EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' STRESS LEVELS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

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ABSTRACT

This study, structured as a literature review, explores the concepts of 'Teacher Stress' and 'School Climate.' Researchers have shown increasing interest in teacher stress; however, studies focusing on preschool teachers' stress remain limited (Hu et al., 2019). Research on stress among preschool educators consistently highlights its profound negative impact on both teachers' well-being and classroom dynamics. High stress levels are closely linked to burnout and emotional exhaustion, which in turn diminish teachers' self-efficacy and motivation, particularly in managing challenging classroom behaviors (Roberts et al., 2020). Furthermore, elevated stress disrupts the classroom climate, weakens teacher-student relationships, and hinders children's socio-emotional development (Sönmez & Kolaşınlı, 2020; Jeon et al., 2018). This stress also reduces teachers' confidence in managing classroom dynamics, adversely affecting their ability to create a supportive learning environment (Zhai et al., 2011). Collectively, these findings underscore the need for interventions that support preschool teachers in managing occupational stress, thereby enhancing both educators' resilience and classroom quality.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the literature by examining the factors influencing preschool teachers' stress levels and their relationship with school climate, which is considered one of the primary causes of stress.

Keywords: Stress, school climate, preschool education.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Stress

Stress is a response that challenges an individual's physical and psychological limits, often originating from environmental or personal factors (Koçyiğit & Sezer, 2024). Hans Selye (1973) defined stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand," emphasizing that such responses aim to maintain the organism's homeostasis.

Stress is an inevitable aspect of human life, and everyone experiences its effects at times. However, stress can sometimes become overwhelming and negatively impact health (Selye, 1976). Research indicates that chronic stress impairs cognitive and psychological well-being and contributes to various disorders, including asthma, anxiety, cardiovascular diseases, and even some types of cancer (Lupien et al., 2009; Slavich, 2016; Yaribeygi et al., 2017).

Lazarus and Manson argue that stress is a specialized process shaped by an individual's personal characteristics and mental state. Walter Bradford Cannon, through his "fight or flight" theory, explained the biological foundations of stress, suggesting that when an individual perceives danger, they physiologically prepare either to escape or to confront the threat (Baltaş & Baltaş, 2013).

The relationship between stress levels and self-esteem significantly affects psychological well-being. High levels of stress can negatively impact individuals' self-confidence and self-esteem. According to Cooley (1902), the self emerges from interactions within society (Rizvançe, 2005). Rogers' (1951) theory is centered around the concept of the self. He used the terms "self" and "self-concept" interchangeably, with the self being composed of all the thoughts, perceptions, and values that define "who I am" or "what I can do" (Matsani Rizvançe, 2020). Prolonged stress can lead individuals to feel inadequate, thus lowering their self-esteem. It is known that individuals with high self-esteem are satisfied with their attributes and can utilize active coping strategies when facing challenges. In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem tend to use passive coping mechanisms and have difficulty finding functional solutions when confronted with stress (Kansu & Rizvance Matsani, 2024).

Chris Kyriacou (2016) suggested that stress can be examined in three different contexts: as a load or force applied to a system in engineering, as an individual's experience of positive and negative challenges, and as the gap between expectations and one's capabilities. In today's information era, rapidly changing conditions and innovations directly affect professional life. The expectation for employees to adapt quickly, manage heavy workloads, and keep pace with constant changes leads to occupational stress (Yetim & Çevik, 2018).

1.2 Occupational Stress

Occupational stress is a significant phenomenon associated with the emergence of negative emotions in the workplace and emotional exhaustion (Koçyiğit & Sezer, 2024). Employees spend a substantial portion of their time at work, and the pressure to fulfill organizational goals often leads to stress, commonly referred to in the literature as organizational or occupational stress (Aydın, 2008).

