



Burnout among senior teachers: Investigating the role of workload and interpersonal relationships at work



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Interpersonal relationships are differentially related to the burnout dimensions.
- Relations with students are most strongly related to the three burnout dimensions.
- Supervisors play a crucial role in giving teachers more autonomy.
- More autonomy leads to less dissatisfaction with non-teaching-related workload.
- Our data support the sequential process model of burnout.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 October 2013

Received in revised form

7 July 2014

Accepted 10 July 2014

Available online 30 July 2014

Keywords:

Teacher burnout

Teacher autonomy

Workload

Social support

Intensification

ABSTRACT

According to the ‘intensification’ thesis, external pressures from policymakers, supervisors, parents, and experts fuel an ever-expanding teaching role and associated workload. Against that background, we examined how four interpersonal relationships (students, colleagues, supervisors, and parents), teaching-related and non-teaching-related workload (e.g., paperwork), and autonomy are related to teacher burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment). The participants were 1878 Flemish teachers 45 years of age or older. The data were analyzed by means of structural equation modelling. Interpersonal relationships were differentially related to burnout. Teaching-related and non-teaching-related workload were both related to emotional exhaustion. Autonomy was most strongly related to non-teaching-related workload.

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1. Introduction

Burnout is a persistent, negative, work-related state of psychological exhaustion that results from a misfit between personal intentions and motivations on the one hand and actual on-the-job experiences on the other (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). It includes a wide range of psychological (e.g., chronic fatigue, low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, depression) and physiological (e.g., headaches, muscle pains, hypertension) symptoms. Burnout impedes the attainment of professional goals (Maslach, 2003), depletes

coping resources (Park, Jacob, Wagner, & Baiden, 2013), and consequently becomes self-perpetuating and hard to rehabilitate.

The prevalence of burnout has been investigated in a wide range of occupational categories (Alarcon, 2011; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In particular, contact professions (e.g., nurses, physicians, social workers, and teachers) turn out to be quite susceptible to burnout (Maslach, 2003). Within this occupational category teachers have repeatedly been shown to report the highest levels of burnout (Heus & Diekstra, 1999; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Not surprisingly, an extensive body of literature studies burnout among teachers (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Byrne, 1991; Dorman, 2003; Grayson, Alvarez, & Grayson, 2008; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005; Kinman, Wray, & Strange, 2011; Kokkinos, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009, 2010, 2011; Van Der Doef & Maes, 2002). This paper engages with this literature by studying the impact of (1) the quality of the interpersonal relationships teachers maintain with

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pupils, colleagues, parents and principals, (2) teaching and non-teaching related workload, and (3) perceived autonomy on burnout among senior teachers (aged 45–65) in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, N: 1878).

The focus on senior teachers is warranted, because the consequences of suffering from burnout for older employees in terms of their (re)integration in the labour market prove to be dramatic. Teachers suffering from burnout have a higher chance of leaving the profession and retiring early (Leung & Lee, 2006; Martin, Sass, & Schmitt, 2012; Rudow, 1999; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2014). This is especially problematic, because in several countries, including Belgium, the teacher work force is ageing (OECD, 2005, 2012). According to the OECD (2012) this tendency will put increasing pressure on the teacher labour market and may lead to increasing teacher shortages. Since policymakers attempt to motivate employees – and more specifically teachers – to work longer, it becomes crucial to understand the determinants of burnout among senior teachers.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we situate our research question against the background of changes the teaching profession went through during the last two decades. This section justifies our focus on the impact of the quality of different interpersonal relationships, types of workload, and autonomy. Next, we review the existing literature on burnout among teachers and locate our own study against that background. This section is followed by a description of our data and the methods we used. Subsequently, we present the results of our study. In the concluding section we elaborate on the implications of our findings.

1.1. Intensification of the teaching profession: interpersonal relationships and workload

Our investigation of burnout is inspired by the multitude of changes the teaching profession has undergone during the past decades, often referred to as ‘intensification’ and ‘deprofessionalization’ (Apple, 1988; Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Woods, 1999). The intensification thesis holds that teachers are increasingly subjected to external pressures from policymakers, supervisors, parents, and experts. This intensification results in an ever-expanding teaching role, a significant increase in non-teaching-related (largely administrative) workload, and less time for social contact with colleagues and in private life.

The increasing demands and expectations towards education in general and teachers in particular by policymakers and society at large, results from the combination of on the one hand the way education (has to) function(s) and the broadening of education’s objectives on the other hand.

First of all, already in the 1980s Apple (1988), pointed to the increasing adoption of a more economic and management-oriented perspective on education among policymakers. Educational policy increasingly follows a market logic in which education is thought of as a product produced by schools. Thus, efficiency and effectiveness become the central evaluative parameters together with maximal freedom of choice for parents and pupils as consumers of education (Ball, 2003; Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). In that view, quality becomes a synonym for the effective and efficient achievement of standards that are objectively measurable. This implies that high-level tasks become routinized, the sphere of work narrows (e.g., pre-specified competencies), and high-stakes accountability demands and standardization, such as prescribed and pre-specified curriculums, textbooks, methods, and standardized tests, increase (Valli & Buese, 2007; Woods, 1999). These externally imposed demands reduce the autonomy and creativity in the classroom and appear to lead towards “deskilling” and “deprofessionalization”.

A second – and related – issue concerns the scope of education’s tasks within larger society which continued to broaden. Today, education is expected to contribute to the solution of numerous social problems (e.g., drug abuse prevention, civic education, health education, etc.). This so called ‘educationalization of society’ implies that schools are expected to take over tasks that were once carried out by parents (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2008). Some of these are experienced by teachers as improper to their assumed job description (Kelchtermans, 1999). Moreover, the broadening of education’s scope also increased the number of other professionals (e.g., equal opportunities teachers, student counsellors, special needs teachers, education inspectors) that work with pupils and teachers. Teachers thus find themselves in a contradictory situation in which they face greater responsibility for their work but have less control over the way they wish to work (Ball, 2003).

Although the literature often emphasizes the negative impact of intensification, different authors stress that it may also have positive effects. Being confronted with intensification, for example, some teachers look for further training or collaborative lesson planning as coping strategies which may result in re-skilling and re-professionalization (e.g., action research, teacher-as-researcher movements) (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009; Woods, 1999). More generally, intensification does not directly flow from educational policy into the classroom. Intensification is a nuanced, mediated and not completely deterministic process (Ballet et al., 2006). For example, teachers filter imposed policy changes through their personal ideologies and perspectives and have a certain freedom in how they implement them in the classroom. Ballet et al. (2006) distinguished several working conditions in schools that mediate the impact of intensification. First, allowing teachers to co-decide how work is organized can induce job satisfaction and fosters feelings of collegiality and a sense of community. Participation in decision-making is crucial to mitigate the impact of intensification by enabling teachers to identify problematic external pressures and tackling them collectively. At the same time, however, participating in school policy-decisions can also increase the feeling of being overburdened especially when a lot of time has to be spent on making decisions without direct benefit for the pupils. Secondly, supervisors play a central role in translating policy arrangements and demands from the local community or parents to the specific school context. Supervisors, for example, can act as a buffer by postponing the implementation of a new curriculum if they feel that this would cause too much strain on the teachers. This implies that supervisors also face intensification which makes their buffering role more difficult. They have to deal with more (administrative) tasks and have to focus on the more managerial aspects of their job. Thirdly, positive interpersonal relationships at school can also mediate the impact of intensification. Positive relations with colleagues are very important in building shared values and norms and create a collective goal orientation. In this regard, Hargreaves (1994) noticed significant changes in teacher culture. He points to a shift from individualism to collaboration, from hierarchies to teams, from supervision to mentoring, from in-service training to professional development and from authority towards parents to a contract with parents. Indeed, teachers have to interact with and are made accountable to an increasing numbers of actors. Not only do they have to maintain relationships with students, but also with colleagues, supervisors, parents, and experts. On the one hand, positive interpersonal relationships can function as a buffer against the impact of intensification. On the other hand, Hargreaves identified “contrived collegiality”, which entails enforced collaboration resulting from a drive towards managerialism and accountability, rather than the interests of the students. This creates stress and contributes to the alienation of individuals who are opposed to such developments.

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