

## SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MACEDONIA AND METHODS FOR PREVENTION AND DEALING WITH STRESS

**Biljana Manoilova Filipova**

Veliko Tarnovo University "St.St Cyril and Methodius" Bulgaria, biljanamf77@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The beginning of formal education and starting first grade is definitely the most stressful period in the life of the child, his parents and even the teacher.

During this period, each of the participants in the education process has their own fears and expectations. On the one hand, there are the students who, after the comfort of the kindergarten as a preparatory institution before starting school, come to a totally new, unknown environment (for which they are not ready either), on the other hand, there are the teachers with curricula and programs that need to be implemented and finally, as indirect participants, parents who have their own ideas and expectations from their children (students) and teachers.

The subject of this theoretical research was to gain knowledge about what are the biggest sources of stress among students and teachers in primary schools in Macedonia, what are the state strategies and trainings for dealing with stress and what methods of dealing with and prevention are applied in schools, and are intended for students and teachers. Through the analysis of the data from the research conducted in the past period, it is evident that the sources of stress among teachers and students differ. The most common sources of stress among students are peer relationships (aggressiveness, insults, belittling), the climate in the school, grades and poor support from parents. The situation with teachers is not any better, they experience stress most often due to dissatisfaction with working conditions, undisciplined students, increased administrative work imposed by frequent changes in curricula and new concepts of education. Neither one nor the other receives the help and support they need to cope with the difficulties. Through the analysis of the data, the future for both students and teachers is not pleasant. The recommendations are to get much more involved in developing programs to deal with and prevent low self-esteem, poor self-image, fear of failure, emotional problems that occur among students, as well as the stigma of seeking professional help, as well as increasing workshops to improve social interaction and communication between peers in order to reduce depression, loneliness, rejection, sadness and feelings of emptiness. Improving the working conditions of teachers, starting with teaching aids, timely training in professional competencies (especially for working with students with special needs), stress management workshops, increased cooperation with professional services, and a number of other seemingly minor shortcomings are of paramount importance for supporting the main bearers of the educational process - teachers.

**Keywords:** stress, student, teacher, peers, coping with stress.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary school, a place where different generations meet and for nine years work in harmony to achieve knowledge, upbringing, social skills, self-confidence.

Starting at six or less years old, students leave what was familiar to them and come to a completely new environment. The new and unknown manifests behavioral changes in many of them that they have not had before. They withdraw into themselves, others become hyperactive or disobedient, others show aggressive behavior, insecurity, irritability, aversion, hypersensitivity, etc. Students experience stress.

The beginning of the school year is not only stressful for them, teachers are also under stress. This stress can differ greatly from that of the student, but the uncertainty until the very acquaintance with the students has always existed in the teacher. How would you define stress?

At the beginning of the 20th century, the basis for the meaning of stress was laid by Bernard, and further developed by Cannon, taking into account that stress is a state of disturbed homeostasis of the organism. In the master's research of Filipova (Маноилова Филипова, Б. 2022) according to Hans Selye, using the term general adaptation syndrome, defines stress as a non-specific reaction of the organism to external demand, during which physiological and biochemical processes are created aimed at balancing and metabolic adaptation of the organism to the situation.

In the 1970s, models of (dis) harmony between the individual and the work environment were developed (McGrath's model, the French and colleagues' model, Harrison's model). In them, work stress is explained as a consequence of the inconsistency of the individual's personal characteristics (attitudes, skills, abilities, resources) and the demands of the work environment, which results in difficulties for the individual at the organizational level (Mark, G. M. & Smith, A. P. 2008).

Stress can most simply be defined as an alarm, a defense mechanism of our organism as a whole, in order to preserve the homeostasis of the organism. The sources of stress in both teachers and students are different but still closely related, because the action of one gives rise to a reaction in the other.

The **subject** of this theoretical explanatory research is the sources of stress among students and teachers in primary schools in the country, and methods for coping with and reducing stress.

