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## **IS SCHOOL A PLACE OF STRESS OR EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS EDUCATIONAL BURNOUT?**

**Abstract.** The modern world requires from a person high hard and soft skills, flexibility in change. Public schools are largely focused on providing students with information, knowledge, achieving high educational results, participation in competitions or Olympiads, thanks to which the school is higher in the ranking. Unfortunately, often in the race for grades, results, the school forgets about the comprehensive development of students, about equipping them with utilitarian skills and attitudes that will allow them to cope with difficult situations in adult life. Requirements towards students, organization of the educational process, pressure are increasingly causing stress, and in the long term educational burnout. Does the modern school generate stress and become the cause of educational burnout among students? The article highlights the importance of school as a place that causes school burnout in a theoretical aspect and presents the results of research worldwide on school burnout, in order to look at the phenomenon from the perspective of a threat to the well-being of the student and the society of the future.

**Key words:** school, professional burnout, school burnout.

**Introduction.** School is an institution where a child acquires knowledge, shapes his/her skills, strengthens moral backbone, verifies values from the family home, learns relationships with others. School is also a place where a student places themselves in the social system for the first time, shapes his/her identity in the individual, unitary world and in the broader socio-cultural world. In this context, school can be assigned a positive meaning. Its negative connotations are considered in the case when educational success is the primary goal of the school's activity or when school stress caused by an excess of school duties, requirements and expectations leads to the phenomenon called «educational burnout». In principle, an educational institution should be a space for the development of an individual, the impact of the school, depending on their course and quality, support the child's potential, while schools sometimes – on the contrary – block it, ignore it, and it may even happen that they destroy it. An overloaded curriculum, high expectations towards the student in the context of results, constant assessment of the student, expectations from teachers and

parents, increased responsibility, additional educational activities, school climate, lack of opportunities to regenerate strength and rest during the day are the causes of school stress, frustration and experiencing the school burnout syndrome. Students in Polish schools increasingly often feel fatigue, emotional and physical exhaustion, psychosomatic diseases related to stress (abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea, headaches and dizziness, skin burns, chest pain), depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, indifference towards school, isolation from others, lack of faith in one's own abilities, which is a huge challenge for the entire school environment.

*Educational burnout in the context of professional burnout.* The term burnout has been present in psychological literature for 50 years. The definition and concept of this syndrome was developed by professor of social psychology Christina Maslach in 1982, who indicated that professional burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment, which can occur in people working with other people in a certain way [11; 27]. Earlier, the problem was also drawn attention by psychiatrist Herbert Freudenberger, in the 1970s and 1980s. Theoretical psychological models approached burnout from the perspective of various psychological theories, including: existential perspective [18; 19], social learning and comparison theory [27], action theory [3; 4], cognitive perspective or professional crisis [13]. An interesting concept of burnout as a loss of resources was developed by Hobfoll [6; 7] based on his own stress theory, known as the «resource theory» (Conservation of Resources). The significant increase in the number of studies, analyses and publications addressing the issue proves that professional burnout and its consequences are very important issues for contemporary societies, especially highly developed ones. It is worth noting that in 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) updated the International Statistical Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), according to which burnout was recognized as an occupational syndrome resulting from chronic stress at work that can no longer be combated by conventional methods. The three main symptoms were recognized as: 1) exhaustion and a sense of total lack of energy; 2) negative or cynical attitude to work; 3) reduced efficiency at work. The concept of burnout is increasingly used by researchers in relation to students in schools. According to Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, and Nurmi [25], school burnout can be treated as a response to chronic school stress and is characterized by 1) exhaustion, 2) cynicism, and 3) a sense of inadequacy. Exhaustion refers to a feeling of being overwhelmed by school pressure, including chronic fatigue caused by worries and ruminations about schoolwork. Cynicism towards school refers to a detached or indifferent attitude towards school in general, with a loss of interest and motivation in school activities and an inability to understand it. A sense of inadequacy as a student refers to a feeling of «not coping with grades» in school, a lack of achievement in school and in school in general. It should be added that exhaustion is a stress component of burnout, while a cynical attitude is considered an individual's way of distancing oneself from a situation of excessive burden [14].

