

Educational Communication and Stress at Preschool and Primary Teachers in the Educational Pandemic Context

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Abstract

In the pandemic context, both stress and educational communication have been altered.

In this article, we will analyse the dynamics of the factors involved in didactic communication and identify the real and potential stressors for teachers teaching before pandemic; we will also assess their perceptions of the anxiety felt about online teaching and how it affects educational communication. The hypothesis of the research postulates that the stress perceived by the teachers has elevated during pandemic and the educational communication has gone through a series of changes and reorientations both at the level of the didactic strategies adopted and the regulation of anxiety factors involved (the feeling of safety, the perception of break as a stress factor instead of relaxation, the volume of tasks attributed to each teacher etc).

The research variables were the pandemic context in school environment, the level of stress as perceived by the teachers and the educational communication.

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The research objectives were aimed at assessing the perception of teachers in rural areas vs. that of teachers in urban areas regarding the stress felt and the dynamics of educational communication; also comparing the stress felt by teachers and the dynamics of educational communication incumbents vs. substitutes, educators vs. teachers and teachers in rural areas vs. urban teachers.

We expect that the results of the research would have therefore a more assumed awareness from school managers of the fact that there are many predictors of stress that should no longer be ignored and that raising teacher's resilience both at personal level and academic one should become a priority. School managers should organize mindfulness courses and anxiety management courses for teachers.

Keywords: teacher anxiety, stress, educational communication, pandemic

1. Introduction

The stage of social reorganization that we face is providing a series of new phenomena and problems for the mental wellness of the individuals. A current social problem is emphasized today in the era of new reforms and technologies, which basically encourages the emerge of "occupational anxiety", and the alert aftermath have become more and more studied, both individually and collectively.

The profession of teaching is placed among jobs with a high risk of unsatisfactory response to stress, which is generated, according to some researchers, by the following: the required activity rhythm, oversteering, unclarity of tasks, advanced degree of responsibility, daily errands. Furthermore, the current social situation contributes to expanding the number of factors related to stress.

Alternatively, the educational communication was affected by the new social context the teachers had to accommodate to. General interactions (teacher-student, teacher-manager, student-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-parent) were unfolding differently in comparison to the pre-pandemic period, this time having a harassing nature for a subject occupying an educational position.

In the following article, we explored the dynamics of the factors involved in the didactic communication and we also identified the real and potential agents of stress for the working teachers and evaluate their perceptions in relation to the anxiety towards their online educational activity.

2. Literature review

Used widely, the term "anxiety" could mean the feeling of fear or tension felt by someone, which appears as a reaction to a stressful situation or a vague, unpleasant emotional state, accompanied by apprehension, maybe dread, distress and discomfort. (Reber, 1985, p.40).

Anxiety is an exaggerated mobilisation of psychic energy and is a part of the fundamental emotional reactions of a human being just as depression and grief.

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The reasons of an anxiety state for a teacher can be multiple: there can be anxiety episodes related to disease, related to the fear of being unable to cope with the profession, fear that comes from the present characteristics of society, in which uncertainty and unsafety prevails.

"Educational communication" is a complex transfer, multiple-phased between two entities (individuals or groups), which simultaneously and successively assumes roles of transmitter and receiver, signifying desirable substance in the context of educating-instructive process." (Cucuș, 1996, p. 123)

2.1. Teacher's anxiety and stress in the pandemic

In 1999, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work defines the working place stress as a reaction of physical and emotional response to the incompatibility between the tasks required and the person's capacity. Later, the answers were classified by different authors as "psychological" and "physical", "keen" and "chronic". (Cooper, 1994, p.456)

Stress is an enabler which, if not kept under control, has harmful consequences, beginning with affecting the person's health and leading to a change of life style towards a negative one. The presence of this enabler brings on the burnout syndrome – "an emotional exhaustion associated with negative attitude." (Luchian, 2010, p.33).

Teachers' anxiety can be caused by:

I. General influences, able to create stress states in a teacher's activity: working with curriculum (alteration), working amounts, preparing of materials for lessons/tests, students' discipline, an incorrect way of managing time, conflicts with co-workers, financial issues, simultaneously participation in other courses or projects.

II. Working environment: overcrowding, too many students in classes, rooms with poor light and ineffective ventilation, constant noise in classrooms, paperwork.

III. Relations with students: lack of cooperation, racial or religious problems, students' attitude towards teachers (indecent vocabulary, lack of esteem and respect).

