

An Exploratory Probe of Burnout Syndrome in the Special Education Profession

Mgr. Lukáš Stárek^{1*}, Jarmila Klugerová²

^{1,2}Czech University of Life Sciences Prague - Institute of Education and Communication, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

The promotion of mental health, not only in teaching staff, is one of the new issues of great contemporary relevance. The present text presents findings on an aspect of burnout syndrome, specifically in the position of special educators.

As part of the research strategy, a qualitative research technique was used, specifically the interview tool. The structure of the interview was prepared in advance and based on the areas that lead to answering the research objective. The goal of the research probe was to find out and describe the aspects that affect the psychological and physical aspects of special educators. And further, do special educators have a predisposition to burnout within their helping profession. Within the group of respondents, it was a targeted selection of people, specifically 15 special educators who have professional experience, but the primary core of the selection was general experience with burnout syndrome. Working with children with special educational needs and inclusive tendencies is all the more difficult because it requires constant intensive contact, individual approach, engagement and maximum involvement of special educators. Very often, however, the right feedback does not appear, in the form of achieved learning results, and the effort to pass on one's knowledge, skills and values does not meet with the response it needs. This is one of the main reasons why burnout occurs more often in special education teachers than in other occupations.

Keywords: burnout syndrome, educator, profession, sociological probe

INTRODUCTION

The character of special pedagogy as a helping profession is primarily given by the professional interest of this pedagogical-scientific field in individuals with a disadvantage or disability, where the humanistic orientation is based on the need to help other people and on the emphasis on respecting the individual needs of the given person. The field of special education is relatively young. Special education was not recognized as a field until the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. It was only in the middle of the 20th century that the field began to resemble the field as we know it today. That is why new questions are constantly being asked and new findings are coming to light, which are important for a better understanding and help for children and all people with disabilities or with special educational needs.

Special pedagogy is a discipline oriented towards upbringing, education and overall personality development of a disadvantaged person with the aim of achieving the highest possible degree of his social integration, including work and social opportunities and application (Slowík, 2016).

The interest of this field is primarily focused on people whose life situation is affected by some disadvantage and who needs professional intervention and appropriate support in their social existence (Slowík, 2016). A special pedagogue works not only with a handicapped individual, but also with his family, because a functional family environment is extremely important for a person with a disability and is never completely replaceable.

The terms upbringing and education are often still associated with children and teenagers, but current special pedagogy tries to pay just as much attention to working-age adults and seniors. In this context, special andragogy and gerontology are discussed (Oriešėiková, 2015).

As can be seen from the text above, special pedagogy in itself is characterized by a character that places it among the helping professions. This fact is linked to the fact that it deals with helping individuals with various disadvantages, supporting their personal development and optimal socialization, and not only under difficult conditions. Help or support in this context is not tied to the individual as such, but also to his surroundings or environment.

Corresponding Author e-mail: starekl@ivp.czu.cz

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6068-215X

How to cite this article: Stárek L, Klugerová J. An Exploratory Probe of Burnout Syndrome in the Special Education Profession, Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2025, 27-38

Source of support: Nil.

Conflicts of Interest: None.

DOI: 10.47750/pegegog.15.01.03

Received: 11.02.2024

Accepted: 13.07.2022

Published : 01.01.2025

Just as in the general level of helping professions, so also in the level of special pedagogy, thus also pedagogy, various requirements are set within the profession and certain prerequisites are expected. In order for a person to be able to practice the profession of a special pedagogue, a certain qualification level is expected of him, but also certain characteristics, skills and abilities that a person should be equipped with for his profession and are generally linked or connected to his personality.

Addressing the issue of burnout in teachers is important not only to help concurrent teachers. Finding the causes and preventing burnout is also important for the next generation of teachers who often leave education early.

The main problem that employers need to address is that of teachers leaving the profession. While young teachers do enter schools, many leave after a relatively short period of time - usually during their second year of practice (Švancar, 2017).

This issue is not unique to the Czech Republic. For example, a 2016 Australian study (Arnup, 2016) found that only 23% of teachers surveyed planned to continue teaching until retirement. Almost 32% of respondents said they planned to leave the teaching profession and 53% of teachers said they planned to stay in teaching for no more than ten years.

It is important to note that burnout not only has dire consequences for the person of the teacher, but that this situation inevitably reflects on the quality of teaching and on the teacher's relationship with students. We should bear this context in mind when we consider the importance of preventing burnout.

The profession of special education teacher should be based on the professional performance of individual teachers who carry out their work with experience, conscientiousness, respect and empathy, and who not only educate but also nurture their students and pupils. They motivate them to learn and to perform. They set an example in developing and reinforcing moral values and attitudes. Their work should be a life mission that can fulfill their life purpose, ambition, and personal direction,

career success ... (Kucharská, Mrázková, Wolfová, & Tomická, 2013). The issue of inclusive education for children with special needs and generally working with pupils who need support is an increasingly debated and acute topic, and the demands of the profession are, without doubt, very high. And to teach effectively, it is necessary to be attentive, successful in problem solving, proficient in subject methodologies and their application to the specific needs of pupils, as well as the ability to communicate with children, and especially with parents or other family members. The difference

between regular classroom teachers and special educators is their knowledge, experience and other skills, including at least the basics of special education. School experience has amply demonstrated that teachers in mainstream classrooms can hardly do without at least elementary special education knowledge and skills in their approach to pupils with learning support needs (Slowik, 2022).

The importance of the teaching profession in the context of the number of children/pupils/students in the Czech Republic. A total of 1,049,723 pupils will participate in primary education in the Czech Republic in the school year 2022/2023, the highest number in the last ten years. In ten years, the number of pupils in primary education has increased by almost a quarter (23.7%), including an 8.5% increase in the last five years. In addition to teaching assistants, special educators, at 742.6 FTE, and special psychologists, at 433 FTE, were also working in primary schools in 2022 (Czech Statistical Office, online).

