

## MENTAL HEALTH OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

### *SAÚDE MENTAL DE EDUCADORES ESPECIAIS: DESAFIOS E ESTRATÉGIAS NO CONTEXTO DO AMBIENTE ESCOLAR*

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on the mental health of special educators working in elementary school settings. With increasing demands for inclusive education and increasing levels of psychological strain on these professionals, it analyses the key factors affecting their mental wellbeing. The study highlights the importance of preventing burnout syndrome, emotional resilience and creating a supportive work environment. It also explores stress management strategies and how systemic changes in the school environment can contribute to the long-term sustainability of special educators' mental health. Finally, the article offers recommendations for practice, including needed support from school administrators and other stakeholders. According to the results we can say that the work of special educators is extremely demanding and requires strong professional commitment and personal resilience. Despite challenging conditions, many special educators find their work a source of fulfilment and a sense of meaning, confirming the profound importance of their role in the education system. This research has highlighted that the conditions in which these educators work should be carefully monitored and that systematic support aimed at their long-term wellbeing needs to be developed.

**Keywords:** Hygiene, Personality, Profession, Stress, Special Educators

**Resumo.** Este artigo se concentra na saúde mental de educadores especiais que trabalham em ambientes de escolas primárias. Com as crescentes demandas por educação inclusiva e níveis crescentes de estresse psicológico sobre esses profissionais, ele analisa os principais fatores que afetam seu bem-estar mental. O estudo destaca a importância de prevenir a síndrome de burnout, resiliência emocional e criar um ambiente de trabalho favorável. Ele também explora estratégias de gerenciamento de estresse e como mudanças sistêmicas no ambiente escolar podem contribuir para a sustentabilidade de longo prazo da saúde mental de educadores especiais. Finalmente, o artigo oferece recomendações para a prática, incluindo o suporte necessário de administradores escolares e outras partes interessadas. De acordo com os resultados, podemos dizer que o trabalho de educadores especiais é extremamente exigente e requer forte comprometimento profissional e resiliência pessoal. Apesar das condições desafiadoras, muitos educadores especiais encontram em seu trabalho uma fonte de realização e um senso de significado, confirmando a profunda importância de seu papel no sistema educacional. Esta pesquisa destacou que as condições em que esses educadores trabalham devem ser cuidadosamente monitoradas e que o suporte sistemático voltado para seu bem-estar de longo prazo precisa ser desenvolvido.

**Palavras-chave:** Higiene, Personalidade, Profissão, Estresse, Educadores Especiais

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Working life is very important for a person. We prepare for it from childhood and, just as in childhood play, in adulthood work duties take up a substantial part of our day and become the dominant activity. Therefore, we need to feel good at work too. Work should develop us, we should feel fulfilled by it. Professional life is a space for self-realisation, which helps us to position ourselves in the community, to find our status and to achieve a certain prestige in society. It allows us to experience success and find meaning in life. Through work, we fulfil our dreams and life goals, build a dignified life in society, have a sense of social usefulness, and integrate into an order of social relationships. Work satisfies the need for self-validation, ambition and self-esteem. Each individual also develops a relationship to work during his or her lifetime, which is a subjective reflection of the well-being or, on the contrary, the discomfort of work. If personal positive attachments are exercised, the individual can find

satisfaction in work, work can become an important element in the development of the individual's personality and can be a source of self-fulfilment.

Mental balance is closely related to work - we can gain a lot through work, but we can also lose a lot if it becomes the sole focus of our lives. To dedicate our lives solely to work and expect it to fulfill and give meaning to our lives is short-sighted and highly risky. People who enter the world of work with great enthusiasm and give their all to their professional life can often quickly become frustrated and burnt out (Buchtová et al., 2002; Vágnerová, 2004; Křivohlavý, 2012; Lemrová & Dobešová Cakirpaloglu, 2016).

In order to cope with the workload, it is necessary to have a certain degree of adaptability. How workload affects us is largely a matter of our adjustment, personality characteristics, level of frustration tolerance and, last but not least, experience (Křivohlavý, 2012; Paulík 2012; Cakirpaloglu et al., 2015).

No one will probably dispute that the profession of a special educator is very demanding and stressful. Teachers are not only burdened with teaching, but they are also burdened with a whole range of stressors and problems that not only special educators must deal with and cope with (Buchwald, 2013). In order for a special educator to better manage stressful issues, great emphasis is placed on personality characteristics. Theories of stress have been addressed by many authors from many different perspectives. Hans Selye's first theory, which defines stress as a non-specific state of the body that is induced by demands placed on the individual, focused primarily on physiological manifestations. Cognitive aspects were taken up by Lazarus and respected both the cognitive and conative aspects of stress as well as the emotional ones. The word stress was adopted from the Agrarian "stress" (tension, load, force, pressure), which has its origin in the Latin word "stringere", i.e. to tighten, to clench (Grofová & Černý, 2015).

## **2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **2.1. Sources and causes of workload in the special education profession**

Most of the thought and feeling patterns that trigger stress are acquired during childhood in the family. They feel that they "have to" do something and that something bad will happen if they accidentally behave differently from what is expected of them. Of course, each person is a different personality and everyone reacts to stress differently. People with a so-called re-active attitude are much more prone to stress, feeling passively exposed to events in their lives, experiencing themselves as helpless victims and shifting their own responsibility to others. In contrast, those with a pro-active attitude actively shape their lives, try to live in the present and future rather than the past, take responsibility for themselves, and confront problems head-on (Hennig & Keller, 1996).

Negative thinking can also be a very significant cause of stress. It is scientifically proven that "we can become 'sick' or 'well' through our thinking and life attitudes" (Hennig & Keller, 1996). For special educators, and indeed other helping professions, it can be said that the motives that lead a person to "help" are very important. They need to make the work meaningful and see a future behind it, because a worker who suffers from feelings of meaninglessness and futility from their work has to expend much more energy, which of course is very draining.

However, according to Hennig and Keller (1996), physical causes can also be a source of stress. It is quite normal that some physical problems may occur as we grow older, and we do not react as flexibly to problematic situations as we did in our youth. Other physical causes can certainly include being overweight, lack of exercise, excessive alcohol consumption or smoking. Stress and burnout syndrome are not only consequences of individual and interpersonal problems, but also result from deficiencies in the management and structure of social organizations and institutions (Hennig & Keller, 1996).

Special educators often complain about the many direct hours with children, where, in addition to education itself, they must also perform the work of a social worker or social services worker, which is no longer their responsibility. A source of stress can be a breakdown in communication and cooperation between workers, or when the management of a school or other institution does not express support and trust to its subordinates, does not create a suitable environment for them, and only takes on the role of administrator and controller.

As the attitude is set in relation to the students, as stated by (Němejc, Smékalová & Kříž, 2019) "teaching aids have become a standard part of the educational process and their appropriate integration into education provides countless opportunities for both teachers and students, from activation of students, their better motivation to learn, more illustrative explanation of the curriculum through demonstrations, and many others" we should also think in the context of the pedagogues themselves and provide them with a wide range of possibilities in development and mental hygiene.

