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Are Special Needs Teachers More Burned-Out Than Volunteers With Disabled People?

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Abstract

This study was focused on the comparison between special needs teachers and volunteers in contact with disabled people in relation to levels of burnout and representation of self and disabled people (students or users). The sample was composed by 106 special needs teachers serving in two Public Junior and Senior High Schools, and 70 volunteers in contact with disabled people attending Rehabilitation Centres in Catania (Sicily, Italy). Measures: We used the 22-items version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory and two Semantic Differentials referred to Self-image and disabled students/users. Results showed that teachers were more burned-out than volunteers. For teachers, the more the self-image was positively judged, the more the levels of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment were low. Also for volunteers, the more the self-image and disabled users were positively assessed, the more the levels of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment were low; finally, the more the self-image was positively valued by volunteers, the more the levels of depersonalization were low. Future researches could deepen the factors which affect burnout syndrome, such as self-efficacy, self-competence, self-acceptance, and other psychological dimensions of self.

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Teaching is considered a highly stressful profession (Friedman, 2000) and burnout is one of the most common reasons that drive teachers to leave their profession (Roloff & Brown, 2011). Burnout in teaching profession is described as similar to burnout at work in general (Maslach, 1982; Cherniss, 1980): it is considered as “a type of psychological distress - a chronic negative psychological condition that results as day-to-day work stressors take their toll” on educators (Roloff & Brown, 2011, p.453). Teachers who experienced burnout reported evident

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symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is experienced when teachers feel as though all of their “emotional resources are used up”; depersonalization occurs when teachers separate themselves from colleagues, family, and their friends and separation may manifest through a physical isolation or through distancing themselves emotionally; a diminished sense of personal realization is experienced by teachers who feel a sense of decreased personal value and as though they are incompetent in their careers (Maslach, 1982; Roloff & Brown, 2011). In addition, Friedman (2000) pointed out that the essence of burnout among teachers is represented by feeling of professional failure as a result of the discrepancy existing between the actual belief of personal professional competence and the ideal competence to which teachers aspire; the personal competence of teachers is related not only to teaching tasks and interpersonal relationships between teachers and their students, but also to performance of teachers in the school organization.

Several scholars highlighted that teachers at risk of burnout syndrome showed high levels of exhaustion and cynicism (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), high degree of stress caused by disruptive behavior and disciplinary problems reported by pupils in classroom (Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004; Klusmann, et al., 2008), frequent and intensive conflicts with colleagues and principal (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009), high levels of vulnerability and neuroticism and low levels of extraversion (Cano-García, Padilla-Muñoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005). For example, Kokkinos (2007) found that both personality traits and work-related stressors were associated with burnout syndrome in a sample of primary school teachers from Cyprus; particularly, for personality traits, neuroticism was a common predictor of all dimensions of burnout and, for work-related stressors, student misbehavior and time constraints were predictors of burnout. Loonstra, Brouwers, and Tomic (2009) examined the relationship between existential fulfilment (including self-acceptance, self-actualization, and self-transcendence) and burnout in a sample of secondary school teachers in the Netherlands; negative relationships between the existential fulfilment dimensions and emotional exhaustion and cynicism were found as well as positive relationships between the existential fulfilment dimensions and professional efficacy. More recently, Fisher (2011) examined the relationship among stress (in relation to classroom demands and resources), burnout, job satisfaction, and preventive coping skills (in relation to self-acceptance) of nearly secondary teachers from Southeastern United States. Low levels of stress and burnout were significant predictors of high job satisfaction; years of teaching experience, job satisfaction, and high levels of burnout were significant predictors of stress; low job satisfaction, self-acceptance, and high levels of stress were significant predictors of burnout. Also, in a sample of teachers from High Schools in New South Wales, McCormick and Barnett (2011) underlined the centrality of stress attributed to student misbehavior in predicting high levels of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment, and the occupational stress attributed to personal failure in predicting negatively personal accomplishment.

Particularly, in relation to special needs teachers, Küçüksüleymanoğlu (2011) analyzed whether burnout levels expressed by Turkish special education teachers working with mentally disabled, hearing, and orthopaedic impaired students were influenced by gender, family status, years of teaching experience, educational background, and school type. These teachers experienced burnout at very high levels, male teachers reported higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization than female colleagues, and teachers working with the orthopaedic impaired students were more emotionally exhausted and depersonalized than those working with the mentally disabled and the hearing impaired students, and, finally, teachers working with the hearing impaired students were more personal accomplished than those working with the mentally disabled and the orthopaedic impaired students. More recently, Bataineh and Alsagheer (2012) studied the influence of some sources of social support (that is, supervisors, colleagues, friends, partner, or family) on the reduction of burnout syndrome in a sample of special education teachers, noticing positive correlations between family and colleagues support and personal accomplishment, without differences for sex, age, marital status, and teaching experiences. In a recent study on burnout and self-representation expressed by Italian teachers, De Caroli and Sagone (2012) found that teachers who expressed a more positive representation of self at professional level reported low levels of emotional exhaustion and high levels of personal accomplishment; teachers who expressed a more positive representation of pupils and co-workers reported low levels, respectively, in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In addition, the representation of self at professional level influenced personal accomplishment and that of pupils affected emotional exhaustion. It meant that a positive professional self-image could be a protective factor for the risk of burnout syndrome at school context.