Although, we can support Daňek and Klugerová (2023) thought who recognise inclusive education as tool of social exclusion.

RESEARCH OF THE ISSUE

With regard to the topicality of the issue, we can present several different researches that have been carried out in recent years and tell about the situation in the whole Czech Republic. From the literature on burnout syndrome and from research studies, it is evident that there are many factors that influence this disease or contribute to its developing process. Similarly, the facts leading to information on this topic are based on several specific areas such as gender issues, length of experience, age of workers, educational attainment, environment, collegial relationships, type of institution in which the individual is employed (e.g., whether it is the public or private sector), and perspectives examining burnout syndrome in the Czech Republic or abroad. „Research into the nature of burnout is closely related to research in the philosophical-psychological and psychological-medical fields“ (Ponížilová, Urbanovská, 2013).

The aim of Smetacková's (2020) research was not only to map the burnout rate among teachers, but mainly to find out what burnout is associated with and how to prevent it. The research had two parts. In the first one, burnout rates, self-efficacy, coping strategies and other professional and personal characteristics of teachers were measured using a questionnaire. The questionnaire involved 2394 primary school teachers from all over the Czech Republic. Of these, 85% were women and 15% were men. Teachers working at the first level were 41%, 36% at the second level and 23% taught at both levels of primary school. The proportion of women and

men and the proportion of teachers at the first and second level in the research population corresponds to the real situation in the entire teacher population. The second part of the research was conducted in the form of case studies in twelve selected primary schools. 60% of the teachers reported feeling under long-term stress, 48% of the respondents felt threatened by burnout. Somewhat worse results were then shown by a questionnaire using the so-called Shirom-Melamed burnout scale. Based on the total score on the scale, the teachers were divided into three groups. In the first group, representing 16% of the respondents, no symptoms of burnout were present. Then 65% had only mild symptoms of burnout present and 19% of the respondents had moderate to severe symptoms of burnout. The research also showed the importance of job satisfaction. Teachers who are more satisfied with their jobs have fewer manifestations of burnout. Similarly, social support, especially at the level of collegial relationships, has a positive effect on burnout rates. Therefore, the message for school management, responsible institutions, professional researchers and the teaching community should be to focus attention on training functional stress management strategies, promoting the climate in teaching teams and sharing professional experiences among teachers (for example, through supervision and interviews) (Smetáčková, 2020).

The incidence of burnout syndrome has long been investigated by the research team of the Psychiatric Clinic of the First Faculty of Medicine of Charles University and the University Hospital of Veterinary Medicine led by Radek Ptáček, professor of medical psychology. The Czech population has been monitored since 2014, which makes their work one of the longest-lasting researches not only in the Czech Republic. In that year, 19.7% of respondents reported a mild form of burnout syndrome, 23% had severe symptoms and 4.5% had very severe symptoms. Six years later, 23.3% reported mild symptoms, 16.3% reported severe symptoms and 2.9% reported very severe symptoms. In the May survey of the same year, one fifth of people reported mild symptoms, 18.8% reported severe symptoms and almost 6.6% reported very severe symptoms (Ptáček, Raboch, Kebza, Šolcová, 2017).

The ability to separate work responsibilities from leisure time activities is seen by Ptáček, Vňuková, Raboch, Smetáčková, (2018) as one of the most significant influences on the development of burnout syndrome in the teaching profession. In 2018, a study was conducted by Ptáček et al. with a research pool of 2,394 teachers. Of these, a total of 53.2% agreed with the statement that the job of a teacher is a source of long-term stress that leads to burnout. And as many as 15.2% of the teachers suffer from depression.

In Freiburg, Germany, a survey was conducted in 2019 (by the psychosomatic department of the university clinic) among teachers in local schools, and it was found that about 60-70% of all teachers show signs of recurrent stress, of which 30% of those surveyed developed burnout syndrome, i.e. physical and mental exhaustion (Čapek et al., 2021).

In the present study, the manifestations of burnout syndrome in school and university professors living in the city of Arequipa were analyzed comparatively. A total of 413 intentionally selected professors were evaluated, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory was applied. It yielded adequate levels of reliability for our sample and three factors obtained through confirmatory factorial analysis. It was found that there are significant differences in terms of sex, marital status and teaching level of teachers, resulting in higher levels of exhaustion for female teachers at school level and moderate levels of depersonalization for university teachers, in whom negative correlations were obtained regarding the number of children and the burnout syndrome (Arias, Huamani, Ceballos, 2019).

Research brings professionally interesting results Jovanović, Karić, Mihajlović, Džamonja-Ignjatović, Hinić (2019) The aim of this research was to examine the levels of burnout syndrome dimensions in special education teachers and correlations with some socio-demographic characteristics, job characteristics, and levels of assertiveness. The research included 225 special education teachers from Serbia (82% were women, 18% were men, with the average age of 42.51 ± 9.23 years). Research instruments included Maslach Burnout Inventory, Rathus Assertiveness Schedule, and a socio-demographic questionnaire. There were differences in all burnout dimensions in relation to types of students' special needs. Higher levels of burnout symptoms were observed in teachers working with children with motor skill disorders. The assertiveness scores had a significant negative correlation with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, and a positive correlation with a lack of accomplishment. The results obtained may help in the planning of the adequate preventative measures for improving the mental health of those professionals.

RISK FACTORS

The risk factors leading to burnout syndrome can be viewed in terms of personality, the non-work sphere and situational factors in the workplace. These all apply to teachers as well as other people working outside education. So what is specific to the teaching profession in terms of the risk of burnout?

The teaching profession fulfils all the components of the risk factors for burnout syndrome. Excessive demands are

placed on teachers in terms of their performance. Kebza and Šolcová (2003) point out that the very basic characteristic of the work activity that can lead to burnout is not only working with people, but also the constant and uncompromisingly enforced demand for high, unwavering performance, which is considered to be the standard, completely without exceptions, without the possibility of relief and with serious consequences in case of non-compliance. Teachers have a high personal responsibility for the quality of their work. At the same time, they have less autonomy in their work activities and are chronically exposed to stressors. It is relatively easy for a teacher to begin to question his or her own beliefs about the success and meaningfulness of the work they do.