Responsibility for pupils and their education can be a significant source of stress for teachers. For special educators, it is all the more difficult because they work with pupils who have their own specificities that the special educator needs to know. Special educators are also held to a high standard of professionalism and continuing education. Last but not least, special educators, like many other helping professions, tend to be underpaid, which I believe is a very significant factor in the birth of stress.

The teaching profession fulfils all the components of the risk factors of burnout syndrome. Excessive demands are placed on teachers in terms of their performance. Kebza and Šolcová (2003) point out that the very basic characteristic of the work activity that can lead to burnout is not only working with people, but also the constant and uncompromisingly enforced demand for high, unwavering performance, which is regarded as a standard, completely without exceptions, without the possibility of relief and with serious consequences in case of non-compliance. Teachers have a high personal responsibility for the quality of their work. At the same time, they have less autonomy in their work activities and are chronically exposed to stressors. It is relatively easy for a teacher to begin to question his or her own beliefs about the success and meaningfulness of the work they do.

Poschkamp (2013) points to a specific relational structure that is often emphasized by teaching professions. This is the relationship with clients, which in the case of teachers are students and parents. Characteristic of this structure is:

- clients' dependence on a professional;
- emotionally taxing relationship context;
- Current expectations of expertise and personal interest in client problems.

**Social factors** - as the school is part of society, it reflects current views and events. It is a kind of mirror of the social system. For example, changes in the development of the family, its frequent disintegration are visible. The responsibility for education is often shifted by parents to various institutions (school or leisure organisations). Teachers are often held responsible for mistakes in education, forgetting that the family provides the educational foundation and further develops it through cooperation with the school. Another disadvantage of schools is that there is essentially no educational consensus that applies to all social groups. The diversity of parents in terms of views, attitudes, beliefs and ideas about boundaries, or different parenting styles, can make school education quite complicated.

Other risk factors not only for special educators, according to Švamberk-Šauerová (2018), are low social recognition, possibly low salary, which are also accompanied by the aforementioned high expectations for job performance. The lack of resources (staff, equipment, further training, etc.) is also usually problematic, which often leads to drastic organisational interventions that not infrequently clash with pedagogical self-concept. Society often tends to have a negative

view of teachers without insight into the difficulties of the teaching profession. The public often sees "pros" such as powers, long vacations, status. Teachers themselves, however, would see these factors more critically.

**Institutional factors** - a significant part of the institutional source of stress is also the quality of preparation for the teaching profession and the issue of teacher training. The future teacher is still being prepared for his/her profession as a knowledge broker, is not prepared to deal with crisis situations, does not have enough information to work with pupils with specific needs, and often does not have the necessary communication competences to adapt to the different target groups with whom he/she comes into contact. In recent years, there have been some changes in the teaching profession. At all levels of the education system, there is a visible struggle for students, which is linked to finances. This has led to increased demands on teaching staff in terms of qualifications, performance, the use of modern interactive and didactic techniques and the application of new didactic practices.

Currently, the increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs is contributing to the stress. Teachers from so-called socially at-risk schools are particularly affected (Švamberk-Šauerová, 2018). Teachers are also burdened by the lack of rest during working hours. Even during breaks between lessons, they often have to supervise pupils and generally have to be on their toes at all times, as they have a great deal of responsibility. Even the limit of the lesson itself can be stressful, as it does not allow for flexibility in responding to the current situation or the needs of the pupils (Poschkamp, 2013). The noisy environment that teachers cannot avoid is not favourable either.

**Individual factors** - the above-mentioned risk factors for burnout syndrome relate to the external domain. Švancar (2017) also highlights the internal domain - specifically personality characteristics. He notes that teachers are often chosen by altruistic people with a desire to help, who are emotionally invested in their work and take it home with them. This can then be a factor that increases the risk of burnout.

Subcategorization of stressors:

**Parents** - the relationship between teacher and parent depends on the social disrespect for the profession. Inadequate demands, disengagement of parents. Overburdening or excessive benevolence of parents towards the education of their children. Prejudice on the part of parents and the general public towards the teaching profession.

Excessive amount of work and tasks to handle.

**Time** - lack of time, time pressures, influenced by the lack of qualified teaching staff and the excessive number of pupils in classes; the bureaucratic system and the associated administrative burden in the form of completed reports, forms, timetables, tables, etc. Adherence to teaching standards and norms, curriculum, hall supervisors, school events, minimum time for rest and recreation. Employees are too busy with work issues to allow themselves to relax (Capek et al., 2021).

**Collegial relations** - unfair relations and practices; differences in values, poor communication, differing opinions, conflictual relations, expressions of hostility, lack of cooperation and willingness to help other colleagues, power struggles, competition, hostility, leading to harm to weaker and more sensitive colleagues, disagreements within the intergenerational team. The most satisfied teachers are those who consider the overall relationships in the staff to be positive and at the same time have friendly relationships with several colleagues (Smetackova et al. 2020).

**Education and school system** - changes based on the legislation in the education system; the organisation and structure of the education system and schools, new educational reforms, involvement in projects, employment of assistants in the framework of the much-discussed inclusion, job insecurity, instability on the labour market, fear of losing their jobs (Bártová, 2011).

**School climate** - without a positive climate, the school cannot function effectively; the school environment (school facilities, aesthetics, safety, lighting, etc.) has a significant role to play, which should have a positive effect on the activities of the staff; the key function is the school management - the professional but also human approach of the headmaster, support of his/her staff, motivation, respect, tolerance. Of course, the influence on the school climate is primarily the leadership, but without the involvement of the staff, even the best ideas will not take hold (Šmejkal in Čapek, 2021). Unsupportive and uncaring leadership risks increasing the workload of teachers (Smetáčková et al., 2020). Positive interpersonal and social relationships based on communication, values, rules, school regulations, etc., are all pathways leading to work well-being, a "healthy" atmosphere, and a sense of security, which also eliminate students' school failures and learning or behavioural problems. Although, we can support Daněk and Klugerová (2023) thought who recognise inclusive education as tool of social exclusion. Cooperative learning, which replaces traditional competitiveness, plays a crucial role in strengthening social bonds among students and developing their collaborative skills (Bačová, 2024).

**Evaluation** - inadequate financial and social evaluation; there should be adequate remuneration for a job well done. Clearly it should be a financial one, but recognition, praise, or "just" a thank you counts as feedback. Expressing gratitude for an activity that gives great effort can have a great effect on mental health.

**Pupils** - problems associated with education, indiscipline and disinterest in learning stem from the relationship between children and their parents, their family upbringing and their approach to education. A negative and rejecting view of the learning process is increasingly common among pupils. And when there are more such pupils in the class, it greatly complicates the teacher's efforts. It is difficult to do quality work in such a team where there is a sense of hostility, indifference, and no willingness to engage.

