

## Professional stress in special integrated education

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**Abstract:** The professional activity carried out by a school counselor teacher may seem like an easy job for some specialists, but for most of them, their job involves many difficulties. The professional stress of school counselors is experienced because their work requires face-to-face communication with people, activities that involve knowing, assessing and addressing various types of problems of all categories of students, who can be described as stable signs of maladaptation to school requirements, problems related to the control of their conduct.

**Keywords:** professional stress, teacher, integrated special education, mainstream education, special education

### I. Introduction

The job of a school counselor may seem easy to some specialists, but, according to the results of our study, for most, it can be fraught with frequent obstacles that they have to face.

The problems they face are primarily related to the nature of the work itself: too many students, students who are not open or willing to receive information from activities, lack of appreciation from them and their parents, relationships with parents difficult, who do not have the responsibility of educating their children, a lot of forms, fact sheets, reports, statistics, too much bureaucracy and last but not least, low wages. By resorting to extended working sessions, lengthy debates, often held from the position of intermediary, which require planning, school counselors relate to all this with care, patience, attention, strain, and effort.

The school counselor “earns on average about a quarter of what a lawyer earns, half of what an accountant receives and less than a shipyard worker. There is no other profession that demands so much of you and for which you receive such a low salary “(Pătrana, 2018, p. 412).

### Objectives and hypotheses of the study

#### Objectives

Objective 1 is a comparative analysis of how the level of occupational stress is perceived in integrated special education, mainstream education, and special education, both in terms of its intensity and the frequency of stressful situations, to identify how the two categories of teachers refer to the activity in mainstream schools and the activity in special schools.

Objective 2 is to investigate the variables that may influence professional stress in integrated special education compared to mainstream and special education; we will consider the analysis of the influences of teaching experience, age, and teaching degree.

#### Hypotheses

1. It is assumed that professional stress is more intense and felt more strongly in special education and in integrated special education, compared to mainstream education.
2. It is assumed that professional stress is more intense in the case of less experienced teachers and in the case of younger teachers, both in integrated special education, in special education and in mainstream education.

## II. Method

### Research methodology

#### 1. Independent variable

##### a. form of education:

- mainstream education (teachers);
- special education (teachers);
- special integrated education (school counselors);

b. age - the median age of the subjects in the investigated group has the value 42, so that two experimental groups were defined:

- younger teachers (including under 42 years old)
- older teachers (more than 42 years old);

c. the didactic experience - the median seniority of the subjects from the investigated group has the value 18, being defined two experimental groups:

- less experienced teachers (less than 18 years old);
- teachers with more experience (over 18 years old);

##### d. teaching degree:

- beginning or final teachers;
- teachers with didactic degree II;
- teachers with didactic degree I.

#### 2. Dependent variable

##### a. the level of professional stress, operationalized by:

- the level of stress at work;
- the level of stress associated with the work itself;
- the level of stress associated with the lack of organizational support.

##### b. the perceived level of professional stress;

##### c. the level of professional exhaustion, operationalized by:

- the level of emotional exhaustion;
- level of depersonalization;
- the level of reduction of personal achievements.

### Instruments

In order to collect quantitative data, the following techniques were used: tests, scales, questionnaires, knowledge sheet.

#### A. *Knowledge sheet*

Author: Maria Comăneanu, 2019.

The knowledge sheet includes 5 sections: Identification Data; Family; Professional Situation; Self-assessment; Interests, free time; Remarks; Information and consent form for psychological evaluation, with processing of personal data offline and online.

#### B. *JSS - Job Stress Survey*

Authors: Charles D. Spielberger Ph.D., Peter R. Vagg Ph.D., 2010.

The test is accredited by the Romanian College of Psychologists for an indefinite period. The Job Stress Survey is designed to assess the general sources of occupational stress in people of both sexes over the age of 18. JSS focuses on work situations that can generate psychological stress.

Each of the 30 items describes a work situation with the potential to generate stress and evaluates both its perceived severity and its frequency of occurrence. In addition to providing information on stressors that have a negative impact on individual employees, JSS also helps identify sources of occupational stress specific to employee groups and allows you to compare the stress level of employees in various departments of the same organization. JSS provides scores for 3 scales and 6 subscales.

