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Original article

## The effect of teachers' emotional intensity and social support on burnout syndrome. A comparison between Italy and Switzerland



### *L'effet de l'intensité des émotions des enseignants et du soutien social sur le syndrome du burnout. Une comparaison entre l'Italie et la Suisse*

C. Fiorilli<sup>a,\*</sup>, P. Gabola<sup>b</sup>, A. Pepe<sup>c</sup>, N. Meylan<sup>d</sup>, D. Curchod-Ruedi<sup>e</sup>, O. Albanese<sup>c</sup>, P.-A. Doudin<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Human Science, LUMSA University, piazza delle Vaschette, 101, 00193 Rome, Italy

<sup>b</sup> University of Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

<sup>c</sup> Milano-Bicocca University, Milan, Italy

<sup>d</sup> University of Lausanne and University of Teacher Education, Lausanne, Switzerland

<sup>e</sup> University of Teacher Education, Lausanne, Switzerland

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** – School-related events require ability on the part of teachers to control their emotional intensity and maintain negative emotions at a low level without compromising their general well-being. Doudin and Curchod (2008) found that satisfaction with received support acted as a buffer against burnout.

**Objectives.** – The current research focused on risk and protective factors for burnout syndrome, while also taking into account the role of two different school systems. We hypothesized that emotional intensity and dissatisfaction with social support would affect teachers' levels of burnout. On this basis, we investigated a range of predictive models for all measures of burnout in both Italian and Swiss teachers.

**Method.** – Participants were 275 primary school teachers (Italian  $n = 140$ ; Swiss  $n = 135$ ). Teacher burnout, emotional intensity and dissatisfaction with support received were respectively assessed by means of: the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996), the Emotional Competence Questionnaire (Doudin & Curchod-Ruedi, 2010) and the Social Support Questionnaire (Doudin, Curchod-Ruedi, & Moreau, 2011).

**Results.** – In line with our hypotheses, in both Italian and Swiss samples, emotional intensity played a significant predictive role in relation to emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, whereas dissatisfaction with support received affected all measures of teacher burnout.

**Conclusions.** – Our results provide fresh evidence for the protective role of social support in a profession that is particularly at risk of burnout. More specifically, burnout was predicted by the same pattern of variables in Italian and Swiss teachers, with significant differences emerging between the two groups in relation to their satisfaction with support received.

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#### R É S U M É

**Introduction.** – Les événements liés à l'école nécessitent des capacités de la part des enseignants à gérer leur intensité émotionnelle et à maintenir leurs émotions négatives à un niveau bas sans compromettre leur bien-être général. Doudin et Curchod (2008) ont montré que la satisfaction du soutien reçu va agir comme facteur de protection de l'épuisement professionnel (*burnout*).

**Objectifs.** – Cette recherche s'est axée sur les risques et les facteurs de protection du syndrome d'épuisement professionnel (*burnout*) dans deux systèmes scolaires différents. Nous avons émis

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [fiorilli@lumsa.it](mailto:fiorilli@lumsa.it) (C. Fiorilli), [piera.gabola@unine.ch](mailto:piera.gabola@unine.ch) (P. Gabola), [alessandro.pepe1@unimib.it](mailto:alessandro.pepe1@unimib.it) (A. Pepe), [nicolas.meylan@unil.ch](mailto:nicolas.meylan@unil.ch) (N. Meylan), [denise.curchod@hepl.ch](mailto:denise.curchod@hepl.ch) (D. Curchod-Ruedi), [ottavia.albanese@unimib.it](mailto:ottavia.albanese@unimib.it) (O. Albanese), [pierre-andre.doudin@unil.ch](mailto:pierre-andre.doudin@unil.ch) (P.-A. Doudin).

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l'hypothèse que l'intensité émotionnelle et l'insatisfaction du soutien social auraient une incidence sur les niveaux d'épuisement professionnel (*burnout*) des enseignants. En outre, nous avons étudié les modèles prédictifs de manière exploratoire pour toutes les mesures d'épuisement, que ce soit chez les enseignants italiens ou suisses.

*Méthode.* – L'échantillon se composait de 275 enseignants d'école primaire (Italiens  $n = 140$ ; Suisses  $n = 135$ ). L'épuisement professionnel (*burnout*) des enseignants, l'intensité émotionnelle et l'insatisfaction du soutien reçu ont été évalués à travers divers moyens, respectivement : le Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996), le questionnaire sur la compétence émotionnelle (Doudin & Curchod-Ruedi, 2010) et le questionnaire sur le soutien social (Doudin, Curchod-Ruedi, & Moreau, 2011).

