TEACHERS’ BURN OUT AND THE TRENDS OF ITALIAN SCHOOL

Tancredi Pascucci¹ & Isabella Poggi²
¹ I.N.M.I L. Spallanzani
tancredi.pascucci@gmail.com
² Dipartimento di Scienze dell’Educazione, Università Roma Tre
poggi@uniroma3.it

Abstract

The paper presents a survey study on the teachers’ burnout in 8 schools of Rome. The submitted questionnaire concerned the stress experienced in different areas, global stress, hopelessness about change, others’ behavior, and results were put in connection with the teachers’ conception of their role (whether oriented to culture transmission or to helping profession), the teachers’ sense of groupness, and the importance of teaching freedom. Results show that 30% of teachers are in burnout, and more often so if they have a conception quite extremely oriented to the culture transmission, while those feeling helping professionals has a protective function against burnout.

Keywords: Burnout, stress, teachers, teaching conceptions, groupness.

1. Burnout and helping professions

Burnout is a syndrome, encompassing physical and psychological symptoms, that often occurs in helping professions. According to Maslach (1978; 1981, 1999), a person can be diagnosed as burnout when the following symptoms are present: sleep problems, anxiety, frustration, impotence, tiredness, depersonalization, cynicism, emotional distance, apathy, absenteeism, depression, sense of failure (Ripamonti & Clerici, 2008). Burnout may be viewed as an outcome of continuous and repeated stress, which in its turn may be seen as an extreme case of the sense of impotence. When a worker feels that his/her work is very likely to be ineffective (like for nurses of terminal patients) or anyway success is very difficult to achieve, s/he may experience a sense of impotence, and a feeling of unbalance between applied effort and poor outcome.

By helping professions we mean those professions in which a person has the professional role of helping another, and must do so thanks to one’s competences but also through an interpersonal relationship with the other. Help may be physical or
material, but the helping performance in any case includes some action from which the helpee achieves an improvement in one’s quality of life or simply relief from one’s psychological pain (Morganti, 1998; Di Nuovo & Commodori, 2004).

At their first definition (Kraepelin, 1907; Braibanti & Zunino, 2005), helping professions classically included only medical ones: doctors, physiotherapists, psychiatrists, nurses. Since help is given not only thank to particular technical and medical competences but also through the very relationship between the helper and the helpee, later the definition came to include all professions involving a strict and long lasting relational contact between the professional worker and the User. So now not only doctors, psychiatrists, nurses and physiotherapists, but also psychologists, priests, volunteers, social workers, firemen, policemen and teachers can be seen as helping professions.

Of course this definition may be problematic. Being a helping professional imposes the expert to provide some performance that is in some way apt to improve the User’s psychophysical condition, giving him/her help in fact. But the mentioned set of workers is quite heterogeneous, and not necessarily do they all give a priority to the User’s wellbeing as compared to the goals of their work. Actually, some of the works mentioned have a clear and socially shared role in society, and generally those who have chosen them have tried to find consistency between the goals of that work and their own. Both doctors and firemen save lives; nurses, psychologists, physiotherapists, volunteers, social workers and priests stand by persons with various kinds of problems. Society generally agrees in viewing these professionals as involved in a helping relationship, and most workers in those categories find themselves at ease in this kind of identity. Yet, two categories of professionals do not have strictly these characteristics: policemen and teachers. They too are in contact with Users that are often in pain and in need of something that can improve their condition, the former by caring social security, the latter by giving instruction and education. Yet, not necessarily do policemen and teachers view their social role as mainly one of helping the persons they work with. A policeman might tell us that his mission is to have people respect the law irrespective of who they are and what are the causes of their problematic behavior; a teacher might tell us that his or her role is to provide students with education and instruction, whether they want or not, to transfer notions and test learning, without giving further help or excuse if something prevented the student from studying or learning. In other words, these two types of workers might not feel helper professionals.
2. Stress

