

## A Qualitative Analysis of Primary School Teachers' Burnout Patterns

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to propose a classification of teachers' burnout patterns. For this purpose, a qualitative analysis of different burnout patterns shown in a sample of Slovenian primary school teachers was performed. Respondents' burnout scores were obtained via the MBI-ES. Eight distinct burnout profiles emerged from the analysis, indicating that the territory between the positive and negative endpoints of teacher burnout is complex. The findings of the study could be used as a framework for future research regarding teacher burnout and for designing interventions for its amelioration.

*Keywords: primary school teachers, teacher burnout, burnout patterns, burnout profiles*

### Introduction

Burnout is a job-related syndrome that has been observed in a variety of human service professions that require an individual's intense involvement with other people. It is defined as a crisis in one's relationships with people at work. Burnout manifests itself in three dimensions. The first, emotional exhaustion, refers to the feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources. Teachers experiencing burnout thus find that they chronically suffer from a lack of emotional energy, resulting in a decline in their ability to commit themselves to students. The second dimension, depersonalization, is manifested as

an individual's psychological withdrawal from other people. In teachers, it can be seen as a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to students. The third dimension, reduced personal accomplishment, refers to a decline in one's feelings of competence and achievement, particularly with regard to one's work with clients. Teachers experiencing burnout can thus feel that they no longer contribute to their students' development and eventually experience profound disappointment (Maslach, 1993; Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996; Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

While the concept of burnout was initially restricted to the human service professions, it was later conceptualized in slightly broader terms to include the occupations that are not so clearly people-oriented. In occupations without direct personal contact with service recipients or with only casual contact with people, burnout is defined as a crisis in one's relationship with work. Therefore, different labels for the three burnout dimensions are used when describing burnout in these occupations: exhaustion (in place of emotional exhaustion), cynicism (in place of depersonalization) and inefficacy (in place of reduced personal accomplishment). Exhaustion refers to a depletion of one's emotional and physical resources, cynicism reflects indifference or a distant attitude towards work, and inefficacy includes an individual's dissatisfaction with past and present accomplishments as well as one's expectations of continued effectiveness at work (Maslach et al., 1996; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). The same labels for the three burnout dimensions are usually used when discussing burnout in general, regardless of one's occupation.

Most research on burnout uses the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to assess the three dimensions. The MBI has three versions: MBI-Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS) for use with professionals in the human services, MBI-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) for use with educators, and MBI-General Survey (MBI-GS) for use with workers in other occupations. The scores for each subscale are considered separately and are not combined into a single, total score. Thus, three scores are computed for every respondent (Maslach et al., 1996).

In the last two decades, burnout has often been conceptualized as one of two endpoints on a continuum in the relationship people establish with their work. Burnout represents the negative endpoint, which is described as a state of exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. The positive endpoint has been labelled as job engagement, and it describes a positive experience with work: energy, involvement and efficacy, which are the direct opposites of the three burnout dimensions (Maslach et al., 2001; Leiter & Maslach, 2016). However, the territory between these two endpoints has not yet been clearly described. Exhaustion is often considered the first sign of the shift from the positive state of engagement toward the negative

state of burnout. Most of the research on burnout has also revealed the existence of the sequential link from exhaustion to cynicism. However, the development of inefficiency seems to be less clear, with some theories suggesting it is the last factor to emerge, while others state it has a simultaneous development in parallel with exhaustion and cynicism (Maslach et al., 2001).

More recently, some research attention has focused on the assumption that people could experience different patterns of burnout. Leiter and Maslach (2016) used the MBI-GS on two large datasets of healthcare employees and identified five distinct latent burnout profiles: two endpoint profiles of Burnout (high on all three dimensions) and Engagement (low on all three dimensions), and three intermediate “one high dimension” profiles of Overextended (high on exhaustion only), Disengaged (high on cynicism only) and Ineffective (high on inefficacy only).

## **Research problem**

In the case of teachers, the territory between the negative state of burnout (defined as high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment) and the positive state of job engagement (defined as low emotional exhaustion, low depersonalization, and high personal accomplishment) remains almost unexplored. Research evidence has thus far suggested that teacher burnout typically starts with the development of emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is also supposed to be the core feature of teacher burnout and is believed to directly cause the development of depersonalization. It seems that emotional exhaustion also leads to diminished personal accomplishment; this is theorized to happen both directly and indirectly, through depersonalization (Byrne, 1999; Genoud, Brodard & Reicherts, 2009). However, some research evidence suggests that teachers do not burn out in a homogenous manner; a study of macro-paths of burnout in teachers of different subjects revealed that only some teachers follow such a path (Brudnik, 2010).

