



# Burnout risk among first-year teacher students: The roles of personality and motivation



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## ABSTRACT

The present study identified individual variables by which first-year teacher students' risk for burnout can be detected at an early stage. We analyzed a sample of teacher students ( $n = 559$ ) and a control group of psychology students ( $n = 150$ ) by using multinomial logistic regression analyses. We estimated the impact of personality (Five-Factor model) and motivation for choosing teacher education on work-related coping behavior and experiences (WCEP types: healthy-ambitious, unambitious, excessively-ambitious, and risk for burnout). Neuroticism and the extrinsic motivation of choosing teacher education (the assumed low difficulty of studies) were risk factors for unhealthy, stress-related coping behavior and experiences. In contrast, high levels of extraversion and conscientiousness as well as intrinsic motivation for choosing teacher education (subject-specific interest) were related to healthy-ambitious behavior. Relations of personality and stress-related WCEP types were partially moderated according to field of study (teaching versus psychology). Our results are of particular importance for improving counseling programs that advise prospective teacher students regarding their individual fit to the requirements and challenges of the teaching profession and for correcting false expectations about study demands.

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## 1. Introduction

The teaching profession is associated with various demands, such as high workload, pupil misbehavior, and lack of reciprocity in social-exchange relationships (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999). Accordingly, de Heus and Diekstra (1999) provided evidence for teachers showing more psychological and physical stress symptoms than other occupational groups. Consequences of teacher stress and high levels of burnout are far reaching. On the one hand, burnout symptoms have been shown to predict health problems such as depressive symptoms, cardiovascular diseases, or sleep disturbances (Ahola & Hakonen, 2007; Saleh & Shapiro, 2008). In Germany, about half of teachers retire early, mainly due to psychological and psychosomatic disorders (Weber, Weltle, & Lederer, 2003). On the other hand, teachers' feelings of exhaustion have been linked to the quality of instruction (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2008). Consequently, detecting factors by which stress-related health problems among teachers can be predicted and prevented at an early stage is not only important for individual teachers, but also for their students and society in general. However, most empirical studies thus far have focused on samples of working teachers and investigated professional demands.

In contrast, a growing body of research underlines the importance of teachers' individual characteristics (for an overview, see Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). In meta-analytic examinations, neuroticism has shown to strongly and positