Workload, stress and job-satisfaction among Waldorf teachers

An explorative study

Jürgen Peters

Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences, Alfter / Germany
Institute for Empirical Social Research

ABSTRACT. This study on the work-load of Waldorf teachers is based upon six narrative interviews, conducted using an open design. Drawing upon the methodology of "Grounded Theory" it proved possible to identify personal commitment to the principle of individual responsibility as the central condition for coping positively with the stresses and strains of teaching. This basic attitude promotes not only self-efficacy but also awareness of one's own contribution to challenging situations. For individual responsibility to be effective within the context of a school it must be reflected and supported at all levels of school organisation.

Keywords: Waldorf teacher, stress management, responsibility, self-efficacy

Point of Departure

Stress levels and job satisfaction among Waldorf teachers in Germany have so far been little investigated.[1] From the data on state schools it is apparent, on the one hand, that teachers have higher workloads than all other professions studied. This is most clearly shown in Uwe Schaarschmidt's study (Schaarschmidt, 1999) on over 20,000 teachers. On the other hand, Gehrmann has put together a whole series of positive findings on job satisfaction among teachers (Gehrmann, A., 2007), according to which between 60 and 89% of teachers seem to be happy in their work. At first sight this might seem surprising, but early on Merz had empirically demonstrated that the weight of teachers' workloads is not a primary indicator of their level of job satisfaction.[2] In the last 10 years an increasing number of studies have focused upon the inner attitude of teachers to their profession. This has been found to be an essential factor in coping with stress and the demands of the workload, as comes out particularly clearly in Dauber's study on early retirement (Dauber, H. & Döring-Seipel, E., 2010).

Assuming, then, that the inner attitudes of teachers have an influence upon their experience of stress, it seemed very worthwhile to investigate the stress levels and job satisfaction of Waldorf teachers in relation to *their* inner attitudes. For, as Ullrich states, this type of school represents a "counterpoint to the regular state schools" (Ullrich, H & Strunk, S., 2009, p. 232), and as such might be able to provide useful insights for the further development of other forms of school. The central question of this study, therefore, is what attitudes

---

1. Except for a workshop report by Katrin Käufer and Ursula Versteegen (see: www.adz-netzwerk.de/files/docs/Selbstwirksamkeit-Burn-out.pdf) and the published survey by Barz and Randoll

2. Merz chiefly mentions personality development, teacher-pupil compatibility and the teacher's inner orientation to teaching. In Merz, J. (1979) Berufszufriedenheit von Lehrern. Eine empirische Untersuchung. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, p. 215)

prevalent among Waldorf teachers can be shown to have a positive influence upon stress management, on the one hand, and job satisfaction, on the other.

Research design

In order to facilitate the expression of attitudes, the chosen design was open and flexible, so that attention could be paid to the subject's own professional situation with as little distortion as possible. Thus six [3] narrative interviews with Waldorf teachers were carried out in spring 2010. The interviewees were chosen through personal contacts to three Waldorf schools according to the following criteria: two class-teachers, two high-school teachers and two founding teachers, in each case one male and one female. The intermediaries for each school were longstanding college members, who had been instructed to find colleagues who were familiar with the theme of "stress management" and willing to share their experience. The cue-line for the interview was kept as open as possible, so as not to preclude any topic:

> *"Could you please tell me how you became a teacher, and how things have been going for you since then in your chosen profession!"*

The assumption that this would provoke a biographical narrative in which the themes of overload and job-satisfaction would naturally figure proved justified in all six interviews. The interviews were transcribed and hermeneutically analysed using Schütze's sequential analysis method (Schütze, F., 1983, p. 283ff.). The individual interviews were worked up into case-studies, and subsequently the whole body of data was put through a comprehensive thematic analysis, according to the Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss (Strauss, A. L., 1998), under categories involving inner attitudes in relation to workload.