Poschkamp (2013) draws attention to a specific relational structure that is often emphasized by the teaching profession. This is the relationship with clients, which in the case of teachers are students and parents. Characteristic of this structure is:

- the dependence of clients on the professional;
- an emotionally burdensome relational context;
- simultaneous expectations of expertise and personal interest in the client's problems.

Social factors - as the school is part of society, current opinions and events are reflected in it. It is a kind of mirror of the social system. For example, changes in the development of the family, its frequent breakups, are visible. Parents often shift the responsibility for education to different institutions (schools or leisure organizations). Teachers are often called responsible for errors in education, and it is forgotten that the educational foundation is provided by the family and further developed by cooperation with the school. The problem with schools is also that there is essentially no educational consensus that applies to all social groups. The diversity of parents, in terms of opinions, attitudes, beliefs and ideas about boundaries, or different educational styles can be quite complicated for school education.

Other risk factors for pedagogy, according to Švamberk-Šauerová (2018), are little social recognition, possibly low salary, which are also accompanied by the already mentioned high expectations for work performance. The lack of resources (personnel, equipment, further education, etc.) is usually also problematic, which often leads to drastic organizational interventions that often collide with the pedagogical self-concept. Society often tends to have a negative view of teachers without seeing the difficulties of the teaching profession. The public often sees „pros“, such as powers, long vacations, status. However, the teachers themselves would see these factors more critically.

Institutional factors - a substantial part of the institutional source of stress is also the quality of preparation for the teaching profession and the issue of continuing teacher education. The future teacher is still being prepared for his profession as a mediator of knowledge, he is not prepared to solve crisis situations, he does not have enough information to work with pupils with specific needs, he often does not have the necessary communication skills to adapt to the various target groups with whom he comes into contact. In recent years, there have been some changes in the teaching profession. At all levels of the education system, there is a struggle for students that is linked to finances. With this, the demands on teaching staff are increased in terms of qualification, performance, use of modern interactive and didactic techniques and the application of new didactic procedures.

Currently, stress is also contributing to the increase in the number of pupils with specific educational needs. This fact mainly affects teachers from so-called socially risky schools (Švamberk-Šauerová, 2018). Teachers are also burdened by the fact that they do not have the opportunity to rest during working hours. Even during the breaks between classes, they often supervise the students and generally have to be on their toes, as they have a lot of responsibility. Even the lesson limit itself can be burdensome, as it does not allow for a flexible response to the current situation or the needs of pupils (Poschkamp, 2013). A noisy environment, which teachers cannot avoid, is not favorable either.

Individual factors - the aforementioned risk factors of burnout refer to the external area. Švancar (2017) also draws attention to the internal area - specifically, personality characteristics. He points out that teachers are often chosen by altruistically oriented people, with a desire to help, who are emotionally involved in their work and take it home with them in their heads. This can then be a factor that increases the risk of burnout.

Subcategorization of stressors:

Parents - the relationship between teacher and parent depends on social disrespect for the profession. Inadequate demands, non-involvement of parents. Busyness or excessive benevolence of parents in raising their children. Prejudices on the part of parents and the general public towards the teaching profession.

An excessive amount of work and tasks to handle.

Time – lack of time, time pressure, influenced by the lack of qualified teaching staff and the over-limit number of pupils

in classes; bureaucratic system and the administrative burden associated with it in the form of completed reports, forms, schedules, tables, etc. Compliance with teaching standards and norms, curriculum, supervision in the corridors, school events, minimum time for rest and relaxation. Employees are too busy with work problems to allow themselves to relax (Čapek et al., 2021).

Collegial relations - unfair relations and practices; difference in values, poor communication, different opinions, conflictual relationships, displays of hostility, lack of cooperation and willingness to help other colleagues, struggle for power, competitiveness, hostility leading to the humiliation of weaker and more sensitive colleagues, disagreements in the intergenerational team. The most satisfied are teachers who consider the overall relationships in the choir to be positive and at the same time have friendly relationships with several colleagues (Smetáčková et al. 2020).

Education and school system - changes based on legislation in education; the organization and structure of the educational system and schools, new educational reforms, involvement in projects, employment of assistants within the framework of much-discussed inclusion, job insecurity, instability on the labor market, fear of job loss (Bártová, 2011).

School climate - without a positive climate, the school cannot function effectively, the school environment plays a significant role here (school equipment, aesthetics, security, lighting, etc.), which should have a positive effect on the activities of the staff; the key function is the management of the school – the director's professional but also humane approach, support of his employees, motivation, respect, tolerance. Of course, the school climate is primarily influenced by the leadership, but without the involvement of the staff, even the best ideas will not take off (Šmejkal in Čapek, 2021). Unsupportive and uncaring management carries with it the risk that the burden on teachers will increase (Smetáčková, 2020). Positive interpersonal and social relationships based on communication, values, rules, school rules, etc., are all ways to work well-being, a „healthy“ atmosphere, a sense of security, which at the same time eliminate the student's school failures and problems with learning or behavior.

Evaluation - insufficient financial and social evaluation; there should be adequate reward for a job well done. It should definitely be financial, but recognition, praise, or „just“ thanks count as feedback as well. Expressing gratitude for an activity that takes a lot of effort can have a big effect on mental health.

Pupils - problems associated with education, indiscipline and lack of interest in education arise from the relationship

between children and parents, their way of education in the family and access to education. A negative and dismissive view of the learning process is increasingly common among pupils. And when there are more such students in the class, it greatly complicates the teacher's efforts. It is difficult to do quality work in such a collective, where hostility, indifference, and unwillingness to get involved are felt.

