STYLES OF COPING WITH STRESSFUL SITUATIONS AND THE PHENOMENON OF PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Style radzenia sobie w sytuacjach stresowych i zjawisko wypalenia zawodowego pedagogów specjalnych

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to determine whether aspects of occupational burnout, i.e. psychophysical exhaustion, lack of involvement in relations with pupils, a sense of professional ineffectiveness, and disappointment are significantly related to the specificity of educational work and care in special education.

The objective of the study was also to determine the relationship between coping styles adopted by teachers in stressful situations, i.e. task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented coping, with the degree of intellectual disability of pupils adopted as a criterion.

The degree of intellectual disability of pupils under the teachers' care was adopted as a differentiating criterion in the analysis. The research was conducted among 77 teachers from the Special Training and Education Centre in Słupsk. In order to collect research material the authors used a diagnostic survey and the following research tools: *The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations* (CISS) and *Link Burnout Questionnaire* (LBQ) by Massimo Santinello.

The analysis of the obtained results indicates the existence of a relationship between occupational burnout among special education teachers, and their pupils' degree of disability. A dependency was observed between the sense of burnout in assessing one's own competence (sense of ineffectiveness), and the pupil's degree of intellectual disability, where effectiveness subjectively assessed by teachers decreases as disorders in the level of pupils' intellectual development and social functioning increase. The obtained results also indicate task-oriented coping style as dominating among the studied teachers. This strategy dominated in the group who worked with pupils with mild and profound intellectual disability.

Keywords: special education, special education teacher, professional burnout, styles of coping in stressful situations, occupational stress.

Streszczenie

Celem badań było ustalenie, czy aspekty wypalenia zawodowego: wyczerpanie psychofizyczne, brak zaangażowania w relację z podopiecznymi, poczucie braku skuteczności zawodowej oraz rozczarowanie są w istotny sposób powiązane ze specyfiką pracy nauczania, opieki i wychowania w szkolnictwie specjalnym.

Celem badań było również ustalenie związku między przyjmowanymi przez nauczycieli stylami radzenia sobie w sytuacji stresowej: skoncentrowany na zadaniu, skoncentrowany na emocjach oraz skoncentrowany na unikaniu, z przyjętym kryterium stopnia niepełnosprawności intelektualnej uczniów.

Analizy dokonano, przyjmując jako kryterium różnicujące stopień niepełnosprawności intelektualnej uczniów, z którymi pracują nauczyciele. Badania zrealizowano wśród 77 nauczycieli Specjalnego Ośrodka Szkolno-Wychowawczego im. UNICEF w Słupsku. W celu zebrania materiału badawczego zastosowano sondaż diagnostyczny z wykorzystaniem następujących narzędzi badawczych: *Kwestionariusz radzenia sobie w sytuacjach stresowych* – CISS oraz *Kwestionariusz wypalenia zawodowego* – LBQ Massima Santinello.

Analiza uzyskanych wyników wskazuje na istnienie związku między wypaleniem zawodowym nauczycieli szkolnictwa specjalnego a stopniem niepełnosprawności uczniów, z którymi pracują. Zaobserwowano zależność poczucia wypalenia w ocenie własnych kompetencji (poczucie braku skuteczności) od stopnia niepełnosprawności intelektualnej uczniów; subiektywnie oceniana przez nauczycieli skuteczność spada, gdy zaburzenia poziomu rozwoju intelektualnego i funkcjonowania społecznego ucznia są poważniejsze.

Uzyskane wyniki badań wskazują również na styl radzenia sobie skoncentrowany na zadaniu jako dominujący wśród badanych nauczycieli pracujących z uczniami z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną w stopniu lekkim i głębokim.

Słowa kluczowe: szkolnictwo specjalne, pedagog specjalny, wypalenie zawodowe, style radzenia sobie w sytuacji stresowej, stres zawodowy.

Introduction

Nowadays stress and its consequences are inextricably tied to every person's life and occupation. Stress is not a new phenomenon, for it accompanies people from the beginning of their lives. However, along with the progress of civilisation and technology, new emerging threats foster the emergence of numerous unpredictable situations, which result in specific emotional tensions. That is why stress and its negative consequences – including the exhaustion of adaptive capabilities – described as the epidemic of the 20th century still constitutes a significant challenge to health, safety, and social functioning.

Such a special area in which numerous stimuli are responsible for states of stress is the work environment, particularly as professional success becomes of paramount importance, and one's occupation becomes a source from which we are increasingly more inclined to draw the sense of our existence. Data from The Workforce View in Europe 2019[1]report by the ADP indicate that Polish employees experience the most

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[1] The Workforce View in Europe 2017 study analyses beliefs and opinions of nearly 10 thousand employees from the entire continent, including France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Results provide a broad overview of what employees think about key aspects of the workplace – from training needs to frustrations.

stress among employees from 8 European countries. As much as 17% declare that they experience stress in the workplace on a daily basis. Moreover, one-fourth of the respondents in Poland (25%) claim that they experience stress in the workplace often or very often, and that 50 to 60% of all lost working days is connected with stress (*The Workforce View in…* 2019, 20–21).

