

Occupational stress and stress coping mechanisms of special educators in Greece. Impact on personal life: a spillover model approach

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate factors that have an effect on special educators' occupational stress, their coping mechanisms and to their possible stress spillover from work to personal life. The spillover model has been selected to examine the impact of work stress to the home domain. In this context, thirteen interviews were conducted with Greek special educators. Results of the thematic content analysis highlighted that lack of equipment and staff, students' physical integrity, the organization of secondary special educational system and work experience were the main stress factors for special educators. Stress experienced at work has a strong impact in special educators' personal life, supporting the spillover model hypothesis. Results are discussed in relation to stress coping mechanisms that special educators use at work and at home as well as propositions for occupational changes in special education.

Keywords: occupational stress, special educators, spillover model.

Introduction

Teaching is one of the most interesting but also stressful jobs, since it includes intense dedication and continuous communication with many students, who have unique personalities and temperaments (Brown & Nagel, 2004; Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor, & Millet, 2005; Kalyva, 2013). Special educators seem to be in a more vulnerable position regarding occupational stress, since they have to cooperate with children with emotional, behavioral and developmental issues and deficits (Sloan Nichols & Lapnate Sosnowsky, 2002). Since stress can affect many aspects of employee's lives, including personal and work life, it is important to examine and provide knowledge regarding the challenges that special educators face in their working life and the consequences of these struggles in their personal life. Knowledge on this topic could be substantial to potential future strategies aiming at informing the constantly changing work environments in schools.

Occupational stress is defined as a situation in which an employee has to adapt to threatening stimuli in his or her work environment (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008 Brough, Drummond & Biggs, 2018). In those situations that employee adaption is not successful these threatening stimuli become job stressors (Jex & Beehr, 1991 Cooper, 2018).

According to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, the majority of European countries have integrated special education in their educational system by promoting and supporting the access of students with special needs in educational units. In the last few years there is a continuing development of Greek public special education and the establishment of new special education units, where more students can find access. According to the Greek legislation (law 2817/2000, OGG78/A/14-3-2000), students are recognized with special education needs if they have been diagnosed with neurodevelopmental and cognitive disorders, autism, learning difficulties, speech problems, cognitive, social and emotional difficulties. Special education consists of primary,

secondary and technical – vocational schools. Education is public and free with students allocated to schools based on their diagnosis. Secondary special education is mandatory and consists of 4 years in junior high school and another 4 years in high school.

Special educator's duties and responsibilities according to Greek legislation (OGGB/1340/16-10-2002), are to organize the teaching material of their students, provide advice and guidelines to students' parents regarding educational issues that students may struggle with and propose educational activities that may develop and betterment students' skills. Finally, they have to cooperate with the school's psychologists and social workers regarding students' special needs and issues.

A significant number of international studies have examined the factors that can affect special educators' occupational stress. Trendal (1989) found that special educators with less working experience were more stressed and work experience as a significant factor of work stress was also supported in subsequent research (Nelson, Maculan, Robert and Ohlund, 2001; Kalyva, 2013; Bailey, 2018).

Another important factor of work stress has been found to be lack of teaching equipment (Williams & Gersch, 2004; Adeniyi, Fakalade & Adeyinka, 2010). Lack of support from the administration and lack of educational material and support from the government was reported as an additional stressful factor for special educators (Karr & Londerholm, 1991; Adeniyi, Fakolade & Adeyinka, 2010). Teaching to students with severe and multiple disabilities was experienced as a stressful situation in itself (Adeniyi, Fakolade & Adeyinka, 2010; Romano, 2016) due to student's challenging behaviors (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Male & May, 1997; Galloway, 2018) and to the intense communication needs necessary for successful interaction and teaching (Piotrowski & Plash, 2006; Braun-Lewensohn, 2016). Bureaucracy and role ambiguity were also reported as significant stressful factors as they were represented by teachers as not related to the nature of their job (Billingsley, 2004; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Karr & Landerholm, 1991; Piotrowski & Plash, 2006; Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, 2015).

