

## Conference Paper

# Teachers of Special Schools: Stressors and Manifestations of Occupational Stress

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** This article demonstrates the stress syndrome among teachers of special schools. There are two teaching techniques to pupils with physical and mental disorders: (1) in-class interaction and (2) distance computer interaction. We assume that teachers of special schools perceived a high level of occupational stress; the specific professional and organizational stressors explained the differences in stress syndromes among teachers of traditional (in class) and distance computer interaction. **Method.** Our study applies the IDICS system that analyzes the syndrome of occupational stress: stressors – subjective representations – acute and chronic stress manifestations – deterioration of stress (Leonova, 2006). The sample consists of 58 teachers (2 m./56 f.) of Russian special schools. **Results.** The findings have demonstrated that 29% participants perceived the high occupational stress and the 'in class' technique determines the most tension in work ( $p < 0.05$ ). As the comparative analysis has proven, participants of traditional technique highlighted the stressful job conditions and chronic stress manifestations (aggression, depression, sleep disturbances) ( $p < 0.05$ ). The teachers who work in a class, perceive the value of work tasks greater and experience the emotional stress on a higher level. Participants applying distance technique on the contrary distinguished extremely negative actual well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Conclusion.** Organization of work process determines the specification of stress syndrome among teachers in special schools. Practical relevance of the research lies in developing and implementing of stress-relieving program, targeting different groups of workers with account of traditional/distance technique.

**Keywords:** occupational stress, stress syndrome, teacher, special school, 'in-class' technique, distance technique, disabled children

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## 1. Introduction

Socialization of children with special needs is one of the priority areas in modern education [2]. There are institutions in the Russian educational system, aimed at learning and upbringing different groups of disabled children (schools of I, II, III, IV, VI, VIII types). Some of such students need special conditions to study – distance computer interaction that is highly developed during the last decade in Russia [8, 11]. The traditional way of education is class interaction (classroom work); digital educational resources are used as supplementary ones. Distance technique implies individual work between the teacher and the student, the Internet here is the basic instrument in the organization of educational process. But the distance work requires teachers the integration of teaching, information and communicative skills. Therefore, the Russian educational system has special conditions and programs adapted to the special needs of different groups of disabled children.

Teacher's work with disabled children is a highly tension work [3, 4, 9, 10, 12]. A resource teacher should know the subject, be able to create the program taking into account students' psycho-physiological features, know the traditional and distance ways of teaching. The ability to work with different groups of disabled children is one of the professionally important qualities for a special school teacher. Stressors in teacher's work are intensive workload, emotional involvement in the teaching process with the absence of the fast available results, complicated communication, increased parents' attention, the lack of support from colleagues [1]. This kind of children is also one of the sources of the teachers' increased stress. For example, a class of mentally disabled children is characterized by special activity, behavioral and personal features [10]. The teachers are included not only in the correctional-training process, but in other students' spheres of life (family problems, health conditions, etc.) [4]. There are not enough researches in psychological literature, that are aimed at complex analysis of stress manifestations among resource teachers in general and special stress features depending on teacher's organization of work (traditional/distance technique). The aim of the research is to study the stress syndrome of special schools' teachers.

## 2. Method

TABLE 1: Demographic characteristics of participants.

	Sample (n = 58)	Form of learning	
		In-class (n = 28)	Distance (n = 28)
Sex (male/female)	2/56	1/28	1/28
Age mean	23-73 46.5 ± 11.1	25-73 49.5 ± 11.1	23-57 43.5 ± 10.5
Experience in teaching (years), mean	0.5-49 22.1 ± 11.4	2-49 22.5 ± 11.5	0.5-36 18.8 ± 10.5

## 2.1. Participants

There were 58 teachers of special schools who took part in our research, middle-aged women represent the most part of the participants. There are two groups of teachers who distinguish the way of communication with pupils: (1) traditional – ‘in-class’; (2) distance – communication using Internet-technologies. Demographic characteristics of participants’ subgroups are presented in Table 1.

## 2.2. Method

To evaluate the stress syndrome, we used ‘Integral diagnosis and correction of occupational stress technique’ (IDICS) [5]. Multivariable diagnosis of stress makes it possible to determine: risk factors in work/organizational conditions; subjective representations of a work situation; negative symptoms of acute and chronic stress manifestations; professional/personal/behavioral deteriorations of a stress type [6, 7].

IDIKS is a well-structured psychometric questionnaire. It consists of six scales: Risk Factors and Job Constraints (TV1), Subjective Perception of Job Difficulties (TV2), Job Rewards and Administration (TV3), Acute Stress Manifestations (TV4), Chronic Stress Manifestations (TV5), Personality and Behavioral Deterioration (TV6). Each scale consists of subscales which characterized a wide range of occupational stress manifestations. The integral evaluation under six main scales – Total Stress Index (Vo) – is used as a general index. There are ranges for all IDICS indicators, that are relevant to different stress levels (low, moderate, intermediate, high and extremely high). The indicators, that are of high and extremely high levels, are so-called risk areas for occupational workers’ health.

TABLE 2: The levels of stress among teachers of traditional and distance technique.

