

## STRESS, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONG TEACHERS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

**Milana DRAZIĆ**

*Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Belgrade, Republic of Serbia*  
milana\_drazic@yahoo.com

**Jasmina KOVACEVIĆ**

*Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Belgrade, Republic of Serbia*  
kovacjasmina@gmail.com

**Zora JACHOVA**

*Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Special Education and Rehabilitation,  
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia*  
zora@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

UDC: 159.944.4:37.011.3-051-048.582

### ABSTRACT:

Teachers working in inclusive classrooms experience numerous challenges that make them especially vulnerable to psychological difficulties such as stress, anxiety, and depression. The aim of this study was to examine the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among teachers working in inclusive classrooms. The sample consisted of 31 teachers employed in mainstream primary schools, and symptoms were assessed using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21). The research results showed that teachers working with children with disabilities exhibit a certain level of stress, anxiety, and depression, which are beyond or at the limit of acceptable values. Although no statistically significant gender differences were found, female teachers reported slightly higher levels of symptoms. The results highlight the need for continuous support and professional development of teachers in inclusive settings. Ensuring adequate training, reducing workload, and improving support systems may significantly contribute to the mental well-being of teachers. The study suggests that mental health should be considered a priority within inclusive education policies to ensure high-quality teaching and positive outcomes for both students and educators.

**Keywords:** *teachers, inclusion, children with disabilities, stress, anxiety, depression*

### Introduction

The teaching profession is characterized by a high susceptibility to the development of mental health problems (Asa & Lasebikan, 2016) and is often described as one of the most stressful and most depression-prone occupations (Biernat et al., 2022; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Garrick et al., 2014; Marooj et al., 2022; Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019). Within the field of teachers' mental health, numerous studies have examined professional stress, whereas considerably less

attention has been devoted to the combined influence of depression, stress, and anxiety on the psychological well-being of educators (Marooj et al., 2022). Interest in the phenomenon of stress in the teaching profession emerged from evidence demonstrating that professional stress can significantly contribute to the occurrence of mental and physical health problems among teachers, negatively affecting their quality of life as well as the quality of the teaching process (Desouky & Allam, 2017; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Krnjajić, 2003).

Empirical findings consistently confirm that elevated levels of stress in teachers have serious consequences for their job performance, overall health, and mental state (Krnjajić, 2003), with anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion representing some of the manifestations of prolonged professional stress (Agyapong et al., 2022; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Krnjajić, 2003; Stanković-Đorđević, 2018). Some of the professional stressors commonly experienced by teachers include low salaries (Desouky & Allam, 2017; Ratanasiripong et al., 2022), problematic student behavior, lack of motivation for learning, discipline issues, insufficient professional recognition, and complex interactions with colleagues, students, and parents (Koludrović et al., 2009). Excessive pressure from educational institutions, students, and parents; negative attitudes within the community; conflicts arising from the numerous roles teachers must assume (Desouky & Allam, 2017); heavy workloads; lack of administrative support; and deteriorated classroom discipline contribute to teachers feeling overwhelmed, which can lead to the development of anxiety (Agyapong et al., 2022; Desouky & Allam, 2017). An unfavorable psychological work environment also significantly increases the likelihood of depression among teachers (Desouky & Allam, 2017). Depression may substantially affect a teacher's health, productivity, and functioning (Besse et al., 2015), both personally and professionally (Agyapong et al., 2022). High levels of stress, anxiety, or depression in teachers negatively influence the quality of their academic engagement, whereby students may show lower motivation and poorer academic performance (Marooj et al., 2022; Ratanasiripong et al., 2022).

Work environments characterized by structural changes and increased expectations regarding job performance may heighten the risk of professional stress (Engelbrecht et al., 2003; Krnjajić, 2003). Educational reforms place numerous demands on teachers, originating from educational authorities as well as parents and students (Stanković-Đorđević, 2018). Teachers are expected to possess multiple competencies (Stanković-Đorđević, 2018), which require them to adopt diverse roles. They must simultaneously take on the role of supportive parents, motivators who encourage students (Brkić & Rijavec, 2011), and skilled pedagogues and psychologists who acknowledge the individual differences in children's abilities and personal characteristics (Grubačić & Čabarkapa, 2013).