In Greek literature, teaching in heterogeneous classes has been reported as a stressful factor for special educators (Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008; Basdaris, 2017) with students' difficulties that stem from their disabilities affecting teachers' stress the most (Kokkinos & Davazoglou, 2009). Moreover, Greek special educators without further expertise on the field of special education, reported feelings of inadequacy concerning their job skills (Kokkinos & Davazoglou, 2009; Basdaris, 2017). In a study by Kokkinos and Davazoglou (2009) it was supported that lack of equipment and resources are quite stressful for these employees, with the study of Antoniou, Polychroni and Kotroni (2009) adding an extra stress factor which was lack of support from the government. Rules and procedures relating to work's organization were identified as stress indicators for special educators, since in a study by Lazuras (2006) was found that teachers were not informed on how to operate their working tasks, and had few guidelines on the accomplishment of the teaching procedure (Lazouras, 2006; Ilia, 2018)

A study conducted by Antoniou, Polychroni and Kotroni (2009) supported that one of the most effective coping mechanisms special educators use to alleviate occupational stress is to try to employ ways to make their job more appealing by building stable interpersonal relationships. Moreover, they stated that they tend to initiate activities and hobbies, as personal life is connected with performance and stress in working life (Antoniou, Polychroni and Kotroni, 2009). This connection can be explained by the spillover model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2012).

The spillover effect tries to explain the impact of work domain towards people's personal life domain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2012). The spillover effect refers to the transference of experiences at work, such as stress, to the personal life of employees. The spillover is an intra-individual process since there is a transference of someone's emotional state (stress,

joy) towards their personal life and can be either positive or negative (Kinnunen, Feldt, Geurts & Pulkkinen, 2006; Lourel, Ford, Gamassou, Gueguen & Hartmann, 2009). This model was supported in a study that used the spillover model and found that participants, who lost their concern and excitement for teaching, transferred this experience towards their family engaging less in their intimate relationships (Bakker, Petrou & Tsaousis, 2012).

Studies that investigate stress factors in the work of special educators are very limited while the concept of the spillover effect has not been investigated in the context of education. Drawing from this research gap, the present research aimed at identifying the factors that affect stress spillover from the workplace to the personal life of special educators and the effect it has to the quality of their work. Since stress is influenced by complex psychosocial factors, a qualitative approach was chosen to offer an in-depth investigation of the underlying factors that lead to stress spillover and examine how these factors are constructed in the discourse of special educators. Based on the literature gap and the aim of the study three research questions have been generated. The first was "Which are the main factors of occupational stress in special educators?" the second was "Which factors affect occupational stress spillover in special educator's personal life?" and the third was "Which are the stress coping mechanisms that special educators use to alleviate job stress?". The aim of the current research project was to identify the key factors that contribute to occupational stress to special educators and identify the factors that can lead to stress spillover.

Body

Method

The participants of the study were 13 Greek full time and part time special educators who work in public secondary special need schools in the region of Thessaloniki. The participants were recruited from the researcher's private network. All participants were approached through phone communication and the interviews were arranged with the same way. The participants were female and male employees and their ages ranged from 36 to 55 years old. The gender of the educators did not have an effect on their attitudes regarding occupational stress. Thirteen semi structured interviews were conducted for the collection of the data. The interviews had a duration that ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews were constructed according to 3 thematic axes that corresponded to the research questions of the study. The first axis focused on questions about participants' job duties and environment, the second involved questions on the underlying factors of occupational stress and how they cope with stress. The third axis focused on the factors that can affect stress spillover to their personal life and the coping strategies of the participants regarding stress. A pilot study was initially conducted in order for the researchers to test the questions and receive feedback from participants about the clarity of the questions and the procedure of the interview. Interviews were voice recorded and then transcribed by the researchers. A qualitative approach was employed to allow for an in depth examination of the main causes of job stress of special educators, the factors resulting in spillover in their personal life and to further investigate coping mechanisms. Thematic analysis was selected for the analysis of the transcribed interviews. Thematic analysis has been selected because the aim of the study was to explore the topic in depth and find the underlying causes of stress rather than quantify them. Also, stress within the special needs education is a complex psychosocial issue that would benefit from an in depth approach in order to better understand the underlying causes of the factors affecting occupational stress, the factors that affect stress spillover to special educators' personal life and the stress coping mechanisms that they apply. Data were analyzed using the 6 steps approach by Braun and Clarke, (2006). The steps that were followed for the interviews' analysis were, familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes based on the participants' repeated patterns of answers, search

for themes, review of these themes and definition and naming of the selected themes and subthemes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The inclusion criterion for the participation in the current study was potential participants to be special educators who work in Greek special need schools. After ethics approval has been granted, an information sheet and consent form was first provided to the participants. To make participants feel more comfortable, the interview started with more general questions and progressed into more specific ones.