Stress in Special Education Teacher Profession

According to current knowledge all professions are exposed to stress. However, in its chronic form stress mostly affects members of professions centred around providing social services and direct work with people, based on personal involvement in interpersonal contacts. These professions are often connected with providing aid, and involve social skills as the primary tool of the trade. The English terms for such professions are *human services, helping professions* (Sęk, 2000, p. 35). Apart from psychologists, psychotherapists, physicians, nurses, and social workers, these professions include teachers and educators, in whose work close interpersonal contact, processes of involvement and interpersonal exchange play a fundamental role. It is unquestionable, as highlighted by Tucholska (2009, p. 92), that it is a profession in which personality constitutes a fundamental professional tool, and is a measure of effectiveness and creativity. According to data gathered by OBOP (Public Opinion Research Centre) from the year 2000 Poles considered the profession of teacher as the second most stressful, right after the profession of physician (after Korczyński, 2014, p. 69). The burden experienced in this profession confirms the results of studies conducted by the International Labour Organisation and the UNESCO, according to which 25-33% of teachers admit that they experience strong stress at school (Chang, 2009). Other studies devoted to this issue, conducted in an international context (Otto, 1986; Borg & Riding, 1991; Fontana, 1998; Kretschmann, 2003; Billingsley, 2004) and in a Polish context (Jodłowska, 1991; Krawulska-Ptaszyńska, 1992; Rylke, 1993; Sęk, 1994; Tucholska, 1999; Grzegorzewska, 2006; Chrzanowska, 2004; Karbanowicz, 2014) confirm the thesis that the profession of teacher is strongly related to stress.

Teacher stress is usually described as a specific emotional condition characterised by negative stimulation, usually accompanied by pathological biochemical and physiological changes in the organism. It results from the assessment of situations connected with the implementation of educational tasks, expectations and demands on the part of the social environment – educational authorities, direct superiors, parents, students – from the point of view of one's own adaptive capabilities, and the assessment of one's personal resources to reduce perceived threats (Biela, 2000, p. 31; Korczyński, 2014, p. 68). Thus the level of mental strain depends, among others, on the intensity of stress factors, subjective sensitivity, and mental resilience of teachers.

Apart from general straining factors typical for all groups of teachers, such as teacher-student interactions, school regulations/structure, poor working conditions at educational establishments, frequent changes in the education system, evaluation of teachers' work, low prestige of the profession and little opportunity for promotion, social insecurity, inadequate interpersonal relationships at school (Travers & Cooper, 1993; Grzegorzewska, 2006), special education teachers experience greater work overload than teachers at mainstream schools. Their working conditions are usually described as difficult, complicated, and the demands of their work often exceed their capacity to deal with them. This results mainly from the requirement upon them to individualise their work, and to cope with specific didactic and pedagogical challenges in their work with pupils with special educational needs. A division of stressors, which place a particular burden on mental regulation processes connected with the professional work of special education needs (SEN) teachers working with students who display conduct and emotional disorders, as suggested by D.B. Center and C. Steventon (2001, p. 330) through factor analysis, includes the following factor groups:

a) environmental factors – mainly administrative and legislative;

b) criminal and aggressive behaviour of children, also directed against the teacher;

c) unrealistic expectations on the part of parents, lack of cooperation and support for the teacher's actions;

d) an excess of demands, a large number of activities to perform (an excess of documentation);

e) demands of parents regarding their child's functioning at school and his/her achievements;

f) pressure of time, excess of tasks to perform, necessity to work long hours.

The conflict of roles, i.e. when an employee receives two conflicting or mutually exclusive messages, and role ambiguity, i.e. lack on information necessary for the effective performance of one's tasks (Plichta, 2014) are also considered particularly strenuous (more so than in the general population of teachers). Data from studies conducted by M.K. Grzegorzewska (Grzegorzewska 2006, p. 143) indicate that special schools are the most stressful environment, in relation to mainstream schools. It is worth noting, as highlighted by J. Pyżalski (Pyżalski, 2007, p. 49), that stress connected with the profession of teacher is considered one of the reasons that fewer people choose this profession, and that those who chose it often resign quickly. This tendency is particularly strong among SEN teachers, especially those who work with pupils diagnosed with conduct disorder. This data can be found in studies conducted in the United States[2] by Brownell et al. (1997), B. Center and J. M. Callaway (1999),

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[2] Referring the situation to current conditions on the Polish labour market one can assume that some people who do not cope with professional stress remain in the profession, regardless of individual and social costs.

