

Burnout Syndrome at School: A Comparison Study with Lay and Consecrated Italian Teachers

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Abstract

A questionnaire was administered, composed of the Maslach Burnout Inventory as well as of questions regarding social-demographic information such as gender, age, and seniority. According to the literature, we expected to find a higher burnout level among lay than among consecrated teachers. Secondly, we expected to find lower burnout risk in lay teachers of private school than in public school teachers. Participants were 469 Italian teachers (97% female) divided in three groups: lay teachers from public school (N=153), lay (N=153), and consecrated teachers (N=153) from private Catholic school. Consecrated teachers of Catholic school showed a higher mean score in the depersonalization scale than both their lay colleagues from private school ($F=24.155, p<.001$), and lay teachers from public school ($F=4.7, p=.031$). In addition, teachers from public school showed a higher mean score in the depersonalization scale than the Catholic school teachers ($F=52.58, p<.001$). Consecrated teachers had a lower mean score also in the scale of personal accomplishment scale in comparison with their colleagues from private Catholic school ($F=11.56, p<.001$), while no difference emerged between consecrated and lay teachers from public school. Finally, lay teachers from Catholic school presented a higher average score in the personal accomplishment scale than their colleague in public school ($F=10.138, p=.002$). Inconsistently with our hypothesis consecrated teachers appeared more exposed to burnout syndrome. Moreover, lay teachers of private Catholic schools have showed lower level of burnout than their lay colleagues.

1. Introduction

The best-known and mostly widely used theoretical model of job burnout is Maslach's, which explains this phenomenon as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach, 2003). Burnout is therefore defined as a syndrome composed of three important factors: emotional exhaustion, characterized by the inability to accept and manage new emotional situations; depersonalization, that involves distancing oneself from others; and finally the lack of professional fulfilment, that leads to feelings of uselessness regarding one's work and a general lack of confidence in one's own abilities (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). Symptoms of burnout include: the intention to leave an organization, lower performance, and reduced psychological and physical well-being.

The burnout syndrome was approached firstly and mainly among those working in human services and health care, who are greatly affected by strong emotional and interpersonal stressors, as they are constantly taking care of people in need (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter, 2001). In the last years a flow of research on teachers' burnout followed, leading Maslach and colleagues to set up a version of the MBI specifically devoted to educational occupations (Kyriacou, 2001; Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, 1996). The main stressors on teachers include: students' learning difficulties and/or aggressive behaviour, ambiguity and conflict amongst colleagues, problematic relationships with students' parents, time constraints, and large classes (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011). There are also social factors that determine teachers' burnout (e.g. continual legislative changes, poor remuneration, and low social recognition) (Drago, 2006). Factors such as these undermine collective teaching quality as well as the autonomy of individual teachers (Ballet, Kelchtermans and Loughran, 2006; Maslach and Leiter, 1999), thus impacting negatively on the faculty's well-being in the school context. In addition, research on teachers, like any other helping profession or service occupation, showed that personal traits and coping behaviour are not the only key factors in determining burnout (Borrelli et al., 2014), but also the specific context in which people work (such as the organizational and management environment) plays a more pivotal role: "This focus has highlighted the importance of the values implicit in organizational processes and structures, and how these values shape the emotional and cognitive relationship that people develop with their work (...). The organizational context is also

shaped by larger social, cultural, and economic forces" (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter, 2001, p. 409).

Surprisingly, given the relevance of the organizational system and its values in shaping burnout, only a limited number of researches have compared private and public school teachers' burnout (see e.g. Akin *et al.*, 2014; Ferreira and Martinez, 2012; Tsigilis, Zachopoulou, and Grammatikopoulos, 2006).

Moreover, to the authors' knowledge, no previous research was done comparing burnout between lay and consecrated teachers of Catholic schools on the one hand, and lay state/public schools on the other.

Research developed in this field showed that public schools, in comparison with private or Catholic schools, have higher internal complexity and more bureaucracy; in addition, the educational activities are loosely connected with the school's authority system (Scott and Meyer, 1994). As Lee and colleagues have noted, daily classroom operations in public schools tend to be separated from long-term decisions and planning; in addition, teachers are more distanced from one another which, in turn, generates difficulties in building a shared understanding about their school's goals and mission (Lee, Dedrick, and Smith, 1991). This tends to make public schools less responsive to the families' and pupils' needs (Hannaway, 1991).

