

## **Teacher's Personality and the Burnout Syndrome**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction.** Ever since the 1980s, stress and burnout have become serious issues affecting millions of workers (Farber, 1983). Due to its stressful nature, teaching profession is a target of burnout (Cherniss, 1980, Jarvis 2002, Maslach 1982, Weisberg & Sagie 1999).

**Objectives.** The objective of this study was to determine the level of the three dimensions of burnout within the sample.

**Method.** The experimental design aims to use the following methods of psychological investigations: Maslach Burnout Inventory - General Scale (MBI-GS, Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach & Jackson, 1996) and Berkeley test - Harare Institute of Advanced Psychology, San Francisco (Eileen Donahue).

**Results.** After analyzing the behavior of depersonalization in teachers, we realized the following aspects: less experienced teachers may suffer from burnout as a result of a feeling of powerlessness; a teacher who experiences low self-esteem and is isolated from students will not be able to perform well.

**Conclusions.** Burnout results from the chronic perception that one is unable to cope with daily life demands. The reviewed research indicates that each type of prevention can be useful in helping teachers contend with an occupation that puts them at risk for burnout.

**Keywords:** teaching profession, burnout, cope, demands

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## **I. Introduction**

Ever since the 1980s, stress and burnout have become serious issues affecting millions of workers (Farber, 1983). Due to its stressful nature, teaching profession is a target of burnout (Cherniss, 1980, Jarvis 2002, Maslach 1982, Weisberg & Sagie 1999).

Researchers in personality can approach their task from many different points of view, depending on their basic assumptions about people. Harry Stack Sullivan considers that "personality" is simply a name for each person's pattern of interpersonal behaviors. To understand personality he looked at the pattern consisting of what a person did with others, said to others and believed about others. According to Sullivan, a person's self (the rough equivalent of Freud's ego) does not develop to mediate unconscious conflicts, but to preserve feelings of security in an interpersonal world in which anxiety is the major threat. The self acts like a benevolent authority figure, by guiding the development of personality, trying to maintain security with other people, seeking prestige and protecting against anxiety through maneuvers similar to Freud's ego defense mechanisms. When anxiety becomes too severe, these maneuvers become so extreme or so rigid that they disturb interpersonal relationship results. According to Sullivan, psychological disorders develop when disturbed interpersonal relationships become so taxing, cumbersome, or frustrating that constructive interactions with other people are not possible anymore.

Leary's model of interpersonal behavior contains two primary dimensions. The vertical dimension ranges from dominance to submission, the horizontal one from love to hate. Each of the eight blocks represents a blend of power (dominance-submission) and affiliation (love-hate) in interpersonal behavior. The first word in the label, appearing in the outer ring of each wedge, describes a mild form of the behavior contained in that wedge, the second word refers to an extreme form of that specific behavior. The intensity of a behavior increases from the center to perimeter. For example, "guide, advise teach", in its extreme form, becomes "seeks, respect, compulsively, pedantic, dogmatic actions".

Sullivan described the importance of interpersonal styles, but he left it to others to chart these styles and their relationship to one another. In this model, Timothy Leary and his associates think that all interpersonal behaviors are seen as blending degrees of power (dominance or submission) and of affiliation (love or hate). The result is eight styles of behavior, such as the competitive- narcissistic style and the

docile-dependent style. The arrangement of the styles predicts, first of all, the behaviors which are likely to appear together in the same person. Behaviors that appear next to each other are likely to occur together in an individual; behaviors appearing in direct opposition to each other are unlikely to appear in the same person. Thus, for example a person who shows cooperative-overconventional behavior is more likely to display docile-dependent behavior than to show self-effacing-masochistic behavior. A great deal of the empirical research on Leary's system and similar models (Wiggins & Broughton, 1985) has supported the accuracy of their predictions.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this study was to determine the level of the three dimensions of burnout within the sample.

1. Evaluation of teachers' stress level measured by the following indicators: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment.
2. Evaluation of teachers' real and ideal personality profile measured by the following indicators: self-image, real image, hetero image and ideal image.
3. Identification of the correlation between teachers' occupational stress indicators of real self-image and ideal self-image indicators.

In this research paper we have checked the following hypotheses:

1. It is presumed that there is a direct correlation between the real self-image and the teachers' level of stress.
2. It is presumed that there is a direct correlation between the valorization of hetero-image and teachers' stress levels in terms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment.

