Teachers' work-related stress during the transition to Estonian-language education: stressors and ways to manage them

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Abstract
In the context of increasing migration and the transition to Estonian-language education starting in the fall of 2024, more and more children whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction in schools and whose linguistic repertoires include multiple languages are studying in Estonian general education schools. This has highlighted the need to adapt teaching practices and places new demands on teachers working in Estonia. The aim of this study was to examine the factors that basic school teachers perceive as sources of work-related stress and to identify possible solutions for supporting teachers' mental well-being and reducing stress. The study used semi-structured interviews with Estonian basic school teachers as the research method. The findings revealed that teachers' increased levels of work-related stress in recent years are predominantly related to work overload, which may be connected to the shortage of teachers. In addition, the study identified several other temporary and persistent sources of stress experienced by teachers.

Keywords: *basic school teachers, burnout, Estonia, multilingual education, stress management, teaching profession, work-related stress*

Introduction

Teacher work-related stress and burnout have become significant challenges affecting the attractiveness and sustainability of the teaching profession. A survey of 1,700 teachers conducted by the Estonian Education Personnel Union in 2022 found that 92% had experienced burnout at work, while 23% reported feeling constantly exhausted (Estonian Education Personnel Union, 2022). Previous research has also demonstrated that higher levels of work-related stress increase the likelihood of burnout, which may result not only in teachers leaving the profession but also in serious health problems among those working in education (Mugu, 2011; National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020). Given that Estonia is already facing a shortage of teachers (Haugas and Varblane, 2022), reducing teachers' work-related stress and preventing burnout are important factors in both attracting new teachers to schools and retaining experienced teachers. This issue is further emphasised by the aging of the teaching workforce and the large number of teachers expected to retire in the coming years (National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020).

In the Estonian school context, these challenges are further shaped by increasing linguistic diversity and changes in language policy in education. The topic of multilingualism has become particularly relevant due to the increasing number of students with a migrant background, as well as the transition to Estonian-language education. More and more students whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction and whose linguistic repertoire includes multiple languages are studying in Estonian general education schools. Consequently, teachers are increasingly required to take into account learners' different mother tongues, language proficiency levels and cultural backgrounds. This places new demands on teaching practices and raises questions about which approaches and strategies best support the development of multilingual learners in general education schools.

One aspect that has added emotional tension to a part of the Estonian teaching community in recent years (see e.g. Niitmäe and Solomina, 2025) is the amendment to the Basic and Upper Secondary Schools Act adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia (Riigikogu, 2022). According to this amendment, the transition to Estonian as the language of instruction in schools previously using Russian as the language of instruction (new term: transition schools) began in the 2024/2025 academic year in preschool institutions and in grades 1 and 4 in schools. The transition to Estonian-language education is planned to be completed in Estonia by 2030 (ibid.).

Few qualitative studies have examined work-related stress from the perspective of Estonian teachers. Gurt (2020) studied students' views on the factors contributing to teachers' work-related stress, so teachers' own accounts were outside the scope of that study. The present study therefore uses a qualitative approach to examine the stressors experienced by teachers in basic schools and the strategies they themselves identify for managing stress.

Work-related stress and burnout among teachers continue to be a widespread issue across Estonia (National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020). To solve this, implementation of prevention and mitigation measures at national level, coordinated by the Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, may prove appropriate, changing the organization of teachers' work so that the impact of stressors is reduced or so that teachers have at their disposal better ways to cope with stress. From the aforementioned stems the research problem of the study on which the article is based: namely, the factors that influence teachers' work-related stress should be studied in more detail, arriving at possible solutions on how to stop teacher burnout. Considering the topicality of the subject matter, this topic is currently still relatively under-researched.

Consequently, the objectives of the article are to ascertain what basic school teachers believe causes stress in their teaching work (including the context of the transition to Estonian-language education), and to find solutions based on teachers' opinions to support teachers' mental well-being and reduce stress. Based on the objective of the paper, two research questions were posed:

1. What are the factors that basic school teachers believe cause work-related stress in teachers?
2. What can teachers themselves, educational institutions, and the state do to support teachers' mental well-being and reduce teachers' work-related stress levels?

The qualitative study underlying this article is based on semi-structured individual interviews conducted with Estonian basic school teachers working in rural and urban schools located in different parts of Estonia.

Stress in the teaching profession

Based on a variety of studies, it has been found that long-term work-related stress and higher stress levels can lead to burnout (Mugu, 2011; National Audit Office of Estonia, 2020), which is accompanied by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, i.e. loss of real interest in work results, and reduced performance (see also Salvagioni et al., 2017). Emotional exhaustion is, in terms of symptoms, most similar to experiencing stress as both typically manifest as headaches, chronic fatigue, high blood pressure, sleep disorders, and frequent viral illnesses (Maslach and Leiter, 2016). If other signs of burnout appear, the risk of developing very serious physical and mental health problems increases (see e.g. Salvagioni et al., 2017). Given the growing challenges related to teachers' work-related stress and burnout, further research is needed to examine the factors contributing to occupational stress and to identify effective strategies at different levels for preventing burnout.

Prilleltensky and colleagues (2016) argue that individual-level stressors are related to teachers' personal characteristics and their ability to cope with stressful situations. Being unsure of their professional competence can be exceedingly stressful for teachers (Wieczorek, 2016). Professional failures, such as the perception that they are unable to cope with students with behavioural issues, for example, have a negative impact on teacher self-efficacy (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2017). This, in turn, is

likely to increase stress levels if teachers feel they are unable to cope with what is transpiring in the classroom (ibid.). It is clear that social-emotional competence is of great importance in teaching work as it helps build better relationships with students and establish a better learning environment in the classroom (Collie et al., 2012).

