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Well-being and academic achievement in secondary school pupils: The unique effects of burnout and engagement



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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this study was to examine the relationship among burnout, engagement, well-being, and academic performance in Portuguese secondary school pupils. The existence of gender related differences in these relationships was also investigated. The sample was composed of 489 pupils who attended an academic track at secondary school. Results of multi-group structural equation modelling indicated that higher levels of cynicism towards studies were associated with lower academic achievement. Exhaustion was not uniquely related to the adolescents' academic achievement or well-being. However, higher levels of engagement, namely dedication and vigour, were related to higher levels of well-being. Moreover, vigour was also uniquely associated with academic achievement. The results were similar for boys and girls. Implications for intervention and future research are discussed.

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Adolescence has long been recognized as a period of vulnerability to stress, which may contribute to stress-related health problems (e.g., [Compas, Orosan, & Grant, 1993](#)). The recent [American Psychological Association \(2014\) Stress in America](#) survey revealed that teenagers reported stress levels they perceived as being unhealthy, and that the two most commonly reported sources of stress were school (83%) and gaining entry into university or deciding what to do after secondary school (69%). The academic transition to secondary school also requires youths to interact with a new and larger peer group and to manage greater academic pressures ([Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2009](#)). In Portugal, the secondary school years are a critical and demanding period: (a) pupils must choose a specific area of studies (specialization within an academic or a vocational track), which can determine their later academic and professional trajectories; (b) entering university depends largely on the average mark obtained at secondary school and the number of university admissions is limited, which can lead to competitiveness among pupils and an extreme focus on achievement. Longitudinal studies conducted in other countries found that about one third of the students showed an increase in their burnout levels in the transition to secondary school and that this increase was mainly observed in the academic (non-vocational) track, due to its demands and its focus on comparison ([Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2012](#); [Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014a](#)). Despite being

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confronted with highly stressful situations, most people do not present burnout symptoms and instead maintain high engagement with their work or studies. Both burnout and engagement can therefore be accompanied by positive or negative outcomes. The aim of this study was to investigate the relationships among burnout, engagement, academic achievement and well-being in Portuguese adolescents attending an academic track in secondary school.

Pupils' burnout, engagement, academic success and well-being

The study of school burnout mirrors that of professional burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Students in a state of burnout feel exhausted, adopt a cynical and withdrawn attitude towards their studies, and end up losing their sense of efficacy as students when confronted with academic demands (Schaufeli, Martinez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Some studies have challenged this three dimensional view of burnout and have considered exhaustion and cynicism as its core dimensions (Choi, 2013; Green, Walkey, & Taylor, 1991; Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011).

Several studies have found a negative association between burnout and academic success (e.g., Dahlin, Joneborg, & Runeson, 2007; Schaufeli, Martinez, et al., 2002) in college students, but this relationship was not always found across different samples. For instance, in a cross-national study by Schaufeli, Martinez, et al. (2002) and Schaufeli, Salanova, et al. (2002) conducted with university students from Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands, exhaustion and cynicism were negatively correlated with academic success (measured as passing exams), but only in the Spanish sample and the relationship was weak. Findings regarding the relationship between school related burnout and academic achievement in adolescents are also inconsistent, with some studies revealing an association between high levels of burnout and low school achievement (e.g., Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009), while in others no relationship has been observed (e.g., Wang, Chow, Hofkens, & Salmela-Aro, 2015). A relationship between burnout and well-being has also frequently been reported for college students (Choi, 2013; Dahlin & Runeson, 2007). Research with secondary school pupils has related burnout mainly with ill-being manifestations, such as depressive symptoms (e.g., Salmela-Aro, Savolainen, & Holopainen, 2009).

Work engagement was initially assumed to be the positive antipode of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), however more recent theorization and research have come to reveal that rather than being two opposite poles, burnout and engagement are independent, yet negatively correlated phenomena (e.g., Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Engagement is a positive and persistent cognitive-affective state, that encompasses vigour (a state of mental vitality and resilience, a will to invest efforts and persist through adverse situations), dedication (feelings of pride towards one's assignment, and finding it meaningful), and absorption (total immersion in and concentration on the task and a subjective perception of time flying) (Schaufeli, Salanova, et al., 2002). Nevertheless, some studies have given priority to simply measuring the vigour and dedication dimensions of engagement, which, on a par with burnout dimensions exhaustion and cynicism, are considered the core dimensions of engagement (e.g., Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010).

Similarly to burnout, the interest in the study of engagement has been extended from work settings to the academic domain and several studies have demonstrated that the engagement dimensions were negatively correlated with the burnout dimensions (Schaufeli, Martinez, et al., 2002; Schaufeli, Salanova, et al., 2002). This approach to pupils' engagement is rooted and more prevalent in Europe, whereas in North America a different approach that conceptualizes school engagement as encompassing a behavioural, cognitive and affective dimension is more frequent and has a longer tradition (for a review see Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). As these two different approaches to engagement coexist, research findings are sometimes difficult to apprehend.

Studies using the European framework have found significant relationships among university students' engagement, academic success (e.g., Schaufeli, Martinez, et al., 2002) and well-being (Choi, 2013). In the cross-national study by Schaufeli, Martinez, et al. (2002) and Schaufeli, Salanova, et al. (2002), university students' dedication was only correlated with academic achievement in the Spanish sample, but the relationship was weak; vigour was the only engagement dimension that was correlated with academic achievement across all three countries. Choi (2013) found that dedication was a predictor of undergraduate students' well-being, but vigour was not.

Studies with adolescent pupils have also found an association among high levels of school engagement, higher academic performance and levels of well-being (Chase, Hilliard, Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011; Li & Lerner, 2011; Salmela-Aro & Upadaya, 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2002). Longitudinal studies have also shown that engaged students in secondary school were more likely to obtain better academic outcomes in the long term, such as finishing university degrees (Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). However, most of these studies have used the North American approach towards engagement.

The relationship among school burnout, engagement, academic achievement and well-being can be understood within the frameworks of the person-environment fit and the demands-resource models. According to the person-environment fit theory, "an individual's behaviour is jointly determined by characteristics of the person and properties of the immediate environment" (Eccles & Midgley, 1989, p. 174). As a consequence, a mismatch between the students' developmental needs and the school environment can lead to a decrease in motivation, and to poor adjustment and mental health outcomes (Symonds, Dietrich, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2016). The basic premise of the demands-resources model is that the environment can not only provide resources, but also impose demands on students: demands involve effort and usually have physical and/or psychological costs, whereas the resources can help to diminish the stress induced by this effort and aid the individuals in fulfilling their personal needs and boost their positive adjustment (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001;

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