



## Theoretical article

### BURNOUT SYNDROME IN TEACHERS

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#### **Abstract:**

*This paper summarizes some viewpoints regarding the burnout syndrome among teachers – its characteristics, causes, and possible interventions. Four perspectives for understanding burnout have been described – clinical, psychosocial, meso-level, and socio-historical. Some personal, social, and organizational factors for burnout development have been highlighted. The possible interventions could be classified as direct versus palliative, individual versus organizational, prevention and treatment, on a personal, interpersonal and organizational level.*

**Key words:** burnout, exhaustion, depersonalization, teacher productivity, interventions for reducing

#### **Introduction**

By now a cliché, it is often said that teachers are the backbone of our society, setting the ground for the social, political, cultural and economic progression of every system. At the same time, their explosion to constant human contact as helping professionals deems them one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of developing stress, which could escalate to a full burnout diagnosis (Brudnik, 2009; Yang et al., 2009). The purpose of this essay is to present the characteristics of the burnout syndrome on teaching professionals. After a brief terminological introduction, the causes of the phenomenon will be presented. In the final section, proposals to address burnout generally will be offered.

#### **The Burnout Syndrome**

Burnout has been classified as a non-medical syndrome which emerges only within the occupational context (World Health Organization, 2019). Originally conceptualized by Freudenberg (1974), the Burnout Syndrome is generally depicted as comprising three distinct symptoms: Drained energy or exhaustion; depersonalization; reduced efficacy (World Health Organization, 2019). Professionals suffering from burnout often find themselves struggling to secure emotional resources while also feeling overwhelmed by a sense of fatigue (Awa et al., 2010; Friedman, 2000). The feeling of depersonalization refers to a cynical and negatively biased approach towards one's occupation, resulting in long-term mental and behavioral detachment from their job (Friedman, 2000). The above is accompanied by an increasing belief of personal inadequacy to excel and effectively carry out one's professional responsibilities, with a significant lack of confidence (Friedman, 2000).

Awa et al. (2010, p.184) caution that burnout should be effectively distinguished from other psychological syndromes characterized by physical fatigue, anxiety and lack of motivation. Indeed, since its initial conception, the term has been used to describe the clinical image of

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workers operating in posts who offer their services through direct contact with customers (Byrne, 1999; Friedman, 2000). It is predominantly found in sectors where an unequal dynamic is established between a professional and the recipient of their services, with the former falling victim to the consequences of such an asymmetry (Awa et al., 2010, p.184). Such professions are nurses, social workers, doctors, but also teachers.

The importance of studying the Burnout Syndrome among teachers lies in the well documented effects of the phenomenon on the teaching staff and the overall didactic process (Brudnik, 2009). Burnout can impact teachers on multiple levels, ranging from physical to psychological (Yang et al., 2009). Studies with academic staff from various countries around the world indicate that burnout is positively associated with absenteeism and early retirement (Awa et al., 2010; Bauer et al., 2006; Unterbrink et al., 2007). Other studies have shown that teachers suffering from burnout face more difficulties addressing behavioral challenges by students and fail to adequately fulfill their teaching duties and ameliorate their performance (Brudnik, 2009; Friedman, 2000). It has also been found that burnout shrinks life expectancy and lowers teachers' quality of life, increasing parallelly the possibilities of a psychiatric diagnosis such as depression, stress and exhaustion syndromes (Bauer et al., 2006).

Byrne (1999) detected four perspectives through which the Burnout Syndrome has been attempted to be understood throughout the years. Initially, there was a dominance of the *clinical* perspective, according to which burnout was perceived as immense fatigue resulting from work overload; later, the term became enriched with a *psychosocial* aspect, which placed emphasis on the individual's professional role as a source of stress. Afterwards, the term was relocated at a meso-level, according to which burnout constitutes a response to the culture of the systems in which they operate. Finally, later theses approached burnout through a socio-historical point of view, which pinpointed to changing value systems as sources of problems, as people's sense of belonging and social support was steadily shattered by the increasing emphasis placed on individualism (Byrne, 1999, pp. 17-18). This overview could be useful in the process of understanding the causes of burnout, and therefore, detecting the contexts in which interventions are required in order to adequately address the phenomenon.

In what will follow, the risk factors linked with burnout will be presented, in an attempt to consolidate a similar classification ranging from personal to organizational etiologies.

### **Causes of Burnout**

As a multilayered phenomenon occurring in dynamic environments such as a school unit, burnout could be the result of a grand variety of factors affecting the professional. Based on evidence found in literature, those factors can be categorized as personal, social, and organizational.

