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Original article

Occupational stress, job satisfaction and physical health in teachers



Le stress au travail, la satisfaction au travail et la santé physique chez les enseignants

S. De Simone*, G. Cicotto, J. Lampis

Department of Pedagogy, Psychology, Philosophy, University of Cagliari, Via Is Mirrionis, 1, 09123 Cagliari, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – Changes within the teaching profession have been blamed for the high levels of stress reported by teachers. In recent decades, Italian schools have been characterised by continuous change, as a result of profound transitions that have affected political, social and economic development.

Objective. – This paper investigated the relationship between occupational stress, job satisfaction and physical health in Italian teachers. Specifically, our aim is to study the role of job satisfaction as a possible mediation role between work stressors and its effects on teachers' physical health (physical symptoms). In addition, we were interested in studying the direct effects of work stressors on the hypothetical outcomes (physical symptoms).

Method. – Data were collected via a questionnaire from a sample of 565 teachers working in different upper secondary schools in Italy. The booklet filled by the teachers consisted of 32 items that measure *perceived occupational difficulties, job satisfaction and physical symptoms*.

Results. – The results showed that workload, perception of work environment, teachers' perceptions of senior management and attitude towards change are specific perceived occupational difficulties of the Italian teachers involved in our research. In particular, workload and attitude towards change have significant direct effects on physical symptoms, and indirect effects on physical symptoms through job satisfaction. Also, job satisfaction decreases physical symptoms.

Conclusion. – The results suggest important implications for stress prevention in teachers. In fact, the level of stress and its consequences can be reduced and prevented through an accurate identification of its sources, with a positive effect on individual and organisational health.

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R É S U M É

Mots clés :

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Introduction. – Les changements au sein de la profession enseignante ont été critiqués en raison des niveaux élevés de stress signalés par les enseignants. Au cours des dernières décennies, les écoles italiennes ont été caractérisées par un changement continu, à la suite de transitions profondes qui ont affecté le développement politique, social et économique.

Objectifs. – Cet article a pour objectif d'étudier la relation entre le stress au travail, la satisfaction au travail et la santé physique chez les enseignants italiens. Plus précisément, notre objectif est d'étudier le rôle de la satisfaction au travail comme médiateur possible entre les facteurs de stress au travail et ses effets sur la santé physique des enseignants (symptômes physiques). En outre, nous nous sommes intéressés à l'étude des effets directs des facteurs de stress sur les résultats hypothétiques (symptômes physiques).

Méthode. – Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'un questionnaire auprès d'un échantillon de 565 enseignants travaillant dans différents lycées en Italie. Le livret rempli par les enseignants est composé de 32 éléments qui mesurent les facteurs de stress au travail, les difficultés d'emploi perçues, la satisfaction au travail et les symptômes physiques.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: desimone@unica.it, desimone.silvia@gmail.com (S. De Simone), dott.cicotto@gmail.com (G. Cicotto), jlampis@unica.it (J. Lampis).

Résultats. – Les résultats ont montré que la charge de travail, la perception de l'environnement de travail, les perceptions de la direction et l'attitude des enseignants envers le changement sont des facteurs de stress typiques de travail dans le contexte de l'école italienne. En particulier, la charge de travail et l'attitude envers les changements ont des effets directs significatifs sur les symptômes physiques, et des effets indirects sur les symptômes physiques par le biais de la satisfaction au travail. En outre, la satisfaction au travail diminue les symptômes physiques.

Conclusion. – Les résultats suggèrent des implications importantes pour la prévention du stress chez les enseignants. En fait, le niveau de stress et ses conséquences peuvent être réduits et empêchés par une identification précise de leurs sources avec un effet positif sur la santé individuelle et organisationnelle.

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1. Introduction

The experience of occupational stress in relation to different occupations has been subject to a large amount of research and interest in the topic shows no sign of waning. Several studies in the last 30 years have investigated occupational stress in teachers (Genoud, Brodard, & Reicherts, 2009; Greene, Abidin, & Kmetz, 1997; Johnson & Richards, 1983; Laugaa, Rascle, & Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2008; Ritvanen, Louhevaara, Helin, Väisänen, & Hänninen, 2006; Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1987; Yazhuan, Qing, & Yugu, 2010) and have identified teaching as a particularly stressful occupation (Chaplain, 2008; Guglielmi, Simbula, & Depolo, 2009; Johnson et al., 2005; McShane & Von Glinow, 2005; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Pithers, 1995; Travers & Cooper, 1993). Changes within the teaching profession have been blamed for the high levels of stress reported by teachers (Moriarty, Edmonds, Blatchford, & Martin, 2001; Santavirta, Solovieva, & Theorell, 2007).

