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## Self-efficacy and burnout in teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Inclusion in schools of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a source of stress for teachers and requires a certain amount of adaptation to deal with it. The effects of perceived self-efficacy on burnout in professionals have been substantiated but the indirect effects, mediated by transactional processes of stress and coping, have never been explored in this specific context. This study aims to test the mediating effect of perceived stress and coping strategies on the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and burnout.

**Method:** A sample of 203 teachers of students with ASD filled out four self-report questionnaires measuring perceived self-efficacy, perceived stress, coping strategies, and burnout. A multiple mediation analysis was carried out using the bootstrap procedure.

**Results:** After controlling for the direct effect of perceived self-efficacy on burnout, the indirect effects through transactional processes were significant. The lower the teachers' feeling of self-efficacy, the more they implemented emotion-focused coping strategies, which predict higher burnout in all three of its dimensions. Moreover, the lower the teachers' feeling of self-efficacy, the more they perceived the stressful situation in question as a threat or loss, perceptions that generate more emotional exhaustion.

**Conclusion:** These results enable us to formulate some ideas for improving both the wellbeing of teachers working with students with ASD and the management of such students, and thus their learning abilities and wellbeing in school.

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## 1. Introduction

A great deal of research is currently dedicated to stress and burnout in the teaching profession. Understanding these phenomena is essential given the key role teachers play in the success and development of students. In a study identifying the main factors of student achievement, [Hattie \(2009, 2012\)](#) found that teachers occupy the highest rank of importance for student success, above other factors like school programmes, teaching methods, or even the family environment of the students. Focusing on the wellbeing and health of teachers thus appears to be a major issue for any school system or society. Yet, the health of teachers in the specific context of school inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has rarely been investigated, despite being an increasingly common situation in France. This article investigates the mechanisms that may explain burnout in teachers of classes that include students with a disability, in particular ASD, in the context of school inclusion in France.

### 1.1. School inclusion and burnout in teachers

Burnout is a worrying phenomenon in the teaching professions ([Chaplain, 2008](#); [Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977](#); [McCarthy, Lambert, O'Donnell, & Melendres, 2009](#); [Stoerber & Rennert, 2008](#)). Research shows that 50% of teachers quit their profession before their sixth year of work, mainly because of a lack of professional satisfaction ([Ingersoll & Smith, 2004](#)). [Rudow \(1999\)](#) reports that 30% of teachers are in a state of burnout in Europe. In France, 70% of teachers worry about fatigue, tension, and overwork ([Horenstein, 2006](#)).

Burnout markedly affects the physical and mental health of teachers, as well as their mission of education, and thus impacts the overall functioning of society, in terms of costs to society and education levels of students ([Bianchi, Boffy, Hingray, Truchot, & Laurent, 2013](#); [Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996](#); [Van Dick & Wagner, 2001](#); [Jennings & Greenberg, 2009](#); [Kovess-Masféty, Seville-Dedieu, Rios-Seidel, Nerrière, & Chan Chee, 2006](#)). Teachers are exposed to many intense professional stressors ([Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003](#)) related to workload, conflictual work relationships, institutional malfunctioning, perceived inequity, and a lack of recognition, social support, and resources ([Burke et al., 1996](#)). A report by [Horenstein \(2006\)](#) drew up an inventory of stress factors related to teaching, one of which was the inclusion of pupils with a disability in classes.

School inclusion of pupils with disabilities requires teachers to implement important structural changes (e.g., educational design and organisation, class management) which significantly increase their workload. These requirements sometimes collide with a lack of knowledge or competence to deal with disabilities, or can be perceived as needing specific personal attributes ([Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Oliver, & Lyons, 2012](#)). All of these factors led [Wisniewski and Gargiulo \(1997\)](#) to assert that teachers who include pupils with disabilities in their classes have high levels of burnout, particularly when the pupils suffer from psychiatric illnesses.

Nevertheless, in France the “2005-102” Law (11th February 2005) and the “2013-595” Law (8th July 2013) set goals for school accessibility and inclusion of pupils with disabilities in classes. All teachers must include and teach these pupils just like pupils without disabilities. The gradual implementation of this law means that the number of teachers concerned continues to rise.

The difficulties presented by pupils with ASD are often severe and affect cognitive processes, social interactions and communication ([Ruble & McGrew, 2013](#)). Behavioural issues frequently emerge from these disabilities. These challenging behaviours and social impairments represent the principal determinants of workplace stress and mental ill health among teachers ([Geving, 2007](#); [Ingersoll & Smith, 2003](#); [Major, 2012](#)). A study by [Baghdadli, Rattaz, and Ledésert \(2011\)](#) highlights the main difficulties reported by teachers of pupils with ASD, notably social interaction problems for three-quarters of the teachers and challenging behaviours for half of them. Furthermore, the inclusion of children with ASD in a regular classroom requires teachers to adapt their usual teaching practices. Consequently, inclusive teachers are exposed to professional stress and burnout ([Hastings & Brown, 2002](#); [Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006](#); [Ruble & McGrew, 2013](#)). This is even truer when teaching pupils with ASD, which represents a complex professional situation in which the feeling of self-efficacy can be decisive for mental health preservation ([Boyer & Gillespie, 2000](#); [Jennett et al., 2003](#); [Lecavalier et al., 2006](#)).

### 1.2. The concept of burnout: the result of chronic professional stress

Burnout is defined as a three-dimensional syndrome ([Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996](#); [Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001](#); [Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993](#)). Emotional exhaustion is its central component and refers to the feeling of being exhausted and emotionally overwhelmed by work and work interactions. Depersonalisation is the interpersonal dimension of burnout and can be depicted by the emergence of negative and cynical attitudes towards clients or service users. Finally, personal accomplishment is the self-evaluation dimension of burnout and refers to an individual's denigration and undervaluing of their own abilities, work, and potentially themselves. For example, a burnt out teacher will no longer be emotionally available to their students and can develop negative attitudes towards them. This teacher may consider that he/she can no longer bring about significant transformations and positive changes in the pupils ([Maslach et al., 1996](#)).

The emergence of burnout in individuals can be caused by situational factors –characteristics intrinsic to work and its organisation- and individual factors –demographic variables and personal characteristics- ([Antoniou, Polychroni, & Vlachakis, 2006](#); [Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Munoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005](#); [Kovess-Masféty et al., 2006](#)). In terms of situational

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