A lack of resources can also be considered as an individual stressor for teachers, as explained by Bakker and colleagues' (2004) model of job demands-resources. Teachers experience high levels of stress when they do not have enough time to tackle current work tasks, such as preparing lessons, creating new learning materials and reviewing student work, or when teachers have little free time due to the burden of these tasks (Feltoe et al., 2016). Shortages of resources can also include, for example, inadequate support services for students with special educational needs and inappropriate teaching materials which increase the teacher's workload (Richards, 2012; International Labour Organization, 2016).

Empirical studies conducted in both Estonia and the USA confirm the great significance of high workload and lack of resources as stress factors for teachers. According to a study conducted among teachers in schools in Estonia, in Tartu city, high workload is the most common stressor, and lack of time is the third most common stressor (Ruus, 2014). In the USA, it has been observed that high workload has led to sleep deprivation for many teachers as extended periods of time spent completing tasks result in less than six hours of sleep per day (Farley and Chamberlain 2021, p. 305).

Interpersonal factors are also a significant source of stress for teachers, as their work involves ample communication and they are exposed to different people who have varied expectations of the teacher. Teachers may experience conflicts with students, parents, and school administrators if they foster different views on teaching and school related issues. (Prilleltensky et al., 2016) Coworkers can be supportive and reduce stress levels; yet, they can also cause social pressure for the teacher, leading to even higher stress levels (Wieczorek, 2016). Stress from parents can be related to the high demands placed on teachers as well as excessive parental interference in teachers' work. Parents sometimes blame teachers without grounds for students' poor academic performance and various school-related problematic issues (Gurt, 2020). However, earlier studies conducted in Estonia indicate that student behaviour is one of the most important stressors for teachers (see e.g. Gurt, 2020; Ruus, 2014). In addition, if teachers discern that their remuneration is low and there is a risk of losing their job, this can lead to significantly higher stress levels among teachers (Wieczorek, 2016). Organisational culture certainly also affects employees' stress levels.

Among organization-level stressors, educational reforms and changes in the organization and nature of teaching work have been discussed in scientific sources quite predominantly (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Shaw, 2016; Travers, 2017). Studies confirm that, in general, educational reforms have increased the demands on teachers' work and their responsibility, and teachers' performance is now assessed more based on formal criteria (see, for example, Putwain and Von der Embse, 2019; Travers, 2017). Furthermore, teachers' performance has begun to be assessed based on student results, which increases the teachers' feeling that they are fully responsible for their students' progress (Shaw, 2016). Today, as compared to earlier times, an increased number of different parties are making demands as regarding teachers' work: teachers are under pressure from school management, parents, and society to improve students' academic performance (Herman et al., 2018). The result can be a situation where teachers devote a lot of time and energy to teaching students preparing for exams, rendering the pre-exam periods exceedingly stressful for teachers (Feltoe et al., 2016). Based on her research, Travers (2017) has found that there has been a trend towards greater regulation and institutional control in the organization of teaching work, on account of which it can be assumed that a certain number of teachers perceive a decrease in their autonomy as teachers.

In the Estonian context, the transition to Estonian-language education in schools adds challenges for some teachers (Niitmäe, Solomina 2025). On the one hand, teachers must consider that teaching must take place by content and language integrated learning (CLIL) when there are students with a mother

tongue other than Estonian in the classroom. This means that teachers must create teaching strategies that support language development, focusing on ensuring that students are able to acquire both subject-specific knowledge and the necessary academic language (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2025). Such strategies are not only important in language learning, but in all subjects (ibid.). All this requires teachers to consciously consider linguistic diversity in their teaching practice.

On the other hand, teachers must simultaneously find a balance between the goals of integration and the development of Estonian as the state language of Estonia (Bower, 2020). Namely, in recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on valuing the mother tongue of all learners and treating multilingualism as a resource (OECD, 2019). International recommendations, including European Union and OECD documents, have also influenced the Estonian education discourse, highlighting the need to support multilingual learners systematically and based on research (ibid.).

It should not be forgotten that cooperation skills between school management, parents and teachers are also very important (see also Bower, 2020), and certainly also with a view to the formation of students' identity and cultural orientation. In practice, this means that schools must find a balance between teaching the state language and maintaining the learners' mother tongue and linguistic identity. It can be stated that this places quite high expectations on teachers from society, parents, school administrations, and actually the students themselves.

However, the impact of changes in the organisation of education on teachers' stress levels may also depend on how teachers and other stakeholders interpret the pressures associated with these changes and what strategies they develop to cope with them.

Supporting teachers' mental well-being to reduce stress

Teachers can use rational adaptation strategies or implement avoidant adaptation to reduce stress (Foley and Murphy, 2015). In the first case, teachers consciously try to find a solution to stressful situations, in the second case, they distance themselves from these situations and therefore from teaching work in general, focusing on substitute activities that can sometimes be based on self-harming behavioural patterns (ibid.). Empirically, it has been confirmed that teachers who apply rational adaptation, e.g. approach problems positively and try to find solutions to complex situations, are better able to reduce stress levels (Antoniou et al., 2013). In contrast, avoidant behaviour results in continuous high stress levels in the long term, which can lead to burnout (ibid.).

