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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/23665
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/23665>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

COMBATING TEACHER BURNOUT: PROVEN STRATEGIES AND PREVENTION TECHNIQUES

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 12 April 2026
Final Accepted: 14 May 2026
Published: June 2026

Key words:-

Stress, Burnout, Teachers, Higher Education

Abstract

Stress is a response that our body puts in place to defend itself from external events that are perceived as harmful or dangerous. However, when the strategies put in place are no longer sufficient, the risk is that of encountering burnout syndrome. The teacher has a greater probability of developing burnout syndrome due to the conditions in which they work as they often lack the resources to achieve certain educational objectives, the salary is not adequately rewarded in relation to the educational function and very important skills are required such as emotional self-control and the ability to ensure cooperation and integration among students. In fact, it is appropriate to offer them effective strategies to deal with the onset of burnout syndrome. This research addresses this problem by conducting a survey among 45 teachers from few selected higher educational institutions in Chennai. The data are collected using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a questionnaire aimed at assessing the risk of burnout in educational profession. It is characterized by 22 items that investigate the three main scales of the questionnaire: depersonalization, reduced personal fulfillment and emotional exhaustion. This work focused in particular on establishing the general percentage of burnout within the cooperative and observing the resulting level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfillment. Finally, it was also possible to make a comparison between those who work closely with students and those who deal with administrative and organizational aspects, in order to have an even broader and clearer vision of the burnout syndrome.

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Introduction:-

Stress is a response that our body puts in place to defend itself from external events that are perceived as harmful or dangerous (Selye, 1956). However, when the strategies put in place are no longer sufficient, the risk is that of encountering burnout syndrome. This term refers to a 360° wear and tear of the person that affects the physical, spiritual, psychological and behavioral component in completely different ways (Edú-Valsania, Laguía & Moriano,

2022). It is a syndrome that mainly affects respondents who carry out the so-called helping professions (teachers, health workers, psychotherapists, etc.). Within the helping professions, a very strong and demanding bond and relationship is created because on the one hand the user seeks help to deal with a situation of discomfort and on the other hand the professional, starting with very high ideals, tries to satisfy the requests (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 2024). Unfortunately, the latter runs the risk of feeling incapable and dissatisfied with the work they are doing because their expectations may be too high and this leads them to experience personal and emotional wear and tear that will affect not only the work sphere but also the private one. In particular, the figure of the teacher or educator has a greater probability of developing burnout syndrome due to the conditions in which they work as they often lack the resources to achieve certain educational objectives, the salary is not adequately rewarded in relation to the educational function and very important skills are required such as emotional self-control and the ability to ensure cooperation and integration among students (Andela, 2021). In fact, it is appropriate to offer them effective strategies to deal with the onset of burnout syndrome. First of all, information and continuous discussion between colleagues are essential to deal with problematic situations in order to have different points of view, while secondly it is necessary to have psychological support from the institution. To address the complexity of this problem, intervention is needed at different levels, starting from the company, which must provide all the tools necessary for respondents to deal with all possible stress situations in order to prevent burnout syndrome. All this becomes possible when information is clear and timely and educates all staff to promote healthy and correct lifestyles.

Objectives of the study:-

The present study aims to explore the burnout syndrome among teachers of higher educational institutions in Chennai. And its first aim is to establish the general percentage of burnout within the study area under examination and the consequent level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfilment in the figures who deal with students. Finally, the second objective proposes a comparison between those who are primarily into teaching and those teachers who deal mostly with the administrative responsibilities.

Review of Literature:-**Work-related stress and burnout:-**

Work-related stress is defined as “a condition that may be accompanied by physical, psychological or social disorders or dysfunctions and is a consequence of the fact that certain individuals do not feel able to meet the demands or expectations placed on them” (Stranks, 2005). However, not all stress conditions that may occur in the workplace are to be considered as work-related stress.

Burnout could be defined as the inability of workers to manage stress with consequent disengagement for their role and is very often “characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfilment” (Edú-Valsania, Laguía&Moriano, 2022). It is therefore a syndrome that leads to a slow and inexorable loss of idealism, energy, goals, motivations and expectations: it is a state of fatigue and frustration that arises and develops when one is too devoted to a cause, a relationship or a way of life that has not produced, despite the effort employed, the results and success expected.