Beginning with socio-personal factors, it should be noted that evidence around the impact of demographic traits such as gender, age and school type are often conflicting and do not provide clear results (Unterbrink et al., 2007). On the other hand, it has been argued that burnout affects some teachers while not being present in others due to idiosyncratic features (Friedman, 2000). Teachers with more negative experiences in the academic context, who lack a proactive attitude, with poor mood regulation, low job satisfaction, external locus of control or low self esteem could be more prone to experience burnout symptoms (Brudnik, 2009; Byrne, 1999; Friedman, 2000; Unterbrink et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2009). On the other hand, an internal locus of control and high levels of self-esteem have been proven to operate as protective factors, shielding professionals with stocks of psychological resilience and thus averting the risk of experiencing burnout (Byrne, 1999).

Idiosyncratic traits, however, are not the only source of resilience. Moving to a meso-level, previous research has highlighted the importance of social-familial ties in preventing burnout (Friedman, 2000). Poor social support systems could cultivate a sense of loneliness, which is positively linked with burnout (Yang et al., 2009). In a similar vein, Bauer et al. (2006) found that those participants in their study who were married or were in a relationship experienced significantly milder burnout symptoms compared to those who were single. An interesting finding comes from a gendered point of view. It has been systematically found that female teachers experience burnout at disproportionately higher levels compared to their male counterparts (Wei et al., 2025). While this could reflect a larger percentage of females in the teaching profession, it could also result from dominant societal values imposing solely on women responsibilities related to the household. Absence of marital and social support severely hampers the juggle of professional and household or motherhood responsibilities, with this role conflict increasing the chances for the emergence of burnout (Bauer et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2009).

More systematic research has been conducted around organizational factors, where consensus among academics is wider. In his analysis, Friedman (2000) underlines the importance of resources as a unit measurement for burnout. Specifically, drawing from the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), he argues that when resources are threatened, lessened, vanished or are disproportionally few compared to the professional's effort, then burnout is prone to occur (Friedman, 1999). His general conclusion, which has been replicated by others, is that the gap between the ideal repertoire of personal, organizational, psychological resources and reality paves the way for the emergence of burnout symptoms (Awa et al., 2010; Friedman, 2000).

In this context, research has found that the lack of resources in the form of nonexistent professional tools or lack of recognition has been associated with burnout (Awa et al., 2010; Friedman, 2000; Unterbrink et al., 2007). Furthermore, teachers often find themselves exposed to sources of stress without receiving support from supervisors, peers or parents (Unterbrink et al., 2007). Nonexistent communication and increased emphasis on individuality and unilateral decisions within an organizational context, strip professionals of psychosocial resources, and have also been associated with burnout (Bauer et al., 2006; Byrne, 1999; Yang et al., 2009).

Apart from issues regarding resources on a personal level, burnout risk factors can also be found in the teacher-student dynamics. It has been found that pupils' behavior could operate counterproductively on teachers' mental and physical health and thus induce burnout symptoms (Unterbrink et al., 2007). A polarized climate in the teacher-student relationship, problematic pupil behavior in the form of aggression, criticism, humiliation or lack of interest towards the didactic process and the tutor, but also steadily poor academic performance could potentially aggravate negative feelings and render teachers susceptible to burnout (Bauer et al., 2006; Unterbrink et al., 2007).

Finally, the wider mode of operation and the culture of schools have also been associated with burnout. Often cited in literature as sources of emotional exhaustion are large classes (Bauer et al., 2006; Byrne, 1999; Friedman, 2000; Unterbrink et al., 2007), mechanized duties (Friedman, 2000) and heavy workload (Bauer et al., 2006; Unterbrink et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2009). Amid these conditions, teachers find themselves questioning their capabilities as professionals, but also the value of their contributions. This situation is exacerbated by counterproductive vertical hierarchy systems which undermine teachers' presence in the school structure by forcing them to constantly answer to supervisors and guardians and be subjected to constant criticism, while also being locked out of decision-making procedures and having their input minimized (Byrne, 1999; Friedman, 2000; Unterbrink et al., 2007). The combination of increased workload and high power-distance could generate role conflict, which refers to the parallel occurrence of job-related pressures, or role ambiguity, which refers to lack of clarity and

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specificity when it comes to expectations, requirements and duties in the professional context, both factors positively related to burnout (Byrne, 1999, p.22).

A final potential risk factor related to the organization of school systems is the concept of change. Constant, significant changes in the tools and technologies used, but also in the methods and strategies employed require teachers to un-learn their old methods and re-learn new ones. The establishment of new didactic norms burdens teachers in terms of time consumption and effort required to remain effective while swimming in unexplored waters (Unterbrink et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2010). This process provides for the investment of significant resources, but also a certain amount of flexibility that would allow teachers to accept and implement these changes (Smylie, 1999). Lack of know-how, absence of support and guidance in adapting to change, failure to increase rewards in order for them to be equivalent to the effort invested by the teachers, but also cognitive and ideological rigidity towards change could produce role conflict and work overload which could result to emotional and physical exhaustion, intensify feelings of incompetence and lead to scarce resources and low job satisfaction, thus shaping up the profile of burnt-out professionals (Smylie, 1999).

