

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health and Professional Performance of Teachers

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is associated with highly significant levels of psychological distress that, in many cases, would meet the threshold for clinical relevance of helping professions - occupations in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, counseling, medicine, nursing, social work, physical and occupational therapy, teaching, and education. Mitigating the hazardous effects of COVID-19 on mental health is a public health priority. The aim of our research was to analyze our experience with this topic and attitudes of teachers to the online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Teachers, Online Teaching, COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

People in constant, prolonged, intensive interaction with other people in an emotionally charged atmosphere are susceptible to the syndrome of burnout [5]. Since November 2019, population of the Czech Republic went through different quarantine phases, passing through border closures, social distancing, and the suspension of presential teaching activities overtaken by virtualization. Schools were closed for almost a year which was one of the longest breaks in the EU.

Well-being of most people including teachers was affected in many countries as it was reported by several studies [2, 3, 4]. In this regard, although efforts have been made to train teachers through online learning platforms, this modal change implied a series of challenges when developed in a hostile, complex and unprecedented context [6]. Experts in clinical psychology expect, it will be necessary to re-develop sustainable work environments and policies, which will provide well-being to teachers in different aspects (social, emotional, physical). This effort will have to be reflected not only in the improvement of their productivity—even in extreme situations, as is the case of job development during the COVID-19 pandemic, it will also help to prevent pathologies associated with the teaching function, such as burnout due to prolonged exposures of stress.

Online teaching transition during COVID-19 school lockdown elicited new situations and challenges for teachers and schools across the globe as remote teaching introduction brought new stressors for teachers. Our own experience inspired us to study feelings and attitudes of teachers towards distant online teaching and possible stressors connected with it (necessity to learn new methods and demands of preparation for distant teaching) and occurrence of the Burnout Syndrome and its specific features within the teacher community. The study was conducted in December 2020 and January 2021.

Objective

The aim of our research was to analyze experience and attitudes of teachers to the online distant teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and to confront them with the results of their discomfort level as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Methods

We used quantitative research method: a questionnaire designed for this purpose was divided into 4 sections (personal data specification, teacher attitudes towards online teaching, teacher opinions on Burnout Syndrome formation and its diagnostics as measured by the standardized Maslach Burnout Inventory).

Research Sample

337 elementary school teachers (92 % female, 8 % male) and 155 secondary school teachers (83 % female, 17 % male) participated in our study. We used the teacher Facebook platform to address potential survey respondents. As seen on Table 1, the age of respondents covered the whole range of productive age, from very young ones (19 % at elementary schools and 8 % at secondary schools) to senior teachers over 60 years (2 % at elementary schools and 6 % at secondary schools).

Table 1: Age of participants

Age of participants	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
less than 30 years	19 %	8 %
31 - 40 years	25 %	33 %
41 – 50 years	32 %	28 %
51 - 60 years	21 %	25 %
more than 60 years	2 %	6 %

Variety in teaching experience can be observed in our research sample – from beginning teachers (23% at elementary schools, 14 % at secondary schools to senior teachers with teaching experience over 35 years (4% at elementary schools, 8% at secondary schools), see data on table 2.

Table 2: Length of teaching experience

Years of teaching experience	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
less than 5	23 %	14 %
5-10	18 %	20 %
11-15	13 %	16 %
16-25	24 %	26 %
26-35	18 %	16 %
35+	4 %	8 %

During quarantine and closures, schools in the Czech Republic had to switch to distant online teaching as an emergency measure within a very short period of time. On the other hand, most teachers got very little training in this regard. Nevertheless, data of Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic confirmed most schools adopted online teaching despite obstacles. This is confirmed in our sample (see tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Use of online teaching during Pandemic

Use of online teaching during pandemic	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
yes	95 %	96 %
partly	5 %	4 %
no	1 %	0 %

Table 4: Previous experience with online teaching

Previous experience with online teaching	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
yes	5 %	6 %
partly	5 %	12 %
no	90 %	82 %

The swift switch from traditional classrooms to online classes in the wake of COVID-19 has given teachers very little or no time for planning and preparation. Next items of our questionnaire aimed at teacher feelings about new methodology and demands preparation of distant online teaching put on them (tables 5-8).

