



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

**TEACHERS' BURNOUT: A COMPARISON BETWEEN LAY AND CONSECRATED TEACHERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Burn-out syndrome is a physical and mental reaction to stress and overwork characterized by three aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1976), mainly affecting workers involved in helping professions. Outcomes of a recent and authoritative 10-year study, carried out by the Medical Association of Milan (2008) show that burnout affects teachers twice as much as it affects clerks, medical staff and health workers.

Our research on teacher's burnout aims to investigate more in depth the impact of some variables, that have not yet been sufficiently explored.

The first independent variable deals with the distinction between lay and consecrated (nuns and priests) teachers.

The Italian adaptation of MBI (Maslach Burnout Inventory, 1985) for teacher was administered to a group of 306 teachers; 153 lay and 153 consecrated teachers.

We hypothesize that there are difference level of burnout between lay and consecrated teaching personnel and that the highest level of burnout is to be found among those who have more years of teaching experience.

Results confirmed the hypothesis. In particular, consecrated teachers show higher level of burnout, experiencing more depersonalization and lower personal accomplishment than lay teachers.

**Key words:** Teachers' Burnout; Consecrated teachers; Lay teachers; Catholic Schools; Catholic teachers

**BACKGROUND**

The Burnout construct defines a syndrome of occupational distress, characterising the helping professions, such as those in the health and social sector, in education. This is because those involved in such occupations usually experience a high level of responsibility and emotional stress. If not



## TEACHERS' BURNOUT: A COMPARISON BETWEEN LAY AND CONSECRATED TEACHERS

addressed properly, working conditions of these employees may easily generate emotional breakdown.

Freudenberger coined the term "burnout" to describe a complex of symptoms, such as feeling exhausted and depressed. He and his colleagues observed that people working in a Department of Health and Mental Hygiene were experiencing a progressive demotivational and emotional depletion as well as becoming less efficient and productive: in fact, after months of activity, staff "burned out", showing a sort of "moral collapse" which changed their attitudes towards work (Freudenberger, 1974).

Later Cherniss (1983) defined the burnout syndrome as an individual response to a work situation perceived as stressful and in which the individual has no resources and appropriate cognitive or behavioral strategies to cope with it.

The Maslach's theoretical model of burnout is the most referential and widely known. She defines burnout as "a reaction to chronic emotional tension created by the continuous contact with other human beings, especially when they have problems or reasons for suffering" (Maslach, 1992, p.20). This work pattern produces a number of reactions that can be grouped into three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal achievement. To the Maslach's model, Folgheraiter (1994) adds the perception of loss of control over one's own work. Burnout, then, is not only a particular type of response to work stress, but it is a real syndrome characterized essentially by a deep feeling of fatigue, frustration, anger, cynicism and a sense of ineffectiveness and failure (Freudenberger, 1974; Leiter, 1993).

Overall, the burnout syndrome is caused by the imbalance between the work demands and the individual capacity to address them. This condition generates frustration and demoralization and emotional stress, followed by inappropriate behavior by the person affected.

Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) described the burnout as a cycle, developing through four phases.

The first phase, that is the idealistic enthusiasm, pushes the individual to choose a charitable, altruistic work. It is based both on conscious reasons (such as: the hope to improve the world and themselves, the opportunity offered by a rewarding activity that can offer job security) as well as on less conscious ones (such as: the search for exercising forms of power over people, the desire of challenging oneself). Such motivations sometimes do not deal with a realistic vision of the responsibilities and difficulties embedded in the work, thus the individual may exaggerate his expectations towards the results achieved, the appreciation of the work done, its career development.

The second phase is defined as stagnation. Due to the heavy workloads and excessive stress, the employee, begins to realize how his expectations are not realistic, and how his job does not respond to the image he had built of it. The enthusiasm, interest and sense of satisfaction related to his profession begin to decrease. This causes a shift from the initial commitment to a gradual disengagement. Boredom, disappointment, compelling routine emerge, transforming what began as a highly desirable profession, into a job like any other. This stage may be interrupted only if the subject can rely on the right (personal and organizational) resources and is able to implement a behavior that allows him to successfully cope with the situation.