Results

Each case-study gives an individual account of the subject of workload and stress and of gradual changes in coping strategies. On the question of the connection between the two values "workload" and "job-satisfaction" the findings quoted in the introduction are here substantiated, insofar as the six case studies can be assigned to the three following types:

Type III
happy ++
workload ++

Type I
happy ++
workload --
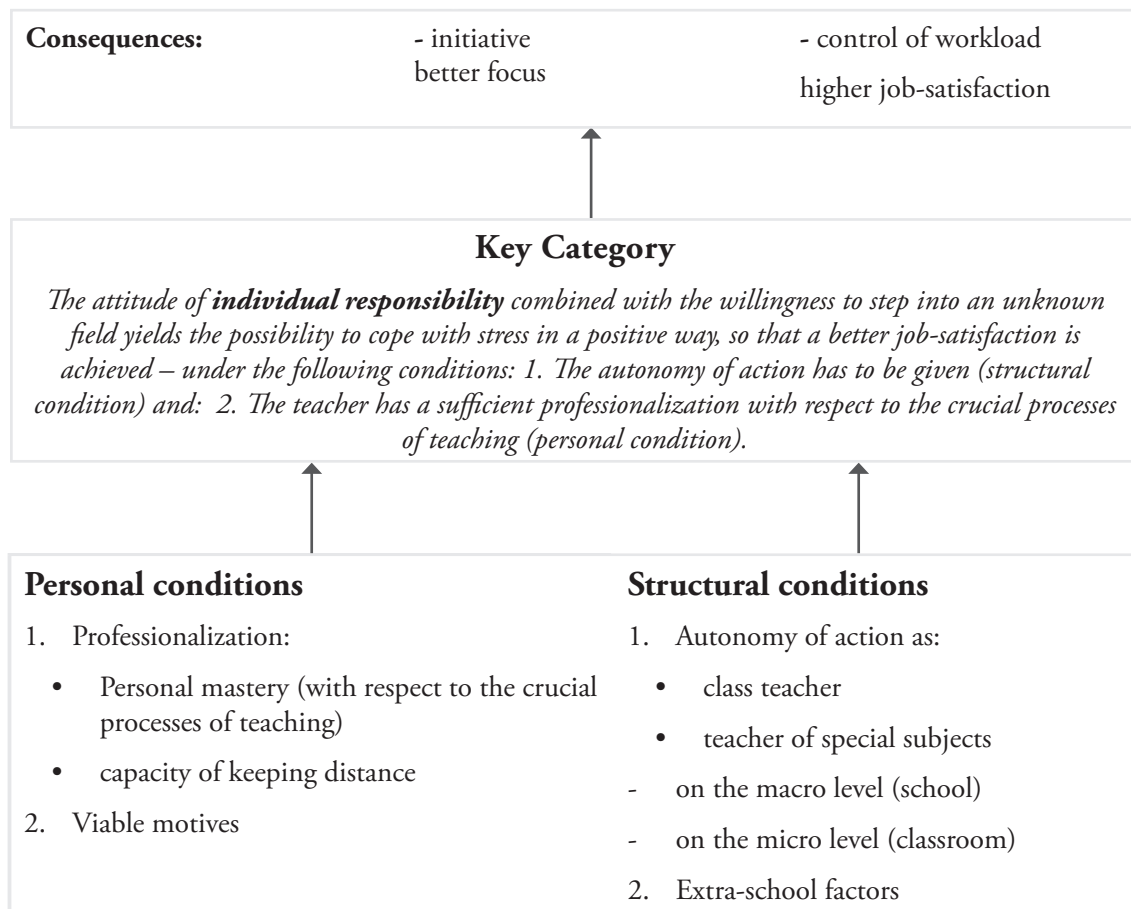
Type II
happy --
workload ++

Type III, for instance, captures those cases registering both a heavy workload and a high degree of satisfaction. Thus, these interviews also show that there is no direct correlation between weight of workload and levels of satisfaction. On the one hand, a heavy workload, as in type III, can go together with high job-satisfaction, whereas heavy workload also appears in connection with professional dissatisfaction, as in type II. The category "light workload" did not arise in any of the six interviews, which does not necessarily allow us to conclude that the interviewees were generally overloaded. Indeed, a state of not being able to cope with the challenges only came to expression in two instances, and this only in passing.

The main focus of the rest of the study was upon identifying, in all six interviews, the common features in the stated ways of overcoming the pressures of workload. This analysis resulted in the identification of a key category, which will be elaborated on in what follows. Subsequently the main results will be explicated

---

3. One of the interviews was adopted from the study by Heinritz and Krautz, where the same cue-line was used. See: Heinritz, C. and Krautz, J. (2010). Kunstlehrer bleiben?! In: Kunst und Unterricht, (2010) 345/346, Beilage, p. 2-19

in connection with particular themes. The key category is shown in Diagram 1:

