

THE EXCESSIVE WORKLOAD CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – THE CONSEQUENCES FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN POLAND

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Abstract

Over two years ago, humankind faced a global pandemic that significantly changed people's lives. The health crisis has affected education and its whole community (Lewis, 2021; OECD, 2021). Pupils, parents, teachers, school leaders, and all school staff have been put in a problematic situation. School managers were in an extreme position due to their responsibility for organizing schoolwork and the decisions they had to make during the pandemic. Management in such extraordinary conditions has increased the stress level and likelihood of health problems among school principals (Harris & Jones, 2020). It is also worth emphasizing that they may influence the school's staff and students' perceptions and behaviors connected with health issues (Van Duong et al., 2021).

The poster aims to indicate the consequences of work overload for school principals in Poland. The main research questions are:

1. To what extent have Polish school principals felt overloaded and stressed by work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What kind of health disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic were indicated by Polish school leaders?

The results come from the online survey among school principals in Poland as a part of the international project *COVID-19 Health Literacy School Principals Survey*. The survey was conducted in 8 out of 16 provinces in Poland between June 2021 and December 2021. Local governments agents responsible for education were informed about the study. The questionnaire was translated into Polish and sent by email to schools principals with an invitation to take part in the survey and complete the online survey. The invitation was sent to schools situated in different regions in Poland (which differ in the degree of urbanization, industrialization, economic resources, and population density) and various school types (primary school, integrated primary school, a school for children with special needs, high school, comprehensive high school, vocational school, music school). In that study following sociodemographic factors were taken into consideration: age (year), gender (female vs. male), school type (mentioned above), and the number of pupils attending school. Also, work-related factors such as weekly workload (didactic work and management work) and the number of principals' work hours during the COVID-19 pandemic were analyzed. Participants were informed about the purpose and importance of the study. Completing the questionnaire took about 20-30 minutes. For data analysis, 928 questionnaires were taken into account as completed filled. The data obtained in the research were analyzed statistically. The study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland (KEUS.118/04.2021).

The poster will present the main findings of perceived Polish schools principals' work overload during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their health conditions. The results will be explained by taking into account the sex and age of the respondents.

The conducted study revealed that surveyed school principals often and very often had to work longer than contractually agreed and were available for their colleagues, pupils, and parents in their free time (appropriately 68,3% and 71,3%). Most of them also had to give up leisure activities in favor of work (67,9%), work extra hours in their spare time (60%), waive breaks during working hours (57,3%), and forgo getting sufficient sleep in favor of work (50,5%). Regarding feeling nervous and stressed at work at school, 48,5% of participants confirmed it – 18,9% admitted they felt that way very often and 29,6% - fairly often. 38,8% of principals felt nervous and stressed at work sometimes. In the presented study, excessive workload indicators were higher for women than for men. Most examined principals assess their health as good (47,8%) and relatively good (30,1%). The primary health disorders that school managers indicated were: muscle pain (neck, shoulder, or back) and headache.

The study has some limitations. Firstly, obtained results relate to the research sample and can not be generated due to purposive sampling. Secondly, the study was conducted in the middle of the pandemic, so principals could not reveal and notice all the health consequences of overworking. That suggests the need for continuing research among school managers and the long-term impact of working during COVID-19 on their health. It also gives indications for future actions aimed to strengthen mental resilience and prevent health problems among school principals.

Keywords: *School principals, COVID-19 pandemic, workload, psychological stress, health problems.*

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