concepts of role fulfillment in pedagogy. The concept assumes, among other things, the centrality of three structures in the model of teacher functioning: attitudes to knowledge, values, and the student. Attitude to knowledge consists of interdisciplinarity, cognitive curiosity, and tolerance of cognitive incompatibility; attitude to values is formed by non-conformism, a sense of agency, and orientation to professional development; and attitude to the student is constituted by interpersonal openness, acceptance of oneself and students, understanding of others, and effective social action (Kosiba & Madejski, 2014, pp. 104–105). Thus, this concept emphasizes the psychosocial dimension of individual functioning.

In a study conducted among 225 teachers, 26.4% scored low on the PRN test, which examines the scales in question, 37.7% scored medium, and 35.9% scored high (Kosiba & Madejski, 2014, p. 105). The study's authors interpreted the results using the adaptive-heuristic model of teacher performance. High results indicate that the teacher performs their role

in a heuristic, highly active way, emphasizing the student's subjectivity and encouraging activity and challenges. More than one-third of the educators in this study fell into this category. In contrast, adaptive educators function in a highly conformist, submissive, and often passive manner, using strategies for survival within the system. The rest constitute the so-called "intermediate state," ambivalent, depending on current trends and environmental impulses (Kosiba et al., 2014).

It is a truism worth emphasizing that in the current dynamic world of change and innovation, a heuristic teacher will more efficiently and effectively prepare the next generation of students to function outside the education system. Moreover, the cited studies indicate that nearly 70% of teachers do not fit the adaptive-heuristic model. The key question thus becomes: How can this state of affairs be changed? This question is all the more important because the consequences of teachers' adaptability are negative not only for students but also for teachers themselves, especially in the area of occupational stress.

Teacher stress can be examined by juxtaposing the adaptive-heuristic model of the teacher's role with the models of occupational stress described above. Expectations defined for educators are complex, multi-dimensional, and full of contradictions. Meeting them, therefore, requires flexibility, openness, and several other competencies and resources typical of a heuristic view of the teacher's role. Behavioral strategies, such as attempting to adapt to conditions and passivity, which are defining characteristics of adaptability, can intensify stress in multiple ways. First, because of modern students' expectations and characteristics, they will certainly not cooperate with a passive teacher. Second, the school system is institutionally heterogeneous and increasingly complex. Given the current development of knowledge, educational technology, and innovation, it will become even more so. Thus, adopting a conformist, survival-oriented role will intensify the gap between work demands, resources, and attitudes, compounding the tension. In terms of the ERI model, it could be argued that an adaptive employee engages a similar amount of energy in pursuing his or her strategies as a heuristic employee (although, of course, this energy is absorbed by quite different activities) but is less likely

to obtain additional rewards, if only in the form of students' gratitude, his or her job satisfaction, or a sense of commitment (so-called flow). This can result in increased levels of occupational stress.

Another interesting concept of the desired personality profile of a teacher is proposed by Wilski (2011, pp. 336–344), who refers to Kazimierz Obuchowski's work and asserts that self-improvement is necessary to maintain a certain level of functioning in life. The author defines three types of teachers' personalities, differing in their level of competence and readiness for development. The typical characteristics of the first type of personality, the reactive personality, are laziness, a low level of commitment, rigidity in thinking, the tendency to reproduce ready-made patterns of behavior, and passivity. According to Wilski, this type of teacher is an ideal implementer of the curriculum. Moreover, a school, like an institution, can promote reactivity through its rules and organization.

The second type is a drifting personality, referring to educators who, at some point in their careers, lose dynamism, proactivity, and motivation. Development is also a cost associated, for example, with uncertainty about the correctness of the choices made or the need to overcome difficulties in the process. For some people, the path of permanent change can prove frustrating for various reasons, resulting in disinhibition. As Wilski states: "it is impossible not to notice that a drifting personality is a stunted developmental personality" (2011, p. 341). This "freezing" may affect people for whom achieving individual goals is a task rather than a conscious and accepted life plan. In this case, overcoming successive stages is accompanied by disappointment rather than a sense of fulfillment.

