

## PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AT WORK OF SUPPORTIVE TEACHER - CASE STUDY

doi: 10.2478/czoto-2019-0034

Date of submission of the article to the Editor: 30/11/2018

Date of acceptance of the article by the Editor: 14/02/2019

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**Abstract:** Work in a special school as a supportive teacher of disabled children requires experience and mental resilience. The supportive teacher is exposed to a whole range of difficult behaviors of the child (i.e. psychosocial risks), including aggression, which brings many other threats with a dangerous nature (accidental). In this paper the results of research conducted among supportive teachers from one of the Polish special schools have been presented. The research contains the identification of psychosocial risks and, as a consequence, indications of ailments observed by the supportive teachers. The results of the conducted survey concern the type of threats with particular emphasis on psychosocial risks, as well as preventive activities that minimize the effects of these threats. In addition, the respondents indicated the extent of professional work on private and family life. The research tool used in this study is a questionnaire divided into three parts: hazard identification, assessment of psychosocial risks and potential effects of their occurrence, and subjective assessment of the impact of professional work on private life.

**Keywords:** work safety, supportive teacher, special school, psychosocial hazards, aggression, disability, accidents at work, preventive actions.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous research results show that improper management of an enterprise or failure to follow system procedures can cause a danger to be built up at work (Niciejewska and Klimecka-Tatar, 2018). However, hazards at work can have different background because to the threat at work are divided into: physical, biological, chemical and psychophysical. The psychosocial risks, with respect to the others, are more difficult to identify and measure. Psychosocial risks are multifaceted and complex threat, which in relation to the work environment is more often studied and commented. Connected to the overall well-being and health of the employee is defined by the World Health Organization „as a state of well-being which every individual realizes their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his

community” (WHO 2018). Living and working conditions, which are changing dynamically in Poland, as well as in other European Union countries, cause human disturbance in: certainty of being, employment stability, work safety, overall stability, which brings peace of mind. At the same time, these changes determine equally strong continuous improvement in the area of competence, skills and knowledge. Lack of sufficient system support is intensified by a sense of stress (Barabanshchikova et al., 2014).

In Europe, stress is among the most frequently reported occupational health problems related to work ranks on second place (<https://www.prawo.pl/kadry/kampania-informacyjna-na-temat-stresu-w-pracy,276758.html>). Stress is identified on the basis of the features: negative emotional arousal caused by the conscious threat and excessive physiological response to the needs, which includes hormonal changes. Stress mechanisms have a very wide range and affect different levels, from molecular to social. Due to this range it is considered as one of the most common natural phenomena that shapes the interaction between environment and all organisms living in it, including humans (Wróblewska, 2006). There can be many reasons for occupational stress, ranging from physical work to organizational and psychosocial factors. However, in the literature the most often sources of stress are as follow (Siegrist 2015, Gólc 2015):

- quantitative overload,
- quality overload,
- quality underload,
- lack of control over work,
- ambiguity of the role,
- role conflict,
- lack of support,
- physical working conditions.

Despite the fact that organizations are increasing awareness of the impact on the health and life of employees (hidden threats), there are still professions in which it is difficult to deal with the impact of these risks on both professional and private life without the support of external organizations or system solutions.

Undoubtedly, this profession is a teacher's profession. The work of every teacher, especially primary school, involves exposure to a number of factors that affect health and work quality. The literature on the subject presents a number of threats - dangerous (accident), arduous and harmful, which characterize the teachers' working environment. The exposure to the numerous of threats classifies the teaching profession among professions with occupational risks at an acceptable level. However, there are situations that make the teaching profession, especially the assisting education of a disabled children, have high physical, mental and emotional requirements. Such work involves a number of risks that do not occur in work with a healthy child or occur with much less intensity. A supportive teacher is a qualified person whose main task is to support a disabled child (child with a recognized degree of disability) during lessons at school. Such a position requires special knowledge, competences and skills (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). In addition to knowledge in the field of science, competences to work with people with special requirements are also required. Among of others, the scope of duties includes: independent conduct of activities with the pupils, as well as help to the other teacher during the lesson. In

addition, the supportive teacher must evaluate the progress of their students and inform the rest of teachers and parents about them. The supportive teacher also prepares an educational and therapeutic program tailored to the needs of those under their care. It is very important that the supportive teacher is in close and constant contact with the parents of the children. Therefore, the supportive teacher must have the ability to conduct a conversation, and above all a patient person with a strong sense of empathy. A supportive teacher at school or kindergarten must also demonstrate creativity while preparing activities and tasks for students with specialized approach. Teacher's work is not an easy task. It all depends, of course, on the student's disability, as well as on the willingness and abilities of parents to work with the child after school (Feng, Sass 2013). Good teacher is like a good boss, needs to be a leader for his students (Ingaldi, Dziuba, 2016).

This paper presents the opinion of supportive teachers on the factors that have the greatest impact on their work safety. In addition, respondents based answers indicated how strongly professional work and emotions associated with it affect the private and family life.