The **purpose** of the research is to better understand and describe the sources of stress that occur among teachers and students in primary schools, and through the method of analyzing existing research, the most common sources of stress, some symptoms of stress, and ways of coping with and preventing stress were examined.

## 2. MOST COMMON SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG STUDENTS

There are many sources of stress, but in this paper we will mention those that we believe have the greatest impact during the period of elementary education.

**-School climate** – the atmosphere that occurs in the school, more precisely in a certain class, and can be encouraging, stimulating, with clear rules and positive values and norms of behavior, with a positive teacher-student relationship, without aggression and violence, with a sense of security, without pressure with the opportunity to develop individual abilities. Or an unsafe environment, with many obstacles to learning and development, without the opportunity for individual progress, an environment with a lot of aggression and everyday conflicts for the resolution of which the teacher wastes a lot of time and teaches little, an environment without clearly defined rules and norms of behavior, etc.

**-Grades** – as part of the educational process that expresses the success of students at the end of the semester and at the end of the school year, they are an indicator of the student's overall success. But do they really speak about the degree to which a certain content has been mastered, are they really realistic at a time when it is more important for parents to get a high grade than the degree of mastery of the content, or do they represent another stress for students. They are often not fair, not realistic, provide little insight into the student's real knowledge, do not motivate the student, and very often, due to the wishes of the parents, they represent a serious fear for the student.

**-Parental expectations** are another source of stress for students, because especially when a first-grader starts school, parents have very high expectations. They expect their children to be exemplary, to quickly adapt to the new environment, to quickly make friends, to be diligent in class, to be independent in class work or in homework. In short, parental expectations are much higher than the child's real capabilities. Parental expectations should be slightly higher than the child's real capabilities in order to motivate and encourage them to develop, but in no case far more than the real capabilities, so when students do not meet their parents' expectations, they quickly become disappointed, give up, and consider themselves worthless and incapable.

**-Peers** – Peers – besides the family, the most important members in the life of a child or student are his or her peers. The extensive school curriculum and programs place more emphasis on knowledge, and less attention is paid to interactions between peers, social relationships between them. Through socialization and interaction, they satisfy the need for belonging, attachment, play, respect, learn acceptable social forms of behavior (self-confidence, cope with success or failure, disappointments, become resilient). Children who are not accepted by their peer group or do not have a best friend become withdrawn, uninterested in joint activities in class, do not try too hard and have lower success in school. Social competencies develop as the child grows, practicing the desired social behavior and developing their own identity. In addition to non-acceptance by peers, ridicule from other children is also a stressful situation. Some authors define peer pressure as direct pressure on a person (Brown et al., 2008; Forko, Lotar 2012; Dustin, Laurence, 2011.) considering it as one of the ways to impose certain attitudes or behaviors, whether positive or negative, others believe that a person can be indirectly persuaded to certain behaviors (Santor, Messerway, Kusumakar, 2000 Forko, Lotar, 2012). Directly or indirectly, a peer group can have a great positive and negative influence on a person's behavior.

**-The teacher as a source of stress** – in the process of education and upbringing, the personality of the teacher plays a major role. He leads and directs the process of learning and teaching, motivates, encourages, does not discriminate on any grounds, does not judge. He is expected to be fair, honest, objective, not to take sides in a conflict, to be patient, always positive and to be an example and idol for his students. The conflicting and contradictory teacher, the one without patience and understanding of his students, builds a bad climate in the classroom, causes distrust, insecurity and fear. Such a teacher is stressful for every student. Such a teacher has poor cooperation with both students and parents.

## 3. MOST COMMON SOURCES OF STRESS AMONG TEACHERS

(Hepburn i Brown, 2001) research shows that the teaching profession is on the same level as doctors or nurses in terms of the level of daily stress. Kyriacou (2001) states in his research that as many as a quarter of the teachers

surveyed responded that they consider their job to be very stressful, and other researchers (Ryan, Embse, Pendergast, Saeki, Segool and Schwing (2017) have found that as many as 40-50% of teachers leave their jobs as teachers in the first five years of their work precisely because of stress.