*B. MBI Questionnaire – Professional Burnout Assessment Questionnaire - Maslach Burnout Inventory*

Authors: Christine Maslach and Susan E. Jackson, 1981.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory assessment questionnaire has 3 scales and evaluates the three aspects: Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization, Reduction of personal achievements. Emotional exhaustion is the waste of emotional energy and the perception of the inadequacy of one's emotions with the created situation, when the individual manifests a low emotional tone, indifference, or emotional supersaturation. Depersonalization is the cognitive and emotional distancing from others, especially those with whom the person must interact in the performance of work tasks, the deterioration of interpersonal relationships within the reference group and negative attitude towards their own accomplishments. The reduction of personal achievements refers to reduced feelings of effectiveness and devaluation of work. It is manifested by the decrease of personal performance, the reduction of the meaning of personal accomplishments, negative attitude towards one's own accomplishments, the reduction of labor productivity.

*D. Perceived Stress Scale Questionnaire- SP-93*

Authors: Levenstein S. et al., 1993.

Levenstein and colleagues developed this form of the scale for measuring the perception of stress, the degree to which situations in a person's life are considered stressful (low stress; moderate stress; intense stress). It explores the individual experience of stress, the subjective feeling of stress felt and how an individual evaluates it. The scale questions are of a general nature, therefore they can be applied to any subgroup of the population and refer to the feelings and thoughts experienced by the participants in the last 6 months.

**Conducting research**

The research is a cross-sectional one, carried out during the first half of the 2019-2020 school year, a period in which tests, scales and questionnaires were applied. The objective was to analyze the situation existing at the time of the evaluation without considering the analysis of changes in this situation over a longer period. The group of subjects was constituted by convenience sampling, the main selection criterion being the status of teaching staff. The tests, scales and questionnaires were administered to the respondents in pencil-paper format, face-to-face, on groups of subjects made up of teachers from the same school. Participation in the investigation was voluntary and unconditional, and the selection of participants was based on the principle of informed consent.

**Lot of subjects**

The group of research subjects includes 300 teachers:

- from the perspective of the type of education in which they carry out their activity, 129 work in special education, 45 in integrated special education (school counselors) and 126 carry out their activity in mainstream education;
- from the perspective of age, 147 teachers are between 19 and 42 years old inclusive, while 153 teachers are between 43 and 66 years old;

- from the perspective of professional experience, 155 teachers have seniority in activity between 1 and 18 years inclusive, while 145 teachers have seniority in activity between 19 and 45 years;
- from the perspective of the didactic degree, 61 teachers are beginners or have the definitive didactic degree, 55 teachers have the didactic degree II and 184 teachers have the didactic degree I;
- from the perspective of the professional status, 272 teachers are tenured and only 28 are substitutes; the small number of substitute teachers makes it impossible to refine the analysis and investigate the influence of status on the professional stress felt.

### III. Results

#### Professional stress in special integrated education

A. **The level of professional stress in integrated special education** is similar to that in special education (independent samples t test,  $p = 0.275$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p < 0.001$ ). The stress assessment index in integrated special education is similar to that in special education ( $p = 0.354$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p = 0.007$ ). The evaluation index of the frequency of professional stress in integrated special education is similar to special education ( $p = 0.368$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p < 0.001$ ).

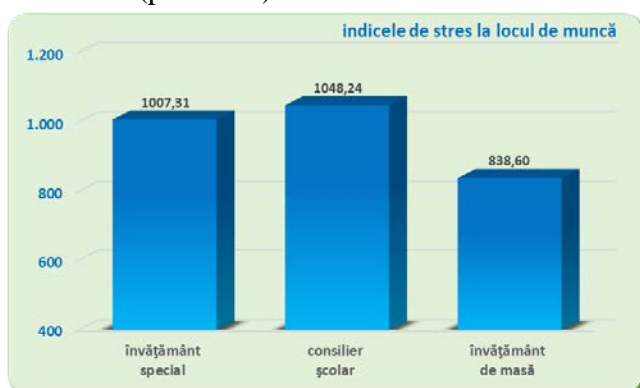


Chart no. 1: The stress index at work in mass education, special and specially integrated (school counselors)



