

Levels of Burnout and Professional Self in a Group of Junior High School Teachers: a Contribution of Research in Sicilian Context

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Abstract - The analysis of Professional Self and Students representations in relation to levels of burnout in a group of 90 Sicilian teachers from junior high schools is the aim of this research. Materials: Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) to measure the levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, and two Semantic Differentials (De Caroli & Sagone, 2008) to valued the representation of Professional Self and Students. Results: Data showed that over half of teachers has low levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment; they have expressed a more positive representation of Professional Self than their Students. From the comparison between the levels of burnout and the representations of Professional Self and their Students, the results indicated that teachers who have low levels of emotional exhaustion have valued their Students more positively than the ones who have high and medium levels; in addition, teachers with low levels of reduced personal accomplishment have valued Professional Self more positively than the ones with high levels. Future research could deepen the role of positive representations of Professional Self and Students as a prevention factors of burnout and enhancement of quality in the relationships between teachers and students.

Keywords: Professional Self, Students, Burnout levels, Teachers, Sicilian context

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the teaching profession has been considered an activity of high relational involvement with students, colleagues, parents, and school managers, and as in all helping and caring professions, in which the “relationship” lies at the heart of the exchange between social workers and users, it is characterized, especially in cases of dysfunctional management of the working context, by high and even more frequent risk of psycho-physical stress, job dissatisfaction (Santinello, 1990; Pedditzi, 2005), low self-efficacy, and emotional exhaustion until the occurrence of burnout syndrome (Byrne, 1991; Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Farber, 2000; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

This syndrome has been described as “a form of interpersonal stress generating the separation by users” (Maslach, 1976), “a state of exhaustion or frustration produced by devotion to a cause, a way of life or a relationship that failed to produce the expected reward” (Freudenberger, 1974), and “a reaction to a state of tension and dissatisfaction which begins to develop when individual believes that the stress he/she is experiencing can not be reduced with an active solution of problems” (Cherniss, 1980).

Burnout syndrome is characterized by the coexistence of three basic elements, recognized internationally as specific factors to helping professions:

- 1) the “emotional exhaustion” refers to the feeling of being emotionally dried up and depleted of one’s emotional resources, unable to recover the energy subject needs, and to the feeling of exceeding personal limits (Leiter, 1992; Lee & Ashforth, 1993); the researches carried out by Maslach and Jackson (1981) indicated that, especially in this dimension, there are significant differences between men and women, since “women tend to experience more emotional exhaustion and to experience it more intensely than men” (Maslach, 2003, p.96); this evidence has been explained with the idea that “women are expected to be more oriented toward people than are men – they are supposed to be nurturing, sociable, and sensitive to people’s feelings. Women are also supposed to be very emotional people themselves, while men are supposed to be hard, tough, and unemotional” (2003, pp.96-97), according to the gender stereotypes;
- 2) the “depersonalization” refers to a sense of inadequacy to the job, the assumption of attitudes of detachment, cynicism, and hostility towards the situations and other individuals (co-workers and users of one’s services or care), involved in the helping relationships; the subject attempts to avoid the contact with others, limiting the quality and quantity of personal intervention;
- 3) the “reduced personal accomplishment” refers to the low self-efficacy (Leiter, 1992; Bandura, 1996) and to distorted attribution of personal failure to external agents in the professional field, with a subsequent decline in self-esteem (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) and in perception of existential collapse (Nindl, 2001; Tomic, Evers, & Brouwers, 2004).

In the profession of curricular and learning support teachers the reasons that seem to affect this syndrome chronically have been related to the inability to control students (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000) because of the overcrowding of classrooms; the instrumental *vs* vocational choice of teaching profession (Acanfora, 2002); the conflict with colleagues; the temporary teaching

coming from the continuous educational reforms (in the increasing trend in Italy); the loss of control at the organizational level (Cooper, 1988; Baiocco *et al.*, 2003) and the reduced recognition of the social prestige of teaching profession (Favretto & Rappagliosi, 1990); and, in the case of learning support teachers to disabled students (Bailey & Plessis, 1998; Prochnow, Kearney, & Carroll-Lind, 2000), the reduced self-efficacy and competence on the job (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000), the lack of qualification in the management of these students (Male & May, 1997), and, sometimes, the lack of support from specialized workers in disability field (Williams & Gersch, 2004).

As recently noted in Brouwers and Tomic' study (2000), who investigated the relationship between perceived self-efficacy in classroom management and the three dimensions of burnout, the more teachers considered themselves less competent and efficient in classroom management, the higher were the levels of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment; vice versa, the more teachers judged themselves emotionally exhausted, the higher were the levels of perceived self-efficacy.

