

Teachers' Professional Development and Burnout Syndrome

Abstract

The author of the article aims to present in short the results of the empirical verification of R. Kwaśnica's concept concerning teachers' professional development. The first part of the article deals with theoretical matters: the understanding of professional development and burnout syndrome. These terms are presented as opposing. Ch. Maslach's theory on burnout along with Kwaśnica's views were the basis of the research. The research was done from 2000 – 2002 on the sample of 257 teachers from different schools in different parts of Poland. In the second part of the article chosen results are referred: a diagnosis of professional development phases: preconventional, conventional, postconventional and the states of teachers' professional activity: expanding from not disturbed activity, through first symptoms of burnout to burnout syndrome.

Some essential conclusions can be drawn from the research. First of all, professional development can protect teachers from experiencing burnout, mainly due to growing professional competences, job adaptation and increasing creativity in teachers' attitude. Moreover, it turned out that, depending on the phase of professional development, different factors stimulate teachers' growth- these factors must be strengthened to prevent from burnout.

Key words: *teachers' professional development, burnout syndrome, teachers' professional activity.*

The demands, made on contemporary teachers, seem to stimulate their professional development outwardly. They encourage teachers to achieve next degrees in professional promotion. One can wonder if such outside motivation concords with inside one? Even more inspiring is the question whether achieving promotion

grades is actually associated with real personal growth? Theory answers yes, but on the other hand practice does not always prove the correlation.

Teachers tend to "grow" in profession- complete another postgraduate studies, participate in different courses and workshops. Gaining diplomas, certifications broadens their professional qualifications (formal features), but not necessarily their competences (for example, because of similar curriculum of courses). Taking part in organized ways of professional training, teachers seem to be in the process of development, but sometimes only formally.

View on teachers' professional development

Professional progress can be understood from a wider standpoint. Assuming that every pedagogical situation is exceptional because of different personalities in dialogue and their different needs, teachers are forced to adapt to ever changing situations. That can evoke advancement in competences. Such an approach is proposed by, for example, the situation theory (cf. Kurcz, 2002). Permanent and "not completed" development is explained by needs and motivation theories. Taking into consideration A. Maslow's theory, the most important factor maintaining professional activity and mental health, is the need for growth (self-actualization, achievements, ...) (Makin, Cooper, Cox, 2000; Schultz, Schultz, 2002). This need (no matter what it is called) expresses natural desire to be successful, which is one of the strongest human activity motivators. It influences actions in some ways, for example willingness to act, persistence, speed, it makes people ready to undertake even difficult actions and efforts, finally it increases the effectiveness of actions (Reykowski, 1976). Self-actualization is never completed, nor is growth. In the process of self-development, new needs and expectations appear which maintain professional activity and increase teachers' demands towards themselves. That is the reason why teachers' authentic professional growth cannot end.

Furthermore, new social needs and education policy changes oblige teachers to develop. Also the specificity of the teaching profession contributes to the need to change- very often, due to cultural and political changes, the competences turn out to be insufficient or not ready. In addition dynamical educational situations make the work and problems hard to predict.

Referring to the concepts concerning human professional growth along with the concepts about teachers' growth we can find more proofs that the growth is never completed. Considering, for example the views of J. Rutkowiak (1982), J. Maślanka and Z. Zaborowski (1989), J. Jakóbowski (1987), A.A. Kotusiewicz (1997), R. Kwaśnica (1993), J. Szempruch (2000), R. Harre and J. Butler "Smart" concept (cf. Gaś,

2001) it can be noticed that all of them emphasize progressive growing in profession which can be divided into some stages. The mentioned concepts use different terms, draw attention to other aspects of development, but the idea is the same – they reflect the process of becoming a more and more efficient and capable teacher.

In his concept R. Kwaśnica (1993, 1995), pays special attention to permanent professional growth. The author, regarding contemporary development models (J. Piaget, L. Erikson, L. Kohlberg, J. Habermas), ascertains that: “growth is a continual process, a process of becoming a human, which never ends... Development is not completed when maturity is achieved, it goes on throughout our lives – advancement does not stop as it is an open process” (Kwaśnica, 1993, p. 85).

The above conclusion is a starting point for Kwaśnica's consideration of teachers' professional development. The tendency to become independent from outside influences is one of the symptoms of this growth. In accordance with Kwaśnica's thought the core of teachers' advancement is: “the evolution of competences: practical-moral and technical. The progress in competences is paralleled and intercorrelated. It proceeds in three phases: from entering the profession (preconventional), through full adaptation (conventional), finishing in creative surpassing (postconventional) and replacing the professional role with personal identity (the knowledge about the self and professional obligation)” (Kwaśnica, 1993, p. 100). Referring to the above it can be assumed that every teacher can develop and the development is influenced by inside and outside motivators. It is also suggested that the development is not always connected with transgressing competences.

The abundance of research suggests that the process of teachers' professional development, although continual, can be impeded, which may lead to burnout. The problem is present in Polish schools, too. A lot of teachers, no matter what their age or job duration is, experience symptoms of burning-out. Recently, the range of the problem seems to shrink as teachers who are not active and ready to master their competences are not accepted in the profession. In Polish reality only teachers who are stress-resistant can “survive” and maintain well-being. Teachers, who feel job vocation, have high professional competences (for example interpersonal, communicational) and abilities to reduce stress are in some way predestined to engage in intensive and permanent development.

The understanding of burnout

Burnout has been identified in a variety of ways for years. It can be perceived as a process opposing professional development. It is differently defined in the quite extensive literature dealing with the problem of professional stress. It is conditioned

by many factors. In short, burnout often occurs as a result of unsuccessful coping with conditions recognized as threatening. The factors contributing to experiencing burnout are presented and explained by H. Sęk. In the author's opinion the burnout syndrome appears gradually as the result of stress and is enhanced by:

- subjective factors such as professional expectations, aims, duties, discrepancies between expectations and reality, role conflicts and ambiguity, lack of support, the level of idealism or realism, unconscious motives, myths, features and competences (especially social and interpersonal),
- objective factors such as job characteristics—organization and obligations, administrative pressure, socio-emotional job climate and many others.

However, the leading factor which contributes to the burnout-out is, in fact, an inability to cope with stress (Sęk, 1994, s. 329).

Similarly, S. Tucholska (2003, p. 218) asserts that the burnout syndrome is the resultant of interpersonal competences and stress reduction capabilities of a particular teacher.

Psychological writings propose abundance of burnout syndrome concepts. Probably the most popular, widely known and approved one, also in Poland, is Ch. Maslach's view. According to it burnout is the reaction of the whole organism to a prolonging stress when abilities to cope with it are not sufficient. Maslach stated that burnout is a response to a chronic stress rather than an occasional one. She did the research with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which assesses three factors:

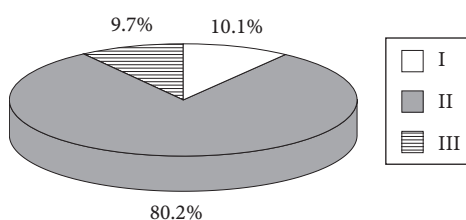
1. emotional exhaustion- feeling used up or drained,
2. depersonalization- feeling emotionally "hardened" and treating recipients as if they were impersonal objects,
3. lack of personal accomplishment- feeling inadequate and ineffective.

The author's interests in teachers' professional development and its inhibition (burnout) resulted in research. The research was performed from 2000 to 2002 and the main aim was to verify empirically the theoretical concept of professional development by R. Kwaśnica along with the diagnosis of teachers' professional activity. The research was designed also to find the answer to the question whether the diagnosed teachers are threatened or not with burnout and check if the stage of professional development is correlated with the burnout symptoms. Concluding, the research proceeded in two phases: the diagnosis and verification of hypotheses. The sample comprised 257 teachers of elementary and secondary schools from southern Poland (Małopolska, Śląsk, Dolny Śląsk districts). Having browsed the literature, it seems that the problem has not been penetrated before.

The research results

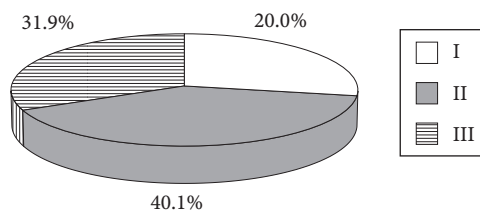
The diagnosis of the phases of the professional development and burnout syndrome was possible owing to the use of two questionnaires: the Professional Development Questionnaire (Ankieta RZ) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The first was constructed by the author. Chosen results are presented in two schemes below.

Scheme 1. Phases of professional development (R. Kwaśnica's concept)



I – preconventional; II – conventional; III – postconventional phase
Resource: author's research.

Scheme 2. Professional activity – burnout.