Education - pressure on teaching staff from management to expand qualifications (professional growth), in the form of various educational events, courses and training to acquire additional professional competence. A pedagogical worker has the obligation to further educate, deepen, renew and supplement his qualifications during his teaching activity, i.e. even after graduation, we are talking about so-called continuous education.

Self-evaluation - based on the approach to oneself. More sensitive teachers are more prone to accept their positive qualities and abilities. Low self-esteem, exaggerated demands, a certain attachment to one's person, feelings of inferiority and doubts about one's qualities. This negatively affects the psyche and reduces the amount of psychic energy.

It may seem that the teaching profession is full of pitfalls and stress that lead to overload, burnout, negative relationships, problems with students and, moreover, without adequate reward. These individual components, which are listed here, are causes leading to burnout syndrome, but they are certainly not a common characteristic of the teaching profession. It depends on the personality of each teacher, on his character traits, resilience, but also on what he expects from this role. In every teaching staff there are individuals who are difficult to work with. They can't use the experience they have enough. They are insecure, passive, without their own opinion, unwilling to admit a mistake. Or they are timid, shy in communicating with colleagues, etc. On the other hand, teachers are active, willing to share their experiences. They get advice, admit their own mistakes, and their work shows progress on the part of the children, which is their main goal (Kucharská, Mrázková, Wolfová, & Tomická, 2013). Supporting teachers in the acquisition of their professional competences and general pedagogical confidence is an area that requires attention and can significantly contribute to the improvement of the pedagogical process and teacher satisfaction. Even directors and their representatives can be unsupportive, unfriendly, inactive, unwilling to listen, help or reach a compromise. On the other hand, it is an inspiring leadership, willing to understand, look for solutions, effectively plan and organize and, above all, appreciate the completed tasks of its employees. This leads to friendly, or at least respectful, relationships and to the good functioning of the entire school institution (Čapek et al., 2021).

PREVENTION AND ELIMINATION OF BURNOUT SYNDROME IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

All occupations that people perform throughout their lives have one thing in common. Ensuring the material conditions for one's own life, or for the life of other people, mainly one's immediate family. And to perform any activity, physical or mental, suitable conditions are needed. The quality of work and the satisfaction of the needs of others, but above all of one's own, depend on this (Bedrnová, 1999). And sometimes a person succeeds in taking care of others, but forgets to take responsibility for himself and his own meaningful life (Venglářová, 2011).

Sharing with other people is essential and important, but it should not be at the expense of your own well-being. We must put ourselves first, take care of ourselves and get rid of the misconception that it is selfish (Leblanc, 2021).

To effectively and permanently prevent burnout or to overcome this syndrome, it is not so important what one is doing wrong; it is important to know how to protect yourself, get calm and strengthen yourself (Poschkamp, 2013). And as Kebza and Šolcová (2003) state, it is easier to prevent the negative consequences of work stress than to eliminate them.

Early recognition of the symptoms of burnout syndrome is also the best prerequisite for treatment or its removal. It should be in the interest of all directors of school facilities to prevent their employees from situations that cause stress, tension, feelings of insecurity and threats, which leads not only to other health problems, but also affects the overall performance of the employee, leading to a decrease in work commitment and commitment, loss of interest, frequent absences and other circumstances that have a negative impact on the functioning of the entire institution. There are so many options these days, and education and awareness targeting teachers facing emotional and physical stress is a top priority.

It is an important task for employers and managers to look after the welfare of employees, but only they themselves can ensure that they receive exactly the kind of support that is most appropriate for them and their work situation (Hawkins, Shohet, 2004). Employees themselves should focus on their personal development, devoting time and interest to attributes that prevent and face the risks associated with stress. They should set certain priorities and, above all, achieve knowledge that will benefit them and protect them from stressful stimuli in the demanding conditions of the school environment. Of course, there is a big difference between theoretical knowledge and the practical side. This is often much more intense and difficult, so it is an effective means to set at least a few principles that act as prevention against burnout and have

a beneficial effect on human health and overall quality of life.

The acquisition of basic procedures and strategies for evaluating stressful situations and managing stress, as well as adjusting lifestyle, daily routine and overall lifestyle, appear to be a necessary prerequisite for the successful prevention of burnout syndrome (Kebza, Šolcová, 2003).

It seems quite simple, but the opposite is true. Many people do not admit problems and certainly do not follow the principles, or they underestimate them. They push their imaginary boundaries. They only admit that such boundaries exist in the case of the first physical symptoms. And awareness of psychological difficulties takes even longer. And that the trigger of their problems is themselves, because they treat each other with disrespect, accept with great resentment (Prieß, 2015).

According to Nešpor (webinar, 2023), the first and timely measure is a change of priorities. People easily succumb to their habits and habits and it doesn't even occur to them that something is wrong with them. If we start with small changes that we will think about and try to include in our busy life, which must start taking responsibility, the perception of ourselves will improve. To stand face to face with dogmas that subconsciously but very significantly influence behavior, attitudes and approach to life and limit it in a fundamental way (Nürnberg, 2011).

The techniques that make life easier are basically simple. Nešpor (2023) called them relaxation techniques, and few will probably be surprised that they act as part of the prevention not only of burnout, but of many other diseases, to strengthen immunity and muscles, they break down substances released during stress, moderate negative emotions, have a beneficial effect on the psyche and anxiety and other strong emotions can thus be alleviated. Nešpor (2023) includes in these relaxation techniques: movement (some exercises, for example yoga, tai chi and physiotherapy exercises); laughter (gaiety and humor); calm diaphragmatic breathing; sleep; good relationships (they increase resistance to stress and are a source of positive emotions); healthy emotions (for example, kindness, warmth); soothing environment and company and relaxation (especially after physical activity).

There are many other options based on the principles of mental hygiene. Most of them belong to the completely trivial and really simple tools for managing stress attacks and subsequent difficulties. But, as Poschkamp says: „Getting rid of habits, ways of behaving and values and replacing them with healthy attitudes and ways of behaving takes time and persistent training“ (Poschkamp, 2013, p. 82).

