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## **Difficulty of Professional Activities Subjectively Perceived by Slovak Primary Education Teachers**

### **Abstract**

The study presents the results of a partial investigation of the demandness of working activities as perceived by primary education teachers. It follows up on broader research contexts and is part of the VEGA 1/0415/22 project. The study presents correlations between teachers' working activities being perceived as the highest load and the length of their teaching experience, age, and school location. The research results show statistical significance between mental and physical loads of activities. Activities with the highest load are: dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts and individual care of pupils with special educational needs – SEN.

**Keywords:** *primary education teachers, demandness of working activities, mental and physical load*

### **Introduction**

The teaching profession has become one of the most frequent topics in international contexts, presented in national and international studies (TALIS – OECD, 2018). Both research and theory pay special attention to job and life satisfaction. A terminological agreement in job satisfaction is an attitude expressing a person's psychological adjustment to work, its features and characteristics. However, this general theoretical concept in research studies acquires a different detailed view of

teachers' work. Current pedeutology, contrary to the past when considered mainly a theory of the teaching profession, accentuates empirical investigation of various contexts of the teaching profession.

Some studies focus on job satisfaction and its link with working conditions (Fuming & Jiliang, 2007; Lopes & Oliveira, 2020; Ma & MacMillan, 1999, they correlate the factors influencing job satisfaction and the "Personal Life Balance" (Gedvilienė & Didžiulienė, 2019; Guoba et al., 2022). A frequent topic involves the connection between the teacher's self-efficacy, culture and anxieties as satisfaction predictors (Barni et al., 2017; Brozmanová et al., 2022; Karacop & Inaltekin, 2022). There are international studies comparing teachers' job satisfaction in various countries (Pepe et al., 2017).

Teachers' job satisfaction is influenced by professional self-efficacy that significantly adds to their pupils' success (Caprara et al., 2006; Wray et al., 2022) and professional feedback necessary for teachers (Živković, 2022). On the other hand, stress can be considered one of the most important factors influencing teachers to leave the teaching profession (Liang et al., 2022). Most research is about individual factors of teachers' job and life satisfaction. Research intentions focus on a diversity of goals: teachers' approaches to instruction, teachers' attitudes to various questions of the educational and socio-cultural context (Vančíková et al., 2021; Zaborniak-Sobczak, 2022), as well as risk factors of the teaching profession, frustration and stress (Tsubono & Ogawa, 2022) and subjective perception of the demandness of professional activities (Rovňanová, 2013). The topic of this study relates to the last goal.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Background**

The study focuses on an in-depth analysis examining the workload in a specific view of the perception of working activities (Kasáčová et al., 2022). It is part of the complex research project VEGA 1/0415/22 "Subjectively perceived difficulty of teachers' professional activities versus their life satisfaction". In the final stage, relationships will be determined between 10 factors of life satisfaction and the subjectively perceived difficulty of 18 professional activities in a Slovak-Czech-Polish comparison. Here are presented the results of a pilot study.

The study presents the results of an input investigation of subjective perception of the demandness of primary education teachers' professional activities in Slo-

vakia, both mental and physical (ML – mental load, PL – physical load). Teachers' statements on the perceived load of individual activities were compared to identify activities with the highest load, and, subsequently, correlations of the perceived load with respondents' length of teaching experience, age, and school location.

## Sample

The research sample consisted of N = 173 primary education teachers from all regions of Slovakia, out of it 3 men. The respondents were included in the research by convenience sampling. The distribution of respondents in terms of the length of teaching experience and school location was very even. Most respondents were 41 to 60 years old. 9 respondents had no teaching experience – they were studying at the time.

**Table 1.** Research sample

Length of teaching experience		Respondents' age		Respondents' school location	
1–10	37	23–30	24	Municipality	89
11–20	36	31–40	32	Town	84
21–30	45	41–50	66		
31–viac	46	51–60	45		
No experience	9	61–65	6		
Average	25		44,6	N respondents	173

## Instruments and Procedures

The research tool developed by the research team had 47 items. The first group of items, 1–36, investigated the perception of professional activity's mental and physical demandness. Professional activities were identified based on the international large-scale job analysis research "The Profession of Pre-primary Teacher and Primary Teacher within a Dynamic Concept", supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the number APVV-0026–07 (Kasáčová et al., 2011). They were the following 18 activities where two parameters were monitored: mental load (ML) and physical load (PL).