Some studies (Johnson et al., 2005; Travers & Cooper, 1993) revealed that teachers, as compared with other highly stressful occupations, experienced lower job satisfaction and poorer mental health. The experience of occupational stress is compared across a diverse set of occupations, and three stress related variables (psychological well-being, physical health and job satisfaction) are examined. The results revealed that teachers were reported as being the most stressed in regard to physical and psychological well-being and as having the lowest levels of job satisfaction.

Although there is a vast body of literature on teachers' stress (e.g., Bradley, 2007; McCormick, 1997; McCormick & Solman, 1992), we are not aware of studies that have explored at the same time the relationship among work stressors, job satisfaction and physical symptoms in the Italian school context.

For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to investigate together work stressors, job satisfaction and physical symptoms in the Italian school context, in order to contribute to the scientific discussion on teachers' occupational stress through the presentation of an empirical study that may offer interesting applications.

The present paper describes the first results of an action research commissioned to the authors by a Territorial Education Office, which among other tasks, is responsible for the reconnaissance of the training needs of school workers and promoting learning actions for head teachers and teachers. The action research aimed at reducing occupational stress and strengthening psychosocial factors that may mediate the negative effects of stress on the health of teachers.

The research involved the head teachers and teachers working in 20 different upper secondary schools in Italy, according to the assumption that in assessing occupational stress it is important to take into account context-specific characteristics (Sveinsdóttir, Biering, & Ramel, 2005), that are certainly well known by those who work daily in that context.

In the first step, this project involved 20 head teachers in two focus groups conducted in order to create a tool for investigating

typical school context sources of stress, according to the vantage point of those who run the school organisation. These tools were also discussed with some interested teachers. The topics that emerged were perceived occupational difficulties (which include difficulties in communication and relationships with colleagues and the leader, workload, work environment, and attitude towards change), job satisfaction and work-related physical discomfort.

In the second step, the head teachers invited 1015 teachers to participate in this research who completed a questionnaire exploring the topics previously identified by the head teachers with the support of the researchers.

Specifically, in this paper, our aim is to study the role of job satisfaction as a possible mediation role between perceived occupational difficulties and their effects on teachers' physical health (physical symptoms). In addition, we were interested in studying the effects of perceived occupational difficulties on the hypothetical outcomes (physical symptoms). We have tested a model of relationships between variables that can describe some critical aspects of the Italian teachers at a time of difficult transition such as at present.

We have studied teachers' occupational stress through an approach that includes both negative (physical symptoms) and positive (job satisfaction) indicators of organisational well-being. The paper also considers studies that have shown how many teachers are satisfied with and enthusiastic about their work (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007; Rudow, 1999), and that they are engaged in their jobs (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). In fact, a healthy work environment can be reached not only through the absence of negative factors, but also by promoting positive characteristics.

The results suggest important implications for teachers' stress prevention. In fact, the level of stress and its consequences can be reduced and prevented through an accurate identification of its sources, with a positive effect on individual and organisational health (Israel, Baker, Goldenhar, & Heaney, 1996).

In the last part of the paper, we examine theoretical and practical evidence based considerations regarding the relations between work stressors, job satisfaction and health.

1.1. Occupational stress in teachers: work stressor, job satisfaction and health

Many studies over the past decade have investigated stressors in teaching (e.g. Brenner, Sorbom, & Wallius, 1985; Kyriacou, 2001; Shirom, Oliver, & Stein, 2009). A survey conducted by teacher trade unions (ETUCE, 2007) and reported by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2008) has identified workload, role overload, lack of support by management, the increased number of students and their serious lack of discipline as major sources of stress for teachers.

Recent researchers found that teachers experience an increasing number of work assignments and a more hectic workday,

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