The topic of the interview included questions that could be quite sensitive for some participants, because they refer to job stress and how personal life can be affected by stress spillover. As a result, a pilot study was decided to be conducted initially, so as to make sure that the interview's questions could capture the research purpose and that the participants would not feel uncomfortable or distressed with the topic of questions.

Results

Participants' answers on the interview questions were transcribed and thematically analyzed so as to create themes based on the collected codes derived from participants' common answers. Two main themes have been generated and eight subthemes in total. Four subthemes created the first theme and three subthemes for the second. Results are presented with each theme followed by participants' excerpts on each specific subtheme to provide support for the subthemes. The two main themes that have been generated were 1) The factors of Occupational Stress in Special educators, 2) The factors of Stress Spillover in personal life.

1st Main Theme: The factors of Occupational Stress in Special educators.

The first main theme included the main stress factors in the work of special educators. Participants supported that the main stress factors were 1) "lack of logistics infrastructure and workforce", 2) "students' physical integrity", 3) "decisions regarding the educational system in Greece" and 4) "work experience".

The first factor "lack of logistics infrastructure and workforce" referred to the participants' discourse about lack of material, school buildings and personnel.

Excerpt 1

"the school building does not give us the ability to perform our educational and work duties" (female, 40), "it is an old school... this year we had no heat at all. Also there are few classes, both the students and we are stacked and being stacked is not good neither for these children nor for us" (female, 49).

Participants also reported that lack of workforce is another factor that can stress them a lot with some stating that:

Excerpt 2

"There is lack of staff. In special education we cannot have free hours when staff is absent. You cannot leave students in special education alone during free hours without staff being present. In special education there are no free hours, we all have to "run" these times and this continuous "running" stresses you a lot" (female, 49).

Excerpt 3

«The severe lack of material and technical infrastructure, accompanied with lack of staff, this fact stresses me in daily basis because it decreases my efficiency at work and it also reduces students' learning motivation» (female, 40).

Lack of educational material (i.e textbooks) has been reported as another stress factor, from the majority of participants by stating that:

Excerpt 4

"There is no provided educational material (i.e textbook, exercises). I have to prepare and develop my teaching curriculum" (female, 39). Another special educator reported that

“There is no educational material in special education. We take and use teaching material from the typical education (female, 49).

The second subtheme focused on factors that can cause occupational stress to special educators is the constant concern for the students’ physical integrity with most of the participants stating that they are constantly worrying about the physical safety of the students.

Excerpt 1

“First of all, what stresses me more is students’ protection... not get injured or to hurt other students” (female, 54).

Furthermore, the majority of special educators stated that in the school there are many students with epilepsy. As a result, these children can easily hurt themselves during epileptic seizures, a fact that can stress teachers significantly:

Excerpt 2

«There is a girl that all of a sudden can display epileptic seizures and as a result can fall from her chair and hit herself» (female, 39).

In addition, a significant number of participants reported that students’ aggressive behaviors are another issue that stresses them, since this fact can affect students’ physical integrity:

Excerpt 3

“Students’ physical integrity stresses me a lot, because there are many students with violent behaviors in the school” (female, 54).

Excerpt 4

“when a student starts hitting other students, this is definitely a stressful incident for me, because during this time, I have to manage the child so as to protect it from hurting themselves but also from hitting other students too. I believe that this is one of the most stressful situations at school” (male, 37).

A last issue that is significantly related with students’ physical integrity is the emotional outbursts occurring from students with autism, an issue that is also reported from special educators as stressful:

Excerpt 5

“I feel stress concerning children with autism, because they become aggressive when they have emotional outbursts” (female, 36).

The Ministry’s of Education decisions have created the third subtheme, drawing from participants’ topic of patterned responses. One major issue that is a major stressor for special educators is the unrealistic educational goals that the ministry sets for special education students:

Excerpt 1

“The educational goals that the ministry sets are not realistic and they are not feasible in practice. The ministry sets educational goals and for many students it will take months to achieve them” (female, 39).