## **II. Methods**

The experimental design aims to use the following methods of psychological investigations:

- Maslach Burnout Inventory - General Scale (MBI-GS, Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach & Jackson, 1996)
- Berkeley test - Harare Institute of Advanced Psychology, San Francisco (Eileen Donahue).

## **III. Results**

The research samples included 51 teachers from primary and secondary schools, aged 19-42 years old from Constanta.

In order to test the first hypothesis the following tools were applied to the sample of subjects: Maslach Burnout Inventory and Berkeley test.

Freudenberger (1974), a psychiatrist, is

largely credited for using the term first. Maslach and Jackson refined the meaning and measurement of the burnout construct in the 1980s (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993) to include three sub-domains: (1) depersonalization, in which one distances oneself from others and views others impersonally;

(2) reduced personal accomplishment, in which one devalues the work with others; and

(3) emotional exhaustion, in which one feels emptied of personal emotional resources and becomes highly vulnerable to stressors.

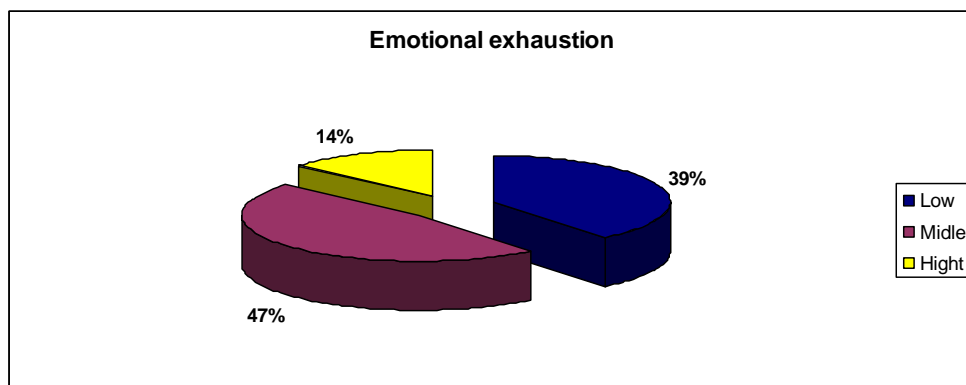
In particular, depersonalization may be expressed through poor attitudes towards students and work environment. Teachers may be at a greater risk for depersonalization because their daily work life often includes large doses of isolation from their professional peers. While teachers interact with others on a regular basis throughout the workday, the majority of such interactions are with students, and not with other teachers or professional staff members who might better understand the demands teachers face.

Factors such as the physical layout of most campuses, with teachers working alone in their classrooms, and scheduling constraints that make

finding time to meet with peers virtually impossible, can cause teachers' feeling of disconnection (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). Depersonalization may act as a protective mechanism, as demonstrated by the descriptions of "worn-out" teachers, whose cynical views towards students and teaching allowed them to continue to remain in the field, even with a diminished capacity (Farber, 1998). While depersonalization may act as protection for teachers, it may also encourage isolation, strengthening the risk for burnout.

An important finding from early studies was that teachers at risk of burnout came to see their work as futile and inconsistent with the ideals or goals they had set for themselves, as teachers, in the beginning (Bullough & Baughman, 1997). Other early studies cited role conflict and role ambiguity as significantly related to burnout (Dworkin, 1986). Role conflict occurs when a teacher deals with conflicting expectations of the job. For example, role conflict may arise from discrepancies between ideals of what it means to be a good teacher. Role ambiguity relates more to a sense of confusion about one's goals as a teacher, including a sense of uncertainty about the responsibilities related to teaching.