Chart no. 2: Severity of stress at work in mainstream and special education (school counselors)

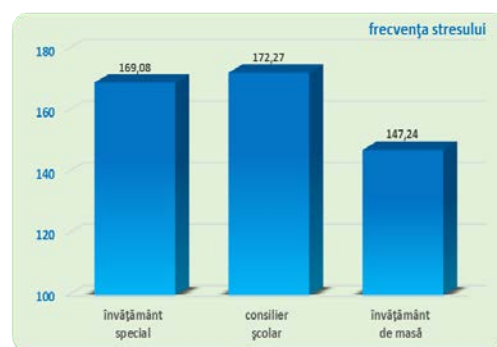


Chart no. 3: Frequency of stress at work in mainstream and special education (school counselors)

**B. The level of professional stress associated with work itself in special education** is similar to the level observed in special education ( $p = 0.557$ ), but significantly higher than in mainstream education ( $p = 0.001$ ). The index for assessing the severity of work stress associated with work itself in integrated special education is similar to special education ( $p = 0.559$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p = 0.009$ ). The evaluation index of the frequency of professional stress associated with work itself in integrated special education is similar to special education ( $p = 0.656$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p < 0.001$ ).

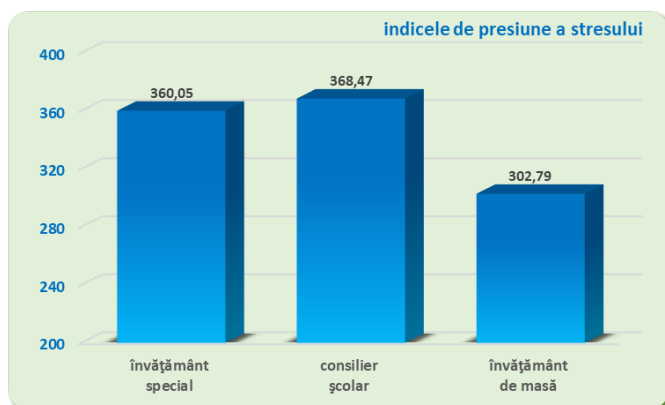


Chart no. 4: Stress pressure index in mass education, special and specially integrated (school counselors)



Chart no. 5: Severity of pressure in mass education, special and specially integrated (school counselors)

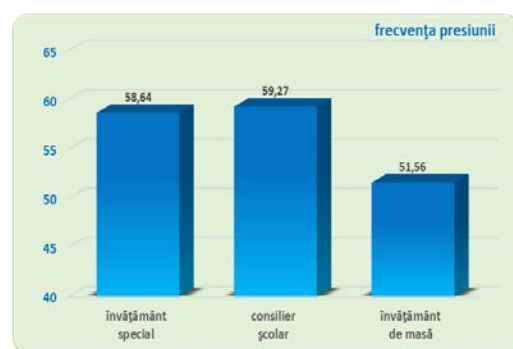


Chart no. 6: Pressure frequency in mass education, special and specially integrated (school counselors)

**C. The level of professional stress associated with the lack of organizational support in integrated special education** is similar to that in special education ( $p = 0.145$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p < 0.001$ ). The assessment index of the severity of professional stress associated with the lack of organizational support in integrated special education is similar to special education ( $p = 0.195$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p = 0.008$ ). The assessment index of the frequency of stress associated with

the lack of organizational support in integrated special education is similar to special education ( $p = 0.297$ ), but significantly higher compared to mainstream education ( $p < 0.001$ ).