Teachers' higher levels of mental or psychological well-being help to prevent stress. If teachers are generally satisfied with their work and life, and if they feel that they can do their job at least on a satisfactory level, it can be assumed that this should help them cope better with stressors (Bradley et al., 2018). Therefore, implementation of measures that support teachers' psychological well-being have the potential to reduce stress among teachers.

In conclusion, the level of stress in teachers can be prevented and reduced by both teachers themselves and school management and at a beyond-the-school (local government, state) level. Korotkov (2020) is of the opinion that in addition to the employer, teachers themselves should take responsibility and initiative for reducing their own work-related stress.

Measures implemented by teachers and schools

Empirically, it has been confirmed that one of the most common stress-reduction measures used by teachers is physical activity (Feltoe et al., 2016). Teachers also use other leisure and hobby activities to reduce stress, such as listening to music, attending cultural events, fishing, etc. (Arismunandar et al., 2022). Various creative activities, reading self-help literature, talking about school related issues with a support person, and a healthy lifestyle help in reducing stress (Reddy and Anuradha 2013). However, some researchers have found that some teachers respond to stress by practicing unhealthy lifestyles, such as emotional eating and alcohol consumption (Klassen and Durksen, 2014).

Schools should create an environment that supports teachers' mental well-being more broadly, rather than focusing solely on reducing work-related stress (Tikkanen et al., 2020). Strategies to support teachers' mental well-being should be proactive and make use of the resources available to the school. Strategies enforced should foster peer support, trust, and knowledge and workload sharing. Bradley and colleagues (2018) emphasize the need to create an empathetic and emotionally positive classroom environment – one in which both teachers and students feel safe at school.

Based on the linguistic aspect in the school context, it has also been emphasized that students must develop a sense of confidence so that they do not feel shy about speaking in the target language when communicating, primarily due to possible language errors (Genesee, 2005). It can be assumed that in a safe learning environment created by the teacher, it is easier for students to acquire language and subject knowledge, because the general atmosphere is calmer (ibid.).

Mugu (2011) notes that the first step in schools to reduce teachers' work-related stress should be to raise awareness of the issue, which is a prerequisite for schools to start planning anti-stress interventions. Schools should not approach teachers' issues presumptively, but instead should communicate with teachers and inquire as to what they think is preventing them from coping with their jobs well (Fitchett et al. 2018). Schools should also ensure that when teachers' work requires new skills, teachers are provided with appropriate training (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021).

Schools should provide social support to new teachers in particular: mentoring and onboarding schemes are suitable tools here; for example, schools can assign mentors to new teachers from among more experienced teachers (Fitchett et al., 2018). In addition, schools should allow teachers to have a greater say in decision-making so that they feel more involved in decision-making processes affecting school life (Collie et al., 2012; Richards, 2012).

In connection with the implementation of the principle of inclusive education in Estonia, students with special educational needs are now included in mainstream schools, and teachers can be assisted in this situation by training that instructs them on how to manage such students in the classroom (for example, students with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders) (Von der Embse et al., 2019). In addition, teachers need skills to handle occasional disruptive behaviour among mainstream students (Bottiani et al., 2019). Classroom management training has been shown to be successful in reducing teachers' stress levels, and it is recommended that such interventions last for approximately 8-10 weeks and take place at least once a week for best results (Von der Embse et al., 2019). In conclusion, Ruus (2014) has recommended that every school develop a functioning system for resolving students' behavioural issues.

Measures beyond school

At national level, it is important to conduct regular studies on teachers' work-related stress: this will explain the causes of work-related stress and provide information on how it can be reduced (Ruus, 2014). Since the widespread prevalence of work-related stress among teachers is related to certain changes in the organization of teaching and the role of teachers, it is important to study how educational reforms are related to teachers' work-related stress (Farley and Chamberlain 2021). When planning innovations, the state should also develop measures to reduce the stressful impact of such innovations (Maphalala, 2014). If innovations require more work and effort from teachers, support measures to be offered to teachers should be considered (ibid.).

As regarding measures concerning the organization of education, teachers' stress can be reduced by reducing teachers' workload and class size (McCarthy et al. 2016). Teachers' perceived workload is naturally linked to national curricula. If the scope of the national curriculum is extensive or the requirements for learning outcomes are strict, teachers may discern great difficulties in achieving curricular objectives, which in turn intensifies work-related stress (Ramatlapana and Makonye, 2012).

Similarly to the school level, involvement of teachers is also important at the level beyond school. Educational reforms have been characterized by application of a top-down approach which allows for

faster and more resource-efficient implementation of the reforms, yet, at the same time, leaves teachers somewhat out of the decision-making process (Tikkanen et al., 2020). In connection with educational reforms and curriculum changes, teachers often perceive that they have no say in the innovations, being left out of educational policy decisions (see also Farley and Chamberlain 2021). Therefore, supporting teachers' mental well-being during educational reforms requires both top-down measures at the policy and institutional levels and bottom-up approaches that consider teachers' own experiences, needs and suggestions for reducing stress (see also Tikkanen et al., 2020).

However, another important aspect has been highlighted regarding prevention of work-related stress among teachers. McCarthy and colleagues (2016) are of the opinion that teachers could be helped in coping with stress if their relevant skills were developed at an early stage as part of teacher training curricula. Ramberg and colleagues (2020) share a similar view. Teacher training has been known to traditionally focus on developing teachers' professional knowledge and skills and knowledge and skills related to teaching methodology as well as on shaping teachers' professional values (McCarthy et al., 2016). However, as coping with stressors in the working environment is generally especially difficult for new teachers, stress management training should be included in teacher training, prior to new teachers starting work (ibid.). Teacher training, curricula, and school culture influence the values and attitudes a teacher adopts (Poom-Valickis and Löfström, 2014).

However, Prilleltensky and colleagues (2016) emphasize the notion that the responsibility for supporting the development of teachers' skills should not lie solely with schools. The authors of this article presume that since the nature of teachers' work-related stress and the principles of class management are largely universal, it may be appropriate to develop common educational materials for schools across the country.

Research methodology

In the study on which the article is based, semi-structured individual interviews were used for data collection, as this allows for a more open examination of the topic and supports understanding of the perspective being studied (see e.g. Esterberg, 2002). The use of this research method for data collection is justified by the objective of the study and the research questions. Since the objective of the study was to identify different stressors and find solutions for reducing stress and supporting mental well-being among basic school teachers, it has probably been possible to learn about a larger number of different stressors and solutions by asking each interviewee for their views separately.

The use of a semi-structured interview is justified because the interview topics are generally known; however, the study does not recommend setting restrictions on stressors and stress relief measures (Esterberg (2002). On the contrary, the study hopes to potentially discover stressors related to teaching work that have not been previously identified in studies. Therefore, the aim of this study has been to find novel ways to alleviate teachers' work-related stress and support their mental well-being, if possible.

Sampling principles

The study sample is, on the one hand, purposeful (see Õunapuu, 2014). Namely, the condition for inclusion in the sample was that the informants must be working as a basic school teacher in Estonia at the time of the study. Another criterion that was considered involved the formation of a sample that would include teachers employed in different cities and rural areas in Estonia. Teachers participated in the study from both Eastern and Western Estonia as well as from Estonia's largest cities Tallinn and Tartu. Teachers were included from both schools with Estonian as their language of instruction and transition schools (in Estonia, the latter were previously called *schools with Russian as their language of instruction*). On the other hand, the study sample was also compiled following the principle of convenience sampling (see also Etikan et al., 2016), examining individuals who, meeting the sampling criteria, were most

available for recruitment for the study (teachers known to the researchers and, in turn, the teachers' own friend network).

The sample comprised nine basic school teachers from rural and urban schools located in different parts of Estonia. The participants represented diverse school contexts, regions and subject areas, which enabled the study to capture a range of perspectives on teachers' experiences of work-related stress and possible ways of reducing it. Given the exploratory qualitative nature of the study, the aim was not to achieve statistical representativeness but to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' personal experiences and perceptions.

The study used purposive convenience sampling. Participants were recruited through the researchers' professional contacts and personal networks, which facilitated access to teachers with relevant experience. However, this sampling strategy may limit the transferability of the findings, and the results should therefore be interpreted in light of the specific characteristics of the participants and the study context.

A description of the teachers included in the sample is presented in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, the names of the teachers included in the sample are not disclosed in the paper and pseudonyms are used instead. Participants in the study were informed in advance as regarding the objectives of the study, participation was voluntary, and the interviewees could discontinue the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

Table 1: Information of teachers that participated in the study

Respondent	Sex	Seniority	City/rural municipality	Homeroom teacher	Subject (field of study)
Maya	W	15 y	Narva	Yes	English Language
Yulika	W	7 y	Narva-Jõesuu	Yes	Natural Sciences
Mati	M	25 y	Pärnu	No	Estonian Language
Robert	M	30 y	Kohtla-Järve	No	Technology
Kristina	W	5 y	Tartu	No	Estonian Language
Kati	W	8 y	Sillamäe	Yes	Homeroom Teacher
Volodja	M	36 y	Tallinn	No	History, Civics and Citizenship Education
Daniela	W	5 y	Toila	Yes	Homeroom Teacher /After School Care
Erika	W	21 y	Tallinn	Yes	Estonian Language

Conducting the study and analysis methods

To conduct the interviews, teachers were contacted in advance by telephone or e-mail in 2024, requesting their consent to being interviewed and recorded on a voice recorder. If the response was "yes", the organizational aspects of the interview were agreed on, e.g. whether the interview would take place face-to-face or online in the Zoom environment. For practical reasons, conducting a face-to-face interview did not always prove to be the optimal solution, i.e. due to lack of time; some of the teachers, due to lack of time, agreed to participate in interviews only under the condition that it would take place online. The interviews were conducted, taking into account the interviewees' preferences, in either Estonian or Russian.

A mobile phone recorder was used to record the interviews, the informants were aware of this and agreed to the recording of the interviews. After the interviews were conducted, transcripts of the interviews were prepared by listening to the recordings. Full transcription was used as with partial

transcription some of the interviewees' responses would have been omitted (Bullock 2016). As the research questions were aimed at finding novel stressors and mitigation measures as regarding work-related stress, it was decided that it was not justified to omit some of the text from the interviewees' responses before analysis.

An inductive approach and open coding were used to analyse the interviews. In this methodology, no pre-defined categories were defined and coding was based on the content of the interviews, rather than on previous theoretical assumptions (Liu 2016). This approach is justified because the goal was to obtain new information about teachers' work-related stress, rather than to seek confirmation of existing information.

The coding process was conducted manually. The interview transcripts were read several times to identify meaningful units related to teachers' experiences of work-related stress, stressors and stress management strategies. Initial codes were assigned to relevant parts of the transcripts, and these codes were subsequently compared and grouped into broader categories reflecting recurring patterns in the data. The final categories were developed based on the frequency and relevance of the topics emerging from the interviews and in relation to the research questions.

The coding process was conducted manually by both authors. The first author analysed the interview data related specifically to the transition to Estonian-language education, including teachers' experiences and challenges connected with this process. The second author focused on other sources of work-related stress and the solutions suggested by teachers for reducing stress and supporting mental well-being. The separately coded data were subsequently compared and discussed by the authors, and the final categories and themes were developed based on the combined analysis of both perspectives.

During the coding process, the following thematic codes were formed based on the generalization of the interviewees' responses: *working conditions, health* and *problematic issues*; *attitude, recognition* and *workload*; *privileges, training* and *class occupancy.* The results of the study are illustrated with sample quotes from the interviews, selected to represent the main findings related to the research questions.

Results

Most common causes of stress among basic school teachers

The results are presented according to the two research questions of the study. First, the main sources of teachers' work-related stress are described, including workload-related, organisational, interpersonal and language-related challenges. Second, the strategies and measures suggested by teachers for reducing work-related stress and supporting mental well-being are presented.

Information obtained from the interviews indicates that all interviewed teachers described their workload as high, and several reported teaching more than 24 teaching hours per week during the academic year. Such high workloads may be related to the shortage of teachers in different parts of Estonia. A few of the interviewed teachers work both in the morning and evening shifts. In addition, one teacher supervises an after-school group unrelated to on-site classes and instructs a preschoolers' group. Teachers list conflict situations with parents, noise in school hallways and classrooms, and long work hours that extend into the evening as stressors for teachers. It should be noted here that one interviewee reported not to experience stress at work because they see a psychologist that is not a school psychologist, but a private psychologist.

Lack of free time during the workweek was also mentioned as a stressor as teachers are responsible for checking students' written assignments, preparing for lessons, and working with documents that have deadlines. Four teachers admitted that they prefer paperwork and filling out e-school because this is checked by the administration; however, when preparing for classes, they occasionally rely only on their own experiences and improvisation due to the lack of time.

Interview excerpt 1

Yulika: *I often have lots of ideas for diversifying lessons. But documentation takes a lot of time and, after classes, there is only one hour left until the end of the working day, which is usually spent either on student consultations or filling out e-school.*

Interview excerpt 2

Kristina: *Preparing individual curricula, for example, for students with special needs, is problematic for me. You have to consider all of the possible characteristics of the student and the curriculum has to be created from scratch. It takes a lot of time and I don't really understand why the subject teacher does this and not the coordinator.*

Substitutions also affect the condition of a language teacher when teaching an entire class; explaining a subject in a foreign language also requires more effort.

Interview excerpt 3

Erika: *It is very difficult when you teach a subject in a foreign language and there are 30 kids in the classroom. Among them, there are always those that hinder it and do not allow the others to learn. As for substitutions, these are isolated cases that I could tolerate, but if the class is not divided into groups, it becomes very difficult. As a teacher, I felt lost in this situation and, for objective reasons, I did not manage to achieve my goals by the end of the year.*

In addition, teaching based on an individual program for students from Ukraine that start from scratch, yet study with other students in the general class population, was mentioned during the interviews as an additional burden.

All of the interviewees noted that they had not observed any differences between male and female teachers in the discernment of stress. However, one informant added during the interview that male teachers generally “let out steam” less, i.e. do not share concerns with other colleagues as often. It was also emphasized that teachers with more work experience are noticed to be more resilient.

Techniques for preventing and managing work-related stress

To prevent work-related stress, Estonian teachers that participated in the study use various options, including weekend activities such as massage, fishing, reading books, and other recreational activities, and some simply prefer to sleep in. Regrettably, there were also those that admitted that they do not have free time to relax and that their whole life consists of work. This was especially noticeable among teachers whose obligations include the duties of a homeroom teacher.

Interview excerpt 4

Maya: *The job of a Homeroom Teacher is an actual nightmare for me because there are 33 kids in my class and they all have parents who find it imperative to be interested in homework and to argue every single time. Seeing as there is no time for this during the school day because I have to teach classes as well, I have to deal with issues related to my homeroom class after school, in the evenings, or even on the weekends. If for some reason I do not answer the phone or reply to an e-mail, they immediately call the administration or contact Tallinn Education Department. In my opinion, a subject teacher works 7-8 hours a day, while a Homeroom Teacher works 24 hours a day. I like my job as a subject teacher, but being a Homeroom Teacher has caused my mental health to deteriorate significantly.*

As Schneiderman and colleagues have emphasized that stress is negatively correlated to a person's psychosocial well-being, meaning that people that experience higher levels of stress are less happy and less satisfied with their lives (Schneiderman et al. 2005). The last interview excerpt also shows that in that particular case, the duties of Homeroom Teacher reduce the level of well-being at school. Dissatisfaction can eventually extend beyond work.

Interview excerpt 5

Yulika: *I am currently a Homeroom Teacher in two classes where the students are problematic in one way or another. I spend a lot of time and energy on this, forgetting my subject classes. Of course, the pay for this is very low, so no one wants to be a homeroom teacher. It would be great if schools employed the system that is used in state high schools where each student has their own so-called mentor.*

One teacher that participated in the interview mentioned stepping outside for fresh air during recess and "relaxing to the fullest" during that time as a way to prevent stress.

It was also revealed that two young teachers are taking special courses related to psychology and reading books on psychology that help find answers to questions regarding how to manage or prevent work-related stress.