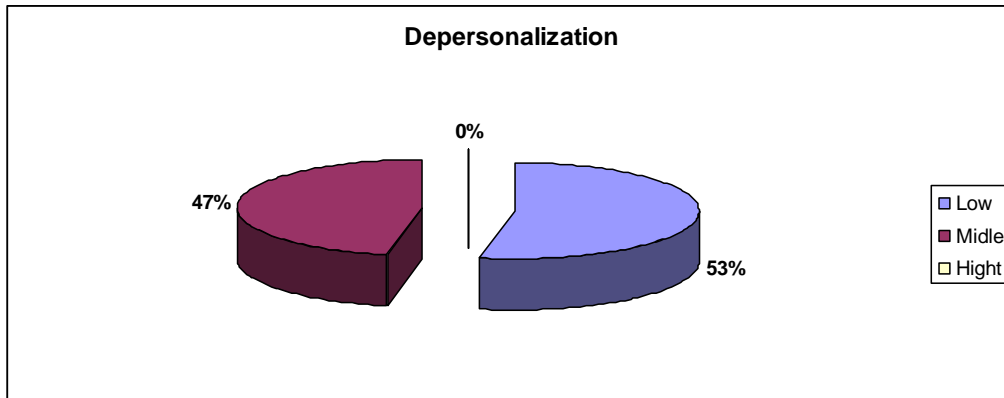
Figure 1. The level of emotional exhaustion



After testing, 39% of the subjects presented a low or minimum level of emotional exhaustion, 47% an average level (middle) and 14% high level of

intensity. Viewed from a dynamic standpoint, burnout is a process that involves a negative evolution of behaviors and attitudes, as a response to work effort.

Figure 2. The level of depersonalization



Depersonalization: indifference and a pessimistic approach toward students, manifested especially by utilizing disapproving labels to describe them.

After analyzing the behavior of depersonalization in teachers, we realized the following aspects:

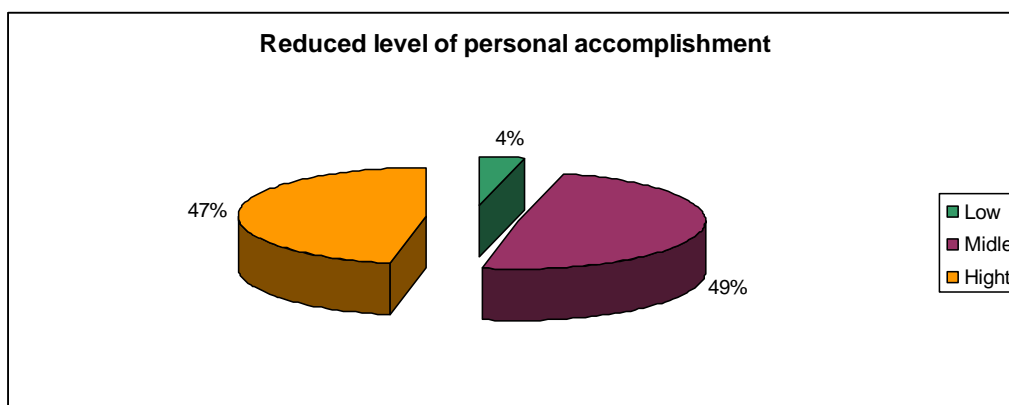
- Less experienced teachers may suffer from burnout as a result of a feeling of powerlessness.
- A teacher who experiences low self-esteem

and is isolated from students will not be able to perform well.

In our study the results are: 53% of subjects presented low or minimum level of depersonalization, 47% an average level of intensity.

In addition, teachers' burnout has been shown to have negative effects on both teachers and students' performance. Teachers who are confused about their job specifications will develop feelings of depersonalization.

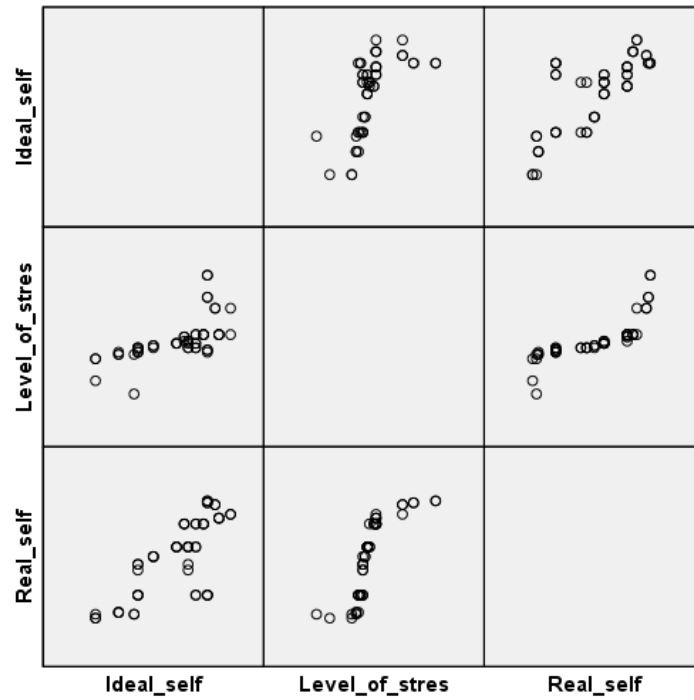
Figure 3. The level of personal accomplishment



Dissatisfaction and increases in tiredness, increases in work pressures and role conflict. Again, less experienced teachers may perceive high levels of burnout as they have to cope with the changes in a new environment.