Maslach (1998) described burnout as a disease that mainly affects respondents in the helping professions and not only, and in particular all those who are more motivated or who have great expectations for the work role they cover. Therefore, burnout turns out to be a form of interpersonal stress that distances the user due to his emotional involvement with the people who ask for help. Subsequently, to better understand the phenomenon, the definition is modified and three interdependent dimensions are identified: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and the feeling of ineffectiveness. Emotional exhaustion is the central characteristic of burnout but alone is not sufficient to trigger this syndrome. In this case, exhaustion is not only characterized by the stress that burnout entails, it is also composed of the relationships that an individual has in his workplace. Through emotional exhaustion, the individual isolates himself from his job both emotionally and cognitively, probably to overcome the excessive workload. The symptoms of emotional exhaustion are multiple and can manifest themselves both alone and in association and consist of: headaches, nausea, anger, increasing tensions and conflicts, chronic fatigue, insomnia, muscle tension, depression and psychic impotence. The consequences of emotional exhaustion become evident when one perceives that one has exceeded one's physical and psychic limits and feels such a sensation of emptiness that one has the impression of no longer having the ability to offer something good and concrete to others (Calin, Tasente&Seucea, 2022)).

The causes of burnout:-

The causes of burnout are many and very often do not depend only on personal motivations, but must be sought within work contexts that are most often inadequate. In this context, the causes of burnout shall be understood by exploring the relationship that exists between the individual and the work environment the person occupies.

Maslach&Leiter (2016) formulated an interpretative model of burnout that highlights the level of adaptation/maladaptation between work and person. According to these authors, the burnout syndrome has a greater chance of developing when there is a strong difference between the nature of the work and the nature of the people who carry out that work.

These differences can lead to the manifestation of burnout and can be experienced in 6 areas of working life (Maslach&Leiter, 2022):-

1. Work overload: it is the most obvious sign of the difference between work and people because the world of work requires producing a lot of material, in a short time and with few resources and this leads to damage in quality, ruins the bonds between colleagues and inhibits innovation.
2. Lack of control: in the world of work people want to bring their own initiatives, make choices, make decisions and be responsible for the innovations they put forward but this is not possible due to the many rigid policies within companies that must keep all staff performance under control. This type of control produces a humiliating effect because workers understand that what they produce is never enough.
3. Lack of rewards: workers do not feel gratified for what they do both from an economic and personal point of view. They feel devalued and experience the loss of internal recognition that occurs when a person is happy to do something that produces a positive effect and that has value for others
4. Sense of community and belonging is in crisis: people lose the positive bonds created by colleagues because work can isolate them physically, technology replaces people or it is the type of work done that freezes relationships. All this leads to conflicts that are often unresolved and chronic, resulting in anger, frustration, anxiety, fear and disrespect.
5. Poor equity: equity within a workplace means respect and recognition of one's role; if this is missing, there is no trust in others and all the relationships and values that employees have shared are broken.
6. Discordance of values: there is discordance of values when our personal principles do not coincide with those of the company, because a job can lead to carrying out activities that clash with our personal beliefs.

Therefore, the main characteristics that characterize a person at risk of burnout are the following (Seibt&Kreuzfeld, 2021):-

- Excessive meticulousness and tendency to idealize reality;
- Immense dedication to work;
- Uninteresting and unsatisfying private life;
- Need to keep everything under control;
- Authoritarianism;
- Excessive obsession with achieving a pre-established goal or objective;
- Strong feeling of helping others;
- Excessive ambition;
- Unrealistic expectations
- Excessive enthusiasm and scrupulousness.

Maslach (1998) speaks precisely of a difficulty for people to understand what their own limits and those of others are and to draw the boundaries between private life and professional life. The author then listed the possible psychological characteristics of a subject affected by burnout: "the worker most exposed to burnout tends to be a weak person, submissive and submissive in relationships with others, often also anxious and fearful, when he has to get personally involved. In the context of professional performance, he often tends to give in to the user's requests, rather than providing adequate answers according to his own possibilities; he is reserved, conventional, compliant and tries to establish the sense of his own personal value, gaining the approval and acceptance of others" (Doğan, Ertuğrul& Akin, 2024).