Thus far, research on teacher burnout patterns has been limited; to the best of our knowledge, there have been only four studies on teacher burnout typologies, providing minor insights into teacher burnout patterns. In the first study, Farber (2000) described three types of burnout among teachers (“Worn-out”, “Classic” and “Under-challenged”), observed through qualitative analysis. The other three studies used cluster analyses of teachers’ burnout scores. Mojsa-Kaja, Golonka and Marek (2015), using the MBI-GS, identified three groups of teachers (“Burnout”,

“Engagement” and “Inefficacy”). At the same time, a study by Jin, Noh, Shin and Lee (2015), using the MBI-ES, identified three similar groups of teachers (“Well-adjusted”, “Distressed” and “Laissez-faire”). Finally, Guidetti, Viotti, Gil-Monte and Converso (2017), identified four teacher burnout profiles (“Enthusiastic”, “Exhausted”, “Exhausted-Indifferent” and “Exhausted-Guilty”). However, the comparison of this study with other studies is limited, as it was based on an alternative model of burnout, which adds a fourth dimension to the burnout concept (i.e., feelings of guilt, which can appear because of the negative attitudes developed and expressed on the job).

The purpose of the present study was a qualitative analysis of burnout patterns among primary school teachers. We used data that was originally collected as a part of a broader study on teacher burnout and educational beliefs in primary school teachers (Depolli Steiner, 2014). Our aim was to propose a classification of these patterns that could be used as a framework for future research on teacher burnout.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 230 schoolteachers from fourteen nine-year primary schools in urban and rural areas in Slovenia participated in the study; 84% were women, and 16% were men; their ages ranged from 24 to 62 years, with the majority of the respondents being under 45 (75%). Half of the participants taught in lower grades (Grades 1 to 5 and/or after school programs), and the other half taught in higher grades (Grades 6 to 9). Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

### **Measures**

Burnout was measured with the use of the Slovene translation of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES; Maslach et al., 1996), with 22 items, which are written in the form of statements about personal feelings or attitudes. The items are divided into three subscales: emotional exhaustion (EE; 9 items), depersonalization (DP; 5 items), and personal accomplishment (PA; 8 items). The emotional exhaustion subscale assesses the teacher’s feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by work, the depersonalization subscale assesses his/her impersonal, unfeeling response towards students, while the personal accomplishment subscale measures his/her feelings of competence and achievement in work with students. Teachers score items on a seven-point Likert scale (from

“never” to “always”). Scores on the three subscales are considered separately and are not combined into a single, total score. It is assumed that teachers will suffer from burnout when their scores on EE and DP are high, and the scores on PA are low.

The three-factor structure of the Slovenian translation of MBI-ES was confirmed with principal component analysis. Reliability of the instrument was measured by Cronbach's alpha, which was .88 for EE, .84 for DP and .54 for PA (Depolli Steiner, 2014).

## **Results and discussion**

In our sample, the teachers' scores on the three burnout dimensions were already assessed as low, average or high, using the cut-off points proposed by the MBI-ES authors (Maslach et al., 1996). This enabled us to place the teachers in groups with the same patterns of burnout scores (e.g., high-high-low, representing a high score on EE, a high score on DP and a low score on PA). As shown in Table 1, there are 27 possible patterns of burnout scores and only four of them were not present in our research sample.

**Table 1.** Possible patterns of burnout scores and their frequency in our sample

Patterns of burnout scores (EE-DP-PA)	f	%
low-low-low	52	22.6%
average-low-low	31	13.5%
low-low-average	24	10.4%
average-low-average	22	9.6%
high-low-average	16	7.0%
high-low-low	11	4.8%
low-low-high	8	3.5%
high-high-high	8	3.5%
high-average-average	8	3.5%
average-low-high	7	3.0%
high-low-high	7	3.0%
low-average-average	5	2.2%
low-average-low	5	2.2%
average-average-average	5	2.2%
high-average-high	4	1.7%

Patterns of burnout scores (EE-DP-PA)	f	%
average-average-low	3	1.3%
high-high-average	3	1.3%
high-average-low	3	1.3%
high-high-low	3	1.3%
low-average-high	2	0.9%
low-high-high	1	0.4%
average-average-high	1	0.4%
average-high-low	1	0.4%
average-high-high	/	/
low-high-average	/	/
low-high-low	/	/
average-high-average	/	/