**Education** - pressure on teaching staff, from the management to expand their qualifications (professional growth), in the form of various educational events, courses and training to gain further professional competence. Teaching staff are obliged to continue to educate, deepen, renew and supplement their qualifications during their teaching activity, i.e. even after graduation; we are talking about continuous education.

**Self-assessment** - based on the approach to oneself. More sensitive teachers are more likely to accept their positive qualities and abilities. Low self-esteem, exaggerated demands, a certain relatability to their person, feelings of inferiority and doubts about their qualities. This negatively affects the psyche and reduces the amount of psychic energy.

It may seem that the teaching profession is fraught with pitfalls and stress that lead to overwork, burnout, negative relationships, problems with students, and without adequate compensation. These individual components listed here are causes leading to burnout syndrome, but they are certainly not a common characteristic of the teaching profession. It depends on each teacher's personality, character traits, resilience, and also on what he or she expects from the role. In every teaching staff there are individuals who are difficult to work with. They do not know how to use the experience they have sufficiently. They are insecure, passive, without an opinion



of their own, unwilling to admit mistakes. Or they are shy, shy in communicating with colleagues, etc. On the other hand, teachers are active, willing to share their experience. They will take advice, admit their own mistakes and their work shows progress on the side of the children, which is their main goal (Kucharská et al. 2013). Supporting teachers in acquiring their professional competences and pedagogical confidence in general is an area that needs attention and can significantly contribute to improving the pedagogical process and teacher satisfaction. On the one hand, principals and their representatives can also be unsupportive, unkind, inactive, unwilling to listen, help or reach a compromise. On the other hand, the leadership is inspiring, willing to understand, to seek solutions, to plan and organise effectively and, above all, to appreciate the mastery of their staff's tasks. This leads to friendly or at least respectful relationships and to the good functioning of the whole school institution (Čapek et al., 2021).

## **2.2. Exploratory Probe**

The motivation for choosing this survey objective was the desire to establish an open and confidential relationship with respondents and the possibility of long-term research and exploration to deepen this topic.

For a comprehensive presentation of the research, it is important to clearly define the main objective and the sub-research questions that were pursued. Based on the stated focus, the research concentrated on exploring the working conditions, stress factors and mental hygiene strategies of special educators.

## **2.3. The main objective of the research**

The main aim of the research was to explore the impact of working conditions and stress factors on special educators and to find out what approaches and strategies they use to promote their mental well-being and prevent burnout syndrome. The research focused on identifying the main causes of stress in the special education profession and what methods of stress prevention and management are most effective in the field.

## **2.4. Sub-research questions**

In order to fulfil the main objective of the research, the following sub-research questions were asked:

1. What are the main motivations for special educators to work in the field of special education?
2. What types of stressors do special educators experience in their profession?
3. In what ways do special educators support their mental well-being and prevent burnout?
4. What roles do organizational and institutional factors play in the development of job stress?
5. What methods of professional and personal development do special educators find useful for their work?

This set of objectives and questions provides a clear framework for analysing and interpreting the results of the qualitative investigation.

Given the nature of the research aimed at understanding the experiences and perceptions of special educators, a qualitative inquiry was chosen, specifically the method of semi-structured interviews. This choice allowed for a deeper insight into the personal attitudes and subjective experiences of special educators that a quantitative approach could not adequately capture. The interviews provided space for the free expression of ideas while remaining thematically focused on the research questions.

The researcher has plenty of room to use a variety of options, creative suggestions, own preparations and ideas, as well as enough time, which leads to the quality of the questions asked, their analysis and the resulting findings in the form of detailed information and the acquisition of reliable data. Also in terms of the personal and assumed intimate relationship between the researcher and the interviewee, which is also the basis of Gavora (2010).

The rationale for choosing a semi-structured interview is mainly due to the flexibility offered in this form. The researcher has plenty of space to use a variety of options, creative suggestions, own preparations and ideas, as well as enough time, which leads to the quality of the questions asked, their analysis and the resulting findings in the form of detailed information and obtaining reliable data. Also, in terms of the personal and assumed intimate relationship between the researcher and the interviewee, which is also the basis of Gavora (2010) - face-to-face contact with the researcher should guarantee that the respondent becomes more "open."

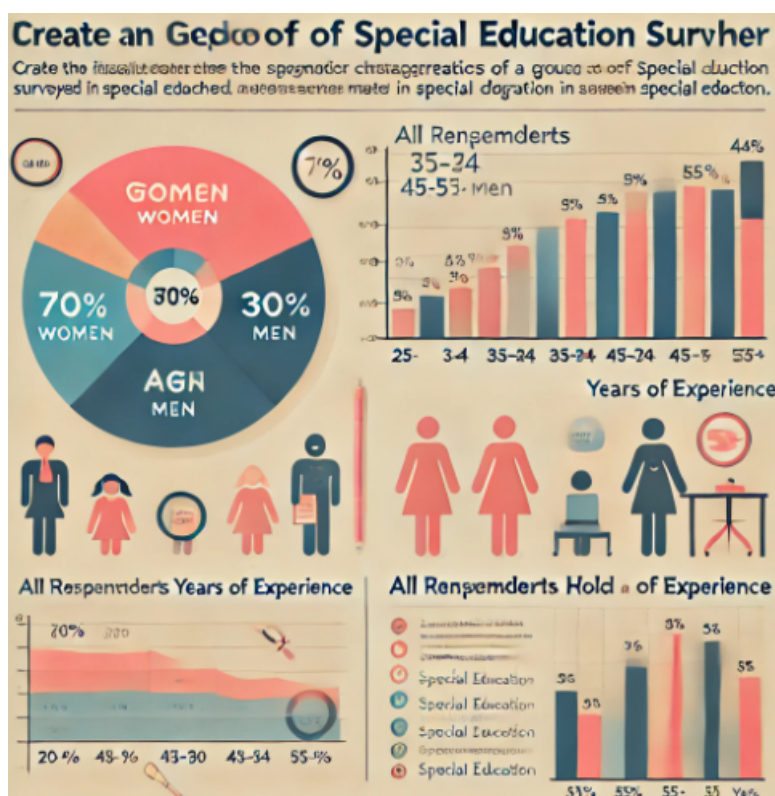
The series of questions for the semi-structured interview was developed immediately after the completion of the theoretical part of this thesis. Their number and composition were designed in a rational, purposeful way, so as to preserve their structure, meaning and relevance. They became such a pillar that it was necessary to return to them several times, for diverting from the topic, to other questions, unrelated to the content. By answering these questions, which were continuously modified, supplemented and adapted to specific situations, the reader will get a clear picture of the subject. From the statements made on the basis of the interviewees' openness and willingness to share their feelings and experiences.

The respondents consisted of 13 special educators who work with children with special needs. Characteristics of respondents include:

- Gender: Approximately 70% female and 30% male, reflecting the general ratio in the education sector.
- Age: Respondents ranged in age from 28-60 years, with an average age of approximately 42 years.
- Length of experience: the range of experience was 5 to 35 years, with a median of about 15 years.
- All respondents have a university degree, master's degree, in special education.