Considering the widespread interest for the increasing burnout in different categories of workers in contact with needy persons and potentially at risk of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization for their voluntary engagement

in difficulties and caring of beneficiaries, investigators examined some aspects mainly connected to burnout in volunteers, such as personality traits (Bakker et al., 2006), intrinsic motivation (Clary et al., 1998; Moreno-Jiménez & Villodres, 2010), psychological well-being (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), self-efficacy (Chau-wai Yan & So-kum Tang, 2003), and so on. For example, in a group of 80 volunteer counselors who cared for terminally ill patients, Bakker and his colleagues (2006) examined the relationship between burnout and personality traits, revealing that emotional exhaustion is uniquely predicted by emotional stability, depersonalization is predicted by emotional stability, extraversion, and intellect/autonomy, and personal accomplishment is predicted by extraversion and emotional stability. By Chau-wai Yan and So-kum Tang's research (2003) with a group of elderly Chinese volunteers in Hong Kong, it emerged that a long duration of voluntary work service, high levels of self-efficacy, work satisfaction, and perceived benefits predicted high personal accomplishment; short duration of voluntary work experience and good health predicted low emotional exhaustion. As found by Kulik (2006) in a group of volunteers serving in social and community services, burnout syndrome correlated positively with difficulty in relations with beneficiaries (particularly, for men) and with difficulty in relations with the provider organization (particularly, for women). Recently, Moreno-Jiménez and Villodres (2010) studied the effects of the amount of time dedicated to the organization, motivation, social support, integration in the organization, self-efficacy, and characteristics of the work on burnout, noticing that the time dedicated to volunteering and extrinsic motivations (e.g., career) predicted high levels of burnout, while intrinsic motivations (e.g., values), life satisfaction, and integration in the organization predicted low levels of burnout.

The relationship between burnout syndrome and self-image and users representation comparing special needs teachers and volunteers in contact with disabled people was not found in previous investigations and this issue constituted the rationale of the current research. The choice of these two groups derived by the motivation that guide them to work with users: the motivation guiding the volunteers is mainly intrinsic, voluntary, and no profit, while that guiding the teachers is mainly extrinsic (or professional) and profit making.

1.1. Hypotheses

This study was focused on the comparison between special needs teachers and volunteers in contact with disabled people in relation to levels of burnout and representation of Self-image and disabled people (students or users). We hypothesized that:

- special needs teachers will be more burned-out than volunteers (H_1); particularly, special needs teachers will report higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and lower levels of personal accomplishment than volunteers;
- special needs teachers will express a less positive representation of self-image and disabled students than volunteers and, on the contrary, volunteers will express a more positive representation of self-image and disabled users (H_2).

1.2. Participants

The sample of this study was composed by 106 special needs teachers (30 men and 76 women) working in two Public Junior and Senior High Schools, and 70 volunteers (30 men and 70 women) in contact with disabled people attending Rehabilitation Centres in Catania (Sicily, Italy).

1.3. Measures and procedure

Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). The Italian version of MBI for teachers is a questionnaire useful to analyze the three components of burnout (emotional exhaustion-EE; depersonalization-DP; reduced personal accomplishment-PA) in school context and it consists of 22 items for each of which the subjects express how many times they have placed themselves in proposed circumstances on a frequency scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day): for the emotional exhaustion subscale ($\alpha=.74$), e.g. "Working with people all day is really a strain for me"; for the depersonalization subscale ($\alpha=.81$), e.g. "I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally"; for the personal accomplishment subscale (reverse scoring; $\alpha=.83$), e.g. "I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work". Each dimension of burnout is divided in three levels (high, medium, low): for the

EE, the highest score of 23 indicates the high level, from 14 to 22 the medium level, and from 0 to 13 the low level; for the DP, the highest score of 6 expresses the high level, from 3 to 5 the medium level, and from 0 to 2 the low level; finally, for the PA, the highest score of 29 represents the low level, from 32 to 28 the medium level, and from 0 to 31 the high level.

Semantic Differential Technique (Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957). This is a measure consisting of 34 pairs of opposite adjectives for each concept, each evaluable on a 7-point Likert scale, referred to Self-image ($\alpha=.88$) respectively, as “special needs teacher” (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2012) and as “volunteer”, and disabled students/users ($\alpha=.86$).

1.4. Data analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out by using the SPSS 15 with the application of the following tests: Chi Square Test and linear regressions with stepwise method. Type of groups (special needs teachers vs. volunteers) and sex (men vs. women) were considered as independent variables, while levels obtained in dimensions of burnout and means in representation of self-image and disabled students/users were counted as dependent variables.