## **2. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH**

The factors that have the greatest impact on the supportive teachers work safety have been assessed on the basis of the original questionnaire. Besides the personal characteristics of the questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part is the identification of hazards occurring in the work of a teacher supporting the education of a disabled child, with particular emphasis on psychosocial risks. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of five questions about psychosocial risks and the potential effects of their occurrence. The last part of the questionnaire, in turn, is a subjective assessment of the professional work of supportive teachers taking into account psychosocial threats, for private or family life. In the study only 20 supportive teachers aged 33-48 have participated. The limited number of respondents has been determined by the fact that this profession is really rare. Willingness to participate in the survey has been expressed by teachers working with children with moderate intellectual disability (they used support in learning and functioning in a school facility, three respondents worked with children who also needed help in moving around). The respondents' work experience was various. The most numerous group were teachers with 10 years of seniority as a supportive teacher. Five of the respondents had 6 years of apprenticeship at the given work, two only 4 years. Only three teachers have held their positions for less than two years.

## **3. RESULTS AND DUSCUSSION**

The surveyed teachers pointed out a number of threats that in their opinion definitely affect their well-being, health and safety. In table 1, the selected and the highest rated threats have been presented. Average assessment of the intensity of the threat (strength of influence on the health, well-being and safety of the supportive teacher) based by the average ratings given by respondents. where note 0 - do not feel threats, while note 6 - strong impact on the on the health, well-being and safety.

The respondents pointed to the most important threat in the work of the supportive teacher, psychosocial factors in addition to contact with viruses or bacteria (biological agents). Also as a source of threats have been recognized the primarily dangerous and aggressive behavior of children, which arise from the lack of understanding of the

surroundings and often as a consequence of their bad mood or fears and are inseparably related to the type of disease or dysfunction at the physiological, mental and social level.

Table 1

Identification and evaluation of selected professional threats in the work of a supportive teacher

No.	Threats	Source of threats	Average assessment of the intensity of the threat (strength of influence on the health, well-being and safety of the supporting teacher): 0-6 points
1.	Excessive voice effort	Frequent repetition of commands to the student	4.25 points
2.	Incorrect lighting	Working with children with hypersensitivity to light	2.8 points
3.	Forced, non-ergonomic body position	Working conditions depend on the position of the body taken by the child, physical disability, etc.	3.0 points
4.	Noise	Loud behavior of children, reactions to situations, crying children, aggression	4.55 points
5.	Tripping, slipping	Bad work organization, rush, etc.	4.95 points
6.	Biological factors - viruses, bacteria	Contact with other teachers, direct contact with sick children	5.0 points
7.	Psychosocial factors - occupational stress	1. Conflicts in working with other teachers; 2. Children's reactions - dangerous, aggressive behavior directed to the teacher and not rarely themselves; 3. Living with chronic and incurable diseases of disabled children every day	2.0 points 6.0 points 5.75 points
8.	Psychophysical factors - physical workload	Help in handling children with motor disabilities - moving, lifting	3.0 points

Source: own study

In addition, the source of stress in the work of a supportive teacher has been pointed the everyday contact with a disease, often chronic and incurable.

An important element of the study was the fact that the respondents also have made an assessment of the impact of professional work on private and family life. Table 2

presents phenomena that take place in the lives of respondents and are a consequence of the impact of threats, especially psychosocial ones, on private and family life.

Table 2

Phenomena resulting from the influence of psychosocial risks in the work of a supportive teacher on the private and family life of respondents – in accordance to education of children with disabilities

No.	The phenomenon is a consequence of psychosocial threats	Average assessment of the intensity of the phenomenon resulting from the psychosocial threat (the impact on private and family life): 0-6 point
1.	Abuse of stimulants e.g. a) Cigarettes b) Coffee	4.4 point 4.6 point
2.	Insomnia	5.33 point
3.	Headaches	4.0 point
4	Conflicts with family members	3.0 point
5.	Willingness to change the work	4.0 point

Source: own study

Almost all group of respondents agreed that their work and especially psychosocial risks affect their private and family life. The abuse of cigarettes (5 respondents), coffee (15 respondents), insomnia (3 respondents), headaches (2 respondents) and conflicts with family members resulted, have been indicated as a negative phenomenon that were the result of stress at work. Among the group of respondents, 5 of them indicated the willingness to change a work.

## CONCLUSIONS

The work of a teacher supporting the education of a disabled child, both intellectually and mechanically, presents many challenges to the teacher. The almost everyday contact with difficult behavior of a disabled student, which largely results from disease entities, creates many professional threats for the teacher. The biggest problem is, apart from physical or biological hazards, psychosocial risks. Difficult to identify, assess and analyze are a real challenge for teachers and their employers. The main task is to minimize the impact of these risks on the employee's safety, health and life. Teachers' qualification and teaching skills are sometimes insufficient to cope with the impact of psychosocial risks on private or family life. Communing with the disease, a chronic and often incurable, which carries a different, difficult child behavior (aggression, screams, fears) undoubtedly affects the psyche of every human being. As shown by the study, the teachers' reactions to stress that accompany their daily work as a supporting teacher are worrying. However, there are methods by which negative phenomena that are the result of these psychosocial risks can be minimized. Motivation to work, which carries a high psychophysical burden is difficult but possible. The school organizes seminars, trainings and courses for supportive

teachers as a preventive actions of a systemic character (Katz and Shahar, 2015). In addition, very important is the entire support mechanism in difficult situations. The teacher, in situations threatening health or life (both his own and the child's), should not remain alone. Auxiliary staff very often support in difficult and dangerous situations. Unfortunately, there are no preventive measures of an individual nature. The systemic actions mentioned above are insufficient.

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