Another issue coming from the Ministry of Education relating to special education is that it does not provide sufficient and proper training educational programs for teachers and it lacks in providing continuous learning programs that could expertise teachers further:

Excerpt 2

“I would like to state that (my) lack of working expertise is something that stresses me generally and the ministry does not provide educational programs and trainings” (female, 50).

In addition, according to participants' responses, the ministry of education does not provide clear directions on teachers' duties, a fact that can cause occupational stress to educators:

Excerpt 3

"The Ministry does not provide a clear direction concerning our working duties. This fact stresses me up to a point, because one year we have some specific guidelines and the other year we have different guidelines. Since there are no clear working duties, many of the responsibilities are based on teachers' decisions" (female, 50).

Another interesting fact that participants stated as something stressful is the frequent changes in the legislation regarding special education:

Excerpt 4

"There is no clear information and clarification about the context of special education (in Greece). It was stated by the Ministry stating that special education schools would be abolished. Now they state special schools that will be integrated into the Ministry of health. This fact stresses you, because you do not know where you belong in the occupational field" (male, 51).

The fourth and final subtheme that has been created is work experience, a factor that seemed to affect special educators' occupational stress according to their discourse. Many participants mentioned that in the first years of their working experience in special education schools, they tended to experience more stress comparing to now, due to lack of occupational experience:

Excerpt 1

"In the first years of my working career I used to experience more stress because I had less experience on teaching" (male, 37),

Excerpt 2

"During the first years of my work in special education I was more stressed. I wanted to change job. Now I am not that stressed because I am in a school setting with more functional students and I am more experienced" (female, 40),

Excerpt 3

"Formerly I was more stressed because I was inexperienced. Now, I am more experienced and I do not experience stress with the same way as in the past" (female, 49).

2nd Main Theme: factors of stress spillover to personal life.

The second major theme that has been generated refers to the factors that can affect the transference of stress from work to the personal life of the educators. The second theme is created by three subthemes: 1) working experience as a factor of stress spillover 2) working environment as a factor of stress spillover, 3) stress management as a copying mechanism of stress spillover.

The first subtheme has been created based on participants' discourse supporting that during the first years of their working experience, they tended to transfer their working stress more often comparing to nowadays, since they are now more experienced.

Excerpt 1

"In the first years of my career that I did not know the job very well, I used to spillover my stress (to my personal life). I was more vulnerable and tended to get mad more easily" (female, 49),

Excerpt 2

«I used to do this (transfer my stress) the early years of my working life. I used to pay more attention (on stressful incidents) and I tended to spillover them to my personal life. Later on (with the pass of the years) I understood that there is a cut-off point» (male, 37).

Other participants concerning this working experience as a factor which can affect working stress spillover reported that:

Excerpt 3

“In the beginning (first years of my working experience in special schools) I was not able to control my occupational stress. I was transferring my stress to my personal life with a lot of irritation to the rest of the family, I had sleep disturbance, I was less tolerant towards my children and impatient” (female, 39).

Working environment was the second subtheme. Many participants mentioned that school environment can function as factor that can reflect stress from spilling over to the personal life of the educators. An effective cooperation with the colleagues can be a limiting factor for job stress transference:

Excerpt 4

«I try to keep the balance between my personal and working life. The good relationships with my colleagues help me a lot (to keep that balance). There is altruism» (female, 36).

Furthermore, for some participants the fact that they do not teach at the current time students with severe disabilities, is another factor that can prevent stress spillover to the home environment:

Excerpt 5

“At the current time, stress does not affect my personal life because I am in a school environment with more functioning students” (female, 40).

The third and final subtheme that has been created is the job stress management that special educators apply during both working and personal life, as another factor that can affect employees' stress spillover. At this point during the interview, participants were asked to express the strategies that they follow so as to deal with vocational stress during the working time and at their personal life. The responses showed that special educators discuss with other colleagues about stressful incidents that may have occurred during work time, so as to calm themselves and deal effectively with their stress:

Excerpt 1

“I like (to discuss) and I believe that the conversations that we conduct are very beneficial. Positive results always or almost always come up with our conversations” (female, 40),

Excerpt 2

“I always discuss (any stressful issues) with the colleagues. The fact that I discuss the issue and I can ask for advice from the schools' psychologist or the social worker it is very helpful to me” (male, 37).