Desire to work as a teacher

One interview revealed that a Russian-speaking teacher is concerned the most about switching to Estonian as the language of instruction as, at the time of this study, the B2 average level of Estonian proficiency was still required from History and Civics and Citizenship Education teachers, yet this requirement will change. Due to reform of the transition to Estonian-language education both teachers and school support specialists had to acquire C1-level Estonian language skills by August 1, 2024 at the latest (see e.g. Niitmäe, Solomina 2025). Relevant informant has already had problems with passing the advanced level of Estonian proficiency exam (C1 exam) in the past (he has had several failed attempts).

Interview excerpt 6

Volodja: *Losing a job is a rather stressful situation for someone who considers their profession a calling. Although I am not sure that even after passing the advanced state exam in Estonian, many subject teachers who have previously worked in Russian would automatically be ready to teach the subject in Estonian as, first of all, the teacher must learn the required Estonian terminology for the subject. When the press writes or the Teachers' Council says that we must obtain C1 level in a short period of time and prepare for the transition to Estonian-language teaching, the teachers' thoughts turn to saving their job, in this case, to in-depth studies of the Estonian language after work or on the weekends.*

The interviewee believes that fear of what will happen in the future is one of the reasons why many teachers are stressed, and in his opinion, this can also affect students' learning outcomes during the current transition period. However, he says he is doing everything he can to achieve high-level Estonian language skills by the required deadline.

On the other hand, the satisfaction of some teachers working in Estonian-language schools is affected by the arrival of refugees from Ukraine that do not speak Estonian at all when they arrive in Estonia and, at the same time, have to study in the same class with children whose first language is Estonian. According to informants, the greater the number of Ukrainian children in the class, the slower and more stressful the work is for the teacher.

Interview excerpt 7

Mati: *I asked the administration for assistance so as to open a separate group for Ukrainian children, where they would study Estonian in depth after school, but no such assistance was given and some of the*

extra work was left to me. Added to this is the fact that the Ukrainian children arrived at school in different weeks, one started learning Estonian in September, the next in October, the third had been at school since April, and at some point I immediately started preparing a sample of the 4th or 5th test for children with different language skills. It certainly took away my strength, time, and desire to work at a school.

Interview excerpt 8

Erika: *Due to the arrival of a large number of refugees, I've had to learn how to approach them. In this regard, I've had to communicate a lot with children and parents. In my opinion, it would be easier to draw up a unified program for those who have arrived from abroad, which the subject teacher could rely on. In my case, I took the initiative, realizing that their presence could last a long time. /../ In this situation, I naturally expected support from the state, the Education Department or the school management, but I was left alone with new challenges and this did not add any motivation to work at a school. Quite the opposite, I even thought about opening my own private language courses and working for myself.*

As Madigan and Kim (2021) have also argued based on their research results, employee burnout leads to them quitting their jobs, which increases staff turnover and emergence of the need to replace the staff that left with new employees. This in turn leads to increased recruitment and training costs for the organization.

Language-related challenges and relationships with students and parents during the transition to Estonian-language education

Some teachers described communication with parents as a challenge, particularly in situations where a common language between teachers and parents could not be established. Translation programmes were considered helpful for written communication; however, for oral communication, such as development discussions, additional support from other school staff was sometimes needed. According to the interviewees, these situations occurred mainly when some Russian-speaking parents did not have sufficient knowledge of Estonian and some teachers did not actively speak Russian. At the same time, most participants reported communicating with parents in the language preferred by the parents, and no significant language-related difficulties were mentioned.

Teachers also discussed how their language practices influenced their relationships with students in multilingual classrooms. One interviewee highlighted that his relationship with some Russian-speaking students improved after he became more flexible regarding the use of Russian during group work in his Estonian-language class. He also reported occasionally using Russian with some Russian-speaking students during breaks.

Interview excerpt 9

Mati: *In the past, my language choices at school were based on one person – one language, but during breaks, especially when I feel that I am starting to get tired of the school day, I switch to Russian more easily with the students. But I always use Russian with Russian-speaking students when a quick response and immediate order on my part are of paramount importance. By the way, in group work I now let Russian-speaking students speak Russian, I used to have zero tolerance for this because I wanted Russian-speaking children to acquire Estonian as quickly as possible. Later I gave up trying and allowed them to speak Russian during work. And interestingly, my relationships with these students improved after that. I also translate the most important terms that will come up in the lesson into Russian at the beginning of the lesson, about half of my study groups are Russian-speaking.*

However, multilingual communication was also associated with challenges. Some teachers experienced difficulties when communicating with parents due to differences in language proficiency.

These situations were described as emotionally demanding and contributed to teachers' overall work-related stress.

Teachers' perceptions of professional recognition and suggestions for reducing work-related stress

In addition to language-related challenges, teachers described difficulties related to relationships with students and parents. One interviewee mentioned long-term anxiety caused by the feeling that "more and more children and parents do not value the work of teachers" and that some students prefer teachers who "demand little" and "undervalue those who really impart knowledge."