Sufficient quality sleep and rest, compliance with the basic rules of a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet, regular physical activity, respect for one's own needs, enough time

for one's interests and hobbies, fairly divided activities (i.e. those we engage in in private life), these are the most basic, most rational stimuli that are guaranteed to work together with warm family relationships, at least stable, functioning workplace relationships, and a few good friends that we can rely on and turn to at any time.

All these factors that if followed, developed, guided and often aware of, can protect us from burnout. There are more methods available to help with burnout. And including them, as part of prevention, in your schedules is beneficial and effective for both teachers and their students. Because everything else develops following a comfortable mental relationship (webinar: Mlátílková, 2023; webinar: Dobešová, 2023). And the cantors themselves, as well as their superiors and the entire school system, should realize this. The starting point for the prevention of burnout would be stress management training already during preparation for the future profession and collegial case counseling as part of the work, as is already the case with social professions. Having satisfied employees who enjoy and fulfill work with children should be the number one priority.

Another possible tool in the prevention of burnout is supervision. It is a method aimed at the development and support of workers, in our case in the Ministry of Education. It is oriented towards the improvement of working conditions, school climate, relations between colleagues and other factors related to the working environment. It focuses on how to help individuals or groups clarify certain inconsistencies, analyze established procedures and methods, define more modern and effective strategies and look for new possibilities that lead to better work quality and a positive attitude towards others, pupils and themselves (Konečná in Starek et al., 2021).

With various specific techniques, supervision helps us find the lost balance, recognize the symptoms of burnout, advises how to defend oneself effectively, or how to avoid mistakes, or to learn from previous ones. Communicate with each other or listen to the opinion of others. An experienced supervisor „stimulates the client to change attitudes“ (Konečná in Stárek et al., 2021). To think and reflect on your actions. How to actively overcome obstacles, both internal obstacles and those related to the work environment (Hawkins, Shohet, 2004).

Providing supervision in school facilities is one of the key activities of a number of organizations and departments, including the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. Implementation of effective and innovative procedures from the system that will increase the professionalism of care. As part of prevention, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic issued a „Methodical instruction for the provision of supervision“, the purpose of which is to establish a procedure for applying

supervision, adapted to all employees who need professional help and support in their efforts to provide children and pupils with the best care and thereby prevent or reduce the risks of burnout syndrome.

As the attitude is set in relation to the students, as stated by (Němejč, Smékalová, Kříž, 2019) “teaching aids have become a standard part of the educational process and their appropriate integration into education provides countless opportunities for both teachers and students, from activation of students, their better motivation to learn, more illustrative explanation of the curriculum through demonstrations, and many others” we should also think in the context of the pedagogues themselves and provide them with a wide range of possibilities in development and mental hygiene.

EXPLORATION PROBE

The main goal of the research probe is to find out and describe the aspects that affect the psychological and physical aspects of special educators. And further to find out whether special educators have prerequisites for burnout syndrome in the context of their helping profession.

The motive for choosing this goal of the research probe was the effort to establish an open and confidential relationship with the respondents and the possibility of long-term investigation and research to deepen this topic.

Qualitative research - specifically an interview - was chosen as the research strategy. Interviews are very popular and often used qualitative research tools. Above all, because it is a method that allows capturing not only the facts, but also a deeper insight into the motives and attitudes of the respondents (Gavora, 2010). Through the interview, a close, in the best case, friendly relationship between the researcher and the interviewee is established. Thanks to this relationship, it is possible to achieve results and information that will present us with the respondent with all his characteristics, fears, anxieties, or, on the contrary, joys, the better we will understand the questions related to the investigation. The rationale for choosing a semi-structured interview is mainly due to the flexibility offered in this form. The researcher has a lot of space to use various options, creative proposals, own preparations and ideas and enough time, which leads to the quality of the questions asked, their analysis and the resulting findings in the form of detailed information and obtaining reliable data. Also from the point of view of the personal and assumed confidential relationship between the researcher and the interviewee, which is also based on Gavora (2010).

The rationale for choosing a semi-structured interview is mainly due to the flexibility offered in this form. The researcher has a lot of space to use various options, creative

proposals, own preparations and ideas and enough time, which leads to the quality of the questions asked, their analysis and the resulting findings in the form of detailed information and obtaining reliable data. Also from the point of view of the personal and assumed confidential relationship between the researcher and the interviewee, which is also based on Hendl (2023) - Face-to-face contact with the researcher should be a guarantee that the respondent will „open up“ more.

A series of questions for a semi-structured interview was created immediately after the completion of the theoretical part of this professional work. Their number and composition were designed rationally, purposefully, so that the structure, meaning and their importance were preserved. They became such a pillar to which it was necessary to return several times, to deviate from the topic, to other questions unrelated to the content. The answers to these questions, which were continuously modified, supplemented and adapted to specific situations, give the reader a clear idea of this issue. From the statements made on the basis of the openness and willingness of the interviewees to share their feelings and experiences. Questions-circles intended for interviewing respondents:

I. Basic (general) questions

- a) When did you start to feel the first signs of burnout?
- b) How did burnout affect your professional and personal life?
- c) What preventive measures do you think are the most effective?

II. Specific questions

- a) What symptoms of burnout syndrome prevailed for you?
- b) As a special educator, are you more „prone“ to burnout?
- c) Has changed due to burnout syndrome, e.g. your interest, performance, outlook on the profession a special educator?
- d) How do you take care of your mental health today, after this experience?

III. Additional (supplementary) questions

- a) Is there something that preceded your burnout syndrome (illness, tragic event, divorce, etc.)? Perhaps this is a state or situation that you only realized in retrospect.
- b) Did you have any idea about aridity syndrome before you got sick yourself? How long did it take for you to fully recover and is there a chance that the situation may recur?
- c) How do you feel about this syndrome today, what is your opinion about burnout after this experience?