Significant differences in relation to the years of teaching have been found: in fact, as indicated in Miller and colleagues' study (1999), the younger teachers with fewer years of teaching assumed to be more stressed because of reduced working satisfaction which is due to lack of institutional support and, as pointed out by Nichols and Sosnowsky's research (2002), to the lack of correspondence between the personal efforts in their job and the improvements of students.

Among the risk elements, studied in the literature with increasing attention in recent years, in agreement with the traditional helping professions, it is possible to indicate the low perceived "quality of relational climate", the negative "representation of Professional Self" (Licciardello, De Caroli, Castiglione, & Mauceri, 2004), the idealization of profession (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980), and the fulfilment of inadequate tasks to expectations (Pellegrino, 2000); teachers who have lived these negative experiences showed high levels of stress, frustration, depression, and feelings of inadequacy to the job (Cosgrove, 2000), and, in extreme cases linked to progressive detachment by users, they tend to leave their profession (Boe, Bobbit, & Cook, 1997; Gersten *et al.*, 2001).

Others researches have shown that teachers with high levels of self-efficacy tend to commit themselves more productively in their job (Coladarci, 1992), to adopt more innovative educational strategies and more efficient management of classrooms (Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bishop, 1992), acting also on the students performance positively (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991).

These components positively affect on burnout prevention and quality of Professional Self representation, which may be an important factor of protection from the stress and the working uneasiness. As noted in a recent study by De Caroli and Sagone (2008), carried out with a sample of Sicilian learning support teachers in training, results have highlighted that teachers with low levels of emotional exhaustion and high levels of personal accomplishment have shown a more positive estimation of Professional Self than teachers who are at risk of burnout; in addition, teachers with low levels of impulsiveness and high levels of assertiveness, in reference to the interpersonal adjustment, have expressed a more positive representation of Professional Self than teachers who are maladjusted.

On the basis of these indications the relationship between the representation of Professional Self and of Students and the burnout dimensions, in a sample of teachers serving in junior high schools, has been deepened in the current study.

METHOD

Hypothesis of research

The aim of current study was focused on the exploration of burnout levels in the three main dimensions and the representation of Professional Self and Students in a sample of Sicilian teachers serving in junior high schools. It was predicted that teachers who obtained low levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, showed a more positive representation of Professional Self and their Students than teachers who obtained high levels in the same dimensions of burnout.

Participants

The sample of study is formed by 90 Sicilian teachers serving in junior high schools from Central Sicily, aged between 30 and 65 years (28 men - 31,1%; 62 women - 68,9%) and divided into 45 *junior* teachers (age range: 30-45 years) and 45 *senior* teachers (age range: 46-65 years). For the years of teaching, 38,9% of sample work in this field from zero to 11 years (N=35), 33,3% from 12 to 23 years (N=30), and 27,8% over 24 years (N=25).

Materials and procedure

Materials were administered individually and in small group setting, and were constituted by background questions, useful to define the characteristics of participants to the current study, and also by the following instruments:

a) n.2 Semantic Differentials (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Di Nuovo & Licciardello, 1997; De Caroli, Sagone, & Falanga, 2007), consisting of 36 pairs of bipolar adjectives used to investigate the representation of Professional Self (“I as a teacher”) and of Students (“My students”); it is possible to measure the Euclidean distance between Professional Self and Students dimensions analyzing pairs of bipolar adjectives, each evaluable on a 7-points scale (with the intermediate value equal to 4);

b) the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), used in the Italian version of Sirigatti and Stefanile (1993) to analyze the three components of burnout (emotional exhaustion-EE, depersonalization-DP, reduced personal accomplishment-RPA) in the helping professions (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Di Nuovo & Commodari, 2004; Licciardello *et al.*, 2004) and teachers (De Caroli & Sagone, 2008). The instruments consists of 22 items for each of which the subjects express how many times they have placed them in proposed circumstances on a frequency scale ranging from zero (“never”) to 6 intervals (“every day”)¹: i.e., for the emotional exhaustion

¹ Each dimension of burnout has been divided in three levels (high, medium, low): for the emotional exhaustion, the highest score of 23 indicates the high level, from 14 to 22 the medium level, and from 0 to 13 the low level; for depersonalization, the highest score of 6 expresses the high level, from 3 to 5 the medium level, and from 0 to 2 the low level; finally, for the reduction personal accomplishment, the

subscale, “I feel emotionally drained from my work”, “Working with people all day is really a strain for me”; for the depersonalization subscale, “I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this job”, “I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally”; for the personal accomplishment subscale (reverse scoring), “In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly”, “I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work”.