School burnout in children occurs when children are faced with constant stress or frustration, without a chance to relax and recharge. The pressure to perform in schools has been steadily increasing for some time now. Even first-graders feel this pressure. Depression in such children is no longer unknown. As a result, their satisfaction with acquiring new information, gaining new knowledge about themselves about the world, learning new activities, exploring and experiencing new things decreases even more, which sets in motion a downward spiral that inevitably ends in burnout. Although previous longitudinal studies have shed some light on the development of school burnout symptoms, these studies have usually covered only a short period. Therefore, longer-term analyses are needed to determine whether the symptoms of burnout in students identified in upper secondary schools appear in some during their primary and lower secondary school years. Although scholars consider school burnout to be common especially among older students [9], they consider it to be a problem that occurs during the school years. For example, evidence on well-being at school among Finnish primary school students indicates that almost 40% of fourth and fifth graders often feel tired at school and almost half of sixth graders experience some degree of cynicism [24; 25]. It is therefore possible that students reporting burnout in upper secondary school may show signs of burnout in primary school. However, it is not yet clear to what extent symptoms of burnout identified earlier in education predict subsequent symptoms in upper secondary school students. Longitudinal studies on burnout are lacking, and it is not clear which factors are early risk indicators of burnout and predict burnout symptoms in students. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the factors at the individual level that cause students to experience burnout symptoms. Based on previous studies linking school burnout with various factors at the individual level, it has been assumed that basic skills (i.e. reading and arithmetic skills), psychological well-being and its problems (i.e. self-esteem and internalizing symptoms) and gender [24] may be some of the critical predictors of students' school burnout. Basic academic skills are the basis for successful school work, but so far relatively little is known about the relationship between reading and mathematics skills and school burnout symptoms in students. Researchers have linked lower academic achievement with burnout symptoms in secondary school. However, most studies have used grade point average or school grades as a measure of skills. This is problematic because these measures not only reflect an individual's skill level but may also tap motivational aspects of performance, such as long-term persistence, task value, and interest in the school subject. In a rare study that used cognitive tests, May et al. found that higher levels of burnout symptoms were associated with poorer cognitive outcomes (i.e., problem-solving processes and attention/inhibition). Furthermore, in a study using a person-centered approach, Korhonen et al. identified a group of students who had problems with reading, spelling, and math tests who also reported burnout symptoms. Similarly, Widlund et al. identified a group of students with relatively low math skills who showed relatively high levels of exhaustion,

cynicism, and inadequacy. However, these studies also identified a group of students with average skills and high levels of burnout symptoms. The phenomenon of educational burnout is a serious institutional (school) and individual (student) problem and affects an increasing number of students. It is associated with the constant experience of stress related to school and the lack of ability to cope with school stress resulting from too much pressure to achieve educational success. Reactions to stress can take various forms, e.g. feelings of fear, anxiety, restlessness, irritability, tension, general fatigue, tearfulness, explosiveness/aggression. Psychosomatic symptoms include: sleep disorders, appetite disorders, abdominal pain, gastric problems, nervous tics, stuttering, mutism, excessive sweating, muscle tremors, blushing [16].

*Educational burnout among students.* In Poland, students experience physical and emotional exhaustion related to the expectations and pressure not only of the school, but also of their parents, who place high demands on them related to educational results and learning, organizing, in addition to compulsory classes and the resulting requirements, additional ones in the form of sports classes several times a week, classes for learning an additional language, tutoring from early school years, classes shaping creativity and logical thinking. The number of school and extracurricular activities, individual conditions, experienced difficulties and conflicts in the school and family environment are a source of fatigue, frustration, which results, among others, in withdrawal from relationships with peers, isolation and deepening difficulties. The student's participation in the school environment can be considered in four dimensions: educational, behavioral, cognitive and psychological [22].

The educational dimension refers to the content and effects of learning. Each student develops individually and the extent to which the didactic process is effective depends on their characteristics. Teachers in Polish schools rarely take into account the individual level of student development, learning and predispositions. In their teaching work, they focus on implementing the curriculum, core curriculum and maximize effectiveness in the area of implementing the top-down program and learning outcomes, which may result in educational failures of some students whose pace of work or cognitive abilities are not adapted to the standards defined for the «average student». As a result, this may contribute to the development of school burnout [29]. At the same time, implementing the curriculum content requires the teacher to use methods, techniques and tools of working with the student that are adequate to the needs, taking into account new, active forms of work that stimulate the student's involvement and interest. In the case of an improper selection of activities by the teacher to the needs and abilities of students, unfortunately, the intended learning effects will not be achieved. The classroom climate and the relationship, the bond between the teacher and students are also important. Building a bond takes place through openness to the student, conversations with students, dialogue, which results in trust, a sense of security and real authority, which is often lacking in schools.