Developmental personality is the most desirable but also the least common model. It is associated with ambition, self-esteem, prosociality, a creative approach to tasks, spontaneity, and independence. A developmental teacher wants to engage students, showing them what passion is and helping them discover new aspects of reality. This approach is close to the heuristic model of an educator described above. Kowalik, writing about the difficulties of students, defines three basic tasks of teachers in this regard: make a proto-diagnosis, that is, recognize the problem and determine its further development; intervene, based, among other things,

on a comprehensive knowledge of the student and their family environment; and plan preventive measures. How each of the above-mentioned activities is carried out depends, in part, on the specific functioning of the teacher, as well as on their sensitivity, sense of responsibility and effectiveness, and readiness to function under conditions of uncertainty (Kowalik, 2011, pp. 40–46).

Heuristic or developmental personality traits seem to be crucial in the process of supporting students academically. Teachers now have many ready-made intervention scenarios at their disposal, and access to specialized knowledge is disproportionately better than it was a dozen years ago (valuable online sources, training courses, EU-funded development programs, modern technologies in the service of education, etc.). However, will a teacher be willing to use them, or will he or she choose a strategy of avoidance and non-recognition, depending on his or her beliefs about self-efficacy, openness, or readiness to take on creative challenges? Reactivity or adaptability (depending on the perspective adopted) may invite the teacher to be passive.

Analyzing the available research in the Polish context on the optimal psychological profile of teachers, several conclusions can be drawn (Poraj, 2014). First, the higher the teacher's self-esteem, the more positively they perceive the student. Moreover, optimistic attitudes toward themselves, the world, and other people, high task efficiency, and a readiness to make changes in their work are conducive to the teacher's effective professional development. According to Tucholska (cited in Poraj, 2014), "suitable teachers" were characterized by a high ability for emotional control, a positive attitude toward themselves, the world, and other people, high social competence, the ability to build good interpersonal relations with the environment, and persistence and discipline. In addition, Poraj found that "passionate people" were considered the most desirable to work in education (Poraj, 2014). These individuals have a positive attitude toward the world and others, believe in their competence and capabilities, and enjoy challenges. They can deal with problems effectively and are eager to overcome obstacles. They build relationships easily and are cordial, always ready to help, and assertive. They are characterized by cognitive

curiosity, acceptance of novelty, a lack of fear of change, and an enjoyable, rich inner life. They show a high level of commitment at work and are persistent and reliable. They do not tend to dominate others but offer them partner relationships. They show a very low level of aggression syndrome, along with a high ability to control their emotions and behaviors. Consequently, it is evident that teachers should be educated not only in subject-matter competence but also in shaping an appropriate psychosocial and pedagogical profile. This is particularly important as each study highlights similar qualities that characterize the “ideal teacher.” In this context, aspects related to optimism and communicative openness appear to be of key importance.

Teachers’ psychological well-being cannot be fully understood without reference to contemporary research on creativity. Recent studies indicate that creative and heuristic thinking may function as important psychological resources. The literature distinguishes four levels of creativity relevant to learning. At the most basic level, “mini-c” refers to the internal processes underlying creative thought, such as divergent thinking, forming remote associations, using analogies, and reasoning through problems. The next level is “little-c” creativity, which involves solving problems and generating novel products without the expectation of producing groundbreaking outcomes. Teachers may also display “pro-c” creativity, reflected in the development of new and useful solutions in their work, such as designing original teaching methods or materials. Finally, “big-C” creativity refers to exceptional achievements and is beyond the scope of this discussion (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009, as cited in Zielińska et al., 2024).