IV. Relations with society: lack of public respect.

Working in stress conditions can lead to chronic tiredness or overwork and teachers lose their work capacity or the quality of

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enforcement. Strongly affected educators can create negative emotions and attitude in classes: sadness, lack of motivation for teaching students, guilt. This is a fact proven by many results of scientific research:

1. A teacher in Hong Kong organized a research in which 61% claimed that teaching itself is a stressing enabler (Oi-Ling, 1995).
2. In Scotland, 71% declared that their job is the cause of health and sleeping problems (Hill, 2008).
3. 85% of teachers questioned in United Kingdom claim that the excessive volume of work affected their life in a negative way, and 35% reported that the volume of daily work left them exhausted (Bubb & Earley, 2004).
4. In Canada, 15-45% expressed an excessive feeling of stress and exhaustion (Leithwood, 2006), (Lasky, 1995, p.370).

Teachers earned high amounts of stress, accompanied by anxiety, depression and sleep disorders, especially as a result of the need to teach online.

In fact, in the absence of coordination, leading and resources, many schools and teachers expressed their unease in both mass-media and streets. Within the scientific community it was pointed out that the immediate priority of the research community, in this unprecedented moment, should be the decrease of mental health-related issues and the support of teachers' wellbeing.

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic can have a long-lasting impact on teachers and teaching activity, which also affects children and teenagers.

The coronavirus pandemic has led to anxiety and lower levels of happiness for teachers. The first deadlock in March 2020 has led to the dropping of the wellbeing for school staff, according to the National Foundation for Educational Research. Anxiety has grown by autumn as Covid cases started to reach higher levels.

2.2. Educational communication

Educational communication is a process of submitting a meaning from one person to another. This process of submitting can be realized with the help of a sign system. The meaning is encrypted in the signs used for its conveying. To receive and understand the meaning

signifies to assume the signs and proceed to their decoding, according to the established rules.

In the educational communication, the message conveyed is selected and logically structured by the educator, in agreement with the syllabus, the educational purpose. Also, the educational communication takes account of the features of age and individuality of the students, a fact that allows the growth of understanding in an easy way of the message conveyed, increasing the efficiency of the whole process.

As any type of communication, this is realized between a transmitter and a receiver. In educational activity, the teacher offers the students a possibility to become themselves those transmitters and receivers. The message conveyed can be achieved verbally, or in a nonverbal or paraverbal way, with the help of different learning strategies, adapted to the intellectual stage of children, their individual features of working and group features.

As a fundamental way of engagement between teacher and students, the efficiency of didactical communication depends on the empathy of the listener/talker, on their opening towards each other, on the support granted in the act of communication, on the speakers' positive attitude, on the attentive and active listening, on creating a positive, warm and pleasant environment.

During the educational communication, the professor does not restrain only with students' communication, but goes further with parents and schoolboard.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Hypothesis:

- *The stress felt by all educators has had a higher level during the pandemic, rather than before.*
- *Educational communication has known a refocusing in the context of Covid-19 pandemic.*

3.2. Research variables:

Independent variable: *The pandemic background in the school and preschool environment.*

Dependent variables:

1. *The perception regarding the level of stress felt by the educators at school (individual perception without specific noted indicators, but also with referred ones such as correlating the tasks' volume at work with*

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preparing the educational materials, the lessons and didactical strategies used, with perceiving the break time as an anxiety factor).

2. The dynamism of educational communication (teacher-teacher/school manager, teacher-parents).

4. The research targets:

1. Assessing the countryside educators' perception vs. the one of the urban educators, regarding the stress felt and the dynamics of the educational communication.
2. The comparison of stress experienced by the educators and of the dynamics of communication in a tenured professor vs. substitute professor case, kindergarten educators vs. elementary school teachers' case and village vs. city professor case.

5. Research type

This research is a comparative one, wishing that in its final stage to be able to emphasize the differences between teachers regarding the level of stress and refocusing of the educational communication according to the kind of tuition that they cover (preschool – elementary school), the village or city setting and the quality of learning (tenured or substitute).

6. The research development

The surveys were applied to a number of 230 educators, in both preschool and elementary school, tenured or substitutes, of both genders, with an age between 20 and 60 years, who develop their activity both in cities and in villages. 102 teachers work in villages which represents 44% of the total educator's number who answered the survey, and 56% work in city environment.