Occupational stress is defined as a psychological and physical condition arising when an individual struggles to cope with demands and pressures (Michie, 2002). Exposure to psychosocial factors in the workplace can increase stress hormone levels, trigger anxiety and tension, and contribute to various health problems (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Studies have shown that women experience higher work-related stress than men and that perceived stress levels vary by age group and profession (Göksu & Kumcağız, 2020). Tekin et al. (2019) identified mining as the profession with the highest stress levels due to its life-threatening risks, followed by security forces such as soldiers and police officers, who work in high-risk environments. Healthcare professionals also experience high levels of stress due to safety concerns and frequent exposure to adverse situations. Teachers ranked fourth in stress levels due to the human-centered nature of education, frequent systemic changes, and financial constraints (Tekin et al., 2019).

Occupational stress significantly affects employees' productivity and well-being, necessitating institutional recognition and intervention (Chyl & Yuen, 2016; Shrivastaya et al., 2023). This type of stress can lead to increased error rates, reduced performance, and various physical health issues, including headaches and cardiovascular diseases (Gomathy, 2022).

In an era of rapid industrial and technological advancement, occupational stress has become a critical issue across all sectors, including education. High levels of work-related stress in educational settings negatively impact teachers' service quality, diminishing the overall effectiveness of educational processes. Research conducted in special education institutions by Bayındır Koçak and Gökler (2018) revealed a negative correlation between stress and job satisfaction, demonstrating that occupational stress reduces teachers' job satisfaction and professional performance.

1.3 Teacher Stress

Teacher stress is a type of occupational stress in which adverse conditions in professional life affect an individual's well-being. It arises from poor working conditions, time pressure, student behavior, workload, and systemic factors (O'Connor & Clarke, 1990; Kyriacou, 2001; Agyapong et al., 2022). Additionally, external factors such as low wages, heavy workload, low social status, inadequate working conditions, and insufficient support for children in the classroom play a significant role in teachers' stress levels (Xiao-he, 2008; Clayback & Williford, 2021). Teachers struggle with various types of stress caused by workload, student behavior, and professional expectations, in addition to the stress they experience in meeting increasing demands (Collie & Mansfield, 2022). Furthermore, factors determining teachers' stress levels include school size, serving students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and professional experience (Collie & Mansfield, 2022).

Research also indicates that teacher stress in the workplace not only has psychological effects but also negatively impacts physical health. For instance, Olivier and Venter (2003) found a strong relationship between job stress in teachers and difficulties in relaxation, absenteeism, overload, and physical disorders. It is suggested that stress negatively affects teachers' physical health, leading to burnout and anxiety, which, in turn, increases the risk of illness (Agyapong et al., 2022).

Studies suggest that while a low level of stress can motivate teachers, high levels of stress result in emotional exhaustion, classroom management problems, and burnout (Koçyiğit & Sezer, 2024; Muhonen et al., 2022). Teachers experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to encounter disruptive student behaviors, leading to a negative classroom climate

(Lambert et al., 2006; Kolaşınlı, 2019). Moreover, teacher stress has been found to reduce the democratic structure of the classroom environment and negatively impact students' academic achievement (Geving, 2007; Liu & Lu, 2011). Stress arising from teacher-student relationships is considered a significant determinant of students' academic success (Liu & Lu, 2011).

In conclusion, reducing teacher stress is crucial for improving teacher-student relationships and enhancing academic achievement. A positive school climate increases teachers' job satisfaction and self-efficacy while reducing stress levels and strengthening professional resilience (Türker & Kahraman, 2021). Therefore, developing teachers' stress management skills is essential for both their individual well-being and the sustainability of educational quality.

1.4 Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education refers to an educational process designed to support the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of children aged 3-6, helping them acquire good habits and facilitating their adaptation to social life (MEB, 2024). This process aims to ensure that children speak Turkish correctly and fluently, prepare for primary school, and provide a common educational environment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Early childhood is a critical period in terms of brain development, with rapid cognitive and social growth (Başaran & Ulubey, 2018). This stage prepares children for subsequent levels of education, leaving lasting positive effects on their long-term cognitive and social development (Pianta et al., 2009).