Less experienced teachers are more likely to experience burnout and conflict-inducing attitudes towards the students. The results of the research show a direct correlation between the real self-image and the teachers' level of stress.

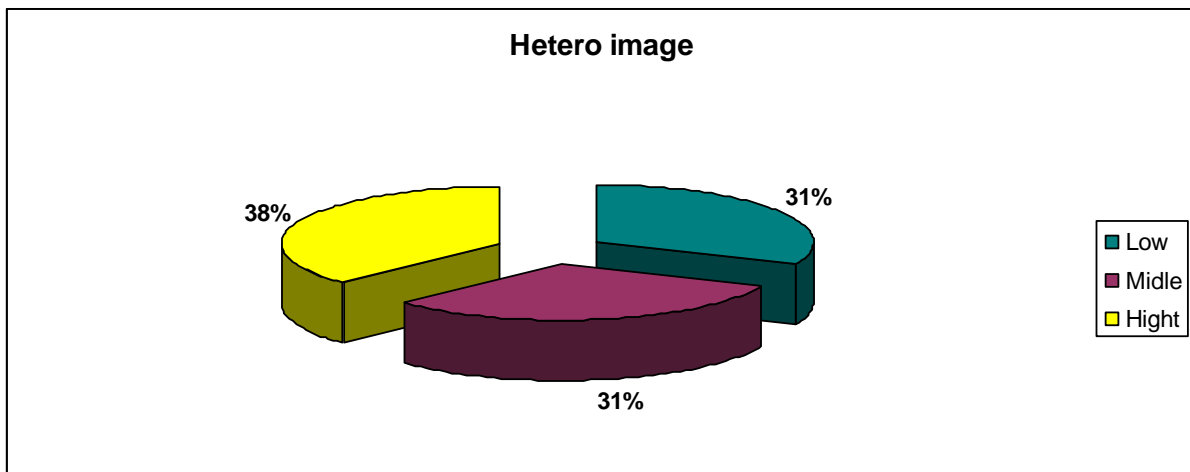
Figure 4. Matrix correlation of real self image, ideal self image and level of stress



The correlation coefficient registered between the level of fatigue syndrome and the level of self-image is  $r=0,796$ , a positive coefficient at a

significance level  $p < 0,01$  that indicates a direct correlation between these two characteristics: high level of fatigue syndrome and self-image.

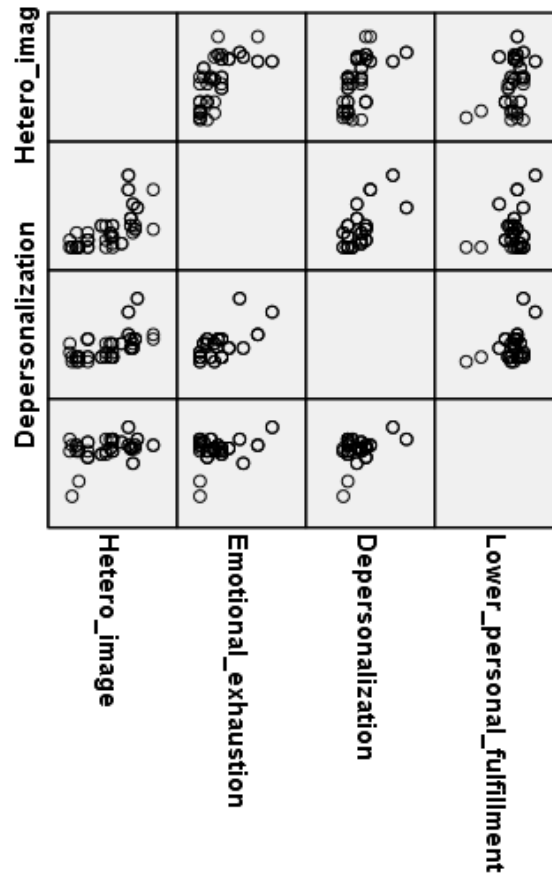
Figure 5. Teachers' hetero image



After testing, 31% of subjects presented a low or minimum level of hetero image, 31% an average

level and 38% high level of intensity.