A particular challenge for teachers is the implementation of inclusive education. While inclusion enables every child to have equal access to education, it also imposes an additional responsibility on teachers to work with students with disabilities. In such an educational system, the role of the teacher becomes increasingly complex, and their professional engagement becomes

more demanding (Stanković-Đorđević, 2018). Many teachers who lack prior experience working with students with disabilities approach inclusive practice with hesitation and a certain degree of anxiety (Weiss et al., 2019). Inclusive education may be perceived as an additional burden that can provoke stress and negatively affect students with disabilities (Engelbrecht et al., 2003). Simultaneously working with students with disabilities and typically developing peers, ensuring acceptance among classmates, lack of time (Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017), insufficient training in inclusion-related competencies, behavioral problems among students with disabilities (Brackenreed, 2008; Engelbrecht et al., 2003; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017; Stauffer & Mason, 2013), and high, often unrealistic parental expectations (Brackenreed, 2008; Stauffer & Mason, 2013) are all factors that may contribute to stress during inclusive education. Teachers report that inclusion would not be perceived as such a significant source of stress if adequate systemic support were provided (Brackenreed, 2008).

However, due to continuous overload and the numerous demands placed upon them, teachers experience heightened emotional pressure that results in dissatisfaction and stress, which may consequently impair their creativity, educational role, and relationships with colleagues, students, and parents (Grubačić & Čabarkapa, 2013).

## **Sample**

The study included 31 teachers from mainstream schools, most of whom were female (93.5%), with an average age of approximately 45 years ( $M = 44.74$ ). The sample consisted of classroom teachers (22.6%) and subject teachers (77.4%). The majority of participants (90.3%) had previous experience working with students with disabilities, most commonly with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, visual impairments, and speech–language disorders.

## **Instruments and Procedure**

To assess the presence of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms, the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used. The scale contains 21 statements divided into three subscales measuring symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Items are rated using a four-point Likert scale, assessing the degree of agreement from complete disagreement to complete agreement. Relevant sociodemographic characteristics of the teachers were collected through a specially designed questionnaire. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study and were asked to complete the questionnaire honestly.

## **Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package (Statistics for Windows, Version 26) applying descriptive statistical methods. Summary scores were calculated for each subscale of

the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale. The nonparametric Mann–Whitney U test was used to obtain the results.

## Results

Using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale, the study examined the extent to which teachers experienced symptoms of these conditions. For interpreting the results, it is important to note that, on the Stress subscale, scores higher than 7 indicate levels of stress exceeding the acceptable range. On the Anxiety subscale, scores higher than 3 suggest an elevated level of anxiety, while scores above 4 on the Depression subscale indicate symptoms beyond the acceptable range.

**Table 1.** Symptoms of Stress, Anxiety and Depression among Teachers (N = 31)

Subscale	M	SD	Min	Max
Stress	7.26	4.28	0	17
Anxiety	4.42	4.54	0	17
Depression	3.65	3.75	0	14

**Note:** *N* – number of participants; *M* – mean score; *SD* – standard deviation; *Min* – minimum score; *Max* – maximum score.

Table 1 presents the mean scores obtained on the Stress, Anxiety, and Depression subscales. The mean score on the Anxiety subscale ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 4.54$ ) indicates that teachers experience mild symptoms of anxiety. On the other hand, the mean scores on the Stress ( $M = 7.26$ ,  $SD = 4.28$ ) and Depression ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 3.75$ ) subscales suggest the presence of symptoms that fall near the upper boundary of the acceptable range.

**Table 2.** Severity of Stress, Anxiety and Depression Symptoms among Teachers (N = 31)

Symptom Severity	Stress		Anxiety		Depression	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Normal	20	64.5	16	51.6	22	71.0
Mild	4	12.9	6	19.4	2	6.5
Moderate	3	9.7	3	9.7	6	19.4
Severe	3	9.7	/	/	/	/
Extremely Severe	1	3.2	6	19.4	1	3.1

**Note:** *f* – frequency; % – percentage.

The percentage distribution in Table 2 provides insight into the severity of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms among teachers. A substantial percentage of teachers display elevated

symptoms, with 35.6% experiencing stress, 48.5% anxiety, and 29% depression of varying intensities, all exceeding acceptable thresholds.