Data analysis

The examination of the statistical significance of results was carried out using the SPSS 15.0 software (Statistical Package for Social Science), using the following tests: *Chi Square*, One-Way Anova, *t* Student and *stepwise* linear regression.

The statistical analyses compared scores by sex (men vs women), age groups (senior vs junior teachers), and years of teaching (0-11 years; 12-23 years; over 24 years) as independent variables using scores on the three dimensions of burnout and the semantic differentials as dependent variables.

RESULTS

Burnout levels

As shown in Fig.1, results obtained by our sample in the three dimensions of burnout have indicated that:

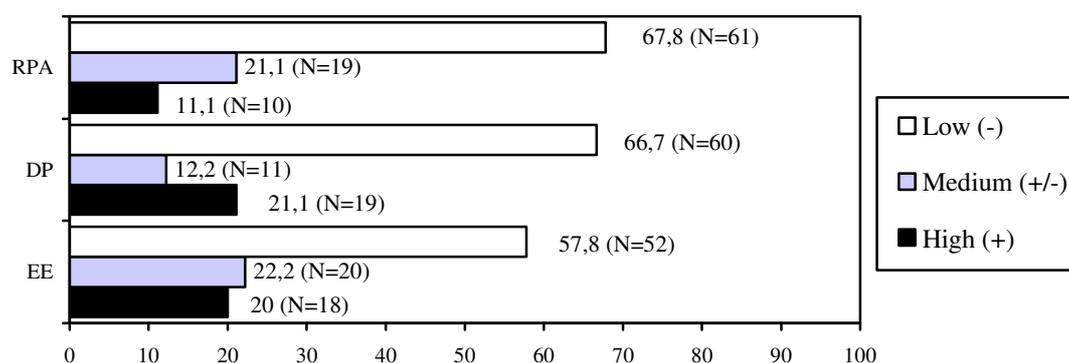
EE - 20% of the teachers expressed high levels, 22,2% medium levels, and, in most cases, 57,8% low levels in *emotional exhaustion* (EE: $\chi^2=24,27$, *f.d.2*, $p<.001$); significant differences by sex were found ($\chi^2=6,94$, *f.d.2*, $p=.031$), since in low levels (men: 22,2% vs women: 32,5%), the percentage of women and men was almost balanced, while in high (men: 1,1% vs women: 18,9%) and medium levels (men: 7,8% vs women: 14,4%), the percentage of women was markedly higher than that of men; no differences for both years of teaching and age were found;

DP - 21,1% of teachers displayed high levels, 12,2% medium levels and, in most cases, 66,7% low levels in *depersonalization* (DP: $\chi^2=46,07$, *f.d.2*, $p<.001$), without significant differences for sex, age, and years of teaching;

RPA - 11,1% showed high levels, 21,1% medium levels and, in most cases, 67,8% low levels in *reduced personal accomplishment* (RPA: $\chi^2=49,40$, *f.d.2*, $p<.001$), also in this dimension without appreciable differences in relation to the analyzed variables.

highest score of 29 represents the low level, from 0 to 31 the high level, and from 32 to 28 the medium level.

Fig.1 - Burnout levels - Percentages and frequencies (in parenthesis)



Comparing the three dimensions of burnout and considering teachers who obtained high levels in all three dimensions (EE+, DP+ e RPA+) or high levels at least in two of the same ones (i.e., EE+ and DP+, RPA-) as “teachers at risk”, we pointed out that 15,6% (N=14) of sample, compared to the remaining percentage of 84,4 (N=76), was at high risk of falling into this syndrome ($\chi^2=42,71$, *f.d.*1, $p<.001$). From these results, in light of positively defined framework, it was possible to highlight that teachers seemed to show any “alarm signal” in relation to burnout, especially in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, factors that constitute the first signals of professional uneasiness both in the triadic perspective of Maslach (1978) and in the transactional one of Cherniss (1980).

Professional Self and Students representation

The teachers have expressed a more positive representation of Professional Self ($M=5,39$, $sd=.50$) compared to that expressed in relation to their Students ($M=4,18$, $sd=.67$)($t_{(89)}=13,84$, $p<.001$). For the years of teaching, teachers with over 24 years of educational activities have valued their students more positively ($M=4,48$, $sd=.59$) than the ones with fewer years (from 12 to 23 years: $M=4,14$, $sd=.67$; from zero to 11 years: $M=3,99$, $sd=.67$) ($F_{(2,87)}=4,23$, $p=.018$). Consistently with this result, *senior* teachers have tended to express a more positive evaluation of their Students ($M=4,33$, $sd=.69$) than that expressed by *junior* teachers ($M=4,03$, $sd=.63$)($t_{(88)}=2,12$, $p=.03$).

Relationship between burnout levels and Self Professional and Students representation

From the comparison between burnout levels in the three dimensions and Professional Self and Students representation, it has been possible to highlight that the more teachers have shown high levels of *emotional exhaustion* (EE+) the more negative their Students representation ($\beta=.251$, $t=2.43$, $p=.017$) and vice versa (Fig.2). With reference to the pairs of bipolar adjectives, teachers who felt themselves more emotionally exhausted have valued their Students as weaker ($F_{(2,87)}=3,07$, $p=.05$), aggressive ($F_{(2,87)}=3,48$, $p=.035$), dependent ($F_{(2,87)}=3,02$, $p=.05$), unstable ($F_{(2,87)}=3,34$, $p=.040$), and unjust ($F_{(2,87)}=4,78$, $p=.011$) (see table 2a).

Fig.2 - Levels of emotional exhaustion - Means

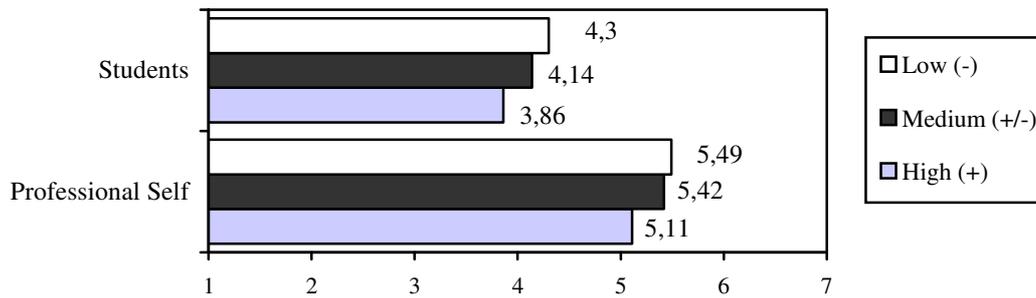
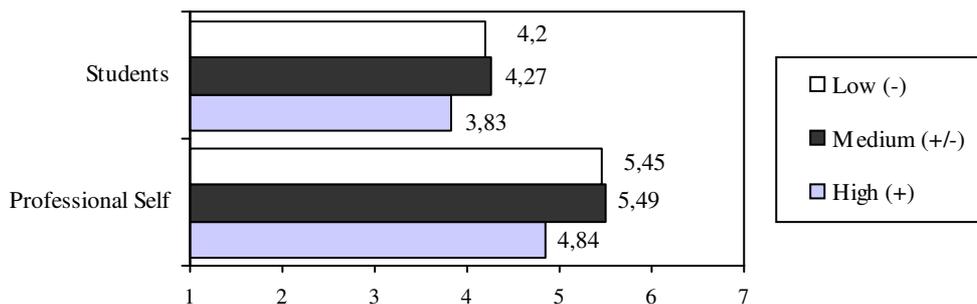


Table 2a - Comparison between levels of EE in the pairs of bipolar adjectives for Students representation

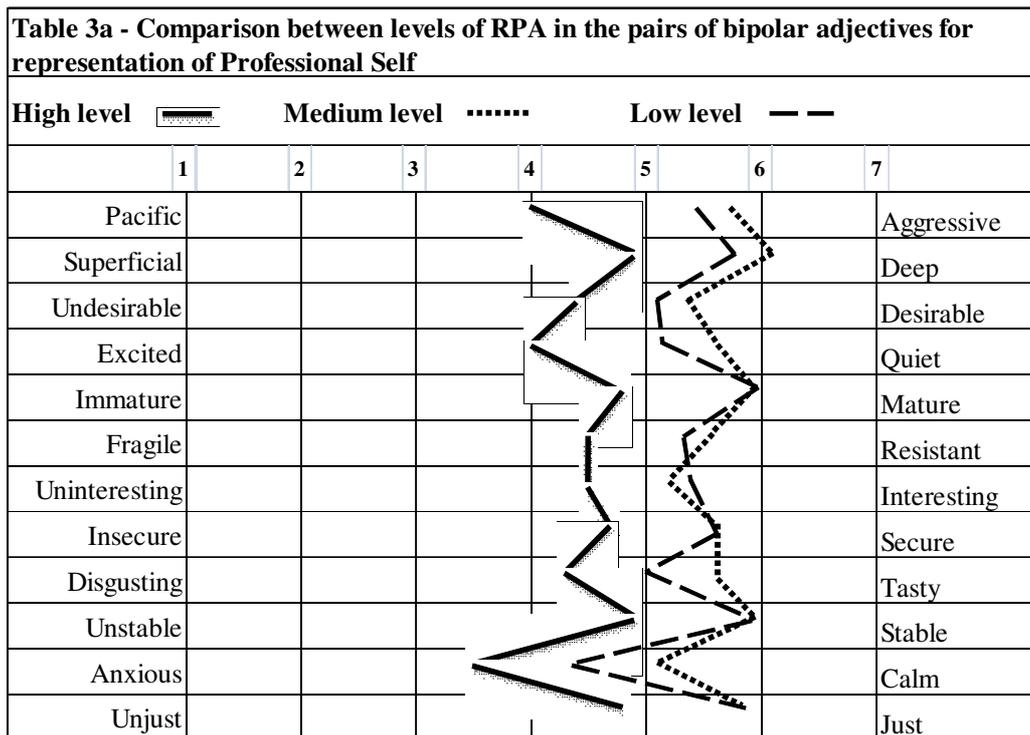
High level	Medium level							Low level
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Weak								Strong
Dependent								Independent
Pacific								Aggressive
Unstable								Stable
Unjust								Just