Figure 6. Matrix correlation of hetero image and stress level



The correlation coefficient registered between the level of fatigue syndrome and the level of self-image is  $r=0,680$ , a positive coefficient at a significance level  $p<0,01$  that indicates a direct correlation between these two characteristics: hetero image and level of stress.

**Discussions**

Many teachers find the demands of being a professional educator in today's schools difficult and at times stressful. When work stress results in teacher burnout, it can have serious consequences for the health and happiness of teachers, students, professionals and of the families they interact with on a daily basis. When a potentially threatening event is encountered, a reflexive, cognitive balancing act ensues, which weighs the perceived demands of the event against one's perceived ability to deal with them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Events perceived as potential threats trigger the stress response, a series of physiological and psychological changes that occur when coping capacities are seriously challenged. The most typical trigger to the stress response is the perception that one's coping resources are *inadequate for handling life*

*demands*. According to the current models of stress, we are constantly measuring the daily demands we experience in life and comparing them to the resources we possess for facing the demands. If our resources appear equal to the demands, we see the latter as mere challenges. If, however, demands are viewed as exceeding our resources, they become stressors and they trigger the stress response. Accordingly, teachers' stress may be seen as the perception of an imbalance between demands at school and the resources teachers have for coping with them (Esteve, 2000; Troman & Woods, 2001). Symptoms of stress in teachers can include anxiety and frustration, impaired performance and ruptured interpersonal relationships at work and at home (Kyriacou, 2001). Researchers (Lecompte & Dworkin, 1991; Farber, 1998; Troman & Woods, 2001) note that teachers who experience stress over long periods of time may experience what is known as burnout.

Matheny, Gfroerer, and Harris (2000) noted that earlier research into the phenomenon described burnout as a loss of idealism and enthusiasm for work. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) developed a more

extensive description of burnout as an extreme type of role-specific alienation with a focus on feelings of meaninglessness, especially as it applies to one's ability to successfully reach students, a finding also supported by Farber (1998). LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) identified powerlessness in defining professional roles as being instrumental in creating stress. Additionally, a sense of both physical and mental exhaustion exacerbated by the belief that expectations for teachers are constantly in flux, or in conflict with previously held beliefs, has been cited by numerous researchers as influencing teachers' burnout (Bullough & Baughmann, 1997; Brown & Ralph, 1998; Hinton & Rotheiler, 1998; Esteve, 2000; Troman & Woods, 2001).

Teaching has been identified by some researchers as a particularly stressful occupation (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977, Savchi & Cooley, 1983, in Moshe Tatar, Gabriel Horenczyk, 2003). Negative aspects of the job such as unmotivated and difficult students, decreasing resources, increasing class sizes and rigid administrative practices are among the stressors faced by teachers (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977, Savchi & Cooley, 1983). As a result of stressful aspects of teaching, psychological burnout may occur, represented by deteriorating work performance (low moral, selfishness, dropping out of teaching), negative psychological states (depression, frustration, anger), and physiological conditions (headaches, psychosomatic symptoms, ulcers). Psychological burnout among teachers has been offered as one reason for capable teachers leaving the profession for other careers (Schwab and Iwanicki, 1972, Mark & Anderson, 1978).

A considerable body of research findings has accumulated during the past ten years from investigations of psychological burnout (Burke and Richardson in press, Shirom, 1989, Cherniss, 1990, Maslach, 1982, Pines Aronson & Kafry, 1981, Golembwieski, 1984, Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Researchers view burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment occurring among individuals who work with other people. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by one's contact with other people. Depersonalization refers to an unfeeling and callous response toward these people who are usually the recipients of one's service or care. Albee (2000), one of the pioneers of prevention research, points out that, "It is publicly accepted in health doctrine that no disease or disorder has ever been treated out of existence" (p. 847). It is far better if the roots of teachers' burnout are identified and eliminated before

the development of syndrome, rather than treating it after it already occurred. Across the various medical professions, a distinction has been made between three levels of prevention interventions: (a) Primary prevention, where the goal is to reduce the incidence of new cases of a disorder, (b) secondary prevention, where the goal is the early identification and treatment of symptoms before they turn into a full-developed disorder, and (c) tertiary prevention, where persons who have recently suffered from a disorder receive some type of intervention to prevent relapse (Conyne, 1991). Such preventive interventions may either be done at the organizational level, with changes in school environment, or at the individual level, in which the goal is to strengthen teachers' resources in order to resist under stressful circumstances.

