



Gendered pathways in school burnout among adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Adolescence
School burnout
Exhaustion
Cynicism
Inadequacy trajectories
Longitudinal
Educational transition
Gender
Academic track
Vocational track

The aim of this study is to examine differences in student burnout by gender, time status with two time points before and after an educational transition, and educational track (academic vs. vocational). The definition of burnout is based on three components: exhaustion due to school demands, a disengaged and cynical attitude toward school, and feelings of inadequacy as a student (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009). A total of 770 Finnish adolescents (M age = 16) were examined at the beginning of their last year in comprehensive school, and three times annually during their secondary education both on academic and vocational tracks. Among boys on the academic track, overall school burnout and its three components, exhaustion, cynicism and inadequacy, increased, whereas among boys on the vocational track, no changes in school burnout emerged. Among girls on the academic track, overall school burnout and inadequacy increased, whereas among girls on the vocational track, cynicism decreased. Finally, school burnout was highest among girls on the academic track, but increased most among boys on the academic track.

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Adolescents gendered pathways of multidimensional school burnout during academic and vocational tracks

Recent surveys show that there have been dramatic increases in school-related stress and stress-related health problems among adolescents in the Nordic countries (OECD, 2009; Schrami, Peski, Grossi & Simonsson-Sarnecki, 2011); over the last decade the number of 16-year-olds reporting stress has been rising steadily. These symptoms are especially prevalent among girls (Basow & Rubin, 1999; Hagquist, 2009). This alarming trend should be taken seriously; it has recently been suggested that educational transitions and educational tracks may play a destabilizing role in school stress and burnout (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, & Nurmi, 2008; Tram & Cole, 2006). In the present four-wave longitudinal study we examined whether certain adolescents have difficulty and experience feelings of stress in navigating school transitions and educational tracks. We analyze differences in gender and educational tracks in school burnout, defined as exhaustion owing to school demands, a disengaged and cynical attitude toward school, and feelings of inadequacy as a student (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, et al., 2009; Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzales-Roma, & Bakker, 2002; see also Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

A recent survey in Sweden revealed that the perceived stress-related demands of adolescents were most often connected to school (ULF, 2009). Academic school-related burnout can be seen as a consequence of deteriorating energy resources and increasing school demands. Although burnout was originally considered a work-related disorder (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), it is also relevant in the context of school (see also Finn, 1989; Modin, Österberg, Toivanen, & Sandell, 2011; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). School is a place where students work: they attend classes and carry out assignments in order to pass examinations and obtain a degree. According to the demands-resources model (Schaufeli & Bakker,

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2004), the investment of a great deal of energy and performance without any return depletes one's personal energy store. If the imbalance between spending and regaining energy persists over a long period, burnout may occur. In accordance with the demands-resources model (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), two processes play a role in burnout: an effort-driven energetic process of overtaxing and wearing out in which the demands of studying exhaust a student's energy and the motivational process in which there is a lack of resources for dealing effectively those study demands.

In many European educational systems, the transition from comprehensive school to either an academic or a vocational track is the key educational change during adolescence, although the actual age at transition varies considerably (Masten et al., 1999; Schulenberg, Maggs, & O'Malley, 2003; Shanahan, 2000). Moreover, as adolescents approach the end of upper-secondary school, they come under increasing pressure to succeed academically as they face another transition to tertiary education (Lefkowitz, 2005). There is substantial evidence of a decline in academic motivation, attachment to school, and academic achievement during school transition in early adolescence (e.g., Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Most of these studies, however, were conducted in the U.S. Less is known about what happens in middle and late adolescence during upper-secondary school (the academic track) or vocational school (the vocational track), which are the typical patterns in the Nordic countries. The track taken determines the quality and the kind of learning opportunities open to the student (Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992) as well as the peer exposure and thus, to a certain extent, the nature of the social relationships formed at school (Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber, 1995). On the academic track the demands at school increase, and adolescents become more aware of individual differences in their abilities and achievements (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roesner, & Davis-Kean, 2006). In line with demands-resources (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), the academic track might create a misfit that provides less caring and supportive teacher–student relationships and increasing social comparisons and competition compared to the vocational track. This might lead to an increase in school burnout, while the less demanding vocational track might lead to decrease in school burnout. Adolescents choosing the academic track might experience the classroom as more competitive, feel an increased emphasis on grades, and perceive higher teacher expectations. This could lead to feelings of exhaustion and inadequacy. The vocational track offers fewer demands and a safer, more supportive environment and thereby supports feelings of competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). It can thus lead to a better fit and less cynical attitudes toward school.

Besides the educational track, gender might play a role in determining the different trajectories of school burnout during adolescence (Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Previous research has identified gender differences in school adjustment with 60 percent of girls in high school reporting the feeling of stress as a result of the demands they put upon themselves, whereas the corresponding figure for boys was 38 percent (ULF, 2009; see also Jose & Ratcliffe, 2004; Matud, 2004). Girls and boys may experience school stressors differently: girls have been found to experience more internalized symptoms (e.g., Hoffmann, Powlisha, & White, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994; Pomerantz, Altermatt, & Saxon, 2002), such as depression (Moksnes, Moljord, Espnes, & Byrne, 2010), exhaustion, and inadequacy (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008), whereas boys typically show more problem behaviors and externalized symptoms (Masten et al., 1999), such as cynicism (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). There is some evidence to suggest that girls respond more negatively to competitive learning conditions, are more exposed to stressful events, and more vulnerable to the negative effects (Ge et al., 2001; Kessler & McLeod, 1984). As a consequence, girls may suffer more from school burnout. However, girls also tend to perform better at school than boys (e.g., Pomerantz et al., 2002), attribute greater importance to academic achievement (Murberg & Bru, 2004), and be more engaged at school (Martin, 2004). For boys, in turn, courses may be taught in a manner that they find either boring or irrelevant to their interests (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), which could lead to the development of a cynical attitude toward education on the academic track. The problem of disengagement is particularly acute among boys during the high school years (Wigfield et al., 2006). According to the dual impact model of gender and career (Abele, 2003), gendered societal expectations and gendered self-concept can direct these gendered paths in school burnout. Gender differences might also emerge if traditional gender role behaviors and values are emphasized (Eccles, 2011), and girls and boys might engage in different activities and value different subjects (Chow & Salmela-Aro, 2011). However, the research thus far has not focused on gendered changes in overall school burnout or on its three components, exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy, on the academic and vocational tracks in late adolescence.

Research aim and hypotheses

The aim of the study is to examine the differences in student burnout (overall, exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy) by gender, time (twice before and after the school transition), and educational track (academic vs. vocational).

- (H1) Track: School burnout, in particular inadequacy, increases on the academic track because of increasing academic demands.
- (H2) Track: School burnout, in particular cynicism, decreases on the vocational track because of decreasing academic demands, better demands-resources fit, and better stage-environment fit.
- (H3) Gender: Girls feel the effects of school burnout, in particular, inadequacy more than boys because girls internalize stress.
- (H4) Gender: Boys feel more cynicism (external symptoms) than girls.
- (H5) Track and gender: On the academic track, cynicism increase among boys and feelings of inadequacy increase among girls.

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