Total Stress Index (TVo)	Traditional (n = 28)	Distance (n = 28)
Moderate	7%	7%
Intermediate	55%	72%
High	35%	21%
Extremely high	3%	0

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Stress syndrome among special schools' teachers

Based on the all the collected data it was found out that more than half of the participants (63.8%) has the intermediate level of stress, every third teacher has high and extremely high levels (29.2%). In other words, work of every third participant requires the increased psychophysiological efforts and represents the threat to physical and psychological teacher's well-being.

The stress syndrome among teachers includes basic 'peaks' (high values) according to scales: Subjective Perception of Job Difficulties (TV<sub>2</sub>), Job Rewards and Administration (TV<sub>3</sub>), Acute Stress Manifestations (TV<sub>4</sub>). The sources of stress development are institutional factors (social conflict and low salary). The subjective representations of a work is made from the evaluations of extremely high variety of job tasks, level of difficulty, high importance of the teaching, lack of autonomy, ineffective feedback and high control of work process. Teachers experience negative manifestations of acute stress in cognitive tension, difficulties in behavior and high deterioration of physical and psychological well-being. Negative chronic stress is represented through depressive experience, psychosomatic reactions and sleep disturbances. Stable deteriorations are expressed through high level of burn-out, psychosomatic reactions and different addictions.

#### 3.2. The specificity of stress among teachers and its dependence on the way of the communication with children

Table 2 demonstrates every fourth teacher (38%) that works in a class has a high or an extremely high level of stress. Whereas the amount of distant-working teachers from risk area is far less (21%).

TABLE 3: Differences in stress syndromes among teachers.

IDICS: scale/subscale	Technologies (descriptive statistics: Mean, standard deviation)		Differences	
	'In class'	Distance	Z	p
Total Stress Index (TV0)	<b>54.9 (5.53)</b>	50.7 (3.98)	2.06	0.03
Risk Factors and Job Constraints (TV1)	<b>39.9 (10.21)</b>	33.7 (6.60)	2.44	0.01
Job Conditions (TV11)	<b>48.1 (10.99)</b>	40.8 (9.11)	2.63	0.01
Specificity of Job Content (TV13)	<b>34.2 (10.59)</b>	27.4 (7.60)	2.64	0.01
Organization of Work Process (TV14)	<b>38.7 (9.02)</b>	33.5 (3.22)	2,50	0.01
Task Significance (TV23)	<b>65.4 (7.10)</b>	62.2 (7.28)	2.09	0.03
Acute Stress Manifestations (TV4)	54.8 (2.54)	<b>56.0 (2.35)</b>	1.95	0.05
Emotional Strain (TV43)	<b>42.4 (4.75)</b>	40.9 (1.26)	2.04	0.04
Aggression (TV52)	<b>47.7 (8.45)</b>	42.9 (6.20)	2.41	0.01
Depression (TV53)	<b>58.8 (10.29)</b>	52.2 (6.49)	2.73	0.01
Sleep Disturbances (TV56)	<b>58.5 (4.88)</b>	55.3 (5.67)	2.30	0.02
Personality and Behavioral Deterioration (TV6)	<b>48.9 (6.76)</b>	45.0 (6.29)	2.28	0.02
Type A Behavior (TV61)	<b>35.8 (7.64)</b>	31.5 (4.82)	1.91	0.05

Table 3 represents significant differences in stress syndrome among teachers, who work in different ways.

As the comparative analysis has proven, participants of traditional technique highlighted the stressful job conditions (job conditions, job content, organization of work process and chronic stress manifestations (aggression, depression, sleep disturbances) ( $p < 0.05$ ). Teachers, who work in a class, have a higher rate of job tasks' significance and they experience emotional tension greater. Participants applying distance technique on the contrary distinguished extremely negative actual well-being ( $p < 0.05$ ). In general, teaching of traditional way (in class) can be characterized as more stressed.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The recent survey aimed at studying of stress syndrome among special schools' demonstrates that teaching is very stressful work. Every third teacher, who works with disabled children, is in the risk area and has a high level of stress. Among institutional stressors there can be distinguished social conflicts, poor salary, high level of work regulation, ineffective feedback, supervision by parents and administration.

The necessity of the rest to recover and unfair salary as signs of stress were highlighted in surveys by Kupriyanova E.I. and others. [4]

The main factor of stress among special teachers is a subjective representations of work tasks: the work is perceived as various, complex and meaningful. Teachers experienced stress because of the necessity to be flexible and be able to work with disabled children of different types, adapting the subject to the needs of every student and taking into account the absence of the fast available results of their work. The understanding of work significance is connected with State's interest and responsibility to teach and educate disabled children. Communication with disabled children and the organization of work process lead to the high every-day stress and accommodation of chronic symptoms.

The comparative analysis of stress manifestations among different groups of teachers shows that classroom work is the most stressed one comparing with distance teaching. Traditional way of teaching can be characterized with more stressful conditions and acute/chronic stress manifestations. Distance teaching makes higher actual tension of a tutor. Probably, equipment and technical difficulties, physical distance from a student and discipline problems are specific stressors in distance teaching.

The identification of stress syndrome among special teachers gives the information for implementation of preventive stress management programs. The main institutional anti-stress resources include the supporting management, good relationships among colleagues, favorable atmosphere and the improvement of teachers' incentive system. Individual ways of psychological state regulation represent the relaxation, emotional discharge and maintenance of physical health. The reduction of teachers' stress helps to improve the effectiveness of school and to maintain resilience among teachers.

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