Table 5: Teacher feelings about online teaching

Going down well with online teaching	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
yes	9 %	13 %
partly yes, partly no	72 %	72 %
no	18 %	15 %
no explicit opinion	1 %	0 %

Table 6: Time needed for preparation during Pandemic

Time for preparation/day	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
less than 30 munutes	1 %	1 %
30 minutes	1 %	1 %
1 hour	10 %	7 %
1,5 hours	9 %	9 %
2 hours	16 %	14 %
more than 2 hours	63 %	68 %

Table 7: Was the preparation for online teaching longer than for regular class teaching?

More time for online class preparation	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
yes	83 %	88 %
no	4 %	9 %
same time	13 %	3 %

Table 8: Did you feel more tired during online teaching than during regular class?

More tired during online teaching	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
yes	53 %	45 %
rather yes	26 %	30 %
rather no	17 %	19 %
no	4 %	6 %

Table 9: Do you think you are in risk of being threatened by the BS?

Do you think you might get BS?	Elementary school teachers	Secondary school teachers
yes	14 %	13 %
probably yes	32 %	33 %
probably no	38 %	35 %
no	16 %	19 %

Teachers in our survey were administered Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The development of the MBI was based on the need for an instrument to assess experienced burnout in a wide range of human service workers. Standardized method includes 22 items and respondents assess every item on a scale 0–7 (0-not at all to 7 quite strong) regarding their feelings of exhaustion. The Maslach Burnout Inventory captures three dimensions of burnout: **emotional exhaustion (EE)**, **depersonalization (DP)**, and **personal accomplishment (PA)**. The three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.

**Table 10: Teacher Burnout Syndrome - results
Score in emotional exhaustion**

Score in emotional exhaustion	Elementary school teachers (N=337)	Secondary school teachers (N=155)
low	38 %	45 %
average	27 %	20 %
high	36 %	35 %

As seen from the table 10, 27 % of elementary school teachers performed an average score in the EE and 36 % high score. Their colleagues from secondary school showed similar results especially in high scores – this means more than one third of teachers is threatened by emotional exhaustion.

**Table 11: Teacher Burnout Syndrome – results
Score in depersonalization**

Score in depersonalization	Elementary school teachers (N =337)	Secondary school teachers (N =155)
low	74 %	71 %
average	18 %	22 %
high	8 %	7 %

Results in the second dimension are more positive than in the first dimension as 74 % of elementary school teachers and 71 % of secondary school teachers show low level of depersonalization.

Table 12: Teacher Burnout Syndrome - results
Personal accomplishment

Score in personal accomplishment	Elementary school teachers (N=337)	Secondary school teachers (N=155)
Low	11 %	16 %
Average	29 %	23 %
High	60 %	61 %

Results in the third dimension are also more positive compared to the first dimension as 60 % of elementary school teachers and 61 % of secondary school teachers had high score in personal accomplishment.

Conclusion

1) Distant online teaching: 95 % of elementary school teachers and 96 % of secondary school teachers introduced within a very short time full online classes, the rest of teachers combined online teaching with other methods. 90 % of elementary school teachers and 82 % of secondary school teachers had no previous experience with distant teaching.

2) Most teachers did not go down very well with online teaching, but 72 % of elementary school teachers and 78 % of secondary school teachers held the view that online teaching had both positive and negative aspects.

3) Most teachers needed lots of self-training to do online teaching well. They felt more exhausted as their preparation for online teaching was much more demanding and time-consuming compared with standard classes.

4) Burnout Syndrome was confirmed in the emotional exhaustion dimension (EE), of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (36 % of elementary school teachers, 35 % of secondary school teachers), but not in other two dimensions – depersonalization (DP) and personal accomplishment (PA).

Members of the teaching profession experienced psychological discomfort at the beginning of the 2020–2021 academic year. Faced with the situation of COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers were dealing with new measures, situations, sometimes with a lack of clear guidelines. Working from home, using ICT for online teaching created feelings of tension, anxiety and exhaustion of many teachers as proved by our results.

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