Stress factors in the behavioral dimension include the necessity of attending school and the reluctance associated with it, the need to enter into relationships with others, do homework and learning, participating in classes in a class group and extracurricular activities at school and/or outside it, participating in competitions, Olympiads, contests and overwork/fatigue with these activities. The group of variables that have a significant impact on the genesis of student burnout also includes organizational and program irregularities that force students to work excessively in a situation of constant time pressure, minimizing their autonomy and creativity [32]. Moreover, Maslach and Leiter indicated among the causes of burnout the lack of a sense of control, unfair assessment, a sense of being underestimated, loss of joy and satisfaction with school activities, interpersonal conflicts and a conflict of values. In addition, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of unsatisfactory and/or lack of peer relationships, exclusion from the class community due to a characteristic and/or status, and peer violence. As a consequence of the above, even students who were initially engaged in learning, due to increasing difficulties and lack of support from both school and family, limit their efforts in searching for new information, acquiring knowledge and learning at school, and begin to present a rebellious or negative attitude towards teachers and school. School is also a place where a sense of identity and belonging is shaped. Failure to satisfy the sense of belonging in the psychological and emotional dimension can lead to withdrawal, exclusion, or negative or indifferent reactions to other people. The degree of identification with the school group and teachers, the sense of belonging to the school community, and relationships in the school environment are elements of psychological participation [22]. An unmet need for peer relationships, a lack of a sense of belonging to a class group and school community may lead to behaviors related to breaking legal and social norms, which fall within the area of social maladjustment or demoralization. American studies on violence among youth confirm that the strongest predictor of aggression and peer violence is social exclusion [32].

In addition, the experience of social exclusion is associated with low school achievements, reduced prosocial behavior, aggression towards others and auto-aggression, suicidal behavior, use of psychoactive substances, depression. Therefore, the key in this context seems to be shaping the sense of belonging to a class group and building bonds and relationships in the class through integration classes, organizing joint games, performing joint tasks based on cooperation and communication, conversations and discussions about emotions, differences between people, perception of others, and the like. At the same time, school should be a place where the student acquires competences (knowledge, skills, attitude) in the field of learning about emotions in themselves and others and expressing them in a way that is adequate to the situation and place, as well as coping with difficult situations. The cognitive dimension concerns the degree to which the student is able to independently cope with everyday life problems, by using metacognitive strategies. Reflective thinking, prudence, care

and willingness to invest one's strength and time in order to learn the material and master the skills required at school are key here [28]. Reflectivity is related to meta-learning, which includes not only the ability to learn, but also knowledge about oneself as a learning subject. As Anna Perkowska-Kleiman points out, awareness of learning strategies allows for the pragmatic management of this process, and the arousal of reflective thinking in the student provides the opportunity to process the material, connect new knowledge with the knowledge already possessed. While in practice this means «slowing down learning», it enables a deeper understanding of it [17]. In the area of educational burnout, the cognitive dimension is considered a variable that reduces the risk of its occurrence or development, standing in opposition to the rigid transfer of knowledge, with a focus solely on the implementation of the core curriculum, rote learning and receiving an appropriate grade in a knowledge test.

School is a source of stress and burnout, but the family environment is also a stressful place that increases the risk of burnout at school, including: parenting mistakes, demands on the child, conflicts in the family system. Antonina Gurycka [5] distinguished the following as the causes of educational irregularities: 1) inappropriate emotional attitude towards the child (extreme emotional acceptance or emotional rejection of the child; 2) inappropriate level of concentration on the child (excessive concentration or ignoring) and false assessment of the child's abilities (overestimating or underestimating the child). It should be emphasized that close contacts, proper parent-child relations, acceptance, attention to the child and their needs, and support from the closest ones are considered to be an important factor preventing many negative phenomena in the child's life and promoting proper emotional and social development and maintaining health. According to Andrzej Januszewski disturbed relationships with close people (parents) have very serious consequences, primarily related to the frustration of the child's basic needs, which blocks their development. They also belong to the group of stressors that introduce uncertainty, instability, chronic anxiety, withdrawal and inhibition of cognitive needs into the child's life. Lack of support and time devoted to the child's own level and their problems causes a feeling of loneliness and threatens the sense of security. The child's fear and anxiety caused by the family situation translate into their functioning at school. It is particularly difficult for the child to maintain a positive attitude towards school and learning in the face of negative messages expressed by parents towards teachers, their contestation of norms and expectations related to the implementation of student duties and considering teachers' attempts to maintain contacts with the family environment as interference in private life. The child then remains in a conflict between school and home, a loyalty conflict may appear, which is an additional stress factor that reduces their resources [28]. The personal characteristics of an individual are a determinant of the extent to which they are resistant to stress and burnout [2]. According to research, important protective factors are such human characteristics as: the ability to effectively cope with

difficult situations, positive beliefs about oneself, satisfaction and a sense of meaning in life, a sense of one's own competence and personal resilience or a belief in one's own independence and autonomy [29] School burnout is associated not only with difficulties in achieving appropriate learning outcomes in the form of high grades (resulting from lack of engagement, lack of results), but also with demotivation [28; 29], negative affective states (anxiety, depression) alienation, withdrawal and isolation [28], negative perception of the social environment.