On the other hand, teachers of Catholic schools on average resulted as being less stressed: either because Catholic schools showed lower levels of absenteeism and burnout, or because the number of seriously stressed or burned-out teachers was lower in Catholic schools (Ferreira and Martinez 2012; Solman and Feld, 1989). In Lacey's (2000) study, teachers of Catholic schools perceived parents to be more supportive of teacher themselves and pupils were found to be more disciplined. In fact, a number of authors remark that Catholic schools teachers tend to have higher job satisfaction and better retention rates than other schools (see Hunt, Joseph, and Nuzzi, 2001). Cherniss and Kranz (1983) observed that burnout was virtually absent in monasteries, Montessori schools, and religious care centres where people consider their work as a 'calling' rather than solely a job. They argued that such "ideological communities" provide a collective identity that prevents burnout from occurring because of social commitment, a sense of communion, contact with the collective whole, and shared strong values.

On the other hand, recent studies have showed that teachers' occupational stress is high both in state and private schools, as well as in Catholic institutions, regardless of the grade taught (Boyer-Colon, 2011). Specifically, major sources of occupational stress among Catholic schools are: lack of support from the school's administration, supervision, job variety, the relationship between the staff and the principal, and the relationship between staff and students (De Nobile and McCormick, 2010). Moreover, differences between public and Catholic schoolteachers emerged mainly with regards to salary satisfaction, since teachers in Catholic schools are often paid less than their colleagues working in state schools (Cook, 2002). This is possibly the most important reason why teachers of Catholic schools decide to move to other schools or to abandon teaching.

The apparent inconsistency of the findings requires more investigations specifically on whether teachers' burnout may be related to specific organizational systems (e.g. State school versus Catholic school) (Benevene and Callea, 2014), along with their culture and values, as well as to individual characteristics of the teachers (lay teachers versus consecrated teachers). Comparing three groups (lay teachers in public and Catholic schools, and consecrated teachers in Catholic schools) we expected to deepen the knowledge about the organizational and environmental role played in determining burnout as well as the differences given by belonging to different groups of teachers.

1.1 Aim and Hypothesis

The core of the current study was to analyse the difference in terms of burnout between lay and consecrated teachers in public and private school systems. According to the literature review we expected to find:

H.1 Higher means on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization sub-scales of Maslach Burnout Inventory as well as lower means on the personal accomplishment sub-scale among public school teachers compared to Catholic schoolteachers (see Cherniss and Kranz, 1983);

H.2 Lower means on negative burnout sub-scales, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, as well as higher means on positive burnout sub-scales, namely personal accomplishment, among Consecrated teachers compared to lay schoolteachers, both from public and Catholic schools (see Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach, 2008).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants included 469 Italian teachers (97% female) divided in three groups: lay teachers from public schools

(N=153); lay (N=153) and consecrated teachers (N=153) from private Catholic schools. Each group was homogeneous for age ranging from 35 to 52 years ($M=43.26$; $SD=5.27$) ($F_{(2,456)}=.841$; $p=.432$), and for years of experience ranging from 10 to 25 years ($M=24.67$; $SD=16.16$) ($F_{(2,456)}=1.07$; $p=.343$). Full-time teachers accounted for 98% of the sample, and all of the participants taught at elementary schools with class sizes of 26 students, on average. Subjects were recruited at six different schools in which the head teachers had authorized the researchers to collect data. Five researchers personally distributed the questionnaires to the teachers on an individual basis, specifying that they were to be completed independently and agreeing on a date by which the completed questionnaires were to be returned. The research was conducted following APA's (2010) ethical guidelines and code of conduct.