The teacher-student relationship is mutually connected, the action of one gives a reaction to the other. We would define stress in a teacher as an unpleasant feeling, an uncomfortable experience that arises as a result of some aspect of his work, while feeling anger, anxiety, frustration and even depression. Based on previous research on this topic, teacher stress as a source is most often:

- **Students' maladaptive behavior** -can occur even from the lowest grades, when students who begin the process of education and upbringing come completely unprepared for what school means, what the rules of behavior are in class, the rules of behavior in the class and in the school in terms of noisy students, students who find it difficult to concentrate, students who behave inappropriately and rudely in class. Students who behave violently and aggressively towards their classmates, and even towards other peers in the school. When such conflicts arise, the teacher is often unable to hold the class, cannot introduce discipline and work on the teaching content with the other students. He is often insulted, ridiculed and his character and work are humiliated by the problematic students.

- **Time constraints and lack of resources** - The poor results of student knowledge tests a decade ago, and the situation is still the same today, have led to a situation of accepting new and abandoning old concepts and programs of education so often that teachers are overwhelmed with administrative work, new training, unclear teaching plans, changes in curricula, lack of work equipment (tablets and textbooks as the main means of work). The changes with the adoption of the new concept of education and the poor communication and coordination between the Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau for the Development of Education, on the other hand, only bring stress and ambiguities in the teaching profession, even among teachers who are about to retire.

Teachers without professional training and preparation are thrust into the process called inclusive education and implement it even though they themselves are aware that they lack competence and knowledge in the area.

- **The need for professional recognition** – after all the programs and concepts of education for which the teacher was not asked for his opinion as a professional who knows the issues of the problem best, he was simply forced to adapt and implement sad decisions with which he certainly does not agree. The personality of the teacher is so degraded, belittled, ridiculed and devalued by society, first because of the inadequate salary of the teacher, and then because of the insufficient opportunity for advancement in the profession. Such an ignorant and humiliating attitude has not been observed in any other profession by the state.

Perhaps it is precisely because of this attitude that teachers lose interest in their work, there is general apathy, poor communication with colleagues and superiors.

- **Inclusive Education** – It is high time for schools to ask themselves whether they are sure they are meeting the needs of all their students (Ekins A. & Grimes P.2009). Starting from the 2022/23 school year, according to the new concept of education, all students receive equal treatment and are included in the regular educational process. There are no more special classes and departments for students with disabilities who previously worked with professionals (specialists, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers). Suddenly, all these students were included in regular classes with students with typical development, which is a serious stress for teachers. The problem is not the number of students with whom the teacher works, the problems come from the teacher's incompetence to work with students with special educational needs. Teachers neither have sufficient knowledge and understanding of each disability, they do not know the working methods or techniques used to work with students with disabilities, nor have such trainings been conducted or implemented in schools. What is needed is a cohesive educational plan, through open communication, sharing ideas and strategies, and showing mutual respect (AuCoin D. 2021) cooperation and support.

#### 4. CURRENT STATUS AND ANALYSIS OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

According to data (State Statistical Office. 2021) the population and household census in the Republic of Macedonia the country has a population of 1,836,713, of which 21.5% are children and adolescents aged 0 to 18, or 24.5% for 0-4 years, 27.7% for 5-9 years, and 47.8% for 10-18 years.

The 2014 action research on peer violence, based on a sample of 4,219 students aged 11, 13, and 15, shows that name-calling, kicking, pushing, and locking, as specific forms of bullying, are very common among students, three to four times more common among girls than boys. Macedonian girls aged 13 (33%) and 15 (30%) are among the most at risk, as are Albanian girls aged 11 (24%) and 13 (23%) years (National Strategy for the Promotion of Mental Health in the R.M 2018-2025) Such research has not been conducted among children aged 6-10, so the actual results are much higher.