Interview excerpt 10

Daniela: *I really want my subject to be useful for the kids, because maybe it is me that the children associate their future profession with, but most of the time I encounter aggressiveness from parents, which makes me wonder whether I should teach the kids at all or if, nowadays, the child is a client/customer. Of course, this affects my well-being and I would like to leave the teaching profession and engage in research instead.*

Interview excerpt 11

Kati: *Nowadays, there are many cases where students are like customers and teachers like service staff. Parents can dictate their terms and if the teacher does not agree with them, there is a big conflict in the making. This is very unfortunate. A teacher should have their own autonomy that would help make the work more creative. But now there is an imposed arrangement instead where you are alone and have to withstand every whim. I have had two cases where I wrote a resignation letter simply because the parents sent me emails that read "You are nobody here!" or "Are you crazy?".*

The participants also suggested several ways to reduce teachers' work-related stress and support mental well-being. The proposed solutions included opportunities for teachers to take a sabbatical year, support for professional exchange and international study visits, and full compensation during sick leave. Teachers also emphasised the importance of valuing the teaching profession through appropriate salaries, as "often for a teacher, their work is their calling". One participant suggested that documentation-related tasks should be assigned to other school staff members who are not directly involved in teaching.

Based on the participants' suggestions, the proposed measures for reducing work-related stress can be grouped into three categories:

1) Supporting teachers' mental well-being and reducing work-related stress:

- creating a personal framework that clearly defines the activities to be completed during the working day and the tasks that fall outside working hours;
- actively seeking solutions to problems and contacting colleagues or mentors for support.

2) Management actions to ensure that teachers have a better working environment at school:

- distributing tasks among teachers to ensure a more balanced workload;
- creating opportunities for teachers to exercise professional autonomy.

3) State-level measures to reduce work-related stress among teachers:

- providing support measures related to teachers' well-being, such as discounts for massage or spa services;
- establishing, at the legislative level, a maximum class size of 18 students;
- creating online tutoring opportunities to expand teachers' professional skills.

Discussion and summary

Based on the results of this article, teachers' lack of time and insufficient free time can be considered to constitute stressors at a personal level, which, according to Wieczorek (2016), is a sign of a lack of

resources that induces stress. The lack of time as a resource is indicated by the teachers' responses, in which they describe the fact that they do not have enough time to prepare lessons, which is why such preparation is sometimes superficial. In the context of content and language learning, it can be expected that lesson preparation may take more time if teachers occasionally have to create teaching materials and visuals with adapted language. The lack of time is also indicated by the teachers' high workload, as the teachers participating in the study work with a workload that is higher than the norm. The analysis did not reveal clear differences between rural and urban school contexts in teachers' descriptions of work-related stressors. However, class size appeared to influence teachers' experiences, particularly their emotional state. One stressor mentioned involved working in the evening, as some of the teachers work in the evening shift, leading to less opportunities to spend quality time with their family. In addition, it was revealed that since teachers are responsible for checking students' work, preparing for classes, and working with documents, some of the teachers that participated in the study and work in day shifts have little free time outside of work to recover from the work day or week. However, the lack of time can also be associated with the organization level, as teachers' heavy workload results from the school's organization of work.

Although the teachers were not asked in this study why they work with such a high workload, it is possible that this is related to the shortage of teachers in Estonia. Since the teachers mentioned high workload repeatedly in this study and in connection with various circumstances (number of lessons, after-school group, preschool group, additional tasks, individual tuition of refugees from Ukraine, transition to Estonian-language education), it can be assumed that this is a very significant stressor for teachers. The results of this study are relatively consistent with the study conducted by E. Ruus (2014) among teachers in Tartu city schools, according to which high workload is the most frequent stressor for teachers, while lack of time places third among the stressors.

Interpersonal stressors in this study included conflicts between teachers and students and parents, which have also been highlighted as work-related stressors for teachers by Prilleltensky and colleagues (Prilleltensky et al., 2016). Teachers' feelings that students and parents do not value them enough can also be understood as an interpersonal stressor. The findings indicate that teachers' well-being is influenced not only by workload and administrative demands but also by the extent to which they feel recognised and supported in their professional role. This finding can be interpreted through the Effort–Reward Imbalance Model, which explains work-related stress as a result of situations where the effort invested in work is not balanced by received rewards. Importantly, rewards in this model include not only financial compensation but also recognition and social status associated with the profession (Siegrist, 1996). This finding is in line with Maphalala's (2014) view that teachers' perceived lack of respect from students and parents may also cause stress in teachers.

Similarly to previous studies (Shaw, 2016; Travers, 2017), the results of this article also indicate that teachers are stressed by the changes taking place in education, to which they have to adapt. Among them, the transition to Estonian-language education, which began in the fall of 2024, was highlighted separately. Based on interview results, it can be argued that said changes cause additional workload and uncertainty for teachers and make them feel incompetent at times. Indirectly, the results of this paper also indicate that the changes taking place in education increase the number of tasks to be handled by teachers.

While one of the changes causing work-related stress in teachers is paperwork and bureaucratic tasks, which have also been emphasized by Putwain and Von der Embse (2019), based on this paper, two changes causing work-related stress that are specific to current Estonian school life can be highlighted. First, a large number of Ukrainian refugee students have arrived in Estonian schools, requiring an individual approach, which causes additional expenditure of time for teachers. Another change specific to Estonia is the transition to Estonian-language teaching in transition schools, which causes stress for Russian-speaking teachers who have taught their subjects in Russian until now. The latter change may make teachers doubt their own competence and create fear that they may lose their job. Thus, such

changes may reduce teachers' self-efficacy, which, according to Bottiani and colleagues (2019), leads to a higher level of work-related stress for teachers. The stressful impact of switching to Estonian as the language of instruction can be explained by the Transactional Model (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), according to which a person evaluates the impact of a perceived event as a potential threat. In this case, the Russian-speaking teacher informant in this study assessed the situation as possibly not being able to cope with teaching in Estonian, which in turn caused him stress.

