

THE EVALUATION OF THE JOB-STRESS IN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION. CASE STUDY OF “CLEVER” SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION CENTER

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Abstract: *the purpose of this research paper is to examine the level of job-related stress and consequences of that aspect in the context of the whole working process of the educational center with the specialization on special educational needs children. There are a number of research works that are focused primarily on job-turnover and low organization commitment, in regards to the fact of stressful work conditions, and most of them spotlight ordinary preschool preparation educational organizations. However, only a few studies spotlight the impact of job-stress in the case of special needs education practice. In order to appraise the fact of job-stress related to the tutoring of the children with special needs, we conducted a survey with faculty members of the educational center with the specialization of the special needs children and preschool preparation. The paper attempts to evaluate the possible causes and consequences of the job-stress in special needs education. It is expected that the study will determine the main sources of the job-stress and some recommendations are going to be proposed based on the research findings.*

Keywords: *job-stress, special needs education, job-turnover, organizational commitment, special education leadership, educational management.*

Introduction

Teaching practice is usually accompanied by a high level of pressure. That is to say in accordance with the fact that teachers are usually under pressure, the possibility of the occurrence of the job-related stress for teachers is higher than for the average worker in other sectors. The special needs education is totally differentiated from the general education practice due to another purpose and teaching strategies.

One of the first researchers who conceptualized the phenomenon of burnout was American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. Burnout is considered from the perspective of the service profession, like teaching practice, as deep-rooted exhaustion of emotional vigor, motivation and job commitment in reply to the demand of social praise for the professional role and occupation [1].

According to Maslach (2003) burnout is the stress that originated as a consequence of interpersonal demands related to the work environment and as a sign of physical and emotional overburden and depletion [2]. Frequently alluded to as mental weariness, the key elements of the burnout disorder are emotional attrition, depersonalization, and a diminished feeling of achievement [2].

Despite thirty years of research, there are no direct indicators or forecasting models of the evaluation of teachers' job stress and exhaustion, instead, a lot of researchers utilize indirect methods to appraise educators' burnout and depletion [3].

Forlin (2001) specified teacher stressors into three main categories: “Administrative” that factor refers to the excessive workload, resource availability, overload of the responsibilities; “Classroom-based” aspect which relates to the irrational balance between teacher/pupils, indiscipline of pupils, atmosphere in the classroom; “Personal” factor that is refers to the poor communication with colleagues and managers, inappropriate working conditions, inadequate salary and low status in society)[4].

There are also some indirect standards of burnout and stress, which include teacher personality traits, qualification, work environmental factors and emotional reaction [5]. The analysis of teacher's personal traits and characteristics considers factors such as gender, age, marital status, health state. Qualification is considered from the perspective of university degrees, additional certifications, and training. Work environmental factors are especially important in case of special needs education. That is to say, the research of work conditions covers the aspects of level of salary, administrative support, relationship with colleagues. The emotional reaction usually appraises current physical and mental health state as well as the influence of the negative work environment on the health state of teachers.

Arguments, which were presented by previous researchers, are going to be evaluated and analyzed in order to determine the main reason for job stress in special needs education practice. The analysis of the problem is based on the collected data in the form of a questionnaire. The survey has been conducted with faculty members of special needs education center. The questionnaire has been formed by a compilation of previous research studies' survey examples.

More specifically, the paper attempts to identify the main reasons for job stress in the context of special needs education. In addition, some of the possible strategies for reducing job-related stress for the management team have been proposed. Insufficient management practice, the problem with programs' syllabuses, and low salaries were expected to be the main causes of job stress in special needs education.

Literature review

According to existing papers regarding education in special education centers, the main factors of teachers' likelihood to stay at a workplace are environment and training. Although it is apparent that the turnover in general schools is less than in special ones the reason is not a difficulty of working with children with disabilities, but mainly the frustration of the system and lack of support from colleagues in a workplace [6][7]. For instance, 91% of teachers in a conducted survey said that they can meet students' needs whereas 24% of respondents felt attrition because of the little administrative support [7].

Westling and Whitten divided environmental factors as administration, classroom assignment, and teachers' salary [7]. When it comes to classroom assignments, research shows that teachers who taught children with physical and mental disabilities were less likely to quit than ones who taught children with emotional disabilities. Moreover, teachers with multi categorical classes were most likely to quit. As several researchers have found, another issue with classroom assignments was excessive paperwork, which led to a decision to leave. Also, they claimed that supportive principals reduce teachers' stress, and increase commitment and job satisfaction. Furthermore, despite more salary increased teachers to continue to work, some studies have shown that mostly salary was not a conserving factor unless the teacher was dissatisfied with the work environment [7].