The third phase is defined as frustration. The employee affected by burnout experiences feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, dissatisfaction, anger, combined with the perception, real or supposed, to be exploited, overworked and unappreciated. He often thinks of not being able to help anyone; tends to escape from work, taking frequent and long long pauses; he is often sick, sometimes he shows aggressive behavior toward himself or others. The difficulty of perceiving the real complexity of his work generates frustration and negative a reaction towards the social context of his work. Still in this phase it is possible to interrupt the vicious circle of burnout.

The fourth and last stage is defined as apathy. Commitment and enthusiasm for one's own work disappear and are replaced by apathy and lack of interest. This outcome can be described as



## DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

a "professional death": the employee is no longer able to fulfill his goals, can not help anyone and feels a real distaste for his job.

Apart from the theoretical point of view, burnout has also been studied from an experimental point of view. In particular, after the first research on results of the discrepancy between individual expectations and consequences of one's work, subsequent studies have been primarily concerned to verify the level of burnout in different professions such as nurses (Santinello, Dallanno, Del Bosco, 2008), social workers (Rabbit, 1994), educators and teachers (Lodolo & Al D'Oria, 2008). In particular, an authoritative study done by the Medical College of Asl di Milano (2008) and lasted ten years, showed that the teachers are subject to burnout syndrome twice as the other categories of employees who participated in the research, namely: employees, workers and medical staff. This result emphasizes the importance of monitoring the level of burnout among teachers, also in order to design preventive interventions. In addition, there are no academic researchers on teachers' burnout, to determine whether the presence of this phenomenon may depend on organizational characteristics (e.g. the type of public or private school) or personal characteristics (e.g. belonging / not belonging to orders religious) (Acanfora, 2002).

### AIM AND HYPOTHESIS

The aim of this research is to deepen the knowledge about teachers' burnout. The more specific objective is to verify if there are significant differences between lay and consecrated teachers.

The first hypothesis is that religious teachers have a higher level of burnout of lay teachers (Bordignon, 2006). In support of this hypothesis is the consideration that a consecrated person considers the offering of help and support for people experiencing any kind of difficulties, while he is not receiving by anybody any kind of support or help to perform his duty (Barzon, Caltabiano and Ronzoni, 2006). Moreover, the same Maslach (2003) points out that burnout is experienced by most single men, since the family can act as an important emotional resource: therefore, the religious seem to be at increased risk of burnout.

The second hypothesis is that the burnout is related with the number of years of teaching. In particular, we assume that along with seniority (namely: increase of the number of working years as teacher), the level of burnout tends to decrease, consistently with a long-lasting stream of research. In fact, along with time, through their direct experience, workers tend to learn how to better cope with the problems arising from their work (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993).

### METHOD

#### Participants

To test the hypothesis it was decided to use a non-proportional quota sampling for the variables "religious / non religious and educational qualifications. This type of sampling, while non-probabilistic, increases the internal validity by making the samples numerically homogeneous (Pedone, 2009). The research participants were 306 teachers (153 lay and 153 consecrated) belonging to 32 private Catholic schools in the city of Rome. It was decided to interview only teachers working in the same Catholic schools, in order to minimize the influence of the context, when comparing lay and consecrated participants. In fact, there are very few consecrated teachers working in government-run public schools and they are mainly restricted to in charge of the religion subject. On the contrary, consecrated teachers working in Catholic, private schools take charge of all kind of subjects, provided they have the required qualification to do so.



## TEACHERS' BURNOUT: A COMPARISON BETWEEN LAY AND CONSECRATED TEACHERS

The group of lay people is composed of 12 males and 141 females and has an average age of 42 years (range: 24-68). The religious group is composed entirely of women and has an average age of 51 years (range: 21-66).