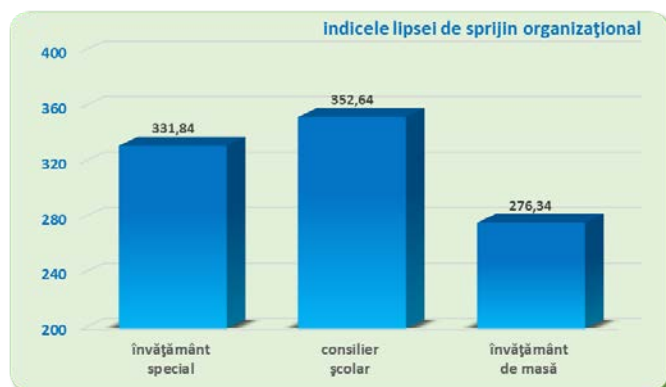


Chart no. 7: Index of lack of organizational support in mass education, special and specially integrated (school counselors)



Chart no. 8: Severity of lack of organizational support in mainstream and special integrated education (school counselors)

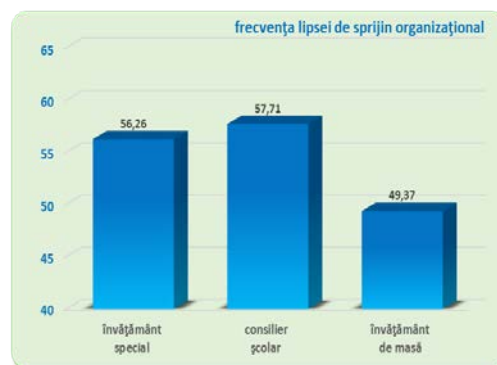


Chart no. 9: Frequency of lack of organizational support in mainstream and special education (school counselors)

#### IV. Analysis of results and discussions

##### A. Professional stress in specially integrated education

The professional stress of school counselors is similar to that of teachers in special and significantly higher education compared to teachers in mass schools, both in terms of professional stress associated with the work itself and in terms of professional stress associated with lack of organizational support, both in terms of stress severity and in terms of stress frequency.

The responsibility assumed for working with a very large number of pupils is particularly high. According to the Ministry of Education and Research, Order no. 5555 / 07.10.2011, Article 1, paragraph 4: "The Psycho-Free Assistance Cabinet provides psycho-pedagogical assistance services to at least two educational units which together have a group of 400 preschools or 800 students" (omen Nr. 5555 / 07.10.2011, p. 9).



If we refer to this conditioning, but we do not omit to mention that in reality, a position of school counselor is assigned a number between 400 and 2000 students, then the occupation of this position involves tasks of exaggerated responsibility.

The Federation of Free Trade Unions in Education (FSLI) shows at the beginning of 2020 that a school counselor may be required to work with even 2,000 students, which is why it was requested to enact amendments to the National Education Law, which hire more school counselors.

a) After each school counselor had the task of working with so many students for years, since 2014, the Ministry of Education and Research has supplemented its activity weekly with 4 hours of teaching.

In this way it can be seen how several kindergartens / schools / high schools are assigned to a single psycho-pedagogical assistance office, to which are added the teaching hours.

Another aspect to mention is that between these schools there are differences in terms of socio-economic and educational level of students and their families, differences that mark the school counselor over time, because it forces him to constantly adapt both speeches as well as intervention methods.

On the other hand, in exceptional situations where students' parents interact with school counselors, it has been found that they may develop unrealistic expectations about the effect they imagine their meetings should have, without distinguishing them from sessions given by a psychotherapist or psychological counselor. Because of this erroneous and propagated perception, of the false disappointments that both parents and students have, the phenomenon of avoiding the school counselor is projected and developed unnaturally.

As time goes on, school counselors begin to recognize that much of what was once their system of expectations in relation to this profession remains unachievable.

Attitudes lacking appreciation not only from students and parents / relatives / beneficiaries, but also ignoring the things they do by the boss or bosses, criticism brought by them, lack of collaboration with colleagues or difficult relationships with them, lead at the appearance of the lack of enthusiasm, of hope, of appreciation of one's own person, of the feelings of helplessness and indisposition.

Difficult relationships with colleagues translate into the professional life of the school counselor in many stressful causes. On the one hand, teachers have the expectation that the support of the conducting classes will be mostly done by the school counselors, to solve thus or not only, the problems related to their behaviors in class and in classes, and on the other hand, other teachers, teachers or not, ignore, discredit, or disregard the role of the school counselor.

In the absence of a specially approved procedure, at least at the level of internal decision of the school unit, through which school counselors are supported, some of them manage to mediate and improve relations with colleagues, to convince and solve problems, but most fail.