Respondents rated their subjective perception on the scale: 1 – no load, 2 – moderate load, 3 – high load, 4 – unbearable load, 0 – it does not concern me,

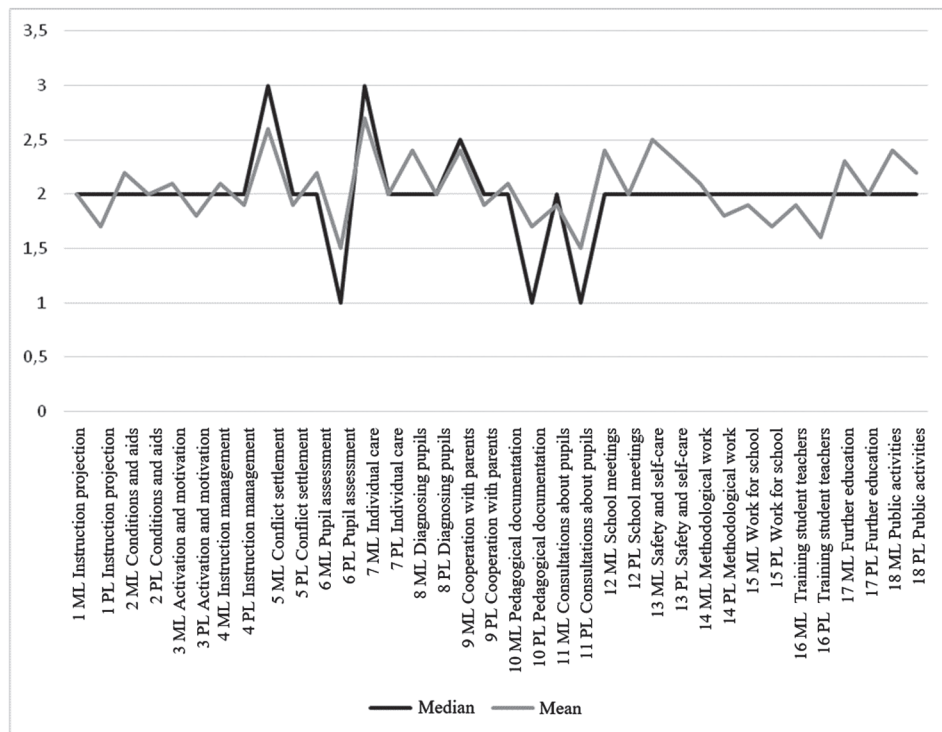
I cannot express myself. The item 37 was open-ended. Respondents could add other activities burdening them and rate their load level. The last 10 items collected respondents' demographic data.

**Table 2.** Descriptions and names of professional activities

Activity description	Activity short name
1. Planning and projecting the educational process	Instruction projection
2. Providing for conditions and didactic aids for the educational process	Conditions and aids
3. Activities inducing pupil activity and motivation	Activation and motivation
4. Carrying out and managing the educational process	Instruction management
5. Dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom	Conflict settlement
6. Assessing learning outcomes	Pupil assessment
7. Preparing individual educational plans and individual care of pupils with special educational needs (SEN)	Individual care
8. Activities related to diagnosing pupils	Diagnosing pupils
9. Meetings and co-operation with parents	Co-operation with parents
10. Maintaining pedagogical documentation	Pedagogical documentation
11. Consulting teachers and other experts about pupils and educational activities	Consultations about pupils
12. Meetings and sessions at school	Meetings at school
13. Activities related to children's safety supervision and activities related to self-care activities	Supervision and self-care
14. Work in methodological associations and other bodies of the school	Methodological work
15. Managing the library, chronicle, website, teachers' room	Work for the school
16. Activities related to the student teaching practice	Training student teachers
17. Teachers' further education	Further education
18. Extracurricular and public activities related to the profession	Public activities

## Data Analysis

Based on the initial descriptive analysis of the data, the level of teachers' mental and physical loads with individual activities was identified. In general, the research results showed that the level of mental load perceived by respondents was higher than the level of physical load.