Each interview was structured into several main thematic blocks that corresponded to the main research questions. The interviews focused on the following areas:

1. Motivations and reasons for working in special education: what personal or professional factors led respondents to choose this field?
2. Experiences with stressors: what types of stressful situations do respondents experience at work and how do they cope with them?
3. Promoting mental hygiene and preventing burnout: what methods or practices do respondents use to manage stress and promote mental health?
4. Organisational and institutional influences: what role do working conditions, school leadership or institutional background play in stress?
5. Personal and professional development.
6. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, while ensuring the anonymity and comfort of the respondents. Thus, the ethics of the research and the researcher were reflected.



**Figure 1.** A graphical visualisation of these demographics is shown in the following figure:

**Source:** own survey, author's text (2024).

## 2.5. Evaluation and interpretation of the exploration probe

Based on interviews with respondents, several main sources of workload specific to the special education profession can be identified. The results were analyzed based on recurring themes in the responses that indicate what factors contribute to professional stress in this field.

### *High accountability for pupils with different needs*

Special educators are often faced with the pressure of the responsibility for correct diagnosis and subsequent work with children with disabilities. This responsibility is often greater than that of mainstream teachers, as the wrong decision can have long-term effects on pupils. As one respondent stated, it is challenging to manage working with a child who requires individual attention and patience.

Special educators are often faced with pressures and responsibilities that go well beyond mainstream education. Working with children with special needs requires not only professional erudition, but also constant adaptation of methods to meet the unique needs of each student. In this context, educators are faced with the task of accurately diagnosing a child's abilities and specific needs, which can be a very complex process given the varied manifestations of disability and differences in individual development. A misdiagnosis or an incorrect approach can lead to long-term negative effects on the pupil, such as feelings of failure, loss of motivation to learn, or even exacerbation of difficulties.

Special educators are also often responsible for selecting appropriate educational strategies and interventions that should take into account not only the child's cognitive level but also their emotional needs. Working with pupils who require extra attention and sensitivity is demanding on the mental and emotional resources of the educator, who must accept that effective results may not be visible until a longer period of time. This process can be very challenging as



educators do not always have immediate feedback or assurance that the chosen approach will have positive results.

Collaboration with other professionals such as psychologists, speech therapists, neurologists and social services workers adds another layer of responsibility. Special educators often have to coordinate their work with these experts and align individual intervention plans, which places high demands on communication and teamwork skills. This aspect of the work requires flexibility and the ability to adapt to the different methodologies and approaches of other professionals. However, complex collaboration is not always smooth - there may be disagreements in the approach or priorities of different professions, which puts additional pressure and responsibility on the teacher to unify the approach to the pupil's education.

Special educators often set high personal standards that stem from the nature of their work and their commitment to their students. Educators themselves tend to be their own harshest critics, reflecting after each interaction with pupils on whether they have done their best and taken the best possible approach. This reflexive approach and self-evaluation can lead to feelings of failure or inadequacy, especially when expected outcomes are not achieved. Research on psychological distress in the helping professions confirms that internal pressure and the constant desire to achieve perfect results increase the risk of burnout. The burden of this responsibility is thus not only external, i.e. caused by the obligations and expectations of institutions and parents, but also internal, stemming from the high demands that educators place on themselves.

The sense of responsibility that educators have towards their students often extends into their personal lives. It is not uncommon for special educators to bring their work concerns home and think about their students outside of work hours. This can lead to disruption of personal and family life, which is referred to in the literature as "work-life intersection." Studies on work stress in the helping professions show that prolonged transference of professional problems into personal life can lead to exhaustion, loss of life balance, and increased risk of emotional burnout. It is therefore essential that educators have access to psychological hygiene tools and resources to help them separate work from their personal lives and allow them to recover.

Psychohygiene is a key aspect of stress and burnout prevention in this profession. Effective forms of psychological hygiene include physical activity, regular rest, relaxation techniques such as meditation and controlled breathing, as well as the promotion of social relationships. An effective way to relieve the pressure of responsibility is to share and reflect in a group of colleagues, as the opportunity to openly discuss work problems and feelings can help manage the emotional demands of work.

### *Emotional exhaustion*

Another source of strain is the need to manage emotionally demanding situations associated with pupils who have disabilities or special educational needs. Special educators often report that they carry concerns about their pupils into their personal lives, leading to fatigue and exhaustion.

Emotional exhaustion is a major source of strain for special educators who are faced with psychologically challenging situations and emotionally intense moments on a daily basis. Working with pupils who suffer from disabilities or have special educational needs requires a high level of empathy and sensitivity from educators. At the same time, there is a need to maintain professional distance at all times while being supportive of pupils, which can be exhausting. This kind of strain is known as 'emotional labour intensity' and is one of the main causes of burnout in the helping professions.

Special educators often express that their work does not end when they leave school; their concern for their students and their efforts to understand and improve their situation extend into their personal lives. This phenomenon of educators "taking work home" increases the

emotional burden and disrupts work-life balance. Unlike many other professions where work issues can be left at the office door, special educators tend to stay mentally connected to the needs of their students outside of work hours.

One concept that experts often associate with emotional exhaustion in the helping professions is "empathic fatigue" or "secondary traumatization." Educators may be subject to emotional overload because they consistently experience the emotional demands and traumas of their students. Secondary traumatization means that even if a special educator does not themselves suffer the traumas that affect their students, they may experience similar emotional impacts in this "vicarious" way. The more intense the contact with a pupil going through a difficult time or suffering from a complex diagnosis, the more likely the educator is to experience symptoms of emotional exhaustion. Symptoms of empathic fatigue can include depression, anxiety, physical exhaustion and in some cases a loss of purpose and personal alienation.

If the emotional demands are too high and the educator does not have sufficient tools to manage the stress, a phenomenon known as depersonalisation can occur. Depersonalisation manifests itself as the educator begins to approach pupils with distance, and sometimes with a certain indifference, as if trying to protect themselves from further emotional pain. This defence mechanism is a natural reaction of the body and mind to overload, but in practice it leads to a disruption of the relationship between the educator and the pupils, which is absolutely essential to the work of the special educator. In extreme cases, depersonalisation can develop into complete burnout, where the educator loses the ability to find joy and meaning in their work, with serious consequences not only for themselves but also for their pupils and work team.

Due to the high risk of emotional exhaustion and burnout, it is crucial for special educators to learn psychological hygiene tools and techniques to help them maintain emotional balance. Research confirms that activities aimed at regenerating psychological strength, such as relaxation techniques, regular movement, meditation and mindfulness, can significantly reduce the risk of empathic fatigue and secondary traumatization. For example, mindfulness techniques, the ability to perceive the present moment without judgement, are considered an effective way to reduce stress and manage challenging work-related emotions.