A growing body of research indicates that creativity is positively associated with well-being. However, this relationship is modest and mediated by creative self-efficacy, defined as the belief in one’s ability to produce creative outcomes. Higher levels of creative self-efficacy are associated with greater life satisfaction, a stronger sense of meaning, and increased psychological richness (Liu et al., 2025). Research also indicates positive associations among teachers’ autonomy support, self-efficacy, and creative thinking (Orakci & Durnali, 2022). Moreover, engaging in

creative activity may help individuals perceive situations as less stressful by enhancing their sense of competence (Fiori et al., 2022). Creative teachers tend to think imaginatively, take risks, reflect on their practice, and remain open to new approaches, while work engagement is positively associated with creativity (Levin et al., 2026).

Taken together, these findings suggest that creative and heuristic thinking may help teachers navigate the complex and often contradictory demands of the educational system, thereby supporting their well-being. Nevertheless, the teachers' education system underestimates the essence and practical importance of educators' psychosocial competence. Teacher education in professional, practical preparation is incomplete and unsatisfactory. It is characterized by over-theorizing the transmitted content, which is often outdated and of little use in school practice. The connection between theory and practice, the development of reflexivity, and competence in solving educational problems and establishing verbal contact with students are also deficient. According to statements from school principals, methodologists, and inspectors, subject teachers are unable to communicate with students, make choices, and overcome adaptation difficulties. Nowak-Dziemianowicz (2014) has emphasized the peculiar imbalance between the substantive, didactic, and pedagogical-psychological preparation of modern teachers (to the disadvantage of the latter). At the same time, she points to education as a primarily communicative process based on active listening, understanding of different perspectives (openness), and cognitive curiosity.

The question "Why does the Polish teacher education system ignore psycho-pedagogical aspects?" seems important because, as the available literature shows, psychological traits are important for various aspects of educators' functioning. Recent publications in this area indicate, among other things, that teachers' psychological traits such as openness to experience, conscientiousness, neuroticism (Zebarjadian & Zadeh, 2015), professional optimism (McIlveen & Perera, 2015), level of hope (Sezgin & Erdogan, 2015), or sense of competence (Künsting et al., 2016) correlate with the level of job satisfaction or effectiveness. Researchers also point to the need for solutions, such as training, that will enhance the positive

impact and neutralize the negative impact of various “character” factors in teachers on the educational process. The effectiveness of this type of action is all the more likely because intensive research is still underway to abstract both categories of “traits,” i.e., those with a negative impact and those with a positive impact, yielding increasingly clear results.

It would seem that, given the above data, stakeholders should be seriously invested in intensifying activities aimed at constructing an “educationally effective” psycho-pedagogical profile of the teacher – especially since this is a scientifically researched area within which the directions of expected development are clearly defined. Moreover, it remains undisputed that the formation of the psychosocial profile is – within certain limits – practically possible, thus providing another argument for raising the profile of psycho-pedagogical knowledge (and practice!) in the education of school personnel. Training, counseling, and development activities with psycho-pedagogical themes could benefit both teachers and students. Psychology and pedagogy provide several solutions and even ready-made development plans for teachers.

Summary

We all function in systems, whether these be family, friends, professional, legal, or otherwise. We, as individuals, are systems. Our psychophysical state and behavior are partly the result of interactions among the elements of the various systems within which we function (Ludewig, 1995). Improvements in an individual’s psychological state (increases in well-being, decreases in stress levels) can occur due to external or intra-system change. The presented models of occupational stress also emphasize this interaction. In caring for teachers’ well-being, one can modify requirements (DCS model), increase rewards (ERI model), or provide resources (JD-R model). However, these changes depend on several systems external to the individual (e.g., institutions governing the education system, state finances, and the goodwill of the executive and legislative branches). This article has emphasized internal sources of enhancing well-being

and strengthening specific qualities and competencies that would provide an effective counterbalance to external burdens. Practitioners and researchers in pedagogy point to clearly defined personality areas, the strengthening of which would benefit educators. This text has presented several of them.

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