Symptoms of burnout:-

Burnout syndrome also presents some more or less visible and more or less serious symptoms that can manifest themselves on a physical, psychological and behavioral level and that obviously differ from person to person. On a psychological level, the subject experiences feelings of disappointment, suffering, intolerance, cynicism, indifference, guilt and personal and professional failure. ForRadka (2021) all this negativity is caused by an

alteration of mood that leads the subject to have low self-confidence. This is followed by behavioral disorders characterized by aggressive and surly attitudes towards colleagues and the manifestation of a strong disengagement towards work, with consequent low attitude towards everything that surrounds us. Finally, and most likely the most frequent, psychosomatic disorders that manifest themselves in various organs.

Burnout in teachers:-

The concept of burnout, since the very first research, has almost always been associated with the figure of the teacher, who, in addition to carrying out a teaching activity and therefore transmitting knowledge, also carries out an educational and formative function in the perspective of lifelong learning. However, compared to other professional categories, teachers present high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In fact, although the consequences of burnout are detectable in any professional activity, "the intensity and pervasiveness of the stress reactions reported by teachers seem to be even more critical than what happens to other types of workers who operate in relational contexts, such as health workers"(Oliveira et al., 2021).

The explanation could be found in the amount of time that the teacher spends with his/her students, which on average is around 4/5 hours a day, five days a week, for education cycles that reach five years with an average of about 60 students per class. Burnout in this case can be defined as a real syndrome that involves the person both physically and emotionally, but also psychologically. Teachers are required to have a great capacity for emotional control and at the same time they must understand and influence the behaviors and emotions of the students, guarantee integration, prevent or reduce forms of inequality and ensure emotional well-being by trying to understand and motivate the difficulties and insecurities that students may encounter. To this emotional control, there is also the ability to put oneself in the shoes of the role of mediator, dealing with that student who puts into action counterproductive behaviors often accompanied by feelings of suffering and anger. However, this does not seem to be the only reason that attests to an increase in burnout syndrome because there is another related path, which causes more discomfort and frustration, which is that of the devaluation of the profession(Llorca-Pellicer, Soto-Rubio & Gil-Monte, 2021). Over the last few years, the institution has undergone many changes due to new political reforms, variations in the labor market and social transformations, which have inevitably contributed to implementing the figure of the teacher, his role and his function, raising the expectations of families, students, institutions and public opinion (Radka, 2021).

The work of the teacher is defined as engaging because very often those who choose it have specific characteristics, so much so that it is defined as a vocation because in addition to taking care of the didactic and programming component, the teacher must cooperate with the family and those margins of educational freedom that he possesses are ambiguous and difficult to delimit. According to Palacios et al. (2021), the teacher's work can be defined as high touch, or with a high level of relationality, because the teacher, in addition to having to carry out specific tasks of his job, finds himself managing relationships with students, trying to understand their requests and needs. "It is not enough for the teacher, in fact, to know everything about the subject he deals with if he then neglects the needs of his students, or if he does not understand the relationships and dynamics within the organization" (Kalynychenko et al., 2021). Finally, the teaching profession, precisely because it is based on the teacher-student relationship and has as its goal the individual and intellectual growth of the student, is to be considered at high risk of burnout. Burnout affects teachers, in different ways and intensities, when the attitude of care towards others, which is essential to create relational teaching, is missing. Burnout, therefore, occurs in the teacher, blocking and hindering change and educational development.

The triggers of burnout in teachers:-

The factors that cause burnout in teachers are many, since burnout is a form of psychosocial distress that occurs in the relationship between the individual and the work environment. Teachers are therefore subjected to numerous stressors that may have to do with the very nature of their work, with the characteristics of students, colleagues, administrative staff and with the college/university management. For example, a large class requires a great expenditure of energy in managing relationships and teaching and this can cause a decline in motivation. Or a class characterized by students with antisocial or provocative behaviors can lead the teacher to implement aggressive attitudes or cynical responses. At the same time, another source of stress can be given by the presence of parents who can assume aggressive attitudes and uncivil relationships against the teacher or the institution. Finally, other stress factors can be given by the hierarchy, difficult relationships between colleagues and precarious and undefined hiring role (Marić et al., 2021). Therefore, in order to better understand the problem, it is important to analyze teacher burnout taking into account the different triggering factors that for practical reasons are divided into three macro-categories: individual factors, organizational factors and socio-cultural factors.