Diagram 1: *Key category in the overcoming of challenges*

Consequences:	- initiative
	  better focus
		- control of workload
		
		  higher job-satisfaction

Key Category

*The attitude of **individual responsibility** combined with the willingness to step into an unknown field yields the possibility to cope with stress in a positive way, so that a better job-satisfaction is achieved – under the following conditions: 1. The autonomy of action has to be given (structural condition) and: 2. The teacher has a sufficient professionalization with respect to the crucial processes of teaching (personal condition).*

Personal conditions

1. Professionalization:

    •   Personal mastery (with respect to the crucial processes of teaching)

    •   capacity of keeping distance

2. Viable motives

Structural conditions

1. Autonomy of action as:

    •   class teacher

    •   teacher of special subjects

    -   on the macro level (school)

    -   on the micro level (classroom)

2. Extra-school factors

The analysis showed that the heaviness of a workload cannot be assumed in principle to be stressful. Thus one interviewee distinguished between "positive burdens" and those that are truly draining. The central condition which decides whether a challenge can be dealt with positively is autonomy of action in the given situation: Does the context of the situation allow for individual responsibility, or not? Such an experience of *individual responsibility* [4] decides whether the challenge is rated as a threat – at least, a drain on one's energy – or as a meaningful opportunity for personal development. This principle of individual responsibility is expressed in the interviews, for instance, as follows:

> *And I know very well that I walked into all this with my eyes open, and at some point, off my own bat, said yes to it, OK? That means it's not some kind of external pressure or compulsion, but I'm fully aware and always reminding myself that I chose it exactly as it is, and actually wish it to be that way.*

Here the responsibility stands in relation to a personal decision to take up the current profession, a decision which must be constantly renewed. This actualising element is also expressed in the following quotation in the final phrase "and that is … good", which is a kind of ratification:

> *" and that's good for the students, and for me too. Because I see that I don't <u>have</u> to be here, I <u>want</u> to be here, but I don't have to be here, and that is … good."*

The freedom to decide one's own actions appears in consciousness in the form of a perception: "*because I see that ..*" This is not a question of a once made decision that one remains true to, but a constant re-actualisation of this decision, which could at any time be altered:

---

4. On this subject see: Sprenger, R. K. (2007), Das Prinzip Selbstverantwortung. Wege zur Motivation. Campus Verlag.

"I could say any time: I'm going to stand back and reduce my activity to an absolute minimum. It's perfectly possible and when I think about it …. But inside I'm committed to the whole thing; that um …. helps a lot at times when I've got too much on my plate."

To be able to take responsibility for the occasionally unpleasant consequences – "*times when I've got too much on my plate*" – of a previously made decision requires an inner revisiting of one's own causal role in its making. In the daily life of a school this principle of responsibility for oneself is thus an ongoing state of mind, and not just a judgement formed from some distant perspective or an action strategy.

The counterpart of this inner principle also appears in the interviews and can be characterised as an experience of external control:

"I increasingly feel that in the last while there are more and more voices from outside telling us all the things we need to rethink."

Autonomy, as referred to here, also relates to self-efficacy. In contrast to the latter, the commitment to individual responsibility has less to do with control over the amount of work and positively predicting one's own ability to meet its demands, and more with the awareness of one's co-responsibility for what has already happened – and this includes negative experience. In essence, therefore, it is not future-, but present-oriented.

Conditions and consequences

Commitment to the principle of individual responsibility on its own is, of course, no guarantee against overload and burn-out. Rather, certain conditions to do with staffing and organisational structure must be in place, if this inner principle is to become a sustainable source of action.

According to Diagram 1, among the staffing conditions are individual professionalization and the appropriateness of the personal motifs in play. Motifs can change in the course of a professional life. In the interviews it is especially noticeable how difficult everything becomes when the motif that initially led to taking up the profession loses its power to sustain. On the other hand, it also happens that in the first years of teaching a previously unconscious motif emerges, this one, in every case, proving itself as very resilient.

The second central staffing condition concerns personal professionalization in the areas of *equanimity* and *detachment.* This includes gaining full command of the chosen metier in respect of content and methods. For the equanimity referred to here can only emerge when attention is no longer completely consumed by the momentary details of the particular situation:

I have become secure in myself and have achieved a certain equanimity, and I can handle things pretty well, […] At the beginning, you know, I really kept my nose to the grindstone, totally focused on things, really, really strongly, like these … smaller tasks, you know, these technical or even pedagogical difficulties. It was a …. well, a really close attachment and gradually, gradually I became able to hold myself back more and more, freed up my head and now instead I have a view over the whole thing and am able to see if something is not going well … I look first of all from a detached position to see what the problem is. And then when I act, I'm able to fit the action to the situation much better, OK? (16, 439-458)

The ability to "hold back" described in this quotation is based upon unencumbered attention – "[I] freed up my head" – the prerequisite for which is professionalization in the realm of "technical" and "pedagogical" processes. As a consequence, the detachment thus achieved prevents unreflected reactions to suddenly occurring events. In other words, it switches off unconscious, individual reflex actions, so that the action taken can "fit … the situation much better".