The average length of each interview was around 90-

120 minutes. With regard to the aforementioned research ethics, all interviews were conducted on neutral ground, in quiet parts of a cafe or park. Always at the request of the respondent, so that he feels good and there is mutual support and building of trust.

Categorization of data:

<i>Conversation Coding Aspects (Category) Explored</i>	<i>Conversation Coding Aspects (Codes) Explored</i>
Basic information about the interviewees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brief description • age • employment • education • family • hobbies
First signs/symptoms of burnout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not realizing the problem • 1st signal - fatigue • panic attacks
Predominant symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • neurological problems - sleep, fatigue etc. • physical problems - pain
The impact of burnout syndrome on professional life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children - relationship with pupils • work commitment - increased work pace • escape from reality
Preventive measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children - relationship with pupils • work commitment - increased work pace • escape from reality
Duration of illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 year • 2 years • 3 years ...

The recordings of the interviews and supplementary data were subsequently transcribed, and all answers were evaluated through its thorough analysis. Coding was used for this. All interviewees were assured of confidentiality and agreed to the research (all were provided with the final edit for review). Consent to the recording of the interview was also secured, that the information obtained would only be used for purposes related to the research probe. In these directions, the responsible researchers are committed to the maximum moral approach and ethical behavior with the participants of the survey probe.

Characteristics of the respondents – the selection was not random. The requirement was an adequate education, i.e. a master’s degree in special education. Another criterion was the length of experience, which was set at the lower limit of 3 years. And the key criterion was personal experience with

burnout syndrome, which is overcome, and with varying duration. In total, at least 50 respondents were contacted through personal contacts and social networks. A total of 15 respondents participated in the interviews. Of these, there were 10 women, aged between 29 and 55 years, with a length of experience between 3 and 18 years. Furthermore, 5 men, aged 27-49 years, with a length of experience from 3 to 15 years. The duration of the burnout syndrome was from 1 year to 3 years.

EXPLORATION PROBE EVALUATION

By processing the research probe, we contributed to the discovery of several facts that are the direct causes of burnout syndrome among special educators. The summary of the results, established on the basis of observations and conducted interviews with individual respondents, led us to think about the complexity and risks that this term hides in itself. The purpose and research goal of the research probe was to find out the aspects that affect the psychological and physical aspects of special educators. And further, do special educators have prerequisites for burnout syndrome in the context of their helping profession. In the beginning, there were some dilemmas and contradictions as to whether it was really a disease in the true sense of the word. However, the actual statements of the interviewees and their personal and factual experiences confirmed to us that mental disorders are among the most serious diseases, as they affect the entire personality in the psychological, physical and social spheres. Burnout syndrome has been the subject of numerous investigations and research studies, which points to a high degree of severity. The answers showed that special educators really have the prerequisites for the aridity syndrome. Their work is demanding. They work with children and pupils who need extra care, special access and individual support. Their mission must manifest with interest, motivation and empathy. And this despite the fact that these are often pupils with really significant and serious specific disorders.

Specific factors that contribute to burnout. To the question „When did you start to feel the first signs of burnout?“ all the participants in the research almost agreed that at first they did not admit the problems at all. They ignored the signals they received or attributed them to another illness. It took a long time to figure out that it was burnout. They attribute the development of the syndrome to excessive workload, ambitions and high demands placed on their person, and responsibility for the work they wanted, they actually had to do as best they could. Furthermore, the internal setting that forced them to give 100 percent performance, the inability to separate work life from personal life and neglecting their own needs.

With the question „Which symptoms of burnout syndrome prevailed for you?“ it was investigated what symptoms they encountered during the course of the disease. All responses agreed on initial fatigue, insomnia, despondency, emotional exhaustion and headaches. Other symptoms were irritability and mood swings. Four female respondents emphasize forgetfulness and loss of concentration, as well as chronic sadness and loss of appetite. One respondent also had gynecological problems and severe abdominal pain. 12 respondents (8 women and 4 men) had symptoms associated with anxiety, dizziness, back pain, but also panic attacks. We were also interested in how burnout affected personal and professional life. Two respondents are sure that her relationship with the pupils has not changed in any way. In contrast to 3 respondents (men), for whom the manifestations of the disease affected them so much that they appeared unpleasant, irritable, intolerable and even mean to pupils and colleagues. Thanks to the syndrome, all respondents lost their job satisfaction, which made their work activity significantly more difficult. In their personal lives, fear appeared in all of them, mainly from the disease itself, but also from their moods, which changed every moment, about losing their jobs and especially about their family, which they were unable to fully take care of at the time. Nevertheless, they all agree that their attitude towards the profession has not changed. They realize that they have worked too much and with great commitment. And that's what they worked on the most. He finds the greatest satisfaction in working with children, which gave us an answer as to whether the approach to students and the profession has changed thanks to burnout syndrome. None of the respondents thought about changing jobs. They take this experience as a lesson. Everyone is sure that the situation will never happen again. They already know what it means to be burned out, and they approach each other with humility.

Among the preventive measures and how they now take care of their mental health was the subject of the last questions during the interview. It is obvious that everyone involved values themselves. They prioritize their interests over the interests of others. The word NO, which was heard in all interviews, is an important landmark for them, separating the time before and after burnout. They reassessed their priorities. They have come to realize that they don't have to be so perfect and unique in everything, and that small failures do not lead to tragedies, but they can learn from them. And how did they manage to cope with this phenomenon? They were not completely alone on the road to recovery, their closest family and friends helped them to overcome and deal with burnout, and they found great support from their colleagues who offered them help, showed concern and pushed them

forward. They say they certainly wouldn't have been able to do it without them. They now put mental health first in their lives. They try to rest more, relax, go for walks, read books, do sports, etc., each according to their possibilities and abilities.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of current findings regarding burnout syndrome, we see that the prevention of burnout syndrome is very important for people employed in helping professions, i.e. also for teaching staff, in our case special educators. Education currently places high demands on teaching staff regarding their professional, managerial and social competences as well as the level of knowledge and skills. School management should actively support the sharing of professional experience among teachers. For this purpose, the reintroduction of supervision would be appropriate. For its proper functioning, the participants should also be well acquainted with its purpose and goal in advance, in order to avoid the negative attitude that some of the teachers have towards supervision.