**Figure 1.** Medians and means of the load with working activities – teachers’ subjective expressions

Legend: 1 No load, 2 Moderate load, 3 High load, 4 Unbearable load /ML – Mental load, PL – Physical load

In terms of ML, respondents perceived the following two activities as having a high to unbearable load: *Preparing individual education plans and individual care of pupils with special educational needs (SEN)* – 69% of respondents, and *Dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom* – 62% of respondents. They perceived ML of *Activities related to children’s safety supervision and activities related to self-care activities* as relatively high load. The diversity in perceived ML caused by meetings and co-operation with parents is interesting. Whereas some teachers did not perceive such activities as high ML, up to 51% of respondents perceived them as high to unbearable load. Teachers also considered meetings and sessions at school, activities related to diagnosing pupils and extracurricular and public activities related to their profession to be mentally demanding.

Teachers perceived the lowest load in consultations with teachers and other experts about pupils and educational activities, both mental and physical. There

was an interesting difference between a low level of PL and relatively high ML in assessing pupils' learning outcomes.

## Results

Table 3 compares all variables: perception of ML and PL of performed professional activities. Since it was an ordinal variable, the Wilcoxon test (W), p (statistical significance) and ES (effect size) could be used. All activities except providing for conditions and didactic aids for the education process showed statistically significant differences between mental and physical load. It was also indicated by descriptive analysis. However, there were non-significant differences, as documented in Figure 1. The effect size (ES) expresses practical significance. The Rank Point Biserial Correlation Coefficient was used for its calculation, where 0.2 means the minimum value, 0.5 a medium effect and 0.8 a high effect.

**Table 3.** Comparison of teachers' mental and physical load with activities

Activity description	W	p	ES
Planning and projecting the educational process	4268	<.001	0.690
Providing for conditions and didactic aids for the educational process	1702	.061	0.226
Activities inducing pupil activity and motivation	2402	<.001	0.599
Carrying out and managing the educational process	2528	<.001	0.416
Dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom	5010	<.001	0.907
Assessing children/pupils' learning outcomes	4902	<.001	0.866
Preparing individual education plans and individual care of pupils with special educational needs (SEN)	4299	<.001	0.847
Activities related to diagnosing pupils	3505	<.001	0.712
Meetings and co-operation with parents	3909	<.001	0.789
Maintaining pedagogical documentation	2606	<.001	0.609
Consulting teachers and other experts about pupils and educational activities	2616	<.001	0.788
Meetings and sessions at school	2200	<.001	0.771
Activities related to children's safety supervision and activities related to self-care activities	1787	<.001	0.523
Work in methodological associations and other bodies of the school	2072	<.001	0.766
Managing the library, chronicle, website, teachers' room...	1391	<.001	0.471

Activity description	W	p	ES
Activities related to the student teaching practice	1303	<.001	0.692
Teachers' further education	1927	<.001	0.596
Extracurricular and public activities related to the profession	1635	<.001	0.524

Our next step was testing whether a statistically significant correlation existed between the highest load activities (5 and 7) and three independent variables: respondents' length of teaching experience, age, and school location (town, municipality).

### Length of Teaching Experience

- H1 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' length of teaching experience and their perception of ML related to individual care of SEN pupils.*
- H2 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' length of teaching experience and their perception of PL related to individual care of SEN pupils.*

Respondents' ML related to the individual care of SEN pupils and their length of teaching experience were in a positive correlation of a lower value ( $r_s = .169$ ,  $p = .027$ ). In practice, it means teachers with longer experience felt a higher load of preparing individual education plans and individual care of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) than teachers with shorter experience.

There was no statistically significant correlation between respondents' length of teaching experience and their perception of PL related to individual care of SEN pupils ( $r = .093$ ,  $p = .226$ ).

- H3 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' length of teaching experience and their perception of ML related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.*
- H4 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' length of teaching experience and their perception of PL related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.*

Respondents' ML related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom and their length of teaching experience had a low positive correlation ( $r_s = .179$ ,  $p = .019$ ). It means that the longer the teacher was employed in primary education, the higher ML s/he perceived in dealing with pupil conflicts.