Organizational practices that prevent teacher burnout are generally those that allow teachers some control over their daily challenges. At the individual level, self-efficacy and the ability to maintain perspective with regard to daily events have been described as "anxiety-buffers" (Greenberg, 1999). At the institutional level, other factors may help mitigate teachers' stress. Chris Kyriacou (2001) draws from an Education Service Advisory Committee report (1998) and offers the following pieces of advice to schools:

- Consult with teachers on matters, such as curriculum development or instructional planning, which directly impact their classrooms.
- Provide adequate resources and facilities to support teachers in instructional practice.
- Provide clear job descriptions and expectations in an effort to address role ambiguity and conflict.
- Establish and maintain open lines of communication between teachers and administrators to provide administrative support and performance feedback that may act as a buffer against stress.
- Allow and encourage professional development activities such as mentoring and networking, which may engender a sense of accomplishment and a more fully developed professional identity for teachers.

Efforts in secondary prevention focus primarily on early detection of problems before they emerge as full-developed disorders. The symptoms of teachers' stress contributing to burnout may take many forms (Brown & Ralph, 1998). Studies by several researchers (c.f., Brown & Ralph, 1998; Hinton & Rotheiler, 1998; Kyriacou, 2001; Troman & Woods, 2001) report the following as early symptoms of teachers' stress and burnout:

- Feeling like not going to work or actually missing for days
- Difficulty in concentrating on tasks
- Feeling overwhelmed by the workload and having a related sense of inadequacy to the tasks given to them
- Withdrawing from colleagues or engaging in conflictive relationships with co-workers
- Having a general feeling of irritation regarding school
- Experiencing insomnia, digestive disorders, headaches and heart palpitations
- Incapacitation and inability to function professionally

Once teachers' burnout has occurred, a decision must be made as to whether the teachers can or are willing to continue their work. Troman and Woods (2001) acknowledge that a series of stressful events or a single major event may lead teachers to make what they named 'pivotal decisions.' Although teachers go through many such events throughout their career, the teachers interviewed by Troman and Woods rarely viewed decisions made in response to high levels of stress as transformative in the positive sense.

Personal factors are also involved in a teacher's decision to stay in a school, such as the current labor market, personal financial and family obligations, and years in the field. These factors are all instrumental in the decision making process. In rough economic times, teachers may stay with the relatively stable profession of teaching due to a lack of outside possibilities for a career change.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

Teachers' personalities are one of the most important factors in the teaching and learning process.

Their attitudes towards the subject and their burnout levels influence students' learning and attitudes towards school. The results of the study indicated that working experience could be considered a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout.

According to the studied literature, burnout is a complex issue that should be addressed in relation to working experience. A few ways to prevent burnout are a combination of organizational change and education for the individuals. This may prevent teachers from burning out. Workshops, conferences and other professional and personal development courses should be offered by experts to teachers so they could deal with their burnout. Therefore, professional development programs should also consider teachers

with both high and low teaching experiences.

Burnout results from the chronic perception that one is unable to cope with daily life demands. Given that teachers must face a classroom full of students every day, negotiate potentially stressful interactions with parents, administrators, counselors, and other teachers, they have a relatively low wage and shrinking school budgets, and they have to make sure that students meet increasingly strict standards of accountability, it is no wonder many experience a form of burnout at some point in their careers. Efforts in primary prevention, in which teachers' jobs are modified in order to give them more control over their environment and more resources for coping with the demands of being an educator, are preferable over secondary or tertiary interventions that occur after burnout symptoms have surfaced. However, the reviewed research indicates that each type of prevention can be useful in helping teachers contend with an occupation that puts them at risk for burnout.

In line with that, teaching competence is an additional determining stressor for less experienced teachers with limited training, as researches show significant differences between the novice and the experienced, the trained and untrained, as well as between those with and without full qualifications. In other words, teaching capability is a factor which makes the teacher who lacks training and experience feel more stressed than other teachers.

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