### INSTRUMENT

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1983) was administered. It is a questionnaire aimed to assess burnout in employees working in social and health services, such as doctors and nurses as well as educational institutions, as educators, social workers and teachers.

The MBI consists of 22 items measuring the three independent dimensions of burnout syndrome, each identified by a specific scale.

The scales of the MBI are as follows:

- Emotional exhaustion, which examines the feeling of being emotionally drained and exhausted from one's own work;
- Depersonalization, which measures a cold and impersonal response towards the users of the service;
- Personal accomplishment, which evaluates the feeling concerning one's own competence and one's own desire for performing successfully while working with others.

The response format of the items is a 6-point Likert scale (from "never" to "every day"). Respondents were asked to assess the frequency with which they experienced the feelings and thoughts described in the proposed statements.

Participants were administered the version of the MBI tailored for the social and educational services. Socio-demographic data were collected too, such as age, marital status, educational qualifications, years of work and activities carried out.

The average response time was about 10 minutes.

### RESULTS

Student's-T Test for independent samples was conducted to test the first hypothesis; being a teacher belonging to a religious order was used as independent variable

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of both the group of lay and consecrated teachers, with respect to the three dimensions of the MBI. Table 2 shows the results for the Student's-T Test.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation: Lay and Consecrated Teachers

	Sample	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional exhaustion	Lay	153	10,46	8,29
	Consecrated	153	11,34	8,13
Depersonalization	Lay	153	1,06	2,16
	Consecrated	153	2,66	3,40
Personal accomplishment	Lay	153	41,46	6,38
	Consecrated	153	38,72	7,66



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

Table 2: Student's-T Test: Lay and Consecrated Teachers

	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Emotional exhaustion	,493	,352
Depersonalization	41,499	,000
Personal accomplishment	6,564	,001

Results show a significant difference between lay and consecrated teachers, in relation to two dimensions "depersonalization" and "personal accomplishment". In particular, the mains show that the consecrated teachers have a significantly higher average score in the "depersonalization" dimension, while they have a significantly lower average score in the dimension of "personal accomplishment". No significant difference, however, emerge between the two group of respondents in relation to the dimension named "emotional exhaustion". These results then verify the hypothesis that the consecrated teachers have a higher level of burnout than the lay ones.

To verify the second hypothesis, participants were divided into five groups with respect to the years of teaching: 1 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, 21 to 30 years, 31 to 40 years and 41 to 50 years. The groups are numerically consistent, so it was therefore possible to run the Fisher's F-test for comparison between means.

Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations of the groups with respect to the three scales of the MB. Table 4 shows the results of Fisher's F test.

Table 3: Means and Standard deviations: seniority in teaching

	Years of Seniority	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional exhaustion	1-10	95	9,53	7,31
	11-20	76	11,70	7,67
	21-30	48	12,88	9,88
	31-40	60	11,85	9,20
	41-50	26	8,00	5,63
Depersonalization	1-10	95	1,40	2,34
	11-20	76	1,29	2,03
	21-30	48	1,88	3,24
	31-40	60	2,85	3,99
	41-50	26	2,73	3,24
Personal accomplishment	1-10	95	41,51	5,37
	11-20	76	40,20	6,15
	21-30	48	39,27	8,55
	31-40	60	39,35	8,13
	41-50	26	38,04	9,72





## TEACHERS' BURNOUT: A COMPARISON BETWEEN LAY AND CONSECRATED TEACHERS

Table 4: *F di Fisher: years of seniority*

	Degrees of freedom	F	Sig.
Emotional exhaustion	4; 300	2,60	,04
Depersonalization	4; 300	3,66	,01
Personal accomplishment	4; 300	1,80	,13

According to the results, both the dimensions "emotional exhaustion" and "depersonalization" show significant differences when compared to the years of seniority.