The action plan for the promotion of mental health in the Republic of Macedonia for the period 2018-2025, in the section on the mental health of children and adolescents, states that 5% need mental health services, and 50% of all

mental health disorders begin from childhood to 14 years of age (which confirms the claim that intervention in preserving mental health should be from an early age). By analyzing the data (National Strategy for Youth Mental Health 2024-2026) obtained from young people, 14% reported feeling anxious, depressed or having mental health problems. 64% of young people had disagreements and arguments with their parents, of which 34% were related to school, 17% were related to social media, 12% were related to family relationships. 4.8% of young people in RSM spent quality time with their parents (as much as they wanted) while 30% of them did not spend any significant time talking to their parents at all in a period of 1 month. The biggest fear of young people is loneliness 40%, fear of rejection by peers 33%, isolation from peers or friends 27%. 11% of young people talk about their problems with a school counselor, psychologist or teacher, 15% talk to a friend, 22% talk to a parent (National Strategy for Youth Mental Health 2024-2026).

At the level of psychological functioning, 56% of the total number of young people surveyed have difficulty concentrating, in terms of sensitivity, 51% are oversensitive, three out of four young people surveyed, or 74%, felt a fear of failure. 60% felt discomfort and anxiety during social interactions, 48% of all respondents felt sadness and emptiness, 39% fear of being left alone at home (National Strategy for Youth Mental Health 2024-2026). This data tells us that worry, anxiety and depression, and fear of social interaction are on the rise among young people. As for stress among teachers, relevant research shows that in Europe 60%-70% of teachers are under stress, while in the US this percentage is 5-20% (Kamceva Panova, L. 2022).

Seidman and Zager (1986; 1991) developed a model of burnout in the workplace based on the sources of stress in the teaching profession. The basic components of this model are job dissatisfaction, undisciplined students, lack of administrative support. The burnout syndrome, as in all professions, is considered a prolonged response to emotional or human stress at work and consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low achievement. The research conducted by Kamceva confirms the high level of stress in the teaching profession among as many as 66.6% of teachers with 16-25 years of experience, and a high level of stress was also shown among primary school teachers 86.6% with over 25 years of work experience.

The results of the research show that stress is less present among male teachers, because female teachers, in addition to the burden and problems of work, also have additional responsibilities at home.

Regarding administrative and professional support in schools, out of 60 surveyed teachers (Kamceva Panova, L. 2022) 41 (68.3%) responded that they were not satisfied with the support they received, and 21 of them expressed satisfaction with their chosen occupation.

(Manoilova, Filipova, B 2022) survey on inclusive education as a source of stress among teachers conducted in 2022 on over 100 teachers and specifically for psychosomatic symptoms, the percentages are: feeling like you're going to faint 49%, impatience 51.9%, sweating even though it's not hot 43.3%, feeling scared for no reason 61.5%, difficulty swallowing 51%, heart palpitations without fatigue 42.3%, feeling lost before easy tasks 47.1%, feeling scared 50%, tremors 47.1%. The surveyed teachers did not express negative attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities, but rather the high stress scores were a result of their incompetence in working with such students.

This research also yielded other results that can indirectly predict interpersonal relationships in schools. Feeling nervous about little things was shown by 47.1%, overreacting in everyday situations by 55.8%, I can easily get annoyed by 47.1%, I easily lose patience by 57.7%, difficulty calming down by 58.7%, difficulty tolerating by 61.5%, nervousness when interrupting work by 47.1%, I notice myself getting nervous by 59.6%. We should pay special attention to the last statement because teachers are actually aware of their feelings and actions in a large percentage of cases but do not have mechanisms for coping and preventing them from occurring.

## **5. PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF STRESS**

Although the Ministry of Education and Science claims that schools are strengthened with professional associates, i.e. psychologists ready to provide assistance, there are still schools where we do not have such professional associates. Topics in the field of stress and mental health are very little covered or represented in the curricula, and the non-governmental sector provides support in the way it can (providing workshops and SOS telephones for children and youth), however this applies to larger cities.