Another method that can help special educators face the emotional demands of the job is the technique of "emotional decontamination" - a process in which the educator consciously processes and releases the negative emotions that have built up during the day. This method consists of the educator consciously focusing on his or her own needs after work hours and releasing himself or herself from work worries. Peer support and regular supervision are important, where educators can share their problems and find ways to address them effectively. Strong social ties are also an important support for coping with emotional demands. Support from family, friends or colleagues is key to maintaining psychological balance. When special educators have the opportunity to share their work experiences with someone close to them, they often find it easier to vent their emotions and gain a new perspective on their experiences. Social support thus acts as a protective factor that reduces the risk of emotional exhaustion.

Maintaining work-life balance is also considered essential. Special educators should create space for activities that are not related to their profession so that they can fully relax and recharge. Regular physical activity, leisure activities, getting enough sleep and planning personal time are essential for maintaining overall well-being and resilience to work stress.

### *Insufficient feedback*

Respondents also mentioned that working with children with special needs is challenging because there is often a lack of clear feedback. Unlike in mainstream school settings, progress is difficult to measure and educators often experience frustration at not seeing the immediate results of their work.

Lack of clear feedback is one of the key stressors in the work of special educators working with children with special needs. These special educators are used to a long-term process where achieving tangible results often takes longer than in standard teaching settings. In mainstream schools, teachers can usually monitor pupils' progress through continuous assessment or testing, whereas special educators work with children whose progress is often gradual and not always obvious. This deficit in clear feedback creates a state of uncertainty in which special educators may feel undervalued or question the effectiveness of their approach.

In addition, special educators sometimes do not have immediate feedback from the pupils themselves, especially when working with children who have significant communication or social barriers. For example, children with autism or intellectual disabilities may respond to stimuli in a non-standard way, making it difficult for special educators to know whether a pupil has really understood the material or how they are feeling about their learning. This lack of direct and visible response can lead to a situation where special educators are unable to assess the impact of their educational approach. Feeling that their efforts are not appreciated or that they are not seeing progress contributes to job stress and increases the risk of frustration.

Special educators often complain of feeling unacknowledged and that the results of their work remain in many ways "invisible." Many achievements in working with children with special needs are not easily measurable or are often taken for "granted." An example might be when a child learns basic social skills, which can be a huge improvement for the child, but may not be perceived as a significant outcome by those around them. This problem is compounded by the fact that special educators are often evaluated according to criteria that are not tailored to the specifics of their work. Standard measures of progress or achievement commonly used in traditional educational contexts are often inadequate or inapplicable, which can lead to unfair comparisons and feelings of professional undervaluation.

The lack of feedback also has a long-term impact on the motivation and self-esteem of special educators. When special educators do not repeatedly receive signals that their work is meaningful and leads to results, they may begin to question their own abilities. This gradually weakens their professional identity and can lead to 'professional burnout', where special educators lose motivation to continue their work. Research in the field of occupational psychology confirms that intrinsic job satisfaction, which comes from visible results and positive feedback, is essential for long-term job satisfaction and resilience to stress. If this element is missing, the risk of anxiety, depression and general occupational exhaustion increases.

Because special educators often work without the opportunity for direct feedback, it is essential that they learn techniques that allow them to stay motivated and evaluate their work in other ways. One recommended method is to keep a "reflective journal," in which the special educator regularly records his or her accomplishments, observations of the work, and progress of individual students. This method allows the special educator to retrospectively see even small accomplishments that would otherwise go unnoticed and provides a space for self-reflection. Research confirms that it is the ability to reflect on one's own work that is essential for enhancing professional self-esteem and personal growth.

Another effective method can be "peer feedback," or feedback from colleagues. In regular meetings and supervision sessions, special educators can discuss their experiences and receive feedback from colleagues to help validate their efforts and approach. This form of feedback is valuable not only as a source of recognition and support, but also allows for the exchange of ideas and methods that can enrich each educator's approach.

Special educators can also benefit from setting "small wins" - small, incremental goals that are achievable and can provide a sense of accomplishment and recognition. By emphasizing small steps and recognizing each progress, special educators gain more control over their work and can more easily overcome feelings of frustration. These small goals also allow for better

tracking of individual student progress and provide meaning to their daily work. Research shows that breaking down large tasks into smaller, manageable steps increases job satisfaction and boosts intrinsic motivation.

Setting realistic expectations is also essential. Special educators should keep in mind that the results of their work can be subtle and are often not immediately visible. The literature confirms that it is realistic expectations and the ability to focus on the process (rather than immediate results) that can significantly reduce feelings of stress and disappointment. In this context, special educators are advised to regularly remind themselves of the goals and values they place in their work and to remind themselves that even small changes and progress can make a big difference for students.

The work of special educators is characterised by the fact that its full impact may only become apparent after a long period of time. Success in the profession often lies not in visible and immediate results, but in the long-term impact on pupils. This long-term approach requires patience and the ability to see meaning in even small advances. Again, peer support and supervision play an important role here, as they enable sharing of long-term perspectives and reinforce the belief that even small efforts can have a big impact in the future.

### *Administrative and bureaucratic burden*

Special educators face increased paperwork and requirements to maintain detailed documentation, which adds additional stress. They also have to keep up with legislative changes, which is time-consuming and often distracts from direct work with pupils.

One of the most challenging aspects of the work of special educators is the high administrative and bureaucratic burden, which is a direct result of the requirements to maintain detailed documentation, record procedures and monitor legislative changes. Administrative duties not only consume a significant amount of working time, but often distract from the main mission of the special educator - working directly with pupils who need their support and attention. This paradoxical situation, where the teacher is more preoccupied with administration than with teaching, creates considerable pressure and stress that can lead to feelings of frustration and demotivation.

Administrative tasks include keeping detailed records of the work with each individual pupil, drawing up Individual Education Plans (IEPs), keeping records of pupils' progress and problems, evaluating the effectiveness of approaches, and regular reporting to education authorities or relevant bodies. These requirements are often very time-consuming, as each IEP must be individually tailored to the specific needs of the child, which requires a deep knowledge of the pupil as well as the ability to formally record every detail. Thus, administrative tasks often require even "micromanagement" of the pedagogical process, which creates pressure for precision and systematicity, but which can act as barriers to flexibility and creativity in working with children.

In addition to the preparation and maintenance of documentation, special educators also face the requirement to monitor current legislative changes that affect not only their direct work, but also procedures and approaches in the field of special education. As educational legislation and standards for working with children with special needs may change frequently, educators must constantly update their knowledge and be prepared to respond quickly to new regulations or guidelines. However, this aspect is very stressful, as each change in legislation means having to adapt to new standards and often adjusting the way documentation is kept or the methodological procedures themselves.

As a result of these administrative and legislative requirements, special educators often find themselves in dual roles as both teachers and administrators. This dual nature of the work can lead to what is known as "professional fragmentation," where the educator tries to meet both educational and administrative requirements, but may not perform either activity with

maximum effectiveness. Constantly switching between the roles of teacher and administrator also makes it difficult to concentrate on the education itself, which can have a negative impact on the quality and continuity of care for pupils. This 'fragmentation' increases the risk of burnout, as teachers often do not feel that they are dedicated to their core job, which reduces their motivation and job satisfaction.