I – no symptoms, II – first symptoms, III – burnout.
Source: author's research.

Referring to the figures in the above scheme, it can be discerned that most of the teachers reached the conventional phase, which is connected with full adaptation to the professional role. Almost the same number of teachers place in the pre- and postconventional stages. Not many teachers keep trying to adapt to the professional role (preconventional phase). Similarly, a few of them seem to be creative and independent of outside influences and conventions in their profession (postconventional).

The Maslach Burnout Inventory was primarily adapted by H. Sęk. The author modified it and adapted to the teaching profession (Cronbach alfa = 0.890). It was

used to estimate the level of teachers' professional activity, which ranges from not disturbed activity, through first symptoms to burnout syndrome. The figures in scheme 2 reflect the state of professional activity in the diagnosed group.

The gathered results, as they are in scheme 2, are not optimistic. About 40% of the teachers are endangered with the symptoms of burnout. These teachers experience difficulties in emotional and physical functioning- are "infected" with the syndrome but "the illness" has not expanded yet. Unfortunately, there is a high possibility that without help, more and more symptoms will appear and they will become more severe, leading to burnout. Almost $\frac{1}{3}$ of the teachers declare suffering from burnout. If these numbers picture the condition of Polish teachers, it is very poor.

In the sample only 28% of the teachers do not experience symptoms indicating burning-out. But they are in minority. Additional information about all the diagnosed people support the statement that some competences and personality features can protect from burnout, especially emotional and social competences which help to deal with the job stress. These teachers, who placed low in MBI, recruit mainly from school management (head teachers), and declare taking part in different forms of supplementing education (postgraduate studies, courses, etc.).

Professional development versus burnout

In the final part of the research the results of two questionnaires were compared to verify the thesis assuming that the burnout syndrome correlates with the professional development phases.

In the research T-student test was used to verify the supposed correlation between the phases of professional development and burnout. It appeared that the burnout syndrome is experienced more often by teachers in the lower phases of professional development. Teachers preconventional in the attitude towards their job more often feel emotionally exhausted, and depersonalized and lack personal accomplishment ($M = 6.81$), these symptoms are more rare in behaviour of teachers in the conventional phase ($M = 5.59$), the fewest symptoms are declared by postconventional teachers ($M = 3.96$).

Comparable results were obtained when χ^2 Pearson coefficient was estimated. The test proved a statistically important correlation between the mentioned variables ($\chi^2 = 27.70$, $p = 0.000 < 0.005$). The states of professional activity (I-not disturbed activity, II- symptoms of burnout, III-syndrome) differentiate according to the phase of professional development. Teachers in the preconventional phase are the most endangered with burnout as they are just at the point of gaining

necessary competences and at the same time are exposed to a strong professional stress. According to the obtained data, 50% percent of them experience burnout and so do 33% of conventional teachers. Consequently, postconventional teachers seem to be more "syndrome proof". Highly independent and creative teachers, with a more critical attitude towards conventions appear to deal with stress quite effectively, which can protect them from burnout.

The syndrome correlates, not only in general, with the phases of professional development. Emotional exhaustion is experienced more frequently by pre-conventional teachers ($\text{Chi}^2 = 29.479$, $p = 0.000 < 0.005$) who in addition more often depersonalize people ($\text{Chi}^2 = 23.212$, $p = 0.000 < 0.005$). The research falsified the correlation between the lack of personal accomplishment and professional development ($\text{Chi}^2 = 4.859$, $p = 0.302 > 0.005$).

Summing up, two hypotheses were supported:

1. experiencing burnout is dependent on the phase of professional development,
2. the more advanced a teacher is in the competences and attitude towards work the less vulnerable to burnout he/she is.

The presented data lead to the conclusion that the process of professional development can protect from experiencing burnout. This resistance can be attributed to progress in teachers' competences, which makes work more effective and helps to deal with different problems. Increasing adaptation and creative attitude towards work, as suggested by the results, can help to avoid burnout. These statements are convincing, but further research in the area is necessary. Another problem highlighted in the research are factors which play a role in maintaining professional activity. It turned out that in the process of professional development different factors are important: at the beginning outside conditions seem to determine professional activity while at the next stages of professional development, inside factors start to play a crucial role. The conclusion can be drawn that smaller probability of burnout at higher stages of professional development can be attributed to psycho-pedagogical (inner) factors. A diagnosis of these factors would be essential for prophylaxis- because we would know which abilities and competences should be strengthened to avoid burnout.

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