Within the teaching profession, it is appropriate to mention the fact that a teacher suffering from burnout syndrome can never do an effective job. For this reason, it is desirable to think about preventive recommendations that are valid with regard to the specifics of the teaching profession. It is appropriate to mention at the outset that awareness of this problem is an important aspect in the prevention of burnout syndrome. If educators have not yet heard of burnout syndrome, they cannot know what risks and pitfalls this phenomenon brings with it. Thanks to this fact, people affected by burnout may not even realize that something is wrong with them, since the beginnings of burnout are usually blamed on, for example, personal failure. For this reason, it would be appropriate to apply various intervention programs or seminars related to the issue in schools, or to choose another way of being informed about the discussed problem, for example in the framework of supervision. Pedagogical workers should learn that burnout syndrome can affect any individual and therefore there is no need for any shame or shyness. It is appropriate to discuss and solve this problem also within the work collective, when employees can share mutual experiences with each other or provide help.

Among other effective preventive measures that are valid for every individual, there is above all the performance of activities that have a positive effect on the overall psychological, physical and emotional state of the individual. It is therefore appropriate in this regard to learn to rest and relax properly. A sufficient amount of sleep is equally important. In addition, in the fight against the occurrence of burnout syndrome, it is advisable to include some physical activity in our life, which

can include both active sports, such as running, swimming, cycling, fitness, etc., as well as, for example, a simple walk in nature. In this regard, it is also important not to forget about personal interests and hobbies, which are important for the emotional well-being of an individual. It is also effective to follow a healthy lifestyle, which includes a balanced and regular diet rich in vitamins, as well as limiting the intake of various addictive substances. All of these above-mentioned activities help to increase a person's overall resistance. An important factor in prevention is also the correct management of time, or time management, which primarily means the ability to effectively schedule and plan the fulfillment of work tasks and duties. These facts are related to other important steps in preventing burnout, which are primarily the reduction of personal demands on oneself, clarification of work tasks and competences, the ability to learn to say NO and also guarding one's own boundaries, beyond which it is no longer appropriate to act. The last aspect of prevention, which should be given no less important attention, is the effort to ensure quality interpersonal relationships. The key is above all to maintain contact with positive people who know how to listen to others, can help or advise and thus provide a person with a certain social support, which is considered one of the most essential components of preventing this phenomenon.

It turned out that teachers have many good suggestions and methods that help them prevent burnout. It would therefore be good if they shared these ideas with each other.

In order to improve the sharing of experiences and support communication, it would also be appropriate to modify the environment, as the school currently lacks a space where teachers could meet. Most of the interviews now take place outside the building, or in the locker room or other less suitable spaces.

To expand skills in practicing functional stress management strategies, it would be advisable to recommend specific courses within the further education of workers.

We suggest several specific areas for further research or experimentation:

Preventing burnout: What strategies and interventions can help special educators prevent burnout? You can explore the effectiveness of various techniques such as mindfulness, relaxation exercises or peer support.

Mental health promotion: What programs or support systems can be implemented in schools and educational institutions to promote the mental health of special educators? You can design and test different support models.

The role of leadership and management: How can the leadership of schools and educational institutions contribute to the prevention of burnout among special educators? You

can examine the effect of different leadership and management styles on employee well-being.

Technology tools: How can modern technology, such as mental health tracking apps or online support groups, help special educators manage stress and prevent burnout?

Individual factors: What personal characteristics and factors (e.g., resilience, coping strategies) may influence the susceptibility of special educators to burnout? You can survey educators and analyze data.

Burnout syndrome is therefore a serious problem that can also affect special educators. This syndrome is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal job satisfaction. Due to the demanding work of special educators, who often work with children/pupils/students with various special needs, it is important to continue to deal with this topic.

CONCLUSION

A special education teacher is a demanding profession and belongs to a profession that is extremely vulnerable to burnout. Working with children with special educational needs is all the more difficult because it requires constant intensive contact, individual approach, commitment and maximum involvement. Very often, however, the right feedback does not appear, in the form of achieved learning results, and the effort to pass on one's knowledge, skills and values does not meet with the response it needs. This is one of the main reasons why burnout occurs more often in special education teachers than in other occupations.

Fifty years have passed since the introduction of the term burnout syndrome, and it is increasing every year. It has to do with the ability to handle stressful situations, with the demands we place on ourselves, but mainly with over-limit workload. It's logical, the age full of modern technology demands it and it's up to us whether we withstand this onslaught and obligations or succumb to them.

From the exploratory probe on this issue, burnout can happen to anyone who works with great commitment, drive and conviction, which at first may seem like a positive quality, but after reading this work, we will come to the realization that it is more of a risk factor, which brings with it a number of obstacles. Everything depends on the personality of each individual and on the circumstances or conditions prevailing in his immediate work and personal environment.

Special educators are teachers who play many roles in the education of children with special needs. From an educator,

through a friend, to a substitute parent and mentor. The special education teacher is under a very strong scrutiny of our society (Příkazská in Čapek, 2021). It is therefore in our interest to deal with the prevention of any stressful situations that contribute to burnout. It is also necessary to appeal to the founders of school facilities, who create the conditions for their operation and functioning. Incorporating methods and programs to support the mental health of teachers should be a major concern of all school leaders and principals. To turn a taboo concept into an expression that is not synonymous with shame, failure and misconduct. They should focus on improving the quality of collegial relations, on functional prevention systems, include discussions, supervision and participate in other ways in creating a high-quality working environment. How this is done, whether it succeeds or fails in the context of enlightenment, could be a subject for further investigation.