As for their position, 152 work in preschool (66%) and 78 work in elementary school (34%). Also, from another point of view, 174 are tenured professors (76%) and only 56 are qualified substitute teachers (24%).

To be able to identify the factors that have led to a growth of anxiety among educators, we realized the comparison of certain indicators in the times before and during the pandemic.

7. Analysis and interpretation of the research data

By comparing the activity of educators and teachers before and during the pandemic, after completing surveys, we have collected the following data:

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The first question of the survey, *"Do you consider that during the pandemic, the amount of stress experienced at work was higher than before?"*, meant to reveal the opinions of teachers regarding the stress at the working place before and during the pandemic. If before the pandemic only 26% of educators considered their jobs to be challenging, after it's beginning, the percentage of those who felt pressure at work has risen up to 42%. As for the educators, before the pandemic only 56% considered that their job was demanding, and throughout, their percentage has risen up to 87%.

For the second question *"Was the volume of tasks to complete reduced before the pandemic or is it reduced throughout?"* – the number of educators and teachers considered that the volume of work has modified. For teachers, before the pandemic only 26% considered the work volume to be increased, and during the pandemic, 32% consider so. Also, the number of educators to believe such a thing has risen from 51% to 68%.

The third question of the survey, *"The working program was convenient before the pandemic/is convenient during the pandemic?"*, has addressed the way in which the perspective of professors over the working schedule has changed in throughout the pandemic, which led to a significant growth of pression. After analysing the results, we could notice that most educators (53%) and teachers (30%) have considered more appropriate the working program prior the pandemic rather that the current one.

At the fourth question, *"Were the class inspections more demanding, in terms of preparing the materials, before or during the pandemic?"*, most of the teachers (20%) and most of educators (45%) consider the class inspections performed before the pandemic more demanding than those performed throughout.

The fifth item of the survey, *"Did the school you teach at make available and encourage the use of modern technological means in organizing and conducting the educational-instructive process before the pandemic/was it prepared for moving in online and has been having a qualifying platform since the beginning of it?"*, pursued finding out the opinion of professors regarding the organizational and technological support provided by the schoolboard. Therefore, of those questioned, most of educators (62%) and 32% of the teachers considered that school

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supported them to use technological means and made available for them what was necessary before the pandemic. As for the pandemic period, most of the teachers (37%) and educators (45%) consider that their school was already prepared to begin online lessons and this fact did not contribute to the growth of pressure in the life of Romanian teachers.

For the sixth question, *"Were the breaks between classes a means to relax before/during the pandemic?"* – prior pandemic, teachers of elementary school (36%) thought that breaks were a way to relax, while teachers of preschool thought the breaks to be a source of anxiety, because they did not have breaks between activities. As for the pandemic period, the number of teachers who considered the break an anxiety factor has significantly risen – from 12% to 32%, such as the number of educators from 22% to 51%. The seventh item of the survey, *"Did I have support from my superiors before/during the pandemic?"*, showed the communication between teachers and their superiors/headmasters. If before, only 32% of teachers could say that there was a good communication, for the pandemic period there were 36% who could confirm. As for educators, in the period before, 57% had an efficient communication with their headmasters, while in the pandemic, 63% could confirm. As for the 8th question, *"Was the communication with parents efficient before/during the pandemic?"*, professors from elementary school (41%) and preschool (73%) considered that their communication with parents was reliable before the pandemic. Due to the changes the pandemic period brought, a good part of the questioned educators (52%) have encountered problems in communicating effectively with parents.

The 9th item of the survey, *"Were the didactical strategies easy to prepare before/during the pandemic?"*, pursued the way teachers felt this aspect as a stress component. 37% of teachers and 16% of educators told us that before the pandemic, the didactical strategies were much easier to arrange, whereas during, only 15% of teachers and 52% of educators are facing difficulties in preparing the adequate strategies for physical or online courses.

At the 10th item, *"Did you feel safe concerning your health at your job before/during the pandemic?"*, 68% of educators and 43% of teachers affirmed that they did not feel stressed about the safety of their

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health at the job. The changes occurred in society in the last years have made a significant number of questioned professors (57% of educators and 25% of teachers) to feel a particular pressure regarding the safety of their health.

For the item 11, *"Do you consider you could/can assure a safety of health for your students before/during the pandemic?"*, most of the elementary school professors (41%) and preschool (63%) considered that the assurance of the feeling of safety regarding the health of their students did not cause them stress. Now, 17% of teachers and 41% of educators consider this aspect a stress-causing one.