As far as the emotional exhaustion is considered, the means show that it is lower both in the class with higher and lower numbers of teaching years. It seems possible to argue that in those who teach since fewer years their enthusiasm tends to reduce the fatigue and depletion caused by their work, while those who have been teaching for many years may have acquired adequate coping strategies to manage their work stress. The latter results, however, is coherent with a long stream of research confirming that burnout is higher among young employees, with limited seniority and lower among employees who have experienced more years of work.

Depersonalization seems, however, increase with seniority, this means that teachers over time tend to become detached from their work. This result is largely confirmed in the literature, too. There are no significant differences, however, in relation to seniority, in the dimension called "personal accomplishment".

## CONCLUSIONS

Burnout is the result of workplace distress, typical of the helping profession, thus also affects also those who work in education and schooling, in spite of the scarce research carried out among teachers (Meazzini, 2000). Within those involved in teaching, there is a particular group of teachers, namely the consecrated people, which in addition to carrying out their work, they profess their faith by helping the most vulnerable and needy (Sandford, 1982). The objective of this research was to study the level of burnout among consecrated teachers, and verify that they are more prone to this phenomenon than lay teachers. The second hypothesis, however, had the objective of verifying if the level of burnout increases along with the years of work.

The results showed a significant difference in size between the lay and consecrated teachers in relation to two dimensions: "Depersonalization" and "Personal accomplishment".

As hypothesized, consecrated teachers appear to be more exposed to burnout, showing higher means in the first dimension as well as higher means in the latter. This means that in comparison with their lay colleagues, the consecrated teachers tend to be less satisfied with their jobs and more emotionally distant from their students. According to Ronzoni (2007) this attitude might be the result of a dysfunctional approach to what they consider to be their institutional role. In addition, consecrated teachers appear to be experienced a lower degree of job satisfaction, being dissatisfied both with the results they achieve and with the recognition they receive for their work.

These results might be explained with a fact: consecrated teachers often do not choose quite freely the kind of work they will be involved in, but on the contrary their professional choices are oriented by the organizational needs of the congregation they belong to. Moreover, in addition to their teaching duties, many consecrated teachers deal with other institutional responsibilities or activities, that might complicate or worsen their professional workload (Mucci, 2007). This result seems to indicate the need to monitor the level of burnout among consecrated teachers and to provide tailored interventions to prevent and reduce this work discomfort.



#### DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

In order to verify the second hypothesis, according to which burnout tends to decrease along with increase of the number of years of teaching, the sample was divided into five groups, with respect to participants' seniority. The results of the Fisher F-test showed significant differences in the dimensions named "Emotional exhaustion" and "Depersonalization", while the dimension of "Personal accomplishment" does not show any relevant differences in relation to the years of work.

Therefore data analysis partially confirms the second hypothesis: not only the group with less years of seniority are more affected by burnout, but also the group with the longest teaching experience (more than 40 years) show a similar condition (Maslach e Leiter, 2000).. The depersonalization, on the contrary, tends to increase along with seniority.

More generally speaking, the two results provided by the ANOVA show that burnout tends to worsen along with the increase of the years of work. Furthermore, high depersonalization emerged in the group of participants with 40 or more years of seniority might be read in connection with the lower mean score in the dimension of "emotional exhaustion". In other words, detachment and lack of empathy might well be the teachers' dysfunctional reaction to their emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Leiter, 1997).

The present research has investigated an area that till now has still received little attention: that is burnout among consecrated teachers. Results have shown the need to address burnout among consecrated teachers, as well as the need to deepen the knowledge on the variables that may intervene, such as: organizational culture, the social support received by teachers, the burden of their actual workload.

Internal validity of The non-probability sampling increased through bringing under control a possible intervening variable, such as the education level (Pedon e Gnisci, 2004).

The stronger limit of this research is, however, the limited number of participants. In order to generalize the results, it would be advisable to enlarge the number of respondents. It would be interesting, too, to compare this group of teachers with an other group of teacher, working the public, government-run schools, in order to observe the differences.

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#### **TEACHERS' BURNOUT: A COMPARISON BETWEEN LAY AND CONSECRATED TEACHERS**

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