Poel and Williams (2006), Billingsley (2004). According to Stempen and Loeb (2002) the percentage of people who remain in the SEN teacher profession after the first year is 89%, compared with 94% for teachers working in mainstream education.

Analysis of the issue of psychosocial professional stress among SEN teachers must be seen from various perspectives. On the one hand, this is of special significance for the development of prevention efforts in the scope of protecting their own health, which undoubtedly contributes to the well-being of employees, as well as the organisation and quality of their work. On the other hand, it has to relate to measures concerned with the health of pupils and respect for their rights (Plichta, 2014). That is because study results confirm the negative influence of professional stress on the quality of relations with pupils and the ability to cope with their difficult behaviour. They also show that stress can be connected with an increase in the risk of abuse in work with pupils (Plichta, 2015, p. 60).

Styles of Coping in Stressful Situations

The work of SEN teachers[3] with pupils with multiple variously conditioned disabilities, inconsistent symptomatology, and limited possibilities of improvement, is undoubtedly aggravating in nature and requires implementation of adequate coping mechanisms in order to mitigate negative emotional states.

Current scientific positions recognise coping with stress as maintaining a dynamic balance or reducing discrepancies between individual capabilities, and external and internal requirements, which he or she judges as aggravating or exceeding his or her resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141; Strelau, 2000, p. 95). An individual is aware of disturbances to adaptive balance and of existing threats, owing to cognitive processes, while accompanying emotional experiences allow him/her to realise that the organism is stimulated to activity in order to improve situations which are a potential source of stress. It is this individual activity, which is adequate to situations of stress, that is specified as coping with stress. When expressed as a specific disposition (trait) to specific activity, it obliges one to examine coping with stress as a style which is individual-specific. From this perspective coping style means "a relatively fixed tendency to use coping methods in order to remove or reduce states of stress, in various situations of stress specific for the individual" (Strelau et. al., 2013, p. 9).

For N.S. Endler and J.D. Parker (1990) coping style is repetitive behaviour in specific situations of stress, typical for a given person. Based on their theoretical and scientific discoveries we distinguish three main styles of coping with stress. *Task oriented*

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[3] Research indicates that SEN (special education needs) teachers, who display a higher level of professional stress than teachers who work with other groups of people with disabilities, hold a special position among special education teachers. Research conducted by Hatton and referred to by Plichta (Plichta, 2015, p. 55) indicates that 1/3 of personnel working with people with intellectual disabilities obtained high results in terms of experienced professional stress and concerning results with regard to their mental health.

coping consists in making efforts in order to resolve problems through cognitive transformations or attempts at altering the situation. Task oriented coping is considered the least mentally strenuous for the organism. However, it must be stressed that it will only work in this way if the frequency of stressful situations is low or if they occur at intervals which the individual can tolerate, and which enable him/her to recover physically and mentally. If the period between one stressful event and the other is too short, then task-oriented coping will be the most strenuous style for the organism. *Emotion-oriented coping* is characteristic of people who, in situations of stress, have a tendency to concentrate on themselves and their own emotional experiences. People with such a coping style have a penchant for wishful thinking and fantasising, which is meant to decrease emotional tension connected with a stressful situation. However, in reality, this can contribute to an increased sense of stress and, in effect, an increased tension and lower self-esteem. Individuals who react to problems in this way more frequently than by using other styles are susceptible to neuroses, phobias, depressions, and even affective uni- and bi-polar disorders (Huber, 2010, p. 274). *Avoidance-oriented coping* is considered the least beneficial way to react to situations of stress, and is specific to people who display a tendency to avoid thinking about and experiencing situations perceived as difficult. Within this style we can distinguish two sub-types which do not solve problems, and do not even bring one closer to resolving them. Thus they do not shape effective remedial abilities and can lead to habitual use of withdrawal. The first sub-type is *engaging in substitute activities* (thinking about pleasant things, escape into dream, doing unnecessary shopping, gorging on food, watching TV), and the second one is *seeking social contact* (organising meetings, participating in social events, meeting with friends, visiting family or close friends and engaging in long conversations with them over the phone) (Strelau et al., 2013, 16–17).

Studies based on understanding coping with stress as a specific style allow us to identify those individuals, whose capacity and disposition to cope are inadequate to the requirements of a given situation of stress. Early identification of people with inadequate resources to cope in specific situations and activities makes it possible to take remedial measures and implement prevention programs on an individual level and on the level of organisations.

The Term Occupation Burnout

Occupational burnout is a complex process. It does not appear suddenly, but builds up slowly and is extended in time, usually measured in years. The state of burnout results from functioning in a state of long and repeating stress. According to the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10) burnout belongs to the category of *problems related to life-management difficulty*

(Z 73.0), which indicates its relationship with individual susceptibility to endure psychological strain. Hence, as noted by M. Kraczla (Kraczla 2013, p. 78), we can assume that burnout results from individual experience of stress in the social context of professional work.