**Table 3.** Stress, Anxiety, and Depression Symptoms by Teacher Gender (N = 31)

Subscale	Gender	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Stress	Female	29	0	17	7.41	4.38
	Male	2	4	6	5.00	1.41
Anxiety	Female	29	0	17	4.66	4.60
	Male	2	0	2	1.00	1.41
Depression	Female	29	0	14	3.79	3.84
	Male	2	1	2	1.50	0.71

**Note:** *N* – number of participants; *Min* – minimum score; *Max* – maximum score; *M* – mean score; *SD* – standard deviation

Descriptive indicators show that teachers, regardless of gender, exhibit stress and depression symptoms within the acceptable range. However, female teachers appear to be at the upper boundary of this range on the Stress ( $M = 7.41$ ,  $SD = 4.38$ ) and Depression ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 3.84$ ) subscales. Regarding anxiety symptoms, a noticeable difference between male and female teachers was observed. Female teachers reported anxiety symptoms that exceed the acceptable range, while male teachers reported anxiety levels within the acceptable boundaries.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that a considerable proportion of teachers exhibit symptoms of stress at varying levels of severity (35.6%). Similar tendencies were observed regarding symptoms of anxiety and depression. Nearly half of the teachers (48.5%) reported elevated anxiety symptoms of different intensities, while 29% exhibited depressive symptoms exceeding acceptable thresholds. These results are consistent with previous research showing a high prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among teachers (Biernat et al., 2022; Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019; Ratanasiripong et al., 2022). The prevalence of stress in the teaching profession is notably high, as demonstrated in the study by Desouky and Allam (2017), where the entire sample of teachers reported experiencing stress. Additionally, 67.5% of teachers in their study reported anxiety symptoms, while depressive symptoms were present in 23.2% of participants. In the current study, teachers demonstrated mild symptoms of anxiety, whereas symptoms of stress and depression, although near the upper limit, remained within acceptable ranges. Despite the fact that these scores do not reach clinically significant levels, their intensity suggests that teachers may occasionally experience stress and depressive symptoms which, if not recognized and addressed in time, may result in more serious psychological outcomes.

Engelbrecht et al. (2003) identified increased anxiety in teachers working with students with developmental disabilities, as well as five primary sources of stress: administrative demands, insufficient support, challenging student behavior, teachers' confidence in their own competencies, and limited communication with parents. Other studies highlight that inadequate financial compensation, increased workload, and teacher age significantly contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, and depression (Desouky & Allam, 2017). Ferguson et al. (2012) identified work overload and student behavior difficulties as key risk factors for the development of depression and anxiety, and inadequate working conditions have also been shown to contribute to elevated anxiety levels. Several studies have confirmed that professional stress is significantly correlated with both depression and anxiety (Asa & Lasebikan, 2016; Ferguson et al., 2012; Khalifa et al., 2022), and these states can substantially reduce job satisfaction among teachers (Ferguson et al., 2012). Multiple studies have emphasized that professional stress, anxiety, and depression tend to be more prevalent among female teachers (Asa & Lasebikan, 2016; Desouky & Allam, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2022). The findings of this study also indicate that, although both male and female teachers reported stress and depression levels within acceptable ranges, these symptoms were slightly more pronounced among female participants, falling near the upper threshold. Regarding anxiety symptoms, the findings show that female teachers experience anxiety levels exceeding acceptable limits, whereas male teachers demonstrated anxiety symptoms within normal ranges.

## **Conclusion**

Most studies examining the mental health status of teachers indicate that the teaching profession is perceived as highly stressful (Desouky & Allam, 2017) and that teachers rate their mental well-being as significantly poorer compared to the general population (Biernat et al., 2022). The findings of the present study show that teachers working in inclusive classrooms exhibit symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression which, although within acceptable ranges, may still be meaningful and warrant careful attention. While no statistically significant gender differences were found, the results suggest that female teachers tend to display more pronounced symptoms of the examined conditions compared to their male colleagues. The limitations of this study primarily relate to the sample size and composition, as well as the potential influence of limited societal openness toward mental health issues, which may have affected the honesty of responses. Future research should aim to identify risk factors and key sources contributing to the development of stress, anxiety, and depression among teachers. The significance of this study lies in raising awareness about the importance of safeguarding the mental health of educators, who play a crucial role in the overall functioning and development of children with disabilities.