Comparing the activity of professors who practice in a city environment (128) with those who practice in a rural environment (102) from before the pandemic and throughout, we gathered the following results: as for stress felt at the job, 72% of the teachers who work in cities and 86% who work in villages answered that their job has become more demanding during the pandemic.

For both categories, the volume of tasks was high both before and during the pandemic. For before, 50% of the professors in cities and 51% in villages consider that the volume of tasks has risen, and for the pandemic period, 57% from cities and 67% from villages think so, which has led to a certain growth.

Following the way, the professors in cities and villages were affected by their working schedule, we noticed that the professors in cities felt that their program before the pandemic (55%) was an accessible one, and during the pandemic 45% did not feel the stress brought by the changes occurred. As for the professors in villages, for 54% the schedule was more convenient before the pandemic, while throughout only a part of them (43%) felt the schedule was not a stress factor.

As for the stress brought by preparing materials for conducting class inspections, most of the professors from cities (30%) thought the inspections performed during the pandemic were more challenging. As for the professors in villages, most of them (39%) thought the preparation of materials for those inspections were more challenging before the pandemic rather than now, of which only 33% think so.

Regarding the organizational and technological support provided by the schoolboard, most of the professors from cities have

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received support both before (57%) and during the pandemic (58%) as to the use of technological means and receiving necessities. Professors from villages think they have the organizational and technological support both before (54%) and during the pandemic (55%).

If before the pandemic, city teachers (43%) considered the break a way to relax, during the pandemic only 34% think so. On the other hand, the professors in villages (53%) think that before the pandemic, break was a way to relax, and during it only 24% of them have kept the same opinion.

Regarding the point of schoolboard support, both city (54%) and village professors (62%) believe that they received support both in the time prior the pandemic and during it (44% city and 63% village), without establishing a stress factor.

If before, city professors (57%) and village professors (78%) have had an effective communication with parents, during the pandemic, in cities, only 41% have managed to keep it that way, as most of the village ones (54%) have considered it to be effective.

Another stress factor for teachers in elementary school is portrayed by the preparation of didactic strategies. If city teachers (54%) thought that this preparation did not constitute a stress causing factor before, during the pandemic only 34% have kept the same opinion. As for the village teachers, the preparation did not represent a form of pressure before (68%), whilst during the pandemic 32% believe it did.

Formerly, most of the city teachers (61%) and village teachers (76%) believed that they did not feel stress in terms at their working place in terms of safety of the health. Pandemic has brought with itself a series of restrictions, so that a part of village (52%) and city teachers (57%) have begun feeling anxiety about the safety of their health.

Before, most of the city teachers (60%) and village ones (76%) believed that the assurance of safety in students' health was not a pressure factor. During, most of the professors teaching in cities (25%) and villages (30%) do not feel pressure concerning the assurance of a safety feeling for students.

Comparing the activity of full didactic teachers and substitutes in the time before the pandemic and during it, as a result of the survey's application we have noted the following:

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After analysing the survey, we could note that 61% of the full teachers and 34% of the substitutes believe their working place was demanding before the pandemic. After its debut, the number of teachers who believe their job has become more stressful has grown to 87% among full and 80% among substitutes.

Most of teachers (54% full and 41% substitutes) believe that the volume of tasks was not a low one before the pandemic, as for now, 64% of full and 55% of substitutes consider that the volume has risen, which has led to the emerge of pressure among them.

As for the stress felt with the change of the working schedule, most of the tenured teachers (53%) and most of substitutes (59%) thought that the schedule was more convenient before the pandemic. It is noted a slight modification among those who consider the program a stress causing factor during the pandemic: 37% of tenured teachers and 36% of the substitutes.

For the stress felt in preparation of didactic materials for the inspections, changes have been observed especially among the tenured teachers. Therefore, if before the pandemic, 47% of them thought the class inspection to be demanding for the preparation of materials, only 37% of them have felt the stress of this action during the pandemic. For the substitutes, the percentage has remained the same: 32%.

If before the pandemic, school provided technological and organisational support for both tenured (61%) and substitutes (64%), during the pandemic, teachers (30% tenured and 18% substitutes) did not receive that support, which has led to a significant rise of stress in the romanian teacher's life.