One consequence of this "magisterial detachment" is the ensuing change of perspective:

"… the other thing is that it's still the case that I still enjoy working in that area, and if anything the work has got easier and more fulfilling through this acquired equanimity, through… through this more expansive view I have gained of things. – And something else that's fulfilling and just great is … the fact that … that I have become freer in this way means that I can now pay closer attention to the pupils themselves, in other words,

their personal development and individuality." (16, 480-488)

The focus shifts from the "technical" and "pedagogical difficulties" mentioned above, which still evince a strong self-preoccupation, to the pupils themselves. Through this a positive intensification of the process has set in, since the field of perception has expanded.

A further consequence of this newly won equanimity consists in being ready to enter new territory and take risks. This is possible because this equanimity is not dependent upon success, but upon the process. This is also the decisive point in which it differs from self-efficacy. Equanimity as described here has less to do with looking positively into the future than with the experience of being "anchored" in the present situation.

The structural conditions affect both the macro-level – the school as a whole – and the individual teacher's lessons. For the principle of individual responsibility to be able to come to expression through appropriate actions, individual initiatives must have the freedom to adopt their own forms: they should not, for instance, be blocked. In teaching, therefore, flexibility in the choice of subjects and contents is indispensable:

> "I think it's so brilliant, when I imagine myself having to use a textbook and doing all that in a fixed order – oh, no! The fact that you have the chance to develop your creativity to the full, that is just so brilliant. And this creativity, I had oodles of it …"

Freedom of manoeuvre for the design and development of lessons and lesson content is thus essential. These creative spaces are, of course, subject-dependent, and are different for art teachers, say, than for those with an *Abitur* subject to teach. In general, autonomy in relation to the curriculum and subject-related projects is fairly large in Waldorf schools. This gives a clear message to teachers at state schools about the significance of this autonomy in relation to self-efficacy.

On the macro-level a major topic in the interviews was that of co-operation among colleagues. Changes affecting the school as a whole cannot be brought about by individual colleagues acting on their own, even if they possess a high degree of self-efficacy. In this they are dependent upon the college working together:

> "Where I experience it as really burdensome is … well, in working with colleagues. I have a sense that for this school as a whole to develop as it needs to we can't just carry on the way we did twenty years ago. If we did that the problems would just get bigger and bigger … And that there was so little willingness to change has saddled us with big problems … And when I observe: change is necessary, or at least a degree of openness, and that some colleagues aren't participating, or far too little, then eh … it's really hard for me to accept that." (16, 782-795)

When experiences like this occur repeatedly then, besides a lack of acceptance, a further stress factor may come into play:

> "For me the most stressful thing is when the whole college takes up this plaintive cry of 'we're all so overloaded!' … if instead we could only have: 'We're going onwards!'" (15, 327-330)

In this case the feeling of not being able to get anything moving has the effect of paralyzing individual initiative. If, in spite of a high degree of "sovereign detachment" and experience-based self-efficacy on the micro-level, the individual cannot get his initiatives accepted within the college, then the only alternative is to change jobs – this was successfully accomplished by one of the interviewees. Either that, or at the level of the whole school a feeling of resignation prevails. This is in turn connected with a retreat into the realm of one's own classroom, where enough in the way of self-efficacy is experienced to render one's overall professional situation more or less satisfying.

If, however, the organisational and staffing conditions are fulfilled, then the principle of individual responsibility becomes a source of action based on initiative, which is focused upon those areas where provision has been made for freedom of action and, regardless of success, is intrinsically meaningful. A positive corollary to this consists in the fact that such a way of working actually increases the chances of success. Since initiative is a kind of "overtime", its dimensions are under the control of the individual, which means that at least in this area there is the possibility of regulating stress. Finally, through the experience of increased self-efficacy and greater autonomy there is also an increase in professional satisfaction.