The most important part of these categories of problems faced by school counselors is the lack of appreciation and recognition of their work, the lack of organizational support. Other previous studies have shown that social support and stress at work have a significant effect on the level of professional stress of counselors, showing that where counselors have received the support of colleagues and managers they have experienced less stress at work (Bakker & Van Der Zee, 2006; Bryant & Constantine, 2006; Peterson, Demerouti, Bergstrom, Asberg & Nygren, 2008; Wilkerson, 2009; Coban & Hamamci, 2009).

Due to the fact that they are included in a fixed scheme, of a complicated organizational chart: the classification is at the County Centers for Resources and Educational Assistance (CJRAE) /

Bucharest Center for Resources and Educational Assistance (CMBRAE), but they carry out their concrete work in within the psycho-pedagogical assistance offices arranged in the educational units, even if their direct heads are the directors of CJRAE / CMBRAE, the relationship with the directors of educational institutions becomes in fact the relevant one by the fact that it remains a professional relationship based on permanent activity reporting.

Many CJRAEs, but also CMBRAEs, very often do not have the funds to support psycho-pedagogical assistance offices, and educational institutions such as schools, high schools and kindergartens are not in possession of a budget for an employee who is not theirs, but of another institution. Thus, these offices operate based on the facilities provided even by school counselors, most of them, barely staying at the limit. Therefore, in most situations, the efforts made by school counselors remain either unseen or ignored. The choice of this profession was represented at the beginning, by the interest for the field, by the desire to assert and determination in working with students. Over time and because of all these obstacles, the perception of school counselors is at least major, if not profoundly distorted.

## **V. Limits of research**

The results of this study are affected by its limitations. Thus, as the study reflected the views of school counselors in several County Centers for Resources and Educational Assistance (CJRAE), the validity of its generalizations depends on the extent to which they are representative of all school counselors.

The conclusions are limited, first of all, by the number of respondents, as their selection procedure is not planned. Secondly, the methodology used, the use of the same quantitative method allowed the recognition at the time of assessment, in a short time, the stress on teachers in integrated special education, special schools and mainstream schools.

The number of school counselors was much smaller than that of mainstream and special education teachers, as these differences may influence the significance of the statistical results.

Even if most of the psychological assessment tools used are accredited by the Romanian College of Psychologists, having previously demonstrated validity and fidelity to the Romanian population, they have highlighted results on some aspects of the complex phenomenon analyzed.

## **VI. Research conclusions**

According to the conclusions obtained from the study, there is an analogy between the level of professional stress and the way it is felt in school counselors and teachers in special education. In contrast, there is a significantly higher level of professional stress in school counselors, compared to teachers in mainstream schools, both in terms of professional stress associated with work itself, but also in terms of professional stress associated with lack of organizational support. Thus, we can say that those school counselors appreciated by their superiors, have low emotional levels and self-perception in relation to stress, they register differences that reflect their increase with decreasing level of appreciation and can also be said with exacerbation of problems related to the conditions and content of the work itself. As a result, appreciation from superiors, colleagues, students, and their parents / beneficiaries / guardians are factors that further affect the level of stress in school counselors when compared to teachers in mainstream education. Thus, what school counselors experience can cause personal and interpersonal problems, explained by: altering the professional ability to communicate with the student or his relatives, cold, cynical, ironic behavior



or indifference to the emotional needs of the other; loss of authenticity during work that leaves room for professional distancing; lack of perspective and mechanical development of activities (Schroder, 2010; Freudenberger & North, 1985). The present study was undertaken in an effort to identify and analyze the level of stress in school counselors. In order to solve this problem related not only to personal policies, but also to institutional, social and health, this phenomenon should be recognized and debated. Thus, it is really necessary for such a study to be known in order to solve problems that could reach important dimensions for institutions, society and health. A major goal should be the development of health education programs aimed at preventing and maintaining health. For these reasons, it can be recommended that teacher training be extended by introducing special programs to provide information and knowledge about the concept of occupational stress, burnout syndrome, about their psychological understanding and physiological symptoms, about the skills needed to overcome and about techniques for improving internal skills to cope externally with the specific conditions of the work performed.

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