The period of early childhood and starting school is very stressful and this stress can have a negative impact later in the lives of young people, which is why coping and prevention programs must be implemented in schools. One such positive example of stress management is in schools in Finland, where students are previously introduced to the school building, introduced to teachers, professional associates, informal gatherings of parents, teachers and children in order to overcome the stress of the unknown.

Schools, following the example of advanced countries, should develop a stress prevention program, teaching children how to more easily face problems at school and in life in general.

**Mindfulness and relaxation techniques:** deep breathing, belly breathing, diaphragmatic breathing in moments of stress in order to relax. Mindfulness technique for awareness and focusing on reducing negative thoughts.

**Organization and planning of free time:** preparing planners and schedules with importance and priority of tasks, step by step, setting goals, planning time for study.

**Conversation with teachers and professional associates in schools:** in order to resolve existing conflicts, build self-confidence and a positive self-image.

**Physical activity, ART or Music Therapy:** Physical activity (running, swimming, short exercises) reduces stress in students and encourages socialization among them, on the other hand, through music, play or drawing, children are encouraged to express their repressed emotions more easily.

When we talk about interventions for stress in teachers, they are divided into:

- primary interventions that aim to prevent the occurrence of serious illnesses,
- secondary interventions - include exercises of a psychological nature and meditation techniques,
- tertiary interventions that are aimed at managing psychosomatic symptoms of stress.

In addition to these, there are also special programs to reduce stress among teaching staff.

- **Stress Management Program:** The goal of the program is to introduce teachers to stress management techniques such as workshops, yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, and relaxation.

-**Wellness programs:** which aim to help teachers maintain their mental and physical health through exercise, quitting harmful substances such as nicotine, caffeine, etc..

- **Professional assistance programs for teachers:** medical or psychological programs that provide treatment or psychotherapy for teachers when they are dissatisfied with human relations at work, loss of job, feeling of injustice, bad relationship with a colleague or superiors.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the results of this theoretical research, we came to the conclusion that the most common sources of stress among students are peer relationships (aggressiveness, insults, belittling), the climate in the school, and poor support from parents.

Students are insecure in themselves, have low self-esteem, a bad self-image, a low level of self-esteem, are afraid of failure and experience it very emotionally. They are afraid to seek help from professional services at school or from teachers. They talk about their problems with their friends, and less often with their parents. They are afraid of social interaction or are insecure in communication between peers and friends, and therefore the feeling of loneliness, depression, rejection, sadness and emptiness is on the rise.

The curricula and programs do not include techniques for coping with and managing stress, and such workshops are lacking and are not organized at all in schools, leaving students alone in dealing with this burning problem.

On the other hand, the situation with teachers is not any better. Stress is more prevalent and more pronounced among female teachers. Teachers experience stress most often due to dissatisfaction with working conditions, undisciplined students, exhaustion and increased administrative work imposed by frequent changes in curricula and new concepts of education. Stress is also caused by the lack of resources in everyday work (textbooks, tablets, smart boards). Inclusive education has also proven to be stressful not from the aspect of the character of students with special educational needs, but from the aspect of insufficient competencies and expertise in working with these individuals. Ultimately, the accumulation of stress disrupts human relationships in the school, relationships with superiors and professional associates, and even between fellow teachers.

The lack of training and programs for acquiring techniques for awareness and management of stress and conflict situations is necessary for both students and teachers, because only a satisfied teacher who loves his job can teach and create an environment that will be safe, pleasant, positive, and stimulating and motivating for students. In the concluding observations of this paper, we would like to emphasize that the school with its complexity has been and will remain a source of stress for students and teachers. What we can change and what we should focus on is building and strengthening resilience among all direct and indirect participants in the process of education and upbringing of the young person.

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