Furthermore, some of the participants reported that a factor that help them eliminate their working stress and as a result not to transfer it to the home domain, is the use of their working experience during stressful events at school:

Excerpt 3

“I will check if the student has been hit himself / herself and to what extent he/she has been injured and I will perform first aids. Nowadays, I behave more calmly because of my greater working experience” (female, 50).

Participants also referred to the coping strategies that they apply in their personal life, so as to deal with their working stress and protect their personal life from any potential negative stress spillover. Discussing about the stressful incidents is a coping mechanism that

is applied not only during their work time, but also in their personal life, with some of them reporting:

Excerpt 4

“I discuss (about stressful events at work) with my mother and my husband. However, job stress is not a reason that will bother me for the rest of the day (in my personal life)” (female, 40).

The data analysis identified some common factors that account for the aforementioned subthemes. For example, the years of working experience is a common factor that explains both the factors that can cause occupational stress to special educators and the factors that can affect stress spillover to employees’ personal life. Another common factor that has been found is communication as a coping mechanism that special educators use to handle their stress and not transfer it at home.

Discussion

In relation to the factors of occupational stress in special educators’ occupation, lack of logistics infrastructure and workforce was one of the factors that have been identified as stressful for educators due to inappropriate school constructions, lack of staff, educational material and general technical equipment. The results of the study confirm the results of previous studies which reported the same factors as stressful (Adeniyi, Fakalade & Adeyinka, 2010; Antoniou, Poluchroni & Kotroni, 2009; Kokkinos & Davazoglou, 2009; Williams & Gersch, 2004). The second main stress factor was students’ physical integrity. Special educators reported that many of their students develop epileptic seizures, a fact that can put their physical integrity in hazard. Furthermore, some of them demonstrate violent behaviors and emotional outbursts, especially students with autism, as a result students can either get injured or hurt other people. No previous study has identified these factors as stressful for special educators.

Previous studies have identified lack of administrative support from the government and school environment as stressful factors for special educators (Karr & Landerholm, 1991; Cancio et al., 2018) with Lazuras (2006) also suggesting that lack of support from the colleagues was perceived as a main stressful factor. These results provide support for this current study which found that the decisions coming from the administration and the special educational system in Greece can be stressful for special educators, since they include unrealistic educational goals and not enough training programs for teachers to develop their teaching skills. Lack of guidelines on their work duties and responsibilities has been stated as another stressful factor, a result that is confirmed by previous research. (Billingsley, 2004; Piotrowski & Palsh, 2006). Although previous studies have confirmed these factors as stressful, this study identified another major stress factor such as the unstable context of special education in Greece, especially with the frequent legislation changes in the educational system during the last years.

Work experience is the first factor was found to affect special educators’ stress spillover in their personal life, with participants stating that the first years of their career, they used to spillover their work stress in their personal life more frequently and intensively, comparing to now. The main explanation behind this finding is probably the fact that participants used to experience more occupational stress the first years of their career and as a result they used to spillover it more frequently to their home life. The current evidence can support previous studies on the spillover effect, which found that stress at work was associated with negative spillover from work to personal life (Lourel et al., 2009). The second factor that can affect stress spillover from work to home life is the school environment. The majority of the participants reported that the fact that they work in a good school environment with great communication and collaboration with their colleagues, is a protective factor for job stress spillover to their personal life.

In relation to stress coping mechanisms that special educators use, previous studies have found that during stressful incidents, special educators draw from knowledge of previous work experience to alleviate stress (Kelso, French & Fernandez, 2005). In accordance with previous research, results of this study supported that participants use knowledge from past work experience to cope with job stress. Networking and communicating with their colleagues is another coping stress mechanism that has been also supported by previous studies (Kelso, French & Fernandez, 2005).

Conclusion

The results support that occupational stress can be affected by different factors. The main sources for job stress in the case of special educators seem to stem from macro social factors. The continuous reforms in the Greek educational system and the effects of the economic crisis on the infrastructure of schools are the main job stressors. Although these factors are challenging to resolve, enhancing stress coping mechanisms could be beneficial, especially since participants supported that they prevent work stress from spilling over and affecting their personal life. Since special educators rely on team work to combat stress, so training programs on team building skills could be fostered in special needs schools to strengthen team dynamics and cooperation between colleagues. Since the present study is qualitative and is informed by the results of a small number of participants, future research could quantitatively further explore stress coping mechanisms of special educators.

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