Following the interpretation of the next item, we discovered that 45% of tenured and 54% of substitute teachers believed that the school break was a mean to relax before the pandemic, and now 58% of the tenured and 45% of the substitutes think that this has become a stress causing factor.

As for the communication between teachers and headmasters, most of the tenured (57%, respectively 64%) and substitutes (63%, respectively 64%) consider that the communication with the schoolboard was a qualitative one.

Figure 28. Teacher-principal communication

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The communication between professors and parents has suffered alterations with the appearance of the pandemic. Therefore, in the period before 76% of tenured and 75% of substitutes have considered it to be effective, while now only 54% of tenured and 50% of substitutes believe they have an effective communication with the parents, which has also led to stress among teachers.

Before the pandemic, 63% of the tenured teachers have agreed with the fact that didactical strategies were easy to prepare, as for the 75% of the substitutes. For the pandemic period, tenured teachers feel the changes more accurately than the substitutes. 51% of tenured and 41% of substitutes said that the didactic strategies were hard to prepare.

Before the pandemic, 70% of full teachers and 86% of substitute teachers believed they did not feel stress regarding the safety of their health at the working place. The changes occurred in the last years have led to altering the teachers' opinion. Therefore, most of the tenured (59%) and substitutes (48%) have felt the impact of the pandemic over the feeling of safety of the health.

Before the pandemic, most of the tenured teachers (66%) and most of the substitutes (75%) thought that assuring of the feeling of safe health for the students did not represent a stress factor. As for the pandemic period, 44% of the tenured and 36% of the substitutes feel stress regarding the feeling of safety of health for students.

The educational communication has known a refocusing during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the stress resented by the teachers has had a higher impact in the pandemic period than before.

Regardless of the classifying of teachers that we made (tenured vs. substitutes, educators vs. teachers, city vs. village professors), still the changes experienced are similar and the level of pressure has risen for every category.

Looking up close to the obtained results, we can easily note the fact that between professors and schoolboards, communication has improved and existed a certain support and help from the last in organizing online activities and providing the technology needed for a good conducting of classes.

If between teachers was noted a tighter relationship, we can sadly observe that the task to communicate with parents was weighed down in the pandemic period. Most of the professors have felt the

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consequences of the pandemic in relation with parents, which has led to the emerge of pressure among them and an alarming rise of the anxiety.

As for communicating with students and preparing the materials and didactic strategies for sustaining activities, we could observe that teachers gathered in those six categories have felt a high level of stress with the pandemic and with installation of the safety measures.

The rising of stress level among professors is not only because of the change of the educational communication's orientation, but because of other factors that influenced directly or indirectly the lives of teachers.

Thus, with the appearance of Covid-19 pandemic, the volume of tasks that teachers had to complete has risen, leading to the emerge of high pressure and anxiety in the professional life.

Furthermore, professors have come to consider the working schedule a burdensome one because of the breaks that have become an anxiety factor instead of a mean to relax, because of the fear regarding the safety of health, but also because of the inability to ensure all the precaution methods necessary to make students feel safe at school.

As for the demand determined by the class inspections, teachers of elementary and preschool did not fell stress, but it was easier for them to prepare what was necessary for sustaining the activities.

Hence, if before the pandemic teachers believed that the mentioned factors did not influence them and did not contribute to the growth of the stress and anxiety level, the pandemic situation influenced their experience and led to an alarming increase of their anxiety.

8. Conclusions

Amid those constant changes, the Romanian professor must find alone, in most cases, the way to diminish the level of stress and must be able to break through the challenges of the contemporary world.

Although the pandemic has led to a good cooperation between teachers and headmasters, still this must not cease with the removal of restrictions and the return to the life we once knew.

Communication with parents represent a real challenge for every teacher, regardless of the pandemic burdens that they experience; anxiety and stress were well managed by the elementary school and

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preschool teachers and did not affect the educational communication with parents.

This research could be valued for the sake of proposing some anxiety management and mindfulness courses for teachers, to help them strengthen their emotional resiliency and the one at school just as such.

The contemporary world's challenges do not resume to the Covid-19 pandemic, they go on with the war in Ukraine, so that the concern for the personal and familial safety does not end with the pandemic. Therefore, such courses are welcomed so that stress, anxiety, fear, awe and other emotions and negative feelings be managed more efficiently and the teachers be able to continue their work in more optimal conditions, by increasing both the individual, social resilience and the one in the professional environment.

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