The effects of burnout on teachers:-

The effects of burnout on teachers are very similar to those of burnout in general since in both situations psychosomatic pathologies occur. However, the teacher tends to assume attitudes of detachment, both physical and emotional, when the care relationship is lacking. Marić et al. (2021) tried to outline the symptoms of burnout in teachers by proposing three levels: the performance level, the relationship level and the emotional-behavioral level. According to the authors, at the performance level, several problems arise, including: difficulty in organizing one's time, inability to meet various deadlines, desire to leave the workplace, dissatisfaction with one's work and low levels of productivity. While at the interpersonal relationship level, aggressive behavior towards others, introverted attitudes, difficulty in relationships with colleagues and frequent conflicts with the lack of will to cooperate and demotivation towards group work can be noted. Finally, at the behavioral and emotional level, the following may emerge: loss of appetite, low self-esteem, use of substances (alcohol, tranquilizers, caffeine), alienation, difficulty in relaxing, development of frequent illnesses, joint pain and continuous negative thoughts (Parker, Tavella&Hopcraft, 2023).

Research Methodology:-

The research study, carried out among the teachers of few higher educational institutions in Chennai, focused on assessing the risk of burnout for all the respondents who work there. To carry out this research, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used, a questionnaire aimed at assessing the risk of burnout in educational professions (Maslach, Jackson E & Leiter, 1997). It is characterized by 22 items that investigate the three main scales of the questionnaire: depersonalization, reduced personal fulfillment and emotional exhaustion. The sample consists of 45 faculty members who work at few selected higher educational institutions at Chennai.

Results:-

Objective 1: to establish the percentage of burnout within the cooperative under examination and the consequent level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfillment. The sample of 45 teachers studied, belonging to the different higher educational institutions, presents a general condition of low level burnout (low level: 70.6%, medium level 26.7%, high level 2.7%). The level of burnout in terms of three different aspects: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfillment are presented below.

Emotional exhaustion:-

Emotional exhaustion is the main characteristic of burnout and is revealed as a perception that makes the individual feel in constant tension and emotionally detached from others (Kalynychenko et al., 2021). However, this criterion is fundamental but is not sufficient to determine the onset of burnout. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion is not something that is felt, but it is only the beginning that leads the subject to put in place barriers of distance between themselves, their work and others. The main signs of emotional exhaustion are: psychological impotence, desperation, depression, anger, impatience, irritability, fatigue, grumpiness, headaches, nausea, muscle tension and sleep disorders.

The questionnaire showed that the respondents present a medium-low level of burnout risk (low level 58%, medium level 41%) but among them, 1% of them present a high level of risk. Teachers who involve primarily into teaching and teachers who involve more into administrative responsibilities have an equal score confirming as previously the presence of medium-low burnout (low level 50%, medium level 44%), however, despite a low score it should be noted that 6% of them are at high risk.

Furthermore, the only coordinator who responded to the questionnaire has a low risk of burnout (low risk 100%). As for the teachers with administrative responsibilities, however, there is a low risk (low level 67%, medium level 22%) but there is a fairly considerable percentage of high risk which is 11%. Finally, the pure teaching staff has a low level of burnout (low level 94%, medium level 0%, high level 6%). In essence, the questionnaire showed that the level of emotional exhaustion among all the respondents who participated is the following: 60% low risk, 36% medium risk, 3% high risk.

Depersonalization:-

Depersonalization is a response to burnout and a consequence of emotional exhaustion that occurs when not enough strategies are put in place to counteract it. Depersonalization leads the person to develop a high sense of cynicism and to distance themselves from all work-related issues (Ferrari, 2020). The main signs that characterize depersonalization are: "negative attitudes of detachment, cynicism, coldness and hostility constitute the attempt to

protect oneself from exhaustion and disappointment, minimizing one's involvement in work. A frequent consequence of depersonalization is the perception of guilt by the operator" (Palacios et al., 2021).

From the questionnaire it emerged that the general percentage obtained for depersonalization is the following: low risk 91%, medium risk 6%, high risk 3%. Confirming also in this case a prevalence of low risk regarding the development of burnout. In this case, unlike the area of emotional exhaustion, pure teachers and teachers with administrative responsibilities obtained very encouraging scores that oscillate between 100% and 83%, highlighting that in their work they do not put into practice negative and cynical attitudes neither towards others nor towards themselves, characteristics that are typical of a subject in the burnout phase.