In Poland the issue of professional burnout only came into existence in the 1980s, whereas the first theories and studies were already conducted in the 1950s. American psychiatrist H. Freudenberger was the biggest contributor to introducing the term *burnout* into scientific literature. In his article *Staff Burnout* (1974) he presented his observations, based on work in a centre for people addicted to psychoactive substances. He used the term burnout to describe changes he observed in the involvement of young voluntary workers, their physical exhaustion, and their discouragement in providing aid and support, after a year of working at the centre (Hereciński, 2016, p. 9).

At about the same time C. Maslach conducted studies on the burnout syndrome. She interviewed people working in professions connected with social services and providing aid. She concluded that characteristic components of professional burnout include: a) emotional exhaustion, which manifests itself through unwillingness, lack of interest in work, irritability and somatic symptoms, such as headaches, fatigue, sleeplessness; b) depersonalisation (objectification); c) decreased sense of personal achievement. Maslach defines professional burnout as "a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people" (Maslach, 2003, p. 2).

This approach was then broadened to encompass other professions which are not necessarily related to providing aid, thus forcing a change in terminology (Hellesøy et al., 2000). In this new formula the tendency to describe the three distinguished basic dimensions of burnout was used in more broad terms than in the previous version. Thus we do not speak of emotional exhaustion, but of exhaustion in general, which refers both to an individual's emotional functioning and his/her physical condition. Depersonalisation was replaced by cynicism indicating coolness, withdrawal of empathy, distance, and an attitude of indifference and superficiality towards one's own work and towards pupils or clients and co-workers. Reduced sense of personal accomplishment is being replaced with a term indicating ineffectiveness, a sense of failure, and low self-esteem, which is related to a conviction of one's professional inadequacy and to a loss of confidence in one's abilities and competence (Maslach & Leiter, 2011). However, this approach to professional burnout is not shared by all researchers of this phenomenon. According to A.M. Pines (Pines, 2010, p. 35) professional burnout is "a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged involvement in various burdensome emotional situations".

According to this proposal physical exhaustion is manifested by loss of energy and strength needed to fulfil one's professional role. Protracted tiredness and sense of

weakness are usually connected with psychosomatic symptoms. Emotional exhaustion is characterised by a sense of helplessness, hopelessness , and in extreme cases may lead to crisis and breakdown. Physical exhaustion, connected with a negative self-image, is responsible for a pessimistic vision of one's work and a negative attitude towards others.

The connection between professional burnout and professional stress is indicated by W.G. Emener, R.S. Luck, and F.X. Gohs (1982). According to their definition professional burnout is a state of physical and mental exhaustion, resulting from prolonged negative emotions, which develop at work and in one's self-image. For A. Bańka (Bańka, 2000, 307–308) professional burnout, in nature, is specific professional stress, which is an emotional reaction of the organism in a specific situation of stress created by the necessity to constantly concentrate on the problems of other people, which results in loss of motivation to act further, loss of care for other people, and in a strong distancing from their problems. However, it is worth noting, as stressed by H. Sęk (1996, 2000), that while stress is a necessary condition for the development of burnout, it is not enough in itself. According to the author burnout is not so much the direct result of chronic stress, but of stress which is not modified by one's own remedial activity.

A broad and seemingly comprehensive definition of professional burnout can be found in the work of W.B. Schaufeli and D. Enzmann. The authors assumed that: burnout is a persistent, negative, work-related state of mind in 'normal' individuals that is primarily characterised by exhaustion, which is accompanied by distress, a sense of reduced effectiveness, decreased motivation, and the development of dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours at work. This psychological condition develops gradually, but may remain unnoticed for a long time by the individual involved. It results form a misfit between intentions and reality in the job. Often burnout is self-perpetuating because of inadequate coping strategies that are associated with the syndrome (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998, p. 36).

Studies on the phenomenon of professional burnout were also conducted, among others, by J. Edelwich and A. Brodsky (1980), T.S. Kristensen et al. (2005); A. Shirom and S. Melamed, (2006); J. Montero-Marín and J. García-Campayo (2010). In Poland the issue was investigated by S. Steuden, W. Okła (1998); L. Golińska, W. Świętochowski (1998); S. Tucholska (2009); J. Kirenko, T. Zubrzycka-Maciąg (2011); P. Hreciński (2016). Despite the fact that in most perspectives professional burnout is treated in statistical terms, there is no doubt that it is a dynamic phenomenon which should be perceived as a process. An example of such an approach is the one presented by C. Cherniss. According to the author burnout actually refers to a process in which a negative, undesired state, characterised by frustration, exhaustion, tension, loss of emotional control and physical strength, and consequently a sense of ineffectiveness and decrease in motivation to continue work at a previous level of involvement, arises

in response to professional stress (Cherniss, 1980, p. 5). If we relate this to the profession of SEN teachers, professional burnout as a process is undoubtedly dynamic in nature and takes place in phases. Initially the symptoms may not be specific . However, each successive stage, with its negative consequences which are difficult to reverse, is more characteristic and intensive.

Research by P. Plichta (2014, pp. 239-250) conducted in 2012 on a group of 100 SEN teachers revealed that 40% of respondents experienced significant existential burdens, i.e. lack of sense in their work, lack of visible effects in the development and therapy of their wards; 31% experienced severe stress related to organizational burdens and workload; 45% showed high results related to a sense of conflict at work, be it with their wards, the parents of their wards or their superiors.

Aim of Research

The aim of the research was to determine whether aspects of professional burnout, i.e. psycho-physical exhaustion, lack of involvement in relationships with pupils, a sense of professional ineffectiveness, and disappointment, are significantly related to the nature of teaching, care and education in special education programs. Analysis was conducted with the students' degree of disability adopted as a differentiating criterion.

Another objective was to determine the relationship between coping styles adopted by teachers in situations of stress, i.e. task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance-oriented coping, with the degree of intellectual disability as an adopted criterion.[4]

Characteristics of the Studied Group

The respondents were 77 teachers from the Special Training and Education Centre in Słupsk. 91% of respondents were women and 9% were men, which is a quite precise reflection of the gender proportion in the population of Polish teachers, the vast majority of which are women. In the school year 2014–2015 there were 552,034 women teachers, which comprised 82.34% of this professional group. (Rachubka, 2015, p. 9). Most respondents were in the range of 41 to 65 years (51 people – 66.23%). Younger

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[4] The degree of the students' intellectual disability, which was the variable, was verified on the basis of a preliminary survey filled out by teachers, who indicated the type of group they worked with. The specific degree of intellectual disability is determined through a diagnosis by a team of specialists (doctor, psychologist, pedagogue) from a psychological-pedagogical counselling centre. As a result a special educational needs statement is issued, based on which a student is accepted to attend a Special Training and Education Centre. The degree of intellectual disability determines the way in which teachers work with students in: a) a class of students with mild intellectual disability (up to 16 people); b) an educational-therapeutic team for students with moderate and severe intellectual disability (up to 6 people); a revalidation-educational team for students with profound intellectual disability (individual work with one pupil).

teachers, between the ages of 28 and 40, made up the smaller group (26 people - 33.77%). Mid adulthood, in the aspect of professional career, is considered the optimal period, which allows people to enjoy their achieved material status and professional authority. However, equally often during this period people experience disparity between job expectations, and the extent to which these expectations can be fulfilled. Unfulfilled expectations, such as lack of promotion, a sense of being burdened by professional responsibilities, and little variety of tasks, can lead to a crisis in professional career development (after Trempała, 2011). The smallest group was comprised of teachers with no more than two years of work experience (2.6%). It is worth pointing out that the studied group did not include people with less than half a year of work experience. Most respondents were chartered teachers (81.8%), and those with over 15 years of work experience (57.1%). The vast majority of teachers (67.5%) took part in trainings, courses and other projects aimed at increasing professional competence in the course of the previous year. The studied sample was also dominated by teachers who were not on take sick leave in the last 5 years (94.8%).

Research Mehods and Tools

In order to collect research material the authors used a diagnostic survey, with the following research tools:

1. *The Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations* (CISS). The authors of the original version of the CISS questionnaire, constructed in 1994, are Norman S. Endler and James D. A. Parker. The Polish adaptation was prepared by J. Strelau, A. Jaworowska, K. Wrześniewski and P. Szczepaniak (2013).

The construction of the CISS questionnaire is based on the assumptions of the interactive model of coping in situations of stress. The questionnaire consists of 48 statements and allows one to characterise strategies of coping in situations of stress, distinguishing three main styles: (1) Task-Oriented Style (SSZ), where high results indicate a tendency to resolve problems through cognitive transformations and rational planning of remedial actions; (2) Emotion-Oriented Style (SSE), which characterises individuals who, in situations of stress, focus on their own emotional experiences and on taking actions aimed primarily at reducing tension, which is often not equivalent to resolving a difficult situation; (3) Avoidance-Oriented Style (SSU), is a strategy which manifests itself in withdrawal from unpleasant thoughts and experiences. Factor analysis conducted by researchers within each scale indicated scale uniformity of the SSZ and SSE scales, while in the case of the SSU scale it was necessary to distinguish two subscales: Engaging in substitute activities, which includes 8 items, and Seeking social contacts (5 items). The CISS makes it possible to conduct individual or group studies of people aged between 16 and 79. Both in the case of

analysis of material gathered among studied groups, and in the case of individual interpretations, we determine which of the presented styles is the dominant method of coping in situations of stress.