2.2 Instruments

The Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES; Maslach and Jackson, 1986; Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter, 1996; Italian standardized version by Sirigatti and Stefanile, 1992) was administered in order to assess teachers' degree of professional burnout. The questionnaire is composed of 22 items covering three different dimensions of job burnout: emotional exhaustion (9 items), depersonalization (5 items), and personal accomplishment (8 items). Responses are given on a 7-point scale, with participants required to evaluate each item in terms of the frequency with which they experience the feelings described, ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day). The answers were scored following Maslach and Jackson's (1986) instructions so as to obtain a measure for each of the three dimensions of teacher burnout. In the current study Cronbach's alphas for the three sub-scales emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment were: 0.778, 0.695 and 0.757, respectively. The MBI-ES is very popular in studies examining occupational burnout (nearly 90% of all research on the topic has used the MBI (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998)) and its factor structure has been proven to be composed of three stable and moderately correlated factors (Worley, Vassar, Wheeler, and Barnes, 2008). Questionnaires were administered individually during school time based on teachers' voluntary participation but only after the administration's permission. The average response time was about 10 minutes.

3. Data Analysis

Firstly, we checked for any missing values and for normality on all variables, as well as examining data in relation to relevant statistical assumptions. We treated emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment scores as dependent variables, while the teachers' position as the independent factors (i.e. whether they were lay or consecrated, and whether they belonged to a public or Catholic school). To explore differences among the three teacher groups on MBI sub-scales, we performed the ANOVA test and two-way MANOVA test followed-up with a *post hoc* analysis of group means using the Bonferroni test in order to guard against inflation of Type I error rates as a result of multiple comparisons.

4. Results

No missing data points were found and all variables displayed evidence of normality in terms of skewness and kurtosis estimates. Table 1 presents comparative descriptive statistics according to Catholic and public schoolteacher groups for all dependent variables.

Table 1. Means (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) according to Catholic and Public schoolteacher groups for all dependent variables

	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Catholic Schoolteachers	10.9 (8.21)	1.86 (2.96)	40.09 (7.17)
Public Schoolteachers	11.8 (8.41)	3.53 (3.62)	39 (7.09)

Firstly, in order to answer the research question about expected higher burnout scores among teachers from Public School than those from Catholic schools (lay and consecrated), we performed a three one-way analysis of variance, ANOVA test. The independent variables were Catholic versus public schoolteachers, while the dependent variables were teachers' scores on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Results showed a significant effect of the school type variable only on the depersonalization sub-scale of MBI. Specifically, teachers from

public schools obtained a significantly higher score ($M=3.53$; $SD=3.62$) than Catholic schoolteachers ($M=1.86$; $SD=2.96$) ($F_{(1,458)}=27.95$, $p<.001$).

Secondly, we performed tests for equality of covariance matrices on the analysed variables, and consistent non-significant estimates demonstrated that this assumption was met in all cases. Subsequently, we entered emotion exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment scores as dependent variables in a MANOVA analysis. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics according to the types of schoolteacher for all of the dependent variables.

Table 2. Means (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) of three teacher-groups on MBI's sub-scales

	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Lay – Catholic School	10.46 (8.29)	1.06 (2.16)	41.46 (6.38)
Consecrated – Catholic School	11.34 (8.13)	2.66 (3.4)	38.72 (7.66)
Lay – Public School	11.8 (8.42)	3.53 (3.62)	39 (7.09)

Results showed a significant multivariate effect for teacher groups ($F_{(2,456)}=9.328$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2_p=.058$, $\lambda=.88$). Specifically, teacher groups significantly differ on the depersonalization sub-scale with a good effect size ($F_{(2,456)}=24.586$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2_p=.097$), as well as on personal accomplishment sub-scale with a moderate effect size ($F_{(2,456)}=6.959$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2_p=.03$). Conversely, no significant difference was found between teacher groups on the emotional exhaustion sub-scale of MBI. More specifically, lay teachers from public schools showed higher mean scores on the depersonalization sub-scale than the others teacher groups, and lay teachers from Catholic schools showed lower depersonalization symptoms than their colleagues. With regards to the personal accomplishment sub-scale a significant difference emerged among all teacher-groups with the highest score registered by lay teachers at Catholic schools. By considering the comparison between consecrated and lay teachers, from respectively Catholic and public schools, no significant difference was found.