In addition, the administrative burden can affect the professional development of special educators. The time and energy devoted to administrative tasks often does not allow teachers to devote to their professional development, such as attending training, supervision or other educational activities. This lack of time for professional development can lead to a sense of stagnation, as educators feel that they are only "mechanically" fulfilling administrative requirements instead of deepening their skills. The long-term lack of professional development then has a negative impact on the quality of care for pupils and on teachers' overall job satisfaction.

In order for special educators to better manage the administrative and bureaucratic burden, it is important that they have effective organisational tools and support. One possible strategy is the use of digital tools and software systems to manage documentation, which can help streamline processes and provide easier access to the information needed. Automated tools for recording pupils' progress or for creating individual plans can greatly simplify and speed up administrative work, leaving teachers more time to work directly with children.

Another effective strategy is to delegate some administrative duties to other staff members or assistants when possible. Within the school setting, efforts can be made to have administrative staff support teachers in preparing documentation or monitoring legislative changes. In some cases, "administrative mentoring," where a more experienced educator assists colleagues with effective documentation and provides tools and tips for managing these tasks, may be a solution.

Systemic changes should include increased support from the management of schools and institutions where special educators work. Management should recognise and respect the fact that administrative burdens are a significant source of stress and should seek to put in place procedures that make administrative work easier. This may include, for example, increased customisation and simplification of forms, access to expert advice on current legislative changes, or the opportunity for regular training on changes to documentation.

Ideally, systemic support should aim to enable special educators to devote as much of their time and energy as possible to working directly with children, which is the core mission of their profession. Thus, administrative tasks should be tailored in a way that gives teachers space for their core work without overwhelming them with excessive bureaucracy. Various initiatives at national level aimed at reducing the administrative burden in schools could also help in this respect.

The administrative burden of special educators remains one of the main factors influencing their mental and professional exhaustion. Therefore, it is necessary to look for ways to reduce this burden while promoting effective coping strategies so that educators can do their work with quality and full commitment for the benefit of their pupils.

## **2.6. Stress management strategies - different ways of coping with stress were identified in the responses of the respondents**

### *Peer support and supervision*

Regular supervision and support from colleagues is proving very useful in managing stress. Sharing experiences with each other allows teachers to better manage psychological stress and gain new perspectives on dealing with challenging situations.



Peer support and regular supervision are among the key strategies for coping with stress and preventing burnout in special education. The work of a special educator is often isolated and demanding on mental resilience, so collegial support becomes an invaluable resource. Sharing experiences with each other, discussing problems, and being able to voice concerns or frustrations creates a safe environment in which educators can openly express themselves and seek new solutions. It is this collegial support that conveys the feeling that the educator is not alone in his or her problems, which greatly reduces work stress and promotes a sense of belonging.

Supervision, i.e. professional guidance or consultation with another experienced professional, is one of the most effective methods of preventing burnout and helps teachers reflect on their own work. In supervision meetings, educators can share difficult cases that are troubling them, discuss the emotions that the work brings up, and focus on self-improvement and finding new perspectives. The supervisor (often a psychologist or specially trained teacher) provides a perspective that allows the educator to gain a new perspective on the situation and learn constructive approaches to problem solving. Supervision offers educators not only professional but also emotional support, which is essential for coping with the psychological demands of the job.

Supervision also proves to be a tool for improving self-reflection and strengthening professional competences. When educators regularly reflect on their practices and emotional reactions in the safe environment of supervision, they become better able to recognize their own stressors and limiting patterns of behavior. This process strengthens their emotional stability and ability to handle challenging situations with greater discernment and resilience. Studies confirm that supervision contributes to educators having greater control over their own emotions, which increases their job satisfaction and overall resilience to stress.

Peer support, often in the form of "peer mentoring," is another key component of managing work stress. As part of this support, less experienced educators can draw on the advice and experience of more experienced colleagues, which eases the transition into the challenging practice of special education and contributes to better coping with the stress of the unknown. Peer mentoring also encourages the sharing of ideas and methodologies that have worked well in practice, allowing educators to improve their skills and learn how to respond more effectively to children's specific needs.

In practice, peer support can be implemented through regular meetings, discussion groups or even informal conversations during the day. Being able to consult immediately on issues or problems that arise when working with children increases feelings of security and reduces anxiety about unfamiliar situations. Research confirms that collegial support improves the working climate, reduces conflict and increases mutual trust between staff, which has a positive impact on overall well-being and reduces the risk of professional burnout.

In addition to individual supervision, so-called preventive supervision groups are also very beneficial for special educators, where educators meet to share professional experiences and find solutions to specific professional challenges. These groups are aimed at preventing burnout syndrome and encourage educators to reflect on their own work in the context of the broader experiences and perspectives of their colleagues. In the groups, educators can share their work difficulties, discuss methodologies and approaches that have helped them cope with challenging situations, and gain new insights for their own work.

Preventive supervision groups also reinforce a sense of professional identity and help educators realize the value of their work. In a group context, educators have the opportunity to hear about the successes and failures of others, which helps to normalize work problems and reduce feelings of failure. This support helps educators develop in an environment where they can share their successes and difficulties without fear, while drawing on the richness of their colleagues' experiences.

Collegial support and supervision are not just formal tools, but create a culture of mutual support and nurturing of mental wellbeing, which is essential for long-term job satisfaction. A work environment that emphasises support, open communication and sharing contributes to a sense of belonging and mutual trust. In such an environment, educators can better manage their emotional reactions, which is essential for stress management. A culture of mutual support also creates space for educators to realise that no problem is insurmountable if they share it and work on it together.

Establishing a culture of well-being in the work environment can include regular workshops on psycho-hygiene and stress management techniques. These programmes help employees learn effective strategies for coping with work stress, which improves their emotional stability. The mutual support and knowledge sharing that are part of this culture not only alleviate work stress, but also enhance the professional and personal growth of educators.

Peer support and supervision are essential to maintain work motivation and the quality of care for pupils. Special educators who have access to regular supervision and peer support report higher levels of job satisfaction and lower risk of burnout. In the long run, this approach has a positive impact not only on the educators themselves, but also on the quality of the educational process, as relaxed and supported educators are able to provide better quality care and education.

Peer support and supervision thus become not only a means of coping with stress, but also a key pillar for the development of professional identity and stability as a special educator.

### *Assertiveness and self-reflection*

Respondents often reported that they set personal boundaries and practice assertiveness to maintain their psychological well-being. For them, self-reflection and personal growth are key factors that help them cope with the daily challenges of the profession.

Assertiveness and self-reflection play a vital role in coping with the stresses and demands of being a special educator. Special educators who are able to set personal boundaries and practice assertiveness are better able to handle the emotional and professional demands of their work. Assertiveness is the ability to express one's needs, opinions, and boundaries clearly and with respect for self and others, which is essential in an environment where educators are faced daily with the complex needs of students and high expectations from colleagues, parents, and school administrators.