Study results indicate that teachers implement several measures previously mentioned in specialist literature to reduce stress, such as fishing and other hobby activities (Arismunandar et al., 2022). The teachers that participated in the study also read self-help books regarding what helps to reduce stress (cf. Bhowmick, 2019) and participate in stress-related training (cf. Reddy and Anuradha 2013). Sufficient sleep is also important for stress management (see Reddy and Anuradha 2013), and this current study as well mentioned sufficient rest as a stress reduction measure. Based on the results of this study, it can be considered positive that it did not emerge that teachers use unhealthy activities to manage stress, such as emotional eating and alcohol consumption, as mentioned by Klassen and Durksen (2014). On the contrary, this study revealed that teachers value healthy lifestyles. As compared to what is mentioned in relevant literature, this study revealed that teachers also visit a psychologist as a stress management measure, which indicates an informed approach to stress.

The informants also suggested that schools could consider reducing teachers' workload in such a way that the management could delegate some of the bureaucratic tasks assigned to them to others, e.g. support staff. According to the study participants, schools should also allow teachers one longer break during the day (e.g. in the form of a longer lunch break); another suggestion was to be granted greater flexibility in preparing class schedules. This desire is in line with the opinion of Herman and co-researchers (2018) that schools should approach the task of reducing teachers' stress in a systematic manner. Teachers' mental well-being could also be increased by providing them with greater autonomy. Teachers want their work to be more flexible in terms of time so that they would have more decision-making power over their working hours. Thus, these suggestions are in line with Ramatlapana and Makonye's (2012) claim that if teachers are given more freedom of choice and decision-making power, they will perceive themselves as more autonomous, which can manage teachers' work-related stress.

As a measure beyond the school, the teachers surveyed suggested that class sizes be reduced by amending legislation. This measure could potentially, in addition to reducing teachers' work-related stress, also have a positive impact on students' academic performance, especially in the process of transition to Estonian-language education. In rural schools, the possibilities of implementing the aforementioned idea would probably be much greater, while the probability of being able to reduce class sizes to such a large extent in urban schools are doubtful, as this would mean that more parallel grades would have to be formed as compared to the current situation, which, in turn, would require more teachers.

In the context of measures beyond the school, several solutions were proposed within the framework of this study that have not been mentioned in relevant scientific literature. For example, teachers found that sick pay should be paid at 100% of relevant individual's salary. Such a measure would likely reduce the number of teachers working while sick. Another novel proposal was the provision of discount coupons by the school management for health treatments (massage, spa visits) requested by teachers.

A surprising proposal for a measure beyond the school was to provide teachers with a sabbatical year. This would be analogous to the free semester for university lecturers, meaning that teachers would retain their salaries during this period, but they would not be required to teach subjects. This would enable teachers to improve their professional skills, but they would undoubtedly be able to use this period also for relaxation, as this time would be less intensive and probably less stressful for them as compared to the regular academic year. A separate question is how to finance such a sabbatical year, as its implementation would likely significantly increase teachers' labour costs. In addition, implementing this

measure would require finding additional teachers to replace teachers that are on a so-called sabbatical year.

This study revealed that teachers would like opportunities to exchange experiences, undertake professional trips abroad, and self-improve online, all of which could develop their knowledge and skills. Teachers hope they would be able to cope with stressors at least somewhat better by applying techniques learned in in-service training, that also in the context of the transition to teaching in Estonian.

The findings also indicate that some teachers had adapted their language practices by allowing students to use different languages depending on the situation and communicative purpose. Such practices correspond to the principles of translanguaging, according to which multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire flexibly in communication (García & Wei, 2014). In educational contexts, translanguaging has been associated with increased learner confidence, motivation and active participation, as well as with the recognition of learners' linguistic backgrounds (García & Wei, 2014). In the context of this study, flexible language practices appeared to facilitate communication in multilingual classrooms and support teachers in managing language-related challenges. It can also contribute to the development of learners' identities by recognizing and valuing their linguistic backgrounds (Cenoz, 2013). However, effective implementation of translanguaging requires teachers' awareness and pedagogical competence (Cenoz, 2013). The findings of this study further suggest that while multilingual communication practices can support teacher–student interaction, teachers may still experience challenges in communication with parents when a shared language cannot be established.

However, it can be argued that the increase in multilingualism in schools has also raised the question of teachers' readiness to work in linguistically diverse classes. Research in the Estonian educational context has shown that teachers feel the need for greater methodological support and in-service training to effectively support the development of multilingual learners (see e.g. Niitmäe, Solomina, 2025).

This study contributes to a better understanding of the work-related stressors experienced by basic school teachers in Estonia during the transition to Estonian-language education. The findings show that teachers' stress is related not only to workload and administrative demands but also to educational changes, multilingual classroom situations, and the extent to which teachers feel supported and recognised in their professional role. The study also highlights teachers' own suggestions for reducing work-related stress, including organisational changes at the school level and greater support for professional development.

The main limitation of the study is the small qualitative sample consisting of nine teachers; therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all teachers in Estonia. However, the study provides an in-depth view of teachers' experiences and identifies issues that require further attention in the context of educational change.

The findings have practical implications for school leaders and education policymakers. Reducing excessive workload, providing methodological support for multilingual classrooms, and strengthening opportunities for professional development may contribute to teachers' well-being and retention in the profession. Future research could further examine effective support measures for teachers during the transition to Estonian-language education, including the role of teaching methods, learning materials, and artificial intelligence-based solutions in supporting both teachers and students.

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