Early childhood education represents one of the most critical phases in an individual's life, during which the foundations of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development are established (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research indicates that safe and supportive environments provided by teachers during this period positively influence children's long-term success and well-being (Pianta et al., 2009).

Interventions aimed at improving the health and professional satisfaction of early childhood educators significantly impact both teachers' well-being and the quality of education provided to children. For instance, studies conducted with teachers participating in the "Be Well Care Well" (BWCW) 12-month wellness program revealed significant improvements

in personal strength, resilience, employee stress, job satisfaction, and physical activity participation. Additionally, this program was found to positively influence teacher-child interactions, supporting children's social and emotional development. Findings suggest that such interventions enhance teachers' quality of life and create a healthier and more supportive learning environment in early childhood education (Moreland et al., 2024).

1.5 Preschool Teachers and Stress

Early childhood is a critical period in which the brain develops most rapidly, learning is most intense, and fundamental habits take shape. During this phase, children are highly receptive to both positive and negative influences, both inside and outside the classroom. Therefore, it is crucial to design early childhood learning environments in a way that maximizes children's social, emotional, and physical development (Babaroğlu, 2018). The relationships that teachers establish with children during this period play a key role in their academic and social development. Research indicates a significant correlation between a teacher's personality and a child's development (Sarp, 2019).

In the context of preschool education, the stress levels of preschool teachers are influenced by various internal and external factors. Gürbüz (2008) examined job satisfaction and burnout levels among preschool teachers and found that factors such as the institution they work at, the type of school, and their motivation for work affect job satisfaction. However, factors like marital status, professional seniority, and monthly income were not found to have a significant relationship with job satisfaction. Ömeroğlu (2015) found that preschool teachers experience more work-related stress than personal stress, and those working in preschools within primary or secondary schools have higher stress levels than those in independent preschools.

The main sources of stress for preschool teachers include low salaries, lack of support, excessive workload, and the absence of classroom assistants (Wiltshire, 2023; Xiao-he, 2008). Particularly, the burden of responsibilities in the classroom, the attentiveness required when working with young children, and concerns about child safety contribute to increased stress levels. Additionally, the lack of adequate support and resources, excessive workload, students' lack of motivation, and the

accountability pressure placed on teachers are significant stress factors (Adu & Okeke, 2016; Koçyiğit & Sezer, 2024).

Since preschool teachers play a crucial role in supporting the healthy development of young children, the stress they experience can negatively impact the classroom environment. Research indicates that highly stressed preschool teachers struggle to communicate effectively with children, which in turn negatively affects children's social and emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Yoon, 2002). Negative classroom environments can hinder children's emotional regulation and lead to a loss of motivation in learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Hamre, 2010). Emotional exhaustion among teachers can disrupt the emotional climate of the classroom, undermine children's sense of security, and reduce their long-term motivation for learning (Ansari et al., 2022). Lack of motivation is often associated with negative emotions. Individuals with low motivation tend to experience feelings such as hopelessness, anxiety, and stress (Matsani, 2024). Sezer and Koçyiğit's (2024) research found that preschool teachers generally perceive stress negatively rather than as an opportunity for personal growth, and that stress can limit children's cognitive, social, and emotional development by negatively affecting the classroom's emotional climate.

Studies conducted in Turkey show that the stress levels of preschool teachers vary based on factors such as monthly income, professional seniority, gender, and the age group of the students they work with (Erdiller & Doğan, 2015). Furthermore, teacher stress varies depending on the school climate, and factors such as the leadership style of the school principal have a significant impact on teacher stress (Milner & Khoza, 2008; Hu et al., 2019). A supportive leadership approach from school principals has been identified as a key factor in reducing teacher stress. Additionally, aspects such as collegial relationships, innovation, participation in decision-making processes, reward systems, and the physical conditions of the school can also contribute to teacher stress (Shen & Wang, 2006).