In Poland, research on school burnout was established by (previously cited) A. Muchacka-Cymerman and K. Tomaszek, according to whom school burnout is understood as a psychological phenomenon, which, on the one hand, is a complex reaction to long-term stress (including school stress), and on the other hand, it is the effect of multidimensional overload of the body (both in the somatic, mental and spiritual dimension), which is revealed in the form of difficulties in the functioning of an individual in various areas of their life. This phenomenon is closely related to the loss of the ability of a person to effectively use their resources (personal, social, organizational or physical) in a situation of struggling with a number of difficult events and life or developmental crises [28]. Based on the adopted concept of school burnout, the researchers conducted Polish-American comparative studies on school burnout in adolescents. The research results confirmed the relationship between burnout at school and sociodemographic variables and poorer functioning in the student role. It was also revealed that the intensity of the exhaustion syndrome is closely related to a specific pattern of socially undesirable personality traits, deficits in the global ability to fight stressors and a dysfunctional pattern of experiencing emotions [28]. The concept of burnout at school also appeared in popular science publications due to the research of the Institute of Positive Education, which referred to the problem of youth in the field of mental health and mental well-being. At the same time, the research methodology adopted by the authors is unknown, which makes scientific comparisons difficult. Since school creates a socio-cultural space for acquiring cultural patterns of constructing the Self, the relational Self, and constructing meanings and sharing reality, satisfactory participation in this «community of minds» allows the child to positively define themselves and their relationships with the environment (Bruner), which is a cognitive-affective basis for the strategy of coping with obstacles and, consequently, coping with stress. We consider negative connotations of school when educational success is the primary goal of the school activities or when school stress caused by excessive school duties, demands and expectations of parents and teachers leads to the phenomenon known as school burnout. The basic causes of school burnout in students may include a group of individual and social factors. The group of individual factors constituting the child's resources includes: the formed level of self-esteem, the level of assessment of one's competences in social relations, the level of school skills, the level of motivation, a low sense of self-efficacy, a sense of helplessness. We place social factors at the level of family, school and peer group. Their connections are dialectical

and transactional in nature. The group of factors inherent in school includes the teacher's educational and didactic activities (including: lack of individualization of educational and didactic interactions, lack of use of methods activating the student, teamwork, use of multimedia, etc.), organizational and physical conditions of learning at school (noise, lighting, overcrowded classes, lack of supporting teachers, etc.). The basic factors determining the effectiveness of the teacher's social influence on the child are: the style of their relationship with the child, expectations in terms of meeting the teacher's requirements, the style of educational activities, individual adjustment of tasks and requirements, assessment style, burdening the child with homework, methods of enforcing work results, the style of peer competition.

**Conclusions and further research prospects.** A characteristic feature of the modern world is change. This is also required by the Polish school in the face of economic, social and cultural changes. The school, its organization and the course of the didactic and educational process, the implementation of cooperation and communication with parents and the wider environment, as well as the disruption of the relations of basic educational entities and thus school life require transformation, otherwise the phenomenon of school burnout will deepen. Many negative activities of the school can be seen, among others, in the area of mismatch of education to the needs of the changing world and the labor market, few undertaken innovations, lack of didactics of thinking and creativity, neglect in the multilateral education of a person [30] as an individual taking on challenges, building and maintaining healthy social relations, coping in difficult situations, equipped with interpersonal skills, cooperation and collaboration in achieving a goal, cognitive curiosity and reflection, which may result in the mental condition of children and youth.

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**ШКОЛА - МІСЦЕ СТРЕСУ ЧИ ДОСВІД  
ОСВІТНЬОГО ВИГОРАННЯ УЧНІВ?**

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**Анотація.** Сучасний світ вимагає від людини високого рівня твердих і м'яких навичок, гнучкості в умовах змін. Державні школи здебільшого орієнтовані на надання учням інформації, знань, досягнення високих освітніх результатів, участь у конкурсах чи олімпіадах, завдяки яким школа піднімається вище в рейтингу. На жаль, часто в гонитві за оцінками, результатами школа забуває про всебічний розвиток учнів, про озброєння їх утилітарними навичками і установками, які дозволять їм справлятися зі складними ситуаціями в дорослому житті. Вимоги до учнів, організація освітнього процесу, тиск все частіше викликають стрес, а в довгостроковій перспективі – освітнє вигорання. Чи генерує сучасна школа стрес і стає причиною емоційного вигорання учнів? У статті висвітлено значення школи як місця, що спричиняє шкільне вигорання в теоретичному аспекті та представлено результати світових досліджень шкільного вигорання, щоб поглянути на це явище з точки зору загрози для благополуччя учня та суспільства майбутнього.

**Ключові слова:** школа, професійне вигорання, шкільне вигорання.

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