The more teachers have expressed medium-low levels in reduced personal accomplishment (RPA+/-), the better Professional Self representation ($\beta=.292, t=2.87, p=.005$) and vice versa (Fig.3).

Fig.3 - Levels of reduced personal accomplishment - Means



In particular, teachers who felt themselves more realized in working field have considered themselves more pacific ($F_{(2,87)}=6,97, p=.002$), deep ($F_{(2,87)}=4,59, p=.013$), desirable ($F_{(2,87)}=3,29, p=.042$), quiet ($F_{(2,87)}=5,09, p=.008$), mature ($F_{(2,87)}=10,38, p<.001$), resistant ($F_{(2,87)}=3,12, p=.040$), interesting ($F_{(2,87)}=4,68, p=.012$), secure ($F_{(2,87)}=3,22, p=.045$), tasty ($F_{(2,87)}=5,74, p=.005$), stable ($F_{(2,87)}=8,40, p<.001$), calm ($F_{(2,87)}=3,78, p=.027$), and just ($F_{(2,87)}=4,90, p=.010$), compared to those who felt themselves less realized (see Table 3a).



No significant difference was found in relation to the dimension of depersonalization.

Regarding to the Euclidean distance between Professional Self and Students, teachers who have shown high levels of emotional exhaustion (EE+) have perceived a greater distance between the representation of Self and that of their students ($M=2,46$, $sd=.81$) than the ones who have shown medium (EE+/-) and low levels (EE-) ($M=2,01$, $sd=.68$) in the same burnout dimension ($F_{(2,87)}=3,43$, $p=.03$). There were no significant differences in other dimensions.

Discussion

The present study has constituted a confirmation of the representational framework concerning more positive evaluation of Professional Self than that of Students, as noted in previous researches (De Caroli *et al.*, 2007; De Caroli & Sagone, 2008), carried out in Sicilian context and with different groups of curricular and learning support teachers. This results have suggested that teachers tended to “look with indifference” users of their professional work (i.e., their students), even if, in reference to years of teaching, teachers with longer experience (over 24 working years) estimated more positively their own Students than colleagues with shorter experience.

This findings have confirmed the specific indications proposed by Farber (2000) and the general ones suggested by Maslach (2003), according to which “burnout is greatest when people-workers are young and is lower for older workers. Younger people usually have less work experience than older ones, but it turns out that the effect of age reflects more than just the length of time on the job [...] with increased age, people are more stable and mature, have more balanced perspective on life, and are less prone to the excesses of burnout” (Maslach, 2003, pp.99-100).

This evidence appears to be a critical element that the scientific literature indicates as a signal and an expression of onset of burnout risk; in fact, in confirmation of the link between burnout and the gradual detachment by users, in the current study teachers (especially, women) who have obtained high levels of emotional exhaustion have expressed less positive valuation of their students.

The positive professional image of Self can be considered in terms of “protective factor” against the risks of burnout, for which a more positive Self representation is related to the feeling of high personal accomplishment in the workplace. This link, also identified in recent studies carried out with other types of *helping professions* (Licciardello *et al.*, 2007), could constitute the basis for the construction of educational activities inspired by action-research (Lewin, 1951; in Italy, see Licciardello, 1999), with the active involvement and participation of direct beneficiaries (teachers and students engaged in *focus group*); those activities could produce positive effects in daily educational practice by improving the quality of interpersonal relations and the organizational climate in educational institutions through the engagement of the other protagonists of school life (non-teaching staff, school managers, parents, etc.).

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