Institutions that deal with the education of helping professions at least focus on education in the field of personality building or do not provide training on how to manage stressful situations and prevent burnout. Workers in the helping professions lack information about the possibilities of therapeutic support.

REFERENCES

- Arias, W. L., Huamani, J., & Ceballos, K. D. (2019). Burnout syndrome in Schoolteachers and University Professors: A psychometric and comparative analysis from Arequipa City. *Propósitos y Representaciones*, 7(3), 72-110. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20511/pyr2019.v7n3.390>
- Arnup, J., & Bowles, T. (2016). Should I stay or should I go? *Australian Journal of Education*, 60(3), 229-244. doi:10.1177/0004944116667620
- Bártová, Z. (2011). *Jak zvládnout stres za katedrou*. Kralice na Hané, Česko: Computer Media.
- Bedrnová, E. (1999). *Duševní hygiena a sebeřízení pro vysokoškoláky a mladé manažery*. Praha, Česko: Fortuna.
- Čapek, R., Příkazská, I., & Šmejkal, J. (2021). *Učitel a syndrom vyhoření*. Praha, Česko: Raabe.
- Český statistický úřad (2024). *Školy a školská zařízení 2022/23*, online. Available from: <https://csu.gov.cz/domov>
- Daněk, A. & Klugerová, J. (2023). Inclusive Education as an Instrument for Preventing Social Exclusion. *ALTA: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 13(2), 142-144. doi: 10.33543/j.1302.142144
- Dobešová, B. (2023). *WEBINÁŘ - Jak na duševní rovnováhu učitele – prevence syndromu vyhoření*, 26. 9. 2023, 16.00 - 19.00. www.societyforall.cz
- Gavara, P. (2010). *Úvod do pedagogického výzkumu*. Brno, Česko: Paido.

- Hawkins, P., & Shohet, R. (2004). *Supervize v pomáhajících profesích*. Praha, Česko: Portál.
- Hendl, J. (2023). *Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace*. Praha, Česko, Portál.
- Jovanović, V., Karić, J., Mihajlović, G., Džamonja-Ignjatović, T., & Hinić, D. (2019). Work-related burnout syndrome in special education teachers working with children with developmental disorders – possible correlations with some socio-demographic aspects and assertiveness. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 34(5), 692–701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1572092>
- Kebza, V., & Šolcová, I. (2003). *Syndrom vyhoření*. Praha, Česko: Státní zdravotní ústav.
- Kucharská, A., Mrázková, J., Wolfová, R., & Tomická, V. (2013). *Školní speciální pedagog*. Praha, Česko: Portál.
- Leblanc, L. (2021). *Sebepěče pro pečující: průvodce vědomou péčí*. Praha, Česko: Alferia.
- Mlátílková, E. (2023). *WEBINÁŘ - Syndrom vyhoření v pedagogické praxi.*, 17. října 2023, 14:00 - 18:00. www.npi.cz
- Nešpor, K. (2023). *WEBINÁŘ - Jak zvládat stres za pomoci toho, co už dávno umíte!*; 20.11. 2023, 17:00 - 18:20. www.raabe.cz
- Němejč K., Smékalová, L. & Kříž, E. (2019). A Reflection of the Quality of Education in the Use of Teaching Aids and the Importance of Lifelong Learning. *Rural, Environment Education Personality (REEP)*, 12(1), 94-103. Doi: 10.22616/REEP.2019.012
- Nürnberg, E. (2011). *Jak získat vnitřní klid a rovnováhu*. Praha, Česko: Grada.
- Oriešáková, H. (2015). *What will be the next, special educational system?*. Miláno, Itálie: EDUCatt Università Cattolica.
- Ponížilová, T., & Urbanovská, E. (2013). *Výzkum protektivních faktorů ve vztahu k syndromu vyhoření v České republice a v zahraničí*. *Klinická psychologie a osobnost*, 2(2), 5-17. <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129903>
- Poschkamp, T. (2013). *Vyhoření: rozpoznání, léčba, prevence*. Brno, Česko: Edika.
- Prieß, M. (2015). *Jak zvládnout syndrom vyhoření: najdete cestu zpátky k sobě*. Praha, Česko: Grada.
- Ptáček, R., Raboch, J., Kebza, V., & Šolcová, I. (2017). Česká verze Shiromovy a Melamedovy škály vyhoření. *Československá psychologie*, LXI(6), 536-545.
- Ptáček, R., Vňuková, M., Raboch, J., & Smetáčková, I. (2018). Syndrom vyhoření a životní styl učitelů českých základních škol. *Česká a Slovenská psychiatrie*, 114(5), 199-204. http://www.cspsychiatri.cz/dwnld/CSP_2018_5_199_204.pdf
- Slowík, J. (2022). *Inkluzivní speciální pedagogika*. Praha, Česko: Grada.
- Slowík, J. (2016). *Speciální pedagogika*. Praha, Česko: Grada.
- Smetáčková, I. (2020). *Učitelské vyhoření. Proč vzniká a jak se proti němu bránit*. Praha, Česko: Portál.
- Stárek, L., Klugerová, J., Kocurová, M., Kotvová, M., Moucha, Z., & Konečná, P. (2021). *Speciálně pedagogická praxe jako významný komponent pregraduální přípravy studentů - Student praxe profese/Special education work placement as a crucial component of undergraduate student preparation - Student practice profession*. Praha, Česko: Univerzita Jana Amose Komenského.
- Švamberk Šauerová, M. (2018). *Techniky osobnostního rozvoje a duševní hygieny učitele*. Praha, Česko: Grada.
- Švancar, R. (2017). *Učitelství je velmi osamělá profese: i to může vést k rozvoji syndromu vyhoření*. *Učitelské noviny: týdeník pro učitele a přátele školy*, 120(2), 21.
- Venglářová, M. (2011). *Sestry v nouzi: syndrom vyhoření, mobbing, bossing*. Praha, Česko: Grada.