Summary

Attitudes to a profession in general or to specific stress-factors are directly related to the way a given workload is subjectively experienced. In the sample test presented here individual responsibility emerges as having central significance in this connection. This designates an attitude, or inner principle, which, on the one hand, is aware of its own contribution to the construction of every-day professional reality and accepts the consequences arising from this, and, on the other, makes active use of available areas of flexibility in order to bring about change through creative initiative.

Prerequisites for this are the necessary freedoms in the design of lessons and personal professionalization in relation to contents and methods. Through an appropriate degree of equanimity within the changing demands of the school day and the associated faculty of detachment an expanded horizon of observation and perception arises, which leads to a new kind of object-relatedness and thus, ultimately, improves the individual's overall competence as a teacher. Moreover, this expanded perception, which is actually a *reflexion in actu*, fosters knowledge of the teacher's own contribution to classroom "situations", which may be stressful or challenging.

What emerges as a critical point in all this is the interaction among colleagues. The problem is that making the principle of individual responsibility fruitful in the area of school management and administration requires that the college "follow suit". The results here tally with the few findings already available. For instance, House, in his study of Waldorf teachers in England (House, R., 2001), spoke of disturbances within the process of self-management as a central problem, and discovered that as a consequence there was a general feeling of resignation at the macro-level plus a compensatory focusing of creative forces upon the classroom. Thus it would seem that badly functioning self-management drives teachers to retreat into their classrooms. This situation entails the danger of being self-reinforcing.

Such a "vicious circle" has also been found by Käufer and Versteegen (2008) on the micro-level in connection with self-efficacy: diminished self-efficacy can lead to a downward spiral, because challenges can no longer be brought to any satisfactory resolution. This in turn can lead to a further erosion of self-efficacy (Käufer, K. & Versteegen, U., 2008).

In the study just mentioned, however, personal attitudes were not taken into account. The reference to vicious circles is certainly plausible in the context of this study's results. The question as to how much of an influence personal attitudes have on such self-reinforcing processes cannot be definitively answered without an in-depth study. Teachers' personal commitments can, however, be taken as positive factors in meeting particular challenges they have to face.

References

Dauber, H. & Döring-Seipel, E. (2010). Was hält Lehrer und Lehrerinnen gesund – die Bedeutung von Ressourcen, subjektiver Bewertung und Verarbeitung von Belastung für die Gesundheit von Lehrern und Lehrerinnen. URL: www.uni-kassel.de/fb4/psychologie/personal/lantermann/person/burnout.pdf

Gehrmann, A. (2007). Zufriedenheit trotz beruflicher Beanspruchung? Anmerkungen zu den Befunden der Lehrerbelastungsforschung. In: Martin Rothland (Ed.). *Belastung und Beanspruchung im Lehrerberuf – Modelle Befunde, Interventionen*, Wiesbaden: VS, p. 189.

Heinritz, C. & Krautz, J. (2010). Kunstlehrer bleiben?! Journal *Kunst und Unterricht, (2010) 345/ 346*, Beilage, pp. 2-19.

House, R. (2001). Stress and the Waldorf Teacher Towards Pre-emption through Understanding, *Steiner Education, Vol. 35, No. 2*, pp. 36-41.

Käufer, K. & Versteegen, U., 2008). *Selbstwirksamkeit und Burn out.* In: *Waldorfschulen: Ein Werkstattbericht.* URL: www.adz-netzwerk.de/files/docs/Selbstwirksamkeit-Burn-out.pdf

Merz J. (1979). *Berufszufriedenheit von Lehrern. Eine empirische Untersuchung.* Weinheim, Basel: Beltz, p. 215.

Schaarschmidt, U. (1999). *Beanspruchungsmuster im Lehrerberuf.* Frankfurt a.M.: AW Fischer – Psychologie und Unterricht.

Schütze, F. (1983). *Biographieforschung und narratives Interview*, Journal *Neue Praxis, 13(3)*, 283-293. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53147

Strauss, A. L. (1998). *Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung. Datenanalyse und Theoriebildung in der empirischen und soziologischen Forschung.* Stuttgart: Fink Verlag Reihe UTB.

Sprenger, R. K. (2007). *Das Prinzip Selbstverantwortung. Wege zur Motivation.* Frankfurt a./M.: Campus Verlag.

Ullrich, H. & Strunk, S. (2009). Zwischen Kontinuität und Innovation: Aktuelle Entwicklungen im Deutschen Privatschulwesen, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, Jg. 55, Heft 2*, S. 232.