2. Results

2.1. Descriptive analysis for dimensions of burnout

2.1.1. Group of special needs teachers

Statistical analysis carried out for the group of special needs teachers in the three dimensions of burnout indicated that: 28,3% of teachers expressed high levels, 34% medium levels, and 37,7% low levels in EE, without differences among the three levels; furthermore, 20,8% of teachers displayed high levels, 13,2% medium levels, and 66% low levels in DP ($\chi^2=51,93$, $p<.001$); finally, 35,8% of teachers showed low levels, 35,8% medium levels, and 28,4% high levels in reduced PA, without significant differences among the three levels. The highest percentage of special needs teachers reported low levels in depersonalization, while the percentage of teachers was balanced in emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, without differences for sex.

2.1.2. Group of volunteers

Statistical analysis reported for the group of volunteers in relation to the three dimensions of burnout revealed that: 11,4% of sample expressed high levels, 17,2% medium levels, and 71,4% low levels in EE ($\chi^2=46,06$, $p<.001$); furthermore, 11,4% of sample displayed high levels, 34,3% medium levels, and 54,3% low levels in DP ($\chi^2=19,31$, $p<.001$); finally, 20% of sample showed low levels, 54,3% medium levels, and 25,7% high levels in reduced PA ($\chi^2=14,17$, $p=.001$). The highest percentage of volunteers showed significantly low levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and medium levels of personal accomplishment, also in this case without differences for sex.

2.2. Comparison between teachers and volunteers on burnout and self-image and disabled people representation

Comparing the two groups on dimensions of burnout (Table 1), results revealed that special need teachers were more burned-out than volunteers.

Table 1. Dimensions of burnout: levels for type of group

Dimensions of burnout		Type of group		Chi Square	Sig.
		Teachers	Volunteers		
Emotional exhaustion	High	30 (28,3)	8 (11,4)	19,29	$p<.001$
	Medium	36 (34)	12 (17,2)		
	Low	40 (37,7)	50 (71,4)		
Depersonalization	High	22 (20,8)	8 (11,4)	11,78	$p=.003$
	Medium	14 (13,2)	24 (34,3)		

	Low	70 (66)	38 (54,3)		
	High	30 (28,4)	18 (25,7)		
Reduced personal accomplishment	Medium	38 (35,8)	38 (54,3)	7,01	$p=.030$
	Low	38 (35,8)	14 (20)		

Referring to the representation of self-image and of disabled people (respectively, students for special needs teachers and users for volunteers) expressed by the two groups, results showed that special needs teachers and volunteers valued equally these two concepts. Particularly, both special needs teachers and volunteers judged more positively the representation of self-image (teachers: $M=5,24$, $sd=.51$; volunteers: $M=5,17$, $sd=.54$) than that of disabled people (teachers: $M=4,17$, $sd=.74$; volunteers: $M=4,17$, $sd=.57$).

2.3. Linear regressions between self-image and disabled people representation and burnout

Group of special needs teachers. The representation of self-image was predictor of emotional exhaustion ($\beta=.419$; $t=4.707$, $p<.001$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($\beta=.587$; $t=7.395$, $p<.001$): thus, the more the self-image was positively judged by teachers, the more the levels of EE and reduced PA were low.

Group of volunteers. The representations of self-image and disabled users were predictors of emotional exhaustion (respectively, $\beta=.490$; $t=4.756$, $p<.001$ and $\beta=.240$; $t=2.330$, $p=.023$); furthermore, the representations of disabled users and self-image were predictors of reduced personal accomplishment (respectively, $\beta=.432$; $t=4.046$, $p<.001$ and $\beta=.239$; $t=2.237$, $p=.029$); finally, the representation of self-image was predictor of depersonalization ($\beta=.443$; $t=4.080$, $p<.001$). These results indicated that the more the self-image and disabled users were positively judged by volunteers, the more the levels of EE and reduced PA were low; finally, the more the self-image was positively valued by volunteers, the more the levels of DP were low.

3. Conclusion

The originality of this research was constituted by the comparison between special needs teachers and volunteers in relation to dimensions of burnout syndrome and representation of self-image and disabled people. We predicted that special needs teachers would be more burned-out than volunteers (H_1); particularly, special needs teachers would report higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and lower levels of personal accomplishment than volunteers. This hypothesis was confirmed. The explanation of these findings could be ascribed to the diversity of the two groups characterized by opposite motivations guiding their work with users: we thought that the motivation guiding the volunteers in contact with disabled people was mainly intrinsic, voluntary, and no profit, while that guiding the teachers was mainly extrinsic and profit making.

Furthermore, we predicted that special needs teachers would express a less positive representation of self-image and disabled students than volunteers and, on the contrary, volunteers would express a more positive representation of self-image and disabled users (H_2). This last hypothesis was not confirmed in sense that both groups showed a similar representation of these concepts and judged more positively the self-image than disabled people. It is noteworthy the contribution of this study about the influence of positive self-image on burnout risk, demonstrating that, for teachers, the more the self-image was positively judged, the more the levels of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment were low. Also for volunteers, the more the self-image and disabled users were positively assessed, the more the levels of emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment were low; finally, the more the self-image was positively valued by volunteers, the more the levels of depersonalization were low.

Future research could be carried out to deepen the role of the aforementioned motivations to support the work with disabled persons and the factors which affect burnout syndrome, such as self-efficacy, self-competence, self-acceptance, and other psychological dimensions of self.

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