## References

- Agyapong, B., Obuobi-Donkor, G., Burbach, L., & Wei, Y. (2022). Stress, burnout, anxiety and depression among teachers: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(17), 10706. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191710706>
- Asa, F. T., & Lasebikan, V. O. (2016). Mental health of teachers: Teachers' stress, anxiety and depression among secondary schools in Nigeria. *International Neuropsychiatric Disease Journal*, 7(4), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.9734/INDJ/2016/27039>
- Besse, R., Howard, K., Gonzalez, S., & Howard, J. (2015). Major depressive disorder and public school teachers: Evaluating occupational and health predictors and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Biobehavioral Research*, 20(2), 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jabr.12043>
- Biernat, E., Piatkowska, M., & Rozpara, M. (2022). Is the prevalence of low physical activity among teachers associated with depression, anxiety, and stress? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(14), 8868. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148868>
- Brackenreed, D. G. (2008). Inclusive education: Identifying teachers' perceived stressors in inclusive classrooms. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 18(3), 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v18i3.7630>
- Brkić, I., & Rijavec, M. (2011). Izvori stresa, suočavanje sa stresom i životno zadovoljstvo učitelja razredne i predmetne nastave. *Napredak*, 152(2), 211–225.
- Desouky, D., & Allam, H. (2017). Occupational stress, anxiety and depression among Egyptian teachers. *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*, 7(3), 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jegh.2017.06.002>
- Engelbrecht, P., Oswald, M., Swart, E., & Eloff, I. (2003). Including learners with intellectual disabilities: Stressful for teachers? *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 50(3), 293–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912032000120462>
- Ferguson, K., Frost, L., & Hall, D. (2012). Predicting teacher anxiety, depression, and job satisfaction. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v8i1.2896>
- Galaterou, J., & Antoniou, A. S. (2017). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education: The role of job stressors and demographic parameters. *International Journal of Special Education*, 32(4), 643–658.
- Garrick, A., Mak, A. S., Cathcart, S., Winwood, P. C., Bakker, A. B., & Lushington, K. (2014). Psychosocial safety climate moderating the effects of daily job demands and recovery on fatigue and work engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 87(4), 694–714. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12069>
- Grubačić, J. B., & Čabarkapa, M. D. (2013). Izvori stresa i sindrom izgaranja kod nastavnika. *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta u Prištini*, 43(1), 433–449.

- Khalifa, E., Khalaf, O. O., & Mohammed, R. (2022). Prevalence of occupational stress and depression among school teachers. *Egyptian Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 46(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.21608/ejom.2021.76784.1237>
- Koludrović, M., Jukić, T., & Ercegovac, I. R. (2009). Sagorijevanje na poslu kod učitelja razredne i predmetne nastave te srednjoškolskih nastavnika. *Život i škola*, 22, 235–249.
- Krnjajić, S. (2003). The teacher under stress. *Zbornik Instituta za pedagoška istraživanja*, 35, 222–244. <https://doi.org/10.2298/ZIPI0335222K>
- Marooj, Alvi, S. M., Altaf, M., & Kathoon, B. A. (2022). Effect of depression, anxiety and stress on mental health of teachers. *Journal of Management Practices, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(3), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.33152/jmphss-6.3.4>
- Othman, Z., & Sivasubramaniam, V. (2019). Depression, anxiety, and stress among secondary school teachers in Klang, Malaysia. *International Medical Journal*, 26(2), 71–74. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2586221>
- Ratanasiripong, P., Ratanasiripong, N. T., Nungdanjark, W., Thongthammarat, Y., & Toyama, S. (2022). Mental health and burnout among teachers in Thailand. *Journal of Health Research*, 36(3), 404–416. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHR-05-2020-0181>
- Stauffer, S. D., & Mason, E. C. (2013). Addressing elementary school teachers' professional stressors: Practical suggestions for schools and administrators. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(5), 809–837. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X13482578>
- Stanković-Đorđević, M. (2018). Stres i izgaranje prosvetnih radnika u procesu inkluzije. *Godišnjak za psihologiju*, 15, 127–139.
- Weiss, S., Muckenthaler, M., Heimlich, U., Kuechler, A., & Kiel, E. (2021). Teaching in inclusive schools: Do the demands of inclusive schools cause stress? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(5), 588–604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1563834>