Stress caused by student behavior is another crucial issue for preschool teachers. Teachers report that they have not received sufficient training in handling challenging behaviors in children, which makes classroom management more difficult (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014). The psychological well-being of teachers plays a critical role in shaping a

positive classroom climate and creating a learning environment that supports children's development (Jeon et al., 2018). In this context, supporting the professional development of teachers, enhancing their stress management skills, and ensuring effective leadership from school administrators can contribute to a higher quality early childhood education process.

1.6 School Climate

School climate reflects the physical and social environment of an educational institution, shaping the perceptions of teachers, students, and other stakeholders. Covering a range of factors from the physical structure of the school to student-teacher relationships and leadership approaches, school climate directly influences teaching and learning processes (Aslan et al., 2022). A positive school climate supports students' academic achievement, social adaptation, and peer acceptance, while a negative climate can hinder these processes (Öz, 2023). School administrators play a crucial role in shaping this climate; their communication skills, problem-solving abilities, teacher support, and reward policies are among the key elements that influence the overall school atmosphere (Karademir & Ören, 2020).

Research indicates that a lack of administrative support reduces teachers' job satisfaction and increases their stress levels (Demirci, 2015; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016). A positive school climate can enhance job satisfaction and reduce teacher stress (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Berg & Cornell, 2016). This, in turn, positively impacts teachers' overall life satisfaction, alleviating negative emotions while fostering the continuity of positive emotions (Hamama et al., 2013).

Veziroğlu Çelik (2014) found that teachers working in independent preschools perceive a more positive school climate compared to those in primary school kindergarten classes, and this positively influences their performance. The leadership approach of the school principal has a significant impact on teachers' perceptions of the school climate; a supportive leadership style enhances teacher motivation and job satisfaction, while an authoritarian leadership style can lead to stress and alienation among teachers (Öztürk, 2014; Araşkal & Gürbüz, 2021).

The stress levels of preschool teachers are influenced by factors such as classroom management, student behaviors, and leadership styles. Challenging student behaviors and the lack of adequate training in managing such behaviors are among the primary sources of stress for teachers (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014). Furthermore, studies highlight a strong correlation between teacher stress levels and the emotional climate of the classroom, noting that high levels of stress negatively impact the classroom atmosphere (Sönmez & Kolaşınlı, 2020). Improving teachers' well-being is crucial not only for creating a learning environment that supports children's academic and social development but also for enhancing teacher performance (Jeon et al., 2018).

Milner and Khoza (2008) emphasized that teacher stress varies depending on the school climate. Research conducted in South Africa has shown that both teacher stress and school climate are critical variables affecting teacher attitudes and overall school performance. Similarly, Akbudak (2010) found that school administrators' leadership behaviors influence teacher stress. While this effect does not vary by gender, it does change based on years of experience and age group. Özdemir (2015) also found a significant relationship between teacher stress and administrative behaviors, noting that teachers with less professional experience experience higher levels of stress compared to their more experienced counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Stress is a complex phenomenon resulting from the interaction of individual and environmental factors. When chronic, it disrupts physiological balance, adversely affects health, and can lead to various illnesses (Recepoğlu & Çınar, 2024). Therefore, understanding and managing stress is critical to maintaining individuals' health and quality of life.

Occupational stress should be regarded as a crucial factor influencing both individual well-being and organizational functioning. Conducting comprehensive studies on its causes and consequences is vital for developing effective intervention strategies.

In conclusion, school climate plays a key role in determining teachers' professional well-being, job satisfaction, and performance. A positive school climate strengthens teachers' self-efficacy and classroom management skills, enhances job satisfaction, and supports students' academic success and social integration (Topçu, 2019; Kelley et al., 2005). On the other hand, factors such as a lack of administrative support and excessive workload contribute to increased teacher stress levels. In this context, school administrators' ability to demonstrate effective leadership, provide support to teachers, and improve the physical and social environment of the school is essential for fostering a positive school climate. Developing strategies to improve school climate and supporting teachers in stress management are critical for both individual and institutional success.

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