*Résultats.* – Conformément à nos hypothèses, dans les deux échantillons italiens et suisses, l'intensité émotionnelle a joué un rôle prédictif significatif par rapport à l'épuisement émotionnel et à l'accomplissement personnel, alors que l'insatisfaction du soutien reçu a affecté toutes les mesures de l'épuisement des enseignants.

*Conclusions.* – Nos résultats renforcent le rôle protecteur du soutien social dans une profession particulièrement à risque d'épuisement. L'épuisement professionnel des enseignants italiens et suisses est prédit par le même ensemble de variables avec des différences significatives quant à l'impact du soutien reçu sur leur satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays the teaching profession is considered a helping profession with a high risk of burnout due to continuous emotional demands (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2008) as well as multiple stress factors such as expanding workload and long hours, physical fatigue, compassion fatigue, psychic exhaustion, feeling detached and ineffective, and cognitive weariness (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Melamed, Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006). More specifically, burnout syndrome is viewed as a consequence of perpetual work-related stress (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). As the term itself implies, "burnout" means damage due to the exhaustion of physical and emotional resources. Early studies of burnout adopted a qualitative approach and were focused on the clinical boundary and social psychological dimensions (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976). The most commonly used measure of burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory ([MBI] Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). The MBI is based on a model of burnout as a multidimensional construct. In fact, according to Maslach and Leiter (1997), burnout syndrome is composed of three emotional and interpersonal key factors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of professional fulfilment. These three dimensions are distinct but related. Emotional exhaustion, viewed as the core dimension of burnout, is characterized by the inability to accept and manage new emotional situations; depersonalization, equated with the interpersonal dimension of burnout, involves distancing oneself from others within relationships; and finally lack of professional fulfilment, reflecting the self-evaluative dimension of burnout, leads to feelings of inefficacy regarding one's work and a general lack of confidence in one's own abilities.

Studies in the educational field have found that the principal risk factors of burnout for teachers are related to contextual variables (Cano-García, Padilla-Muñoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005).

The contextual variables that have received the most attention to date include having to cope with student learning difficulties and aggressive behaviours (Pepe & Addimando, 2013), ambiguity and conflict amongst colleagues, problematic relationships with parents (Pepe & Addimando, 2014), time pressures and large classes (Chan, 2003; Genoud, Brodard, & Reicherts, 2009). No less important are the social factors that come to bear on teachers such as continual legislative changes, low remuneration, lack of support from colleagues and principals, inequity, inadequacy of training programs, poor social recognition, and lack of appreciation (Borrelli et al., 2014; Drago, 2006; Friedman, 2000; Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999).

Although most of the studies in this area have been conducted within specific cultures (e.g., Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2002; Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008; Hastings & Bham, 2003; Laugaa, Rasle, & Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2008), it is widely agreed that teacher burnout is a culture-free syndrome (Schaufeli et al., 2008). More specifically, teacher well-being appears to be influenced by personal psychological factors and by the school-system context more so than by membership of a cultural group.

The aim of the present study was to investigate teachers' psychological dimensions by comparing Italian and Swiss teachers, viewed as displaying both similarities and differences. With regard to commonalities, Italian and Swiss cultures display relatively similar socio-cultural values – see the criteria proposed by Hofstede (2001), particularly regarding the dimensions of individualism, masculinity and long-term orientation. On the other hand, there are several key divergences attributable to the Italian and Swiss school systems. Italian teachers are employed by the state, enjoying superior employment rights compared to private sector workers. Their annual base salary is lower than in other European countries and there are no career advancement paths open to them (OECD, 2013). In order to become a teacher, a high level of education and specific training is required, while additional training over the course of a professional career in teaching is voluntary. As regards the organization of the educational system, Italian classes number an average of twenty-five students with the inclusion in each of no more than two students with disabilities. Schools provide teachers who are specialized in the field of disability (Special Education Teachers) to support curricular class teachers during teaching activities. In a recent survey with a large sample of Italian teachers ( $n = 508$ ), 19.7% reported being affected by burnout. Nevertheless, this rate was lower than in a number of other European countries in which 25% to 35% of teachers were affected by burnout (Quattrin et al., 2011).

With regard to Switzerland, unlike Italy, there is no one single, unified, school system but rather 26 different systems (one per canton). In the Francophone school systems explored in the present research, teachers are state-employed but their salaries are higher than in Italy (OECD, 2013). Moreover, average class size is less than twenty pupils with a higher rate of exclusion than in other European school systems. Within this system, a high proportion of pupils with special needs are excluded from regular classes and assigned to special classes or specialized institutions.

In conclusion, although a more inclusive policy is currently being developed in Switzerland, when the current research was conducted the major difference between the two school systems in

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