5. Discussion

Our findings partially confirmed our first hypothesis. As expected from the literature (Cherniss and Kranz, 1983), public schoolteachers showed higher means on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization sub-scales of MBI, as well as, a lower mean score on personal accomplishment scale. Nevertheless, by means of statistical analysis we concluded that the difference between the two teacher groups, public versus Catholic schools, was significant only for the depersonalization measure. The second hypothesis, according to which Consecrated teachers show lower burnout than lay schoolteachers, both from public and Catholic schools, was also only partially confirmed. Catholic school teachers showed significantly lower means of burnout in comparison with their public school lay colleagues, and surprisingly, contrary previous literature findings (Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach, 2008), also performed worse than their lay colleagues working in Catholic schools, particularly in the scale of depersonalization.

This last result might be interpreted in the light of the findings of Huston (1989), who found that religion impacts significantly on the depersonalization scale of burnout.

Consecrated teachers, in fact, more than their lay colleagues, feel more the responsibility of delivering the values and the principles of the Catholic faith; in addition, those who commonly work as teachers in Catholic schools usually belong to specific teaching orders, who run the school where they work. This means that teaching is a decisive part of their vocation, as well as of their identity as consecrated people (O'Donoghue and Potts, 2004).

It has to be considered also that consecrated teachers of Catholic schools hold their teaching position indefinitely, unlikely their lay colleagues. They know that they are not free to terminate or to take a leave from their work at their discretion. They are not free to choose the school or the class; yet, they might be moved to another school or even another city if required. This factor might be relevant, since personal control plays a significant role in causing burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2008).

In addition, nuns, priests, and brothers who represented the vast majority of the teaching staff of the Catholic schools worldwide, are now a small minority. This process started in the 60s and it is still ongoing, due to the decreasing number young people entering novitiates and the increasing number of those who choose to leave the religious life. Nowadays lay teachers in Catholic schools represent over 80% of faculties in most countries (see e.g. Caravan, 1999; Ciatelli, Malizia, and Pieroni, 2013; Przygocki, 2004). It can be assumed therefore that consecrated teachers feel a heavier individual responsibility about conveying the Catholic values and monitoring the school environment.

As Maslach noted very early, teachers more at risk of burnout are rightly those most committed to their job

(Maslach, 1999), especially when this has become an essential element of their identity. More in general, from different researches, it appears that consecrated people are at risk of psychological distress, because of the very demanding work required from servicing others and due to their overwhelming vocational responsibilities, even though these findings are not always consistent with previous researches (see e.g. Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge, 2004; Turton, 2010; Virginia, 1998). It has to be underlined, however, that stress and burnout among Catholic consecrated people was studied almost exclusively in males, and mainly with secular or parish clergy; research on nuns is rare and developed mainly among those working as nurses.

Thus, if we compare burnout of Catholic consecrated teachers with lay teachers we find the prior to have a higher level of burnout, but this might be correlated not just to their teaching activities, but also to the requirements of a more comprehensive pastoral service.

In addition, it has to be noted that many researches have demonstrated that gender is often related to burnout: females tend to be more prone to burnout than males, and Catholic teachers are mostly women.

Limits of our research are to be found in the lack of a statistically representative sample of respondents, which hinders the generalizability of the results, even though these finding should be further explored. In fact, consecrated teachers do not appear more protected from burnout risk than their lay colleagues as suggested by previous studies (see e.g. De Nobile, McCormick, and Hoekman, 2013; Solman and Feld, 1989). This means anyway that there is a need to be addressed, since burnout can be prevented and reduced (Gold and Roth, 2013).

According to the latest available data, in the 2008/2009 school year, consecrated teachers working in Italian Catholic schools were about 16,5% of the whole teaching staff. Even if this percentage is slowly diminishing, it can be estimated that in the 2010/2011 school year there were about 4,000 consecrated teachers, out of the whole 31,581 teaching staff (Cicatelli, Malizia, and Pieroni, 2013).

It would be interesting to replicate the same research in other countries, with a larger and more representative sample, to see if consecrated teachers show the same trend as well as developing the understanding of the organizational roots of burnout among Catholic schoolteachers (Dorman, 2003). Also, perhaps, using qualitative methodology, such as in depth interviews and focus group discussions, could be used to deepen the understanding of our findings.

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