The ability to communicate assertively helps teachers to maintain their mental well-being by allowing them to refuse excessive demands that could overload them, while also carving out time and space for their own needs and recovery. In practice, this may mean being able to say 'no' to tasks that are not necessary or that fall outside the teacher's core responsibilities, or being able to have a constructive dialogue with colleagues and school management about their needs. Assertiveness thus allows educators to set healthy boundaries and avoid the exhaustion that is often caused by overload and a constant sense of responsibility.

Self-reflection, the ability to analyze and evaluate one's own thoughts, actions and feelings, is another essential tool for special educators to help them meet the challenges of their profession. Regular self-reflection allows them to better understand their own reactions to stressful situations, identify their weaknesses and strengths, and better manage challenging work moments. In practice, self-reflection involves regular introspection and questions such as "How do I feel after a difficult day?" "What could I do differently next time?" or "What fulfils me most at work and what exhausts me?" This process allows educators to identify which aspects of their work are most stressful for them and then look for ways to better manage these situations.

Self-reflection also allows teachers to better understand the emotional aspects of their work. Through self-reflection, many educators realize that their work often has a "deeper" dimension

- that they are not only teaching and supporting students, but also facilitating positive change in their lives. This realisation provides them with a strong sense of fulfilment and contributes significantly to maintaining professional motivation and life balance. Research in the field of occupational psychology shows that regular self-reflection is crucial for long-term satisfaction in the helping professions, as it increases the degree of 'internal control' over work and promotes professional growth.

Assertiveness is also a key strategy for preventing burnout syndrome, which affects many helping professions. Assertive educators are able to identify the moments when their workload is already beyond tolerable and express these feelings to their supervisors or colleagues. Research confirms that people with assertive communication skills have a lower risk of burnout because they are better able to set boundaries and protect their personal time. For special educators who are under high work pressure, assertiveness is essential - it helps them to define their working hours and ensure that they have time for recovery and their own interests, which is important for maintaining psychological well-being.

Assertiveness also has a positive impact on relationships with colleagues and management, as it enables constructive conflict resolution and promotes a healthy working environment. Special educators who can assertively communicate their needs and opinions create a work environment that fosters open communication and mutual respect. In practice, this can mean that the educator feels more confident in sharing concerns or suggestions for improvement with management, which increases their sense of belonging while fostering team spirit.

Educators who practice self-reflection regularly evaluate themselves not only on the basis of their performance, but also on how they feel in their role. This approach helps them to better understand their own limitations and also to look for areas in which they would like to develop. The process of regular self-reflection involves not only analysing work successes and failures, but also finding ways to manage challenging situations more effectively. Educators who engage in regular self-reflection are more aware of how their emotional and professional needs are changing and can adapt their approach to work more quickly.

Teachers can use various self-reflection techniques, such as keeping a work diary where they write down their daily observations or regularly assessing their own goals and progress. This process allows them to keep track of their own professional development and reduces the feeling of stagnation that can be one of the risks of professional burnout. Reflecting on progress and challenges thus promotes positive self-regulation and helps educators maintain long-term job satisfaction.

Together, assertiveness and self-reflection form a strong foundation that enables special educators to manage daily stress and maintain a positive relationship with their work over the long term. Assertiveness allows them to effectively communicate their needs and protect their own boundaries, while self-reflection provides tools for ongoing assessment and self-development. This combination of approaches contributes to the development of personal resilience, which is crucial for coping with challenging situations and for long-term job satisfaction.

In the context of professional development, this combination is particularly valuable as it allows teachers to better manage challenging situations and push their boundaries. Regular self-reflection gives them the opportunity to assess their own skills, learn from mistakes and identify areas where they can grow. Once they have built assertive skills, they can then proactively seek out opportunities for further training or ask for support where they feel the need. This flexibility and growth-focused approach ensures that educators remain motivated and resilient in the face of stressful situations, contributing to the overall quality of their working lives and better outcomes for their students.

### *Emphasis on psychohygiene*

Special educators emphasise the importance of psychological hygiene, such as relaxation techniques, sports or recovery activities. Some respondents prefer active forms of relaxation, while others prefer passive methods such as reading or listening to music.

In the profession of special educators, who are exposed to high emotional and physical stress on a daily basis, psychological hygiene plays a key role in maintaining long-term well-being and preventing burnout syndrome. Psychohygiene, or a set of activities and practices aimed at taking care of mental health, is essential for recovering strength and restoring inner balance. Special educators often realise that without regular psychohygiene they would not be able to cope in the long term with the demands of their profession, which include working with children with special needs and dealing with complex situations that require not only professional but also strong emotional commitment.

Psychohygiene not only helps teachers to manage everyday stress, but also prevents the accumulation of negative emotions and feelings of frustration. This aspect of self-care is considered an essential tool for maintaining mental resilience, as it allows them to actively regenerate and maintain the energy needed to perform effectively under challenging conditions. Regular psychological hygiene thus acts as a preventive shield that helps to reduce the risk of emotional burnout and psychological exhaustion, which are common consequences of prolonged exposure to stressors.

The most commonly reported active forms of psychological hygiene include physical activity such as sports, hiking or various forms of exercise. Active recreation allows teachers to release accumulated tension and contributes to the release of endorphins - the happy hormones that have a positive effect on mood and overall psychological well-being. Physical activity is an effective way to restore energy after a busy day, while strengthening mental resilience. Studies in the mental health field confirm that regular exercise reduces stress levels and improves the ability to concentrate, which are key factors in maintaining the quality of work and personal well-being of special educators.

For example, jogging, yoga or brisk walking provide teachers with the opportunity not only to actively relax, but also to process the emotional experiences of the working day. Regular sport is also an effective means of increasing self-discipline and developing the ability to cope with stress, which helps educators not only on the level of physical recovery but also in developing internal resilience and mental health. This proactive approach to psycho-hygiene allows special educators to recover energy more quickly and better prepare for the next working days.

In addition to active relaxation, many special educators prefer passive forms of psychological hygiene such as reading, listening to music, watching movies or meditating. These activities provide a needed mental "break" and allow educators to detach from work problems, relax and regenerate mental strength. Reading or listening to music acts as a form of escape from work stress and provides a space where teachers can focus on themselves without having to react to external stimuli. Meditation and breathing exercises then provide an opportunity for deep relaxation and a reduction in mental tension.

Meditation, mindfulness or relaxation techniques focusing on conscious breathing are increasingly used as effective psychological hygiene tools. Research confirms that these techniques help to reduce stress levels and improve concentration, which is particularly important for educators working in highly demanding environments. Meditation allows the educator to attend to thoughts that he or she does not normally have time to process and leads to a sense of inner peace, which is important for psychological stability. Regular meditation thus contributes to a better ability to cope with stressful situations and to increased emotional resilience.

Long-term neglect of psychological hygiene can lead to burnout syndrome, which is common in professions with high stress levels, such as special education. Educators who do not cultivate

regular psychohygiene rituals face a greater risk of exhaustion, fatigue and feelings of hopelessness, which can lead to a significant reduction in their professional motivation and quality of life. Psychohygiene is therefore not only a means of relaxation but also an effective preventive strategy to help educators manage long-term stress and reduce the risk of emotional and physical exhaustion.

Occupational health research shows that regular psychological hygiene not only has an immediate positive effect on work performance, but also has long-term benefits for employee health and satisfaction. Educators who are mindful of psychological hygiene report lower stress levels, better ability to concentrate and higher job satisfaction. It is therefore essential that special educators see psychological hygiene as an integral part of their work, enabling them to maintain professional energy and enthusiasm for their profession over the long term.

The care of psycho-hygiene of special educators should also be supported at the institutional level. Schools and educational establishments can offer mental health programmes for educators, workshops on psychological hygiene techniques or regular meetings where educators can share their experiences and discuss stress management techniques. Creating a work environment that promotes psychological hygiene is key to maintaining the quality of educational care and preventing burnout among special educators.

Institutions can also support teachers' psycho-hygiene by allowing time off for recovery or by organising respite programmes such as relaxation stays or the opportunity to work with a psychologist or coach. This support not only has a positive impact on teachers' health and well-being, but also on the overall working atmosphere and the quality of work with children. Educational institutions that pay attention to the psychological hygiene of their staff contribute to ensuring that educators can carry out their work with full commitment and a high level of quality over the long term.

Psychohygiene plays a key role in maintaining the professional balance and mental health of special educators. Regular activities aimed at regenerating physical and mental strength help educators to cope with daily work challenges and maintain a positive attitude towards their profession in the long term. By consciously setting aside time for psychological hygiene, educators strengthen their mental health and ensure that they can support their students with full attention and care.

Psychohygiene is therefore not just about personal relaxation, but is essential to the teacher's overall approach to work and his or her ability to provide quality care in the long term.

Interpretation of the results suggests that a key aspect of stress management in this profession is support from management and colleagues. It is also necessary for educators to adopt effective psycho-hygiene strategies and set aside time for relaxation. Assertive attitudes, self-education and the opportunity to participate in supervision have proved to be important elements in the prevention of burnout.

### *Implicit Recommendation*

Future developments in the field of special education present a number of challenges, not only in terms of individual support for teachers, but also in terms of broader systemic changes. These challenges can be divided into several key areas:

#### 1. Increased need for mental support and burnout prevention

As the demands on special educators increase, so does the need for systematic mental health support. Stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion are common consequences of long-term workloads. The future challenge is therefore to expand psycho-hygiene options and provide special educators with regular access to support, for example through school psychologists, supervision and other forms of mental well-being care.

#### 2. Educational reforms and the extension of competences





Special education requires continuous professional development and adaptation to new methodologies and the needs of pupils. Reforms in the field of inclusive education, which emphasise the integration of children with special needs into mainstream classrooms, will require additional skills and knowledge from educators. Flexible further education programmes and specialised courses need to be developed to respond to the new demands on their competences.

### 3. Addressing the administrative and bureaucratic burden

The administrative duties of special educators tend to be time-consuming and distracting from direct work with children. Streamlining these tasks through digitisation and support for assistants would greatly ease the workload of teachers. The challenge for the future is therefore not only to simplify these processes, but also to provide concrete tools and procedures that enable teachers to better organise their work.

### 4. Individual approach and demands for personalisation of teaching

Pupils with special needs require individual attention and tailored support programmes. One of the key challenges is to introduce effective methods and materials to facilitate the development of individualised learning plans, while ensuring sufficient time and resources for their implementation.

### 5. Management support and institutional background

The work of the special educator is influenced by the institutional environment and the support of school management. School leadership should not only be an organisational support, but also actively promote the psychological hygiene of their teachers and create an open communication culture. The challenge for the future is to put in place school policies that reflect the mental health needs of educators and support their professional growth.

### 6. Improved social recognition and appreciation

Special educators often work in challenging conditions with minimal social recognition and often for inadequate remuneration. Improving the social status and financial valuation of these educators will be essential for the long-term sustainability of the profession and for motivating young educators who wish to specialise in this area.

### 7. The use of technology and innovation to support teaching and diagnostics

Modern technology can be a useful tool not only in diagnosing specific needs, but also in creating adapted learning materials. The use of new technologies in diagnosis, monitoring pupils' progress and personalising learning programmes will require teacher training and access to the necessary technical equipment.

These challenges represent critical areas that need to be addressed to ensure the development of special education and sustainable support for those in the profession.

## 3. CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzed the professional lives of special educators, focusing on the impact of working conditions, stressors, and mental hygiene strategies that educators use to maintain a balance between their personal and professional lives. Through a qualitative exploratory probe in the form of interviews with 13 special educators, we gained valuable insight into the specifics of this demanding profession and the various aspects of their mental health burden.

The work focused on identifying key sources of stress, including high responsibilities for educating and supporting pupils with special needs, emotional exhaustion associated with everyday interactions, and administrative and bureaucratic burdens. Special educators have a significant responsibility not only for the education itself, but also for selecting appropriate educational strategies, diagnosing pupils' abilities and coordinating with specialists in the event of more severe difficulties for pupils. Many respondents described experiencing a sense of lack

of recognition and a lack of clear feedback on their pupils' progress. This often leads to a loss of motivation and the risk of professional burnout.

In light of these findings, it appears crucial that special educators have support to help them manage the mental and physical demands of their profession. The research revealed that respondents found effective ways to cope with stressors, particularly through support from colleagues, supervision and the practice of personal psychohygiene such as regular exercise, relaxation techniques and clear personal boundaries. Self-reflection and assertiveness also play an important role in stress prevention, enabling teachers to maintain psychological well-being and healthy working relationships. The importance of these methods is particularly evident when coping with the demands of working directly with pupils and the need to manage administrative and legislative requirements, which are often time-consuming and mentally demanding.

The thesis also highlighted that the support of school leadership and the overall school institution is crucial to keeping special educators motivated and minimizing the risks associated with burnout.

Management should actively seek to create a work environment that supports teachers' professional growth, psychological hygiene, and provides clear and constructive feedback that helps teachers feel meaningful in their work. Furthermore, a stronger systemic recommendation is to reduce the administrative burden on special educators through digitisation and streamlined processes, allowing educators to focus more on direct work with students. Increasing institutional support in the form of mental health resources, such as access to counselling and regular supervision, would also enhance resilience and job satisfaction among educators. Implementing these systemic improvements would address burnout factors and improve educators' overall well-being.

Overall, the work of special educators is extremely demanding and requires strong professional commitment and personal resilience. Despite challenging conditions, many special educators find their work a source of fulfilment and a sense of meaning, confirming the profound importance of their role in the education system. This research has highlighted that the conditions in which these educators work should be carefully monitored and that systematic support aimed at their long-term wellbeing needs to be developed.

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