Note: The patterns are ordered by their frequency in our sample

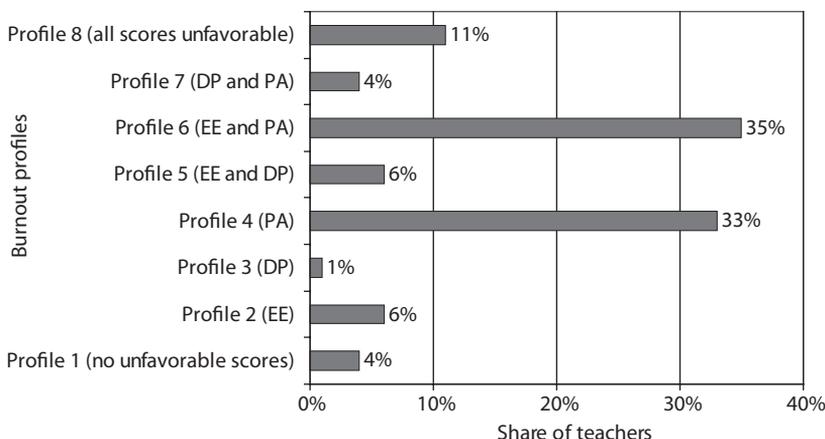
We proceeded by evaluating the burnout scores as favorable, unfavorable or highly unfavorable. The term *favorable* score depicts the teachers' positive feelings, i.e., low EE (their emotional energy is still at a high level), low DP (their attitudes toward others are positive, they see their students as persons) or high PA (they are confident that they are contributing to their students' achievement). The term *unfavorable* score depicts a moderate degradation in these feelings, i.e., a beginning of EE, a beginning of DP or a decrease in PA. The term *highly unfavorable* score depicts the teachers' highly negative experienced feelings, i.e., high EE (they feel emotionally drained), high DP (they feel callousness toward their students) or low PA (they feel ineffective and incompetent in their work with students). This evaluation of burnout scores enabled us to group together similar burnout patterns (those with negative feelings on the same dimension/dimensions, regardless of the intensity of these feelings), thus reducing 27 burnout patterns into eight burnout profiles:

- Profile 1: no unfavorable/highly unfavorable scores
- Profile 2: unfavorable/highly unfavorable score on EE
- Profile 3: unfavorable/highly unfavorable score on DP
- Profile 4: unfavorable/highly unfavorable score on PA
- Profile 5: unfavorable/highly unfavorable scores on EE and DP
- Profile 6: unfavorable/highly unfavorable scores on EE and PA
- Profile 7: unfavorable/highly unfavorable scores on DP and PA
- Profile 8: all scores unfavorable/highly unfavorable

Profiles 1 and 8 represent the positive and negative endpoints of the burnout process, respectively, while the other profiles depict the six possible intermediate states that might occur between the endpoints. As can be seen, three of these intermediate profiles have an unfavorable or highly unfavorable score only on one burnout dimension, while the other three have an unfavorable or highly unfavorable score on two burnout dimensions.

As shown in Figure 1, all the eight burnout profiles are represented in our sample. Two profiles, Profile 6 (EE and PA) and Profile 4 (PA), with roughly equal shares, emerged as the most prevalent and comprise a total of 68% of the sample. The third most prevalent profile is Profile 8 (all unfavorable), which is present in 11% of the sample. Other five profiles are less frequent and make up the remaining 21%, all with relatively low shares of the sample.

**Figure 1.** Prevalence of the eight burnout profiles



Another finding that can be derived from Figure 1 is that almost all the teachers in this study were experiencing at least one unfavorable or highly unfavorable burnout dimension, specifically predominantly diminished PA (83%) and/or increased EE (58%), while only a small share of the teachers (22%) experienced increased DP.

A large share of the teachers experiencing increased EE is expected and in concordance with the models of teacher burnout and other research evidence that considers EE to be the primary element of burnout (Byrne, 1999; Genoud et al., 2009). However, the large share of the teachers experiencing diminished PA is surprising, because the diminished PA is supposed to be the last of the three

burnout dimensions to develop according to the models of teacher burnout. One possible explanation for this can be based on Leiter and Maslach's (2016) view of the intermediate profiles: in some teachers, a diminished PA could be a sign that some positive change from a more severe level of burnout has occurred over time, meaning that their current burnout profile reflects an improvement, e.g., from Profile 8 to Profile 6 (or even Profile 4). Another possible explanation is that some teachers do not show diminished PA because of their work, i.e., as a result of their stressful work experience, but already prior to work, as a result of a low self-assessment of their teaching competences even before they actually start their teaching career.

It is possible that when entering the work situation, some teachers already experience a low PA, meaning that they do not expect to make a significant contribution to their students' development. This kind of low professional self-efficacy, when present in in-service teachers, could interact with the stressful work conditions in such a way as to create a self-perpetuating cycle. For instance, if feeling low self-efficacy leads the teacher to self-assess poor performance of his/her work tasks and simultaneously his/her students, for reasons unbeknown to him/her, do not work hard enough (i.e., because of a lack of motivation that has nothing to do with this teacher), the students consequently do not show enough progress for the teacher to feel successful, and the cycle continues. For this reason, it is very important to support teachers in such a way as to help them develop positive self-efficacy, both during their pre-service education and in-service training. Nonetheless, in order to obtain a better picture of teachers' PA and its development in relation to teachers' work experience, it would be advisable for future research to include additional variables, such as teacher self-efficacy and teachers' assessment of their professional competences.

The relatively small share of the teachers experiencing DP is also unexpected since, according to the models of teacher burnout, this burnout dimension should be the second one to appear. As these models consider DP to be a forerunner of diminished PA, it should also be present in a much larger share than diminished PA. One possible explanation for the described prevalence of the three burnout dimensions in our research sample is that burnout in teachers typically begins with diminished PA, which is followed by increased EE, while DP seems to be the last one to appear. However, this explanation is only a suggestion that should be confirmed in future research. Since our study is cross-sectional, no definite answer about the possible existence of sequential links between the eight burnout profiles can be made at this time. A longitudinal study would be required to examine the possible changes in individuals' burnout profiles over time as well as on paths that

lead to a full-blown experience of burnout. However, despite this limitation, we can argue that the prevalence of the identified burnout profiles depicts the territory between the positive and negative endpoints of burnout, which is unexpected in regard to what is already known about teacher burnout.

First, according to the models of teacher burnout (Byrne, 1999; Genoud et al., 2009), only four of the eight burnout profiles are supposed to emerge, namely the profiles that depict: (1) the positive endpoint of job engagement (Profile 1), (2) the initial stage of burnout with increased EE (Profile 2), (3) the advanced stage at which increased EE is joined by increased DP (Profile 5), and (4) the negative endpoint of burnout at which the increased EE and DP are also accompanied by diminished PA (Profile 8). However, these four profiles comprise only 27% of the sample, while the larger part of the sample remains uncovered.

Second, our results show that teachers should be sorted in more than just three groups that vary in their experience of the three burnout dimensions, as proposed by previous studies (Farber, 2000; Mojsa-Kaja et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2015).

Third, our results are also not in accordance with Leiter and Maslach's recent proposition of five latent burnout profiles (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Even though their five profiles, Burnout (equal to Profile 8), Engagement (equal to Profile 1), Overextended (equal to Profile 2), Disengaged (equal to Profile 3) and Ineffective (equal to Profile 4) seem to cover our results better than the previously described four profiles, which are theorized from the models of teacher burnout, they still include only 55% of our sample, leaving almost half of the sample uncovered. Therefore, our proposed classification offers a better description of differences in teachers' burnout patterns in our sample and is thus sufficiently functional to warrant its use.

Based on our findings, we can conclude that the territory between the positive and negative endpoints of teacher burnout is quite complex, with the presence of several burnout profiles. However, the proposed classification needs to be further confirmed. We can provide two recommendations for future studies of teacher burnout patterns. First, a large sample of teachers would be needed to allow for the use of appropriate quantitative data analysis (e.g., latent profile analysis). Second, a longitudinal study would be desirable, as it would enable researchers to make informed inferences about the stability of profiles and also about the path(s) from job engagement to burnout. Leiter and Maslach (2016) have already suggested that at least two of their intermediate profiles (Disengaged and Overextended; possibly also Ineffective) could be interpreted in two ways, either as steps to or away from a full-blown experience of burnout on three dimensions (the negative endpoint). They argue that these profiles could be an earlier, less negative fore-

runner of burnout, or an improvement, in which things are getting better, but one aspect of burnout is still problematic. The same could be suggested for teachers' intermediate profiles in our sample.

Our findings can also be helpful in educational practice in schools, if considered as a basis for developing interventions that are customized for different groups of teachers. Interventions that take account of teachers' burnout profiles would be more effective than general interventions offering the same solution regardless of individuals' unique burnout experience.

## **Conclusions**

The relevance of this study is that it represents a step forward in the research into teacher burnout. The study has succeeded in attaining its objective by proposing a workable classification of teacher burnout profiles, thus providing a framework for describing the territory between job engagement and burnout, which could be used in future research on teacher burnout. Even more, the identified burnout profiles also provide some direction for educational practice in schools. They could be used as a basis for designing more customized interventions for burnout for different groups of teachers.

However, our research is not without limitations. First, participation in the study was both voluntary and anonymous. We do not know which teachers and for what reasons chose not to participate in this study; therefore, our sample might not be representative of the overall population of primary school teachers in Slovenia. Second, a much larger sample of teachers would be desirable, enabling us to use quantitative methods of data analysis in addition to a qualitative one.

Despite these limitations, the study has succeeded in providing some novel insights into teacher burnout, which can be used in designing future studies. It has also shown that subsequent research into this area, especially regarding the development of teacher burnout profiles over time, would be a much welcome addition to the understanding of teacher burnout.

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