### **Addressing the Burnout Syndrome**

Commencing the discussion on burnout prevention and treatment, it is useful to outline Friedman's three-level distinction of interventions (1999). One way to differentiate approaches is by classifying them as *direct* versus *palliative* (Friedman, 1999, p.171). Whereas the first refers to interventions targeting direct sources of burnout such as large classes, the latter focuses more on burnout symptoms, seeking to minimize their effect on teachers (Friedman, 1999, p.172). A second level of distinction is *individual* versus *organizational*. Interventions at individual level primarily focus on teachers, whereas organizational approaches propose interventions concerning the school as a system and all its subsystems and components (Friedman, 1999, p.172). A mix-matched approach comprising both direct actions and alleviating techniques could be applied on both levels. Finally, Friedman distinguishes between *prevention* and *treatment* approaches (1999, p.173), cautioning however that prevention in the form of training and cognitive behavioral supervision, albeit more effective and less costly, can only be applied to non-burnt-out professionals.

Based on the above categorization, intervention proposals can be made on a personal, interpersonal and organizational level.

### **Individual Skills**

To begin with, palliative approaches focusing on the individual could include stress management through cognitive-behavioral therapy, counseling, recreation, muscle and other relaxation exercises, adaptive skills and coping skills training, biofeedback and other therapeutic recipes which have been proven to minimize burnout symptoms by addressing feelings of exhaustion and preserving job satisfaction in order to avoid depersonalization (Awa et al., 2010; Friedman, 1999; 2000; Yang et al., 2009). Personalized interventions focusing on technical skills could be applied both preventively and palliatively. Those could include workshops to excel in teaching methods, tools, procedures and techniques; training and teaching sessions to unpack the source, nature and components of problematic student behavior; workshops to effectively intervene in order to change the classroom climate by ameliorating various aspects of the teacher-student relationship (Friedman, 2000, pp. 602-603).

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Moving to an interpersonal level, in order to respond to burnout risks deriving from lack of social and peer support, the establishment of communication skills training programs has been proposed with the aim of cultivating teamwork, respect, mutual assistance and consolidating

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strong social ties (Awa et al., 2010; Friedman, 2000; Unterbrink, 2007; Yang et al., 2009). Self-help groups in accordance with the Balint model have been proposed by various academics, which could offer teachers the opportunity to voice any work-related challenges they might be facing, exchange views, receive feedback and offer solutions, with the aim of overcoming isolation, enhancing resilience and finding ways to better in-classroom relations (Bauer et al., 2006; Friedman, 2000; Unterbrink et al., 2007, p.439).

### **Organizational Skills**

Organizational reforms are also required to adequately address the burnout phenomenon. Direct actions such as reducing the number of pupils per classes (Friedman, 1999; Unterbrink et al. 2007), changing evaluation and supervision protocols (Awa et al., 2010) and attempting modifications to the curriculum (Friedman, 1999) could be accompanied by indirect interventions such as appointing school psychologists and redrawing the hierarchy structure, in order to offer teachers more freedom and control over their work, restructure their tasks to defuse pressure and clarify any ambiguities, while also replacing strict vertical structures with more horizontal leadership models, which would envision a more active participation of teachers in decision-making procedures (Awa et al., 2010; Friedman, 2000).

Such organizational interventions are also deemed necessary in a pandemic context. Zhou et al. (2020) propose that the didactic process should be modified drastically in terms of duration and timetables in order to achieve a more balanced distribution between time resources invested in online teaching and extracurricular activities. Reich et al. (2020, p.18) also point to the importance of setting boundaries between offering students as much support as possible and tending to teachers' extraordinary needs under unprecedented working conditions. Collie (2021) also proposes that leaderships more oriented toward freedom and inclusion in the decision-making process be adopted in the educational context, in order for teachers to be able to address the uncertainty arising from imminent pandemic waves.

Finally, Friedman (1999) sets out four prerequisites to achieve a healthy school environment that could operate preventively against burnout. This includes a healthy, authentic teacher-student relationship based on trust; a complete reorientation of the school culture in order to replace individuality with a sense of community and personal fulfilment; the active involvement of parents in the educational equation in order to cultivate their understanding by offering insights into the didactic process; ameliorating the managerial and leadership skills of principals in order to avoid working environments characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, low satisfaction and high power distance (Friedman, 1999, pp. 174-175).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay was to present the case of burnout in teachers, with emphasis on its causes and methods to effectively address it. Risk factors were detected on a personal, interpersonal and organizational level. Preventive but also treating interventions could be applied to the professional individually, to the academic staff as a group, but also to the school system as an organization, with the aim of increasing resources, a sense of belonging, while also reforming the leadership structure in order to bolster and upgrade relations among its subsystems.

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