Reduced personal fulfillment:-

Reduced personal fulfillment is characterized by a total lack of confidence in one's own abilities and very often attitudes of escape, dismissal or continuous and prolonged absences from the workplace develop (Burns et al., 2021). The main symptoms that characterize reduced personal fulfillment are the following: inadequacy, the subject may feel incompetent towards their work, low confidence in their own abilities, self-esteem decreases and the first symptoms of depression may appear (Kalynychenko et al., 2021). Finally, regarding the reduced personal fulfillment of the sample examined, the following scores emerged: low level 67%, medium level 31% and high level 2%. In this case, the category of pure teachers presents a medium-low level (low risk 58%, medium risk 41%, high risk 2%). The teachers with administrative responsibilities present a low level of burnout development (low risk 75%, medium risk 22%, high risk 2%). Objective 2: To make a comparison between those who are primarily into teaching and those who take administrative responsibilities mostly. By comparing respondents who are primarily into teaching with those who are more into administrative responsibilities, it emerged that in both cases the risk of burnout is relatively low, with the only difference that both of them have a greater probability of developing a medium risk burnout.

Discussion and possible intervention strategies:-

The investigation of the burnout situation, carried out among the teachers of higher educational institutions, using Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), shows a low level burnout condition (low level 70.6%, medium level 26.7%, high level 2.7%). The questionnaire was administered during November and December 2024 and involved 45 respondents. This study did not investigate a possible correlation between the degree of burnout and the age of the workers since they are mostly figures aged between 26 and 58 years. Furthermore, it was not possible to highlight further correlations between the degree of burnout and gender because most of the respondents are female (41 out of 45). However, thanks to this study it was possible to observe whether the respondents present the burnout syndrome and whether there is a difference between those who work closely with students and those who deal with organizational and administrative aspects. In fact, one of the most significant data that deserves attention concerns the area of emotional exhaustion which in pure teachers and teachers more into administrative responsibilities is characterized by 42% against 25%.

This study helps to have a vision of the worker's profile in relation to the symptoms of burnout and therefore understand if these are present, which are the most frequent, what their intensity is and how much they influence and interfere with the normal functioning of the subject. This study allows us to understand how serious burnout is within the structure and if it compromises relationships within the workplace. Furthermore, it also provides us with ideas to understand if there are repercussions within the family environment. Strategies to prevent burnout in work contexts must take into account psychosocial risks, motivational aspects and factors that can cause organizational changes. However, Maslach&Leiter (2022) in several of their studies have shown that the support of the work group and the possibility of expressing and sharing work or personal problems, while trying, at the same time, to create or find new solutions, can significantly reduce burnout.

Communication and social support are already two prevention techniques that are implemented at the time of training, given that in burnout the aspects at play are multiple and therefore prevention techniques must focus simultaneously on different fronts that concern the individual in his totality, the work context in which he works and the interpersonal relationships he establishes (Sandrin, 2022).

In the work environment, in this regard, Maslach& Leiter (2016) proposes three fundamental factors (collaborate, personalize and commit) that serve to encourage participation and achieve lasting changes. In fact, collaboration implies that all employees contribute to the improvement of the organization or an aspect of it and that each of them has a key role in the change process. Collaboration begins when a problem is identified and all employees work to

solve it by implementing continuous exchanges of information. Personalization implies the adaptation of a change, which follows the principle of corporate culture and is inherent to the sector of employment. The personalization of initiatives occurs when within the organization the correspondences between employees are harmonious and collaborative, such as to increase the probability of success. Finally, commitment is a support and an effort towards changes because the problems may not be resolved immediately and therefore the possible solutions may require a longer intervention and with the possibility of new changes and adaptations. However, if all the employees involved share the main objective, they will be more motivated to commit themselves to achieving the expected results (Maslach & Leiter, 2022).

However, whatever method is chosen to intervene to prevent burnout, the essential element is clear and transparent communication that creates the conditions in advance to prevent events that, if neglected or untreated, could lead the individual to face very serious and burdensome situations at an individual, work and social level. Even with regard to the teachers, it is appropriate to implement intervention strategies when the first symptoms appear, especially because the phenomenon of burnout is multidimensional and is intertwined with both individual and extra-individual factors such as society, institutions, organizations and culture. To conclude, this work focused in particular on establishing the general percentage of burnout among the respondents and observing the resulting level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfillment. Finally, it was also possible to make a comparison between those who work closely with students and those who deal with administrative and organizational aspects, in order to have an even broader and clearer vision of the burnout syndrome.

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