The Polish adaptation of the CISS questionnaire, based in internal coherence and stability over time, as well as correlation with the WCQ questionnaire by Lazarus and Folkman, is considered an accurate and reliable research tool (Strelau et al., 2013).

2. *Link Burnout Questionnaire* (LBQ) by Massimo Santinello, in the Polish adaptation by A. Jaworowska, is a tool which measures professional burnout among people whose professions are connected with work and providing aid. The LBQ makes it possible to assess the level of professional burnout, taking into consideration four areas: (1) exhaustion, which is connected with the assessment of one's psychophysical resources; (2) lack of involvement in relationships with clients, which enables the assessment of the quality of relations on a continuum, at the ends of which we find a sense of involvement and subjectifying clients or indifference, distance and objectifying clients; (3) lowered level of effectiveness, which reveals the individual's subjective beliefs regarding his/her level of professional competence; (4) career disappointment, which is a dimension connected with perceived disappointment or, on the contrary, with a sense of satisfaction and enthusiasm regarding tasks performed at work, connected with direct contact with people (Jaworowska, 2014).

Statistical analyses were conducted using the IBM SPSS STATISTIC programme, Version 24. Data was compiled using Fisher analysis of variance. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was adopted, which indicated the existence of statistically significant differences or dependencies.

Results

In order to study the possible connection between the work of special education teachers with students with various degrees of intellectual disability, and their adopted styles of coping in difficult situations, the authors used the CISS questionnaire, which enables us to determine the dominant mode of coping in situations of stress: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, or avoidance-oriented.

Determining whether special education teachers who work with students with a higher degree of intellectual disability may be more exposed to problems connected with professional burnout, was made possible by adopting the LBQ Questionnaire. Table 1. presents average results obtained by teachers in particular subscales of the CISS Questionnaire.

Table 1

Average results obtained by respondents in the CISS Questionnaire scales

Variables	M	SD
Task-Oriented Style	61.81	8.11
Emotion-Oriented Style	35.55	9.04
Avoidance-Oriented Style	44.90	8.49

Source: the author's own compilation

Analysis of results in the studied group (table 1) indicates that the dominating style of coping with stress is the task-oriented style (M = 61.81; SD = 8.11). The determining factor for such distribution is undoubtedly the respondent's higher education. Similar data was presented by J. Strelau et al. (2013), who adopted education as a differentiating criterion for the control sample. Authors highlight that in situations of stress people with higher education tend to focus on the task, and this regularity is observed in the group aged between 25 and 54 years, and in the older group – 55–79 years (Strelau et al., 2013).

Table 2
Strategies of coping in situations of stress implemented by teachers, taking into account the students' degree of intellectual disability

Degree of pupil's intellectual disability	CISS questionnaire scales			ANOVA		p *post-hoc* Test					
	Task-Oriented Style			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild (I)	12	66.42	8.02	3.29	**0.03**	0.07	0.58	**0.01**	0.29	0.14	**0.04**
Moderate to severe (II)	32	61.63	7.80								
Profound (III)	10	64.60	5.95								
All pupils (IV)	23	58.43	8.28								
	Emotion-Oriented Style			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild	12	33.33	8.96	1.54	0.21	0.14	0.43	0.99	0.66	0.06	0.34
Moderate to severe	32	37.84	10.41								
Profound	10	36.40	7.60								
All pupils	23	33.13	6.99								
	Avoidance-Oriented Style			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild	12	48.42	8.94	1.50	0.22	0.22	0.59	0.05	0.59	0.28	0.21
Moderate to severe	32	44.90	7.40								
Profound	10	46.50	9.85								
All pupils	23	44.90	8.86								

Source: the author's own compilation

Single-factor variance analysis revealed that a significantly higher level (p < 0.05) appears in the instance of choosing task-oriented strategies, however, only in the case

of teachers working with students wild mild intellectual disability (table 2). The post hoc comparisons between teachers using the task-oriented style in groups which differed in terms of the degree of intellectual disability indicate that the task-oriented style is most frequently adopted by teachers who work with students with mild intellectual disability (M = 66.42; SD = 8.02) and significantly less frequently used by teachers who work with all groups (M = 58.43; SD = 8.28). The task-oriented style is also significantly more often employed by teachers who work with students with profound intellectual disability (M = 64.60; SD = 5.95), compared with teachers who work with all groups (M = 58.43; SD = 8.28).

Table 3
Results of respondents studied using the LBQ Questionnaire, after transformation into standard normalised results

	Results in the range of 1–2		Results in the range of 3–7		Results in the range of 8–9	
	frequency	%	frequency	%	frequency	%
Psychophysical exhaustion	7	9.1	68	88.4	2	2.6
Lack of involvement in relationships	10	13.0	67	87.1	0	0
Lowered level of effectiveness	12	15.6	63	81.9	2	2.6
Career disappointment	3	3.9	72	93.6	2	2.6

Source: the author's own compilation

Raw scores obtained by teachers were transformed by into standardised results (table 3). In the case of the LBQ questionnaire these are sten scores within the limits of 1–9 (Santinello, 2014). According to author's interpretation results in the range of 1–2 reflect a positive professional situation, results in the range of 3–7 indicate problems in the scope of a specific scale of professional burnout, while results in the range of 8–9 make it possible to identify people with a high level of professional burnout. When analysing the results of the respondents in a group perspective we may notice that in each area of burnout the majority experience the following problems: psychophysical exhaustion (higher results among 68 respondents – 88.9%), lack of involvement in relationships (67 respondents – 87.1%), lowered level of effectiveness (63 respondents – 81.9%), career disappointment (72 people – 93.6%).

Table 4
Results obtained by respondents in professional burnout scales

Variables	M	SD
Psychophysical exhaustion	4.83	1.53
Lack of involvement in relationships	4.30	1.60
Lowered level of effectiveness	4.70	1.80
Career disappointment	5.40	1.11

Source: the author's own compilation

Results presented in table 4 show the distribution of means in particular areas of professional burnout among SEN teachers. The highest parameters (M = 5.40; SD = 1.11) were reported in the area of disappointment, which indicates a sense of contradiction in the scope of expectations which an individual has/had towards his/her profession after coming into contact with the realities of its practice. Another area in which problems were reported was psychophysical exhaustion (M = 4.83; SD = 1.53), which manifests itself by higher tension connected with expectations specific for the teaching profession, which, if persistent may lead to exhaustion. In the lowered level of effectiveness (M = 4.70; SD =1.80) and lack of involvement in relationships (M = 4.30; SD = 1.60) scales the respondents obtained results which can be interpreted as higher, indicating problems in the scope of professional functioning.

Table 5
Areas of professional burnout among teachers, taking into account the students' degree of intellectual disability

Degree of pupil's intellectual disability	Areas of professional burnout			ANOVA		p *post-hoc* Test					
	Psychophysical exhaustion			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild (I)	12	4.17	1.20	1.50	0.24	0.08	0.08	0.37	0.66	0.33	0.26
Moderate to severe (II)	32	5.10	1.60								
Profound (III)	10	5.30	0.95								
All pupils (IV)	23	4.70	1.72								
	Lack of involvement in relationships			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild	12	3.80	1.36	1.40	0.25	0.19	0.06	0.55	0.33	0.42	0.
Moderate to severe	32	4.44	1.60								
Profound	10	5.00	1.15								
All pupils	23	4.10	1.80								
	Lowered level of effectiveness			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild	12	4.00	2.00	3.04	**0.03**	0.07	**0.03**	0.88	0.39	**0.04**	**0.02**
Moderate to severe	32	5.10	1.60								

	Profound	10	5.60	1.20								
	All pupils	23	4.09	1.93								
	Career disappointment			F	p	I-II	I-III	I-IV	II-III	II-IV	III-IV
	N	M	SD								
Mild	12	4.83	1.27									
Moderate to severe	32	5.38	1.13	1.12	0.35	0.15	0.16	0.08	0.76	0.63	0.96
Profound	10	5.50	0.71									
All pupils	23	5.52	1.12									

Source: the author's own compilation

An analysis of results presented in table 5 indicates that the lack of professional effectiveness among teachers was the highest in the group working with students with profound intellectual disability (M = 5.60; SD = 1.20) and with students with moderate intellectual disability (M = 5.10; SD = 1.60). This level was significantly higher (p < 0.05) than in the case of other groups, i.e. when working with students with mild intellectual disability (M = 4.00; SD = 2.00) and in the case of teachers who worked with all groups (M = 4.09; SD = 1.93). The area of sensing low professional effectiveness turned out significantly connected with a higher level of intellectual disability among students, and thus with a decreased sense of control among teachers working with the indicated groups in the scope of fulfilling educational tasks. The post hoc comparisons in the scope of the degree of a sense of low professional effectiveness indicate significantly lower conviction regarding one's professional competencies among teachers working with students with profound intellectual disability (M = 5.60; SD = 1.20), compared to teachers working with students with mild intellectual disability (M = 4.00; SD = 2.00). The sense of low professional effectiveness may have also turned out significantly higher among teachers working with students with moderate and severe intellectual disability (M = 5.10; SD = 1.60) compared to teachers working with all groups (M = 4.09; SD = 1.93).

Discussion and Conclusions

The results presented in this study allow us to conclude that styles of reacting to situations of stress, and the phenomenon of professional burnout among special education teachers, is determined by the degree of intellectual disability of pupils.

The dominating coping style in the studied group was task-oriented, and statistical analyses revealed a significantly higher frequency of using this strategy by teachers, who work with pupils with mild disability. It should be added that the specific character of working with this group of clients is similar to working with non-disabled students, where in both cases educational work is connected with implementing the core curriculum. Moreover, this result could be influenced by specific reinforcements which can be found in special education teachers' everyday work, though are seldom discussed in research. Thus it may be justified to state, after P. Plichta (Plichta, 2014, p. 247), that in

research on professional stress of special education teachers and on their coping strategies one should include not only the context of the burden, but also the context of situations of positive nature, which have a strongly reinforcing character.

Also of importance with regard to the intensity of experienced stress, and associated remedial actions, is the pupils' level of functioning. As indicated by H. Tynan and D. Allen (after: Plichta, 2015, p. 59), special education teachers who work with people with mild intellectual disability, are characterised by a greater sense of control over their pupils' behaviour, and so manifest lower intensity of stress than teachers who work with more severe forms of intellectual disability. Therefore it is the former group that implements task-oriented strategies of coping more frequently, and makes efforts to resolve problems through cognitive transformation or attempts at altering the situation.

Knowledge concerning strategies of coping with stress in a given group should be treated as an indicator, which informs about the direction and character of rehabilitation, reinforcement or remedial action. Domination of task-oriented coping among respondents suggests taking up tasks which are primarily reinforcing in nature. According to Hobfol task-oriented coping can be treated as an individual resource, which initiates a spiral of benefits (Heszen, 2016) if properly reinforced. Each solution to a difficult situation, with the implementation of task-oriented strategies, will result in the development of resources, the use of which will cause their growth. Examples of such resources are knowledge and skills, which undergo improvements in organisation and are often complemented by new content, if used frequently. Therefore, teachers who implement task-oriented strategies in the process of coping will gather experience and develop skills to accurately assess situations and their own abilities (Heszen, 2016).

In the process of analysing results obtained by the respondents in the scope of four areas which encompass the phenomenon of professional burnout the authors noticed a significant increase in the sense of professional ineffectiveness among teachers, who work with pupils with more severe disabilities (moderate, significant, severe). Observation revealed a dependence of the sense of burnout in the scope of assessing one's competence on the degree of pupils' intellectual disability, where subjectively measured effectiveness of the teacher's actions decreases as intellectual disabilities and social functioning disorders among pupils increase. However, M. Santinello points out that the experience of burnout often makes it harder for the individual to notice the progress made at work (Santinello, 2014). Also of importance is the specific nature of the special education teacher profession, where developmental disorders of pupils (moderate, significant or severe) may result in progress being nearly invisible to the teacher. The peculiarity of the profession is marked, one the one hand, by didactic and organisational difficulties of the teaching process, which result from the pupils' intellectual deficits. On the other hand it is also a challenge to

cope with issues resulting from disorders of the social and emotional functioning of pupils, for as intellectual deficit progresses, the ability to perform effective emotional regulation decreases. In other words, the higher the degree of intellectual disability, the greater the problems with expressing and regulating one's emotions, and with recognising and reacting to the emotions of others. The frequent experiencing of emotional restlessness on the part of pupils may be interpreted as a professional failure, which in turn may bring about a sense of professional ineffectiveness (Plichta, 2015, 57–58). Studies by M. Sekułowicz (2006, 127–138) regarding the phenomenon of professional burnout among Polish teachers working in special education centres for students with intellectual disability indicate than SEN teachers are the professional group most at risk of professional burnout, because of their particular educational client group and the resulting difficulties regarding, for instance, making contact – especially with students with profound disorders, frequent aggressive and auto-aggressive behaviours among students, and most of all a lack of observable effects despite involvement and effort. In her analyses M. Sekułowicz focused, among other things, on establishing the relationship between professional burnout and ways of coping with stress adopted by SEN teachers. Research showed that the intensification of the professional burnout phenomenon in the area of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization correlates positively with a more frequent use of emotional coping strategies, at the same time decreasing the tendency to use task-oriented strategies. That is why it is necessary to focus on teacher training dedicated not only to learning abilities to cope with difficult behaviour on the part of pupils and with interpersonal conflicts, but also to reinforcing specific competences, such as the ability to observe and accurately assess small, but beneficial changes to the pupils' functioning. This also indicates a necessity to introduce supervisory action. Perhaps, as indicated by the studied group of special education teachers, one method of preventing excessive stress and professional burnout would also be (bearing in mind one's qualifications and fulfilment of requirements) a cyclic change of student groups with which the teacher works, taking into account their degree of disability. That is why analysis of the needs of special education teachers on the level of particular institutions should be performed, as it may contribute to the rebuilding of administrative and peer support.

The results presented in the article show the dominant styles of coping with stress and the degree of professional burnout among SEN teachers. The small number of respondents resulted from the fact that the authors focused on conducting the study in one selected centre and on exhausting the population. That is why the results need to be treated with caution, while research should be continued using more in-depth analysis that would include a larger sample from various special education centres.

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