There was no correlation between respondents' length of teaching experience and their perception of PL related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom ( $r_s = .109$ ,  $p = .157$ ).

### Age of Respondents

- H5 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' age and their perception of ML related to individual care of SEN pupils.*
- H6 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' age and their perception of PL related to individual care of SEN pupils.*

There was no statistically significant correlation between respondents' age and their perception of ML and PL related to individual care of SEN pupils (mental load:  $r_s = .115$ ,  $p = .131$ ; physical load:  $r_s = .037$ ,  $p = .327$ ). As presented in Figure 1, the ML of this activity was high in all age groups (median 3, mean 2.7).

- H7 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' age and their perception of ML related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.*
- H4 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' age and their perception of PL related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.*

Respondents' age correlated with their perception of ML related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom ( $r_s = .212$ ,  $p = .005$ ). In practice, it means older teachers felt higher ML when dealing with problems and pupil conflicts. On the contrary, there was no statistically significant correlation between respondents' age and their perception of PL related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom ( $r_s = .112$ ,  $p = .143$ ).

### School Location

- H9 *A statistically significant correlation is assumed between respondents' school location and their perception of ML related to individual care of SEN pupils.*
- H10 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' school location and their perception of physical load related to individual care of SEN pupils.*



There was no statistically significant correlation between respondents' school location and their perception of ML and PL related to the individual care of SEN pupils (mental load:  $\div 2(4) = 4.90$ ,  $p = .298$ ; physical load:  $\div 2(4) = 3.33$ ,  $p = .504$ ). Town and municipal school teachers perceived similar loads related to individual care of SEN pupils.

H11 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' school location and their perception of ML related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.*

H12 *It is assumed that there is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' school location and their perception of PL related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.*

There was no significant correlation between respondents' school location and their perception of ML and PL related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom (mental load:  $\div 2(4) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .722$ ; physical load:  $\div 2(4) = 5.21$ ,  $p = .266$ ). Town and municipal school teachers perceived similar loads related to dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom.

The quantitative results were added to a qualitative analysis of the open-ended item: *You can add other activities you perceive as a load and rate their level.* Teachers felt highly unbearably loaded with: substituting colleagues during illness, planning and carrying out extracurricular activities, searching for instruction materials, supervising during breaks and in the school canteen, managing the textbook store-room, writing reports and filling in school documentation, communicating and unplanned meetings with pupils' parents. Some teachers felt the unbearable mental load of parents' unauthorized and unprofessional interventions in pupil assessments.

## **Discussion**

The research showed a statistically significant difference between subjective perception of ML and PL of activities, except for providing conditions and didactic aids for the educational process. This activity was equally demanding in both measured parameters.

The correlations of activities with ML and PL were obvious, only in the relationship with the variables respondents' length of experience and age; the perception of load did not differ by the school location.

The activity dealing with problem situations and pupil conflicts in the classroom was identified as the most mentally demanding, identified by Rovňanová (2013) in her research as dealing with disciplinary offences ranked third in demandness. Čiliaková (2016), too, paid attention to maintaining discipline as a problem for primary education teachers.

Preparing individual plans and individual care of SEN pupils ranked third in demandness in our research, which also complies with the research findings (Rovňanová, 2013), where respondents ranked the work with special educational needs pupils first in demandness of educational activities.

The most demanding activities in terms of subjectively perceived ML and PL were compared with the results of the job analysis research carried out in 2011 (Kasáčová et al., 2011). The time snapshot of both activities showed a relatively low time allocation compared to instruction projecting and managing, 90 minutes a week on average for individual care of SEN pupils and 80 minutes a week for dealing with problem situations. Despite their low time allocation, teachers perceived them as highly demanding.

## **Conclusions**

According to various authors, the mental load is one of the serious reasons for the burnout effect in teachers, which causes absenteeism from work even leaving the profession. The analysis of stress factors in primary school teachers was carried out by Tsubono and Ogawa (2022). They noted that dealing with difficult pupils was the main stress factor in teachers' work. Our research results correlate with their finding.

## **Acknowledgement**

The study is an output of the project VEGA 1/0415/22 "Subjectively perceived difficulty of teachers' professional activities versus their life satisfaction".

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