By stress we mean (Selye, 1956) the biological reaction of an organism to a threatening external stimulus. When the individual confronts a situation in which the available resources are not sufficient to the task to accomplish, a sense of impotence is repeatedly felt, to which the subject responds with a sequence of alert, adaptation, and overload of the organism. If this biological overload is often felt in connection with the work as a helper, it may result in burnout (Cherniss, 1983). A teacher may feel stress in giving classes in an uncomfortable classroom, because s/he does not have enough time to finish the program, because the schedule is not well organized and students are too tired or not motivated, or because too many pupils are far from brilliant. A relevant cause of stress are often others: students, parents, colleagues, principals, clerks, caretakers. Even when they do not cause stress through mobbing proper – a systematic intentional action aimed at making work at school unpleasant – also unintentional actions may cause distress. The teacher may feel frustrated because students do not study enough, or due to parents’ complaints, or to conflicts with colleagues; the low salary may be stressing not only because it does not allow a fair economical wellbeing, but also as a symptom of low social prestige. One more cause of stress is the sense of impotence, hopelessness (Solano, 2001) about the possibility of doing anything to make things go better. Such hopelessness may be both a cause and a consequence of stress, and might even be a coping strategy to take refuge in a fatalism that in some cases may be reassuring, but still destructive.

3. Being a teacher: a difficult job in Italian school

In Italy the social representation of school teachers has undergone dramatic changes in the last 50 years. Before 1960, the teacher was an authoritative person; usually a male, he was respected by students and parents and his salary was not bad. The socio-economic change in the last decades has shifted the teacher’s social position to a completely different status. Now teachers are in the vast majority females, their authority is only formal, they are not so respected by students and their salary is hardly sufficient. Moreover, in the present Italian context workers in public agencies, like public school, suffer from a very heavy image of being incompetent and low-working. So the teacher is doubly attacked: on the one side for the low importance attributed to culture, on the other side for the negative image cast on public workers. At the same
time (possibly, because of this?), the whole Italian school system is in trouble: Italian
students in the average score lower than their colleagues in other countries in many
disciplines. Two problems are the integration of disabled students and of immigrant
students. As to the former, less and less resources are devoted for specialized teachers to
follow the disabled students, so very often the curricular teacher has to take care also of
the disabled pupils. As to the latter, different from other countries, the problem of
immigrant students has not been confronted in a systematic way in Italy, so the teacher
sometimes has classes with up to 60% students not speaking fluent Italian.
To sum up, a teacher’s life in Italy is not easy: the teacher has no good social image,
s/he earns a low salary vis à vis the work s/he is bound to do, and the context in which
she works is often very hard. While s/he’s giving a class on math s/he can be forced to
help a discalculic boy, to run after the ADDH pupil trying to jump off the window; to
stop some pupils bullying another; and so on and so forth.

4. The teacher's identity. Culture transmission or helping profession?
While presently many Italian teachers may have come to see their profession as a
helping profession, not all of them might be willing to accept this role. Some decades
ago the teacher used to view oneself as an expert in a discipline only bound to transfer
one’s knowledge to pupils, without even bothering whether they were interested or able
to learn it; if learning did not occur, the teacher might impute this to the student's
cognitive skills or to his/her own incapacity in explaining or evaluating; only some
teachers wondered if it was because a share of the student’s attention was taken by
affective problems (like parents’ divorce, family abuse or so). Even the teacher who
took into account the affective relationship with the student might at most use it, not
always with total awareness, to enhance the students’ learning motivation, but did not
see it as a crucial aspect of teaching. Such an old-fashion pedagogical model was
attacked as obsolescent and authoritarian by the new pedagogical trend. The new
teacher outlined by recent education sciences is more friendly and less formal and, in
case of failure, is willing to change one’s teaching style or to try to understand if the
student has personal problems that block his efficacy. Yet, not necessarily are all
present teachers willing to give up the old model, also because helping professions are
often seen as less prestigious than other jobs. Why should a teacher who thinks s/he is
underestimated, underpaid and not so respected accept a less prestigious job? So the
teacher must confront a choice: either to maintain an old conception of teaching that
s/he anyway considers more prestigious even if others view them as outdated, or to accept the mainstream and adopt a conception of teaching in which the teacher gets involved in the relationship with the student.

Incidentally, recently OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) explicitly claimed that school rejection is detrimental from an economic point of view, since the rejected student costs more to the State which supports him/her during the whole course of studies. In view of this, a teacher of the former kind, not so indulgent with students, should be reject as harmful by school policies. This implies that the teachers still adopting the “old” view of teaching tend to meet more and more hostility: not only the obvious hostility of students and parents, but also the subtle one of colleagues and principals, defending the students that, if massively rejected, would cast discredit on the school.

5. The teachers’ groupness
One more issue may cause trouble to teachers: they are very different from each other, and very individualistic. Teachers of different disciplines have taken different courses, they may have slightly different salaries and their workload may be different – to gain students’ participation may be easier for a sport than for a math teacher. More importantly, not for all teachers is the choice of teaching a vocational one. Not all (present) teachers expected or wanted to become teachers when graduated. Some have tried to teach at the University, or to work in other jobs they consider more prestigious than school, they may feel frustrated, and take school as a second choice job. So they may have different conceptions of their work, different teaching styles, and different levels of stress from each other. Finally they may stick to different ideologies, political parties or trade unions. All these differences can make the relationships between teachers conflictive and possibly lower the sense of groupness that, on the other hand, might keep them together and protect them from stress.

6. A study on the teachers’ burnout in Italian school
To investigate the occurrence of burnout and some of its causes in Italian school teachers, we run a study in eight secondary schools of Rome. Our research questions were:

1. Whether and how much burnout exists in Italian secondary school teachers;
2. What is, if so, the relationship between burnout and other variables like the teachers’ groupness, their conception of their teaching role, whether of culture transmission or helping profession, and the importance attributed to teaching freedom.

6.1. Method
The study was conducted in eight public secondary schools in the area of Rome, in sections of medium-high class: 6 high schools (out of which, 3 lyceums in humanities and 1 in science, 1 with emphasis on commerce and 1 on technology) and 2 Grammar schools.
In each school, after getting the agreement and formal permission from the principal, 400 copies of a questionnaire were distributed (sometimes directly handed to the teachers, sometimes leaving in the common teachers’ room), with special care for the participants’ anonymity and privacy. Each participant willing to take the questionnaire posted it into a closed box after filling it.
The following teachers were not included in the study:

a. Primary school and kindergarten teachers: we supposed them to be more likely than others to feel at ease in the role of helping profession.

b. University teachers: they differ from Secondary school teachers for a higher salary and a more prestigious role, more typically oriented to culture transmission.

c. Teachers of private schools. These teachers differ from those of public school in two respects: 1. they are hired without regular competition and often through favouritism, and can be fired very easily, so they must necessarily comply with the principal’s will. 2. they interact with students generally at a lower cultural level that those of public school, because private schools are typically attended by children of rich people who failed in public school. So we assumed them to have high levels of stress than teachers of public schools, and a conception of teaching more oriented to the helping profession than to the culture transmission.

d. At first we had devised to exclude also substitute teachers and the teachers for the disabled, given their roles and sometimes salaries different from curricular teachers. Yet, since some of them were curious about the questionnaire, we anyway included their answers.

6.2. The questionnaire
We elaborated a questionnaire of 98 statements to be judged along a Likert scale, distinguished into three areas. The first area, concerning stress, tackled three cases of it:

a. Stress caused by the role. This area includes a-specific statements concerning the teacher’s work in general, with stress due to organizational or environmental causes.

b. Stress caused by others. We tackled stress caused by students, parents, colleagues, principals, clerks, caretakers, politicians or the dominant class that, either explicitly or not, discredit the teachers’ image.

c. Stress caused by hopelessness about change, caused by a conception of school that sees no hope for improvement.

Other areas include:

a. Importance attributed to teaching freedom: how important a teacher considers one’s right to manage teaching programs and students evaluation.

b. Conception of helping profession: how much the teacher gets involved in the relationship with students to favor learning, and how much s/he is willing to give up to the cultural quality of teaching by giving preference to the student’s wellbeing.

c. Groupness: how much teachers feel they are part of a wider professional category, irrespective of the differences in formation, conception of teaching, stress, type of school and political ideas.

6.3. Results

A first interesting datum is the level of participation in the study. Two principals did not allow the study to be conducted in their school. See Table 1 for the means of acceptance.

Table 1. Participation in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Commerce</th>
<th>Scientific</th>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>Human. 1</th>
<th>Human. 2</th>
<th>Human. 3</th>
<th>Grammar 1</th>
<th>Grammar 2</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distributed questionnaires</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>447</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filled in questionnaires</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>155</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The mean percent of filled questionnaires is 34.68%, with wide variations across schools (SD 19.35%). Grammar schools have higher levels of acceptance than others (66.67%). This might be accounted for by higher openness or higher willingness to external evaluation.

13 teachers explicitly refused to fill in the questionnaire. From their – sometimes aggressive – refusals one might infer a resistance to evaluation – or to some tools for it – in teachers, which might in its turn be caused by some problems while at work.

As to participants, they have worked for a number of years ranging from 0 to 40, 16.35 years in the average. Temporary teachers have worked for up to 27 years as temporary, 5.7 years in the average. These data show that the mean age of teachers is very high and most of them must go through a long period of temporary teaching before being a permanent professor.

Since statements in the questionnaire were judged along a 4 points Likert scale, for the questions in the area of stress we considered stress as significant if it reached the cut off of 2.5 out of 4. In this case can we say that burnout occurs.

From data analysis (Tables 2 and 3), 42.86% of participants result to be subject to burnout, with more than a half with a low level, and less than 5% with high levels of stress. Then, quite a wide diffusion of burn out, with no big variations between curricular teachers and teachers for disabled.

Table 2 Levels of teachers’ burnout

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
<td>38.31%</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total burnout teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Burnout of teachers for disabled students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The conception of teaching as culture transmission is not highly represented (only 6.49%) as compared to one oriented to the helping profession and to the neutral one (Table 4).

Table 4 Conception of teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Helping profession</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Culture transmission</th>
<th>Tot</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>40.91%</td>
<td>51.60%</td>
<td>6.49%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We must note that the teacher seeing oneself as a culture carrier is also a kind of teacher who is less willing to fill in a questionnaire about one’s work, because s/he might feel it as an attack to his/her teaching freedom; probably a great part of the teachers that did not fill in our questionnaire are this kind. This might account for why the teachers with this conception result to be a minority. This might mean that teachers are encouraged to move on the helping profession pole, and discouraged if they identify themselves with the opposite pole. This hostile attitude toward teachers oriented to culture transmission come from parents and pupils, but also from colleagues and principals, as well as from the wider cultural context and from all psycho-pedagogical theories complying with the mainstream.

The correlation between levels of burnout and conceptions of the teacher’s role confirm this account (Fig.1).

Figure 1. Teaching conception and stress
Actually, our perhaps more intriguing research question concerned the relationship between burnout and conception of the teacher’s role. Our hypothesis was that the most stressed teachers are those having a too extreme conception of teaching, be it too oriented to helping profession or else to cultural transmission. This hypothesis is confirmed only for the conception of culture carrier. The teachers less keen to change are disadvantaged. On the other hand, the conception of the teacher as helping professional is more protective from stress. This is probably due to a heavy social pressure on teachers encouraging them to adopt this conception. Different from expected, instead, the “neutral” conception, one similarly oriented in both senses, reveals critical too, even if not so much as the culture carrier conception.

Why is this so? Our hypothesis is that the teachers with a neutral conception do not have a strong model of teaching. One who sticks to the helping profession is indulgent, available, informal, on the other hand, one who is a carrier of culture is cold, rigid, strict, formal, and applies these ways of being in any situation to any student, since these are extreme conceptions and are then rigidly applied. On who has a neutral conception in every new situation has to choose how to behave before each student. Should I be strict or indulgent? Formal or informal? Should I care the student’s personal and familiar problems or only stick to my role of schoolteacher? These teachers’ job is by far more tricky and difficult, hence, more stressing.

From Tables 5 and 6 it results that both teachers’ sense of Groupness and the importance attributed to teaching freedom are quite high.
Table 5. Teachers’ groupness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>0,00%</td>
<td>0,00%</td>
<td>22,73%</td>
<td>70,13%</td>
<td>7,14%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Teaching freedom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0,65%</td>
<td>7,79%</td>
<td>64,94%</td>
<td>26,62%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of variance (Figure 2) reveals a high correlation between the sense of groupness and the importance attributed to teaching freedom, so much so as to encourage seeing a causal relationship between the two. It might be that the highly shared value of teaching freedom is so crucial as to determine a high sense of groupness.

Figure 2. Groupness and importance of teaching freedom

Table 7 shows the distribution of burnout across schools.

Table 7. Burnout across schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Medium burn</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>out</th>
<th>burn out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38,71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52,63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8,33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities 3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar 1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46,15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tot.</strong></td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>38,23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Standard Deviation</strong></td>
<td>13,12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Types of school and burnout

From our data, a slight difference emerges between levels of stress in Grammar, Technical and Commerce schools as opposed to Scientific and Humanities schools.
Actually, from an analysis of variance (see Figure 2), the variation in burnout in schools of different degrees seem due to chance; but it might depend on several intervening variables, like different age of teachers, different organizational culture, and the teaching conception of the whole school.

Conclusion

In our research we stated from the idea that teaching in school is a highly stressing job in the present Italian socio-cultural context. The data of our research demonstrate that this is true. The teacher feels s/he is performing a difficult task, full of oppositions with students, parents, colleagues, principals, without receiving decent economic reward and social consideration. Many teachers did not participate in the study, and some took a very aggressive stance toward it, probably itself a cue of problems. The teaching freedom that all teachers believe in is at the same time a point of strength and weakness. Strength, because it is their greatest value and it has not been challenged yet: a value assuming the same dignity of intellectual freedom and freedom of thought, and a cause of pride for them. Weakness, since this makes teaching a highly self-referential activity. This is also the reason why many questionnaires have not been filled. Teachers are part of a culture of evaluation and confront an external evaluation in the very same way in which their students do: a way not devoid of fear of judgement. Therefore, many teachers refuse external evaluation, they do not accept others to tell them what to do about their teaching, since they feel any evaluative or formative action as an attack to their teaching freedom, ofte the only thing they are left with. In a sense, the very idea of studying the teachers’ stress was a cause of stress for some of them! Any work with teacher they can perceive as an – albeit minimal interference with teaching freedom, will be rejected. Years of psychopaedagogical intervention have not helped teachers, even, they have spoiled the image of psychologists in school. Teachers do not want anyone to tell them how to do their work.

Our research hypotheses predicted the highest levels of stress in teachers with the conception of teaching most extremely oriented to either the helping profession or the culture transmission. We thought unease to be associated to the exaggeration of a teaching model, to the acritical application of a particular style, be it the extremely soft, willing to give up the transmission of knowledge and competence, or the most strict and authoritarian one, willing to skip the student’s wellbeing. But we discovered that the
only way for teachers to live in peace at school is to embrace the helping profession. This is probably the result of new education science, that imposed this as the only acceptable conception of teaching, thus inducing, in those teachers who do not identify themselves in this conception even higher levels of stress than they naturally are bound to feel.

Instead of further overloading teachers with further duties, and providing them with lots of notions and competences to confront bullism, disabled’s and immigrants' integration, why not introduce a psychologist in school to teach the teacher how to cope with one's stress and overcome burnout?

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References


