



School engagement and burnout in a sample of Brazilian students[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: Some studies have suggested that school engagement can be an ally in the prevention of psychosocial and occupational risks, to which students are exposed daily. The aim of this study is to estimate the impact of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement on burnout syndrome among pharmacy undergraduate students.

Methods: A total of 363 students enrolled in the pharmacy undergraduate program in the College of Pharmaceutical Sciences at Sao Paulo State University’s Araraquara Campus (UNESP) participated, 78.0% of whom were female. Mean age was 20.3 (SD = 2.7) years. The Maslach Burnout Inventory for students (MBI-SS) and the University Students School Engagement Inventory (USEI) were used. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the psychometric properties of the instruments. The data were included in a structural equation model in which burnout was considered the central construct. The impact of school engagement on burnout was based on the statistical significance of causal paths (β) evaluated by z tests ($\alpha = 5\%$).

Results: The psychometric properties of the MBI-SS and USEI were adequate and the structural model also presented an adequate fit. Behavioral engagement ($\beta = -0.56$) and the emotional engagement ($\beta = -0.71$) explained 81.0% of burnout variability in the sample. Cognitive engagement was not found to contribute significantly. This data provides evidence of the impact of school engagement on burnout that can be used by educators and policymakers in charge of educational process.

Conclusion: School engagement presented inverse and significant influence on burnout syndrome among pharmacy students.
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Keywords: Professional burnout; School engagement; Students; Education; Pharmacy; Structural equation modeling

[☆]This study received funding from the São Paulo Research Foundation—FAPESP (Grant #2013/09923-4).

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Introduction

School engagement is a multifactorial construct that can be defined as a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind.^{1,2} There are several definitions of the term “school engagement” in the scientific literature; however, a common point among the main definitions of this construct is the student’s “commitment to” and “participation in” the school

environment.² According to this concept, school engagement can be considered in terms of three factors. The first is behavioral engagement, which is based on students' participation in academic and non-academic school activities and which involves academic engagement, social engagement, and extracurricular activities. The second factor is emotional engagement, which involves positive and negative reactions to peers, professors, and the educational institution itself. This factor is based on the students' affective reactions in the classroom, as well as on their interests, happiness, sadness, and anxiety. Emotional engagement surveys include questions about liking or disliking school, the teacher, and the activities, as well as questions about feelings toward and interests in the school. The third factor is cognitive engagement, which is defined as the psychological investment in learning, a desire to go beyond the requirements, and a preference for challenge, all of which results from the reflection and willpower required to accomplish difficult tasks and develop skills.^{2,3}

According to Fredricks et al.,² these factors should not be considered separately, but should be applied as a unit so that the factors may interact with each other to provide researchers with a better grasp of the construct. The authors also emphasized that the interaction of these factors is reciprocal and has been found to have a long-term effect on students' achievement. Furthermore, Schaufeli et al.¹ suggests that school engagement is not a momentary and specific state, but a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state.

Wang et al.³ write that the interaction of school engagement factors works synergistically in the learning process. Further, students who exhibit behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the educational institution and their school subjects are more likely to achieve academic success. In addition, some authors have suggested that school engagement can be an ally in the prevention of psychosocial and occupational risks, to which students are exposed daily.^{1,2} Thus, it is understood that more engaged students exhibit higher academic achievement, more positive feelings about school, teachers, and peers, and are more motivated to develop skills and seek new challenges. As a result, these students cope better with psychosocial and occupational risks created by the school environment. An example of psychosocial and occupational risk in the academic environment is burnout syndrome.^{1,4,5}

Burnout is most likely to occur as the result of students' difficulty in coping with common situations experienced in the academic environment. It can be characterized by three factors: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.⁶ Emotional exhaustion can be understood as feelings of fatigue resulting from academic demands. In this context, cynicism is defined as the development of a detached and impersonal attitude toward study. Professional inefficacy, meanwhile, is characterized by students' feelings of incompetence in relation to their studies.⁷

In previous studies, researchers who investigated burnout syndrome focused their attention on undergraduate

students,^{1,4,5,8,9} since, according to Schaufeli et al.¹ and Campos et al.,⁴ burnout can be present while students are still in the initial stages of their professional education. Motivation among researchers to conduct these studies stems from concern about the physical, social, psychological, and academic damages that result from the development of the syndrome or from related symptoms. These consequences, in turn, may prevent students from adapting to the school environment and to experience losses in future professional performance.¹⁰

Although several studies on burnout among undergraduate students studying medicine,^{11–13} dentistry,^{4,8} and nursing^{14,15} in Brazil can be found in the literature, few studies have investigated burnout among pharmacists or pharmacy students in world scientific literature.^{16–19} Barnett et al.¹⁶ and Lahoz and Mason¹⁷ reported the first results on the prevalence of burnout syndrome among pharmacists. These authors detected moderate levels of burnout in their samples. In pharmacy students more specifically, Ried et al.¹⁸ investigated and compared burnout levels and the predictors of the syndrome among pharmacy students from two university campuses (the founding campus and one of its satellite campuses). The authors reported the student's year of enrollment in the program to be the main predictor of burnout. Campus assignment was also found to be significant for emotional exhaustion, with the highest levels of burnout occurring on the founding campus. Thus, given the shortage of studies, the present study can contribute to the information available on burnout syndrome in different areas and therefore aid in decision making on prevention and intervention settings.

Furthermore, the relation between burnout syndrome and school engagement is also poorly investigated. Although school engagement is considered the opposite of burnout,¹ this relationship preserving the latent characteristics of these variables is infrequent in the scientific literature.

While similar research has been performed, our study focused on providing data with adequate validity and reliability in order to improve the quality of the estimates and to properly consider the contribution of school engagement to burnout syndrome among pharmacy students for the first time in the literature. This study was conducted to investigate the effects of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement on burnout scores among students enrolled in a pharmacy undergraduate program available in Brazil.

Methods

Study Design and Sampling

A cross-sectional study with a non-probabilistic sampling design was developed. The minimum sample size was estimated based on the proposals by Hair et al.²⁰ and Kim,²¹ who suggest the use of 5–10 subjects per item/parameter evaluated in the structural model. Thus, we estimated a sample size between 185 and 370 subjects.

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