Other literature also supported the narrative of the environment as being the main factor in high turnover among teachers. Gersten et al. in their paper expanded this by identifying job design as the source of stress [8]. In other words, poorly designed job description contributes to low self-efficacy and high attrition, because of the frustration and stress, and failure in achieving valued goals for an organization. Moreover, teachers might lose motivation to put effort into their job, as well as lowered expectations for their students.

All of these are since the job description creates a dissonance with the actual expectations of parents, administration and their colleagues. Furthermore, it is evident that in the special education field this ambiguity leads to burn out, stress and dissatisfaction in general [8].

To solve these issues, they also proposed principles and other teachers to take action. It can be done by providing adequate resources, and relevant information [8]. Moreover, support can be shown not only in material resources but rather by showing appreciation and understanding of the hardship of being a teacher in special education. For example, general conversations with administration and staff showed correlation with decreased stress, as teachers often felt isolated [8]. Furthermore, the research highlighted the importance of providing continuous learning, development opportunities, helping to tackle conflicts, and encouraging support from fellow teachers. Also by involving teachers in the decision-making process, the commitment increased [8].

Miller, Brownell, and Smith have suggested that outstanding leadership can be a tool to improve the relationship with students and colleagues, which also reduce job-related stress [6]. An organization should have a shared vision to foster a collaborative team. Leaders should also have knowledge and skills to help employees to navigate and have more confidence in their work. These actions lead to a positive school climate [6]. Whitaker (2000), on the other hand, claims that mentoring can enhance emotional support, and facilitate entry into a special education center, as it has been reported that the first year of teaching is most important and young teachers are more likely to leave than other employees [9]. It showed to improve job satisfaction and an increase in retention subsequently. However, the selection of a mentor should be critical to increase effectiveness. It is best to choose a mentor with similar teaching styles, planning, and children with disabilities. In addition, if it is not possible to have a mentor in the same building, co-mentor can be considered as another substitution. They usually provide assistance but will refill the need for socialization and emotional support. As long as having sufficient knowledge in their field, mentors should be trustworthy, approachable, comfortable to be working with and enthusiastic. Lastly, they should frequently check in with their mentees (once a week)

Methodology

Research Methods

This section will describe and explain the study design and research methods of the problem analysis which the educational center has faced. The purpose of the research is to identify the main factors that influence the job-stress related to the educational process and find possible solutions to the problem. The first part of the section will describe the use of quantitative research including such factors as sampling, size, age. The second part of the section will describe data collection and analysis.

Study Design and Research Method

Our group has chosen as a research object educational center «Clever», which is primarily focused on the special needs education. The educational center provides a variety of services, such as teaching foreign languages, pre-school preparation, giving a basis of musical education, individual classes, etc. Most coaches in the educational center are mostly people with special qualifications, as they teach pupils with special needs. In addition, children who study in the «Clever» center are from 3 to 12 years.

Quantitative research

Results from the observation group were analyzed quantitatively. Quantitative research provides an opportunity to convert teachers' experience into real data and analysis in order to solve the organizational problem in the education center, as we can understand what workers expect from a suggested job.

Data Collection

The discussion was guided by our group with the executive director of the «Clever» educational center, after that our group defined marginal groups within teachers and created a questionnaire to understand what are the issues and how it could be tackled as a result. The observation group is teachers who often framed around children with special needs. The sample size of our research is 10 people. The survey has six items and originally was written in English, however it was further translated in Russian for Russian speaking teachers.

Ethical consideration

Our group requested and obtained permission from the executive director of the «Clever» center, in order to provide a survey, and participants were asked permission to analyze given data. The participants were instructed orally. The survey was conducted with faculty members working in an educational center on a voluntary basis. No compensation for participating in the focus group was offered to participants. In addition, the participation of the survey was completely anonymously, in order to avoid the possible conflict between staff and manager occurrence. The introduction part of the questionnaire stated that all the results would be applied only for the research paper, and would not be published or utilized for other purposes.

Findings

After the participants passed the survey, the results were analyzed and interpreted for the study purposes. The results showed that out of 10 teachers, there were 8 women and 2 men working in the «Clever» Educational Center. 6 out of 10 participants work part-time(50% of a full-time job), the remaining 3 participants work full-time and only 1 participant works half time but more than 50% of full time. The number of workers who work only in the educational center is nine, while one participant works in an online school additionally. Except for one participant, everybody has a bachelor's degree. 80% of participants are satisfied with work conditions, while the other 20% are not satisfied. Job stress is occasionally experienced by 70% of respondents. Moreover, even though participants experienced health problems as a result of job-related stress, they are generally satisfied with their health condition. However, 40% of participants took a break from work due to job-related stress. 3 out of 4 took a break for only one week, while 1 participant took a break for a few weeks. 2 participants claim that break did not help and after returning to the work job-related stress back, whereas 2 participants claim that they have not experienced stress after taking a break. 60% are sure that they will leave for another position in 5 years, 20% are sure that they will change their profession, 10% claim that they will remain in the same position in the «Clever» center and 10% believe that they will work in another center in the same position. The illustrated interpretations of findings are attached in the Appendices section.

Results

A number of factors, which influence the job-stress have been revealed after the analysis of the conducted questionnaire. The detected aspects could be divided into several groups: administrative factors, studying process, and psycho-emotional components.

The administrative aspects which respondents mentioned as increase factors of the job-stress include the insufficient level of salaries, the scarcity of resources for studying process, no perspective for further career development, and poor connection with the management team.

In accordance with questionnaire results, the main stressors related to the studying process are the inadequate number of students; work with violent and aggressive behavior; implementation of new courses, which leads to the increase of working hours; deficient performance appraisal criteria, and lack of regular breaks.

Psycho-emotional triggers for job-stress include the underestimation of job-performance from managers' and parents' sides, poor psychological support from executives and the lack of motivation of the pupils.

The consequences of job-stress are mostly related to health issues. The respondents reported a number of problems with health as a result of the special needs teaching practice. There are several health problems, which were mentioned by the participants: headaches and/or migraines, high blood pressure, insomnia, skin rashes, indigestion, stomach ulcers, asthma, anxiety, depression, changes in appetite, exhaustion, increased consumption of tobacco and alcohol, inability to concentrate, erratic moods and low self-esteem/confidence.

Discussion

Our hypotheses were that management practice, program syllabuses, and low salaries were indicators of stress in the special educational center, which proved to be true in our findings, with more clarity of what factors are more apparent than others. Moreover, it was evident that stress led to a wide spectrum of health problems, including more physically apparent things other than burnout, which was primarily focused on many pieces of research in the special education field.

Management practices that are held by administration influence a lot of factors to create stress in a work environment, as the administration was a core source of the syllabus, extensive working hours, salary, and tools for employees. Communication and the number of students in one class were also crucial factors. Although some

papers claimed that salary was not an indicator for teachers, as long as they are satisfied with their work, our findings suggest that some employees saw a low salary as a source of stress. However, it could be due to the fact that this organization did not offer any career development for its workers.

The research findings are valuable because it identifies that stress can impact various factors. Especially the effect of stress on health in the physical sense can be a subject of further research, as many articles previously took burnout or attrition as the main variable in studying special education. Moreover, this research can be an important start in the improvement of scientific literature in the special education field in our country, as it has not been a subject of research for many years.

Recommendations

There is a list of recommendations which are proposed in order to reduce the level of job-stress in special needs education, particularly in the examined center. Firstly, management team needs to reconstruct the appraisal system and system of bonuses, due to most of the faculty members are dissatisfied with the current level of salary and career development perspectives. Secondly, current program syllabuses need to be rearranged in accordance with teachers' qualification and abilities of pupils, because of the fact that most of the respondents stated that amount of students in classes do not meet the syllabuses' requirements. Moreover, the activity of departments needs to be more coordinated, changing of department's leadership could be the way to tackle that issue, however before the evaluation of job-performance of these leaders should be conducted. Another important aspect is communication within the organization, lack of connection between the company's executives and faculty, has consequently led to the decreasing of job-satisfaction and rising of job-stress within the faculty. Constructive feedback sessions, as well as constant psychological support, should be provided in order to overcome the problem of job-stress. In addition, the degree of faculty engagement in company issues should be increased in order to raise the teachers' feelings of self-esteem and the faculty's organizational commitment. The presented recommendations are proposed from our objective point of view. Nevertheless, further research work should be conducted for a deeper and more accurate proposal of strategies for overcoming existential problems.

Limitations

The generalization of these results is limited by the small sample size of participants, to be exact only 10 tutors have participated in the survey. The evaluation of the model based on collecting data and other surveys. The main limitation, which was faced was a lack of specialists in the field of teaching children with special needs. The next problem was a lack of study by other researchers. Although, it can be due to the fact that nowadays people are less interested in teaching pupils with special needs. This problem has affected the result of our group, due to no one has provided research in the concrete field of job-stress of teachers who work with students with special needs. The impact of limitations could be provided a poor solution, which can not solve the problem.

Conclusion

This research paper reviewed the research design and methods used to understand the issues raised in "Clever" educational center where faculty teaches students with special needs. It specifically looked at how the issues of organizational behavior affect the work of employees and the quality of the services provided by the educational center. The paper discussed the use of quantitative research methods, with the focus on data gathering and processing as a suitable method for the subject of research. Finally, this paper explored ethical aspects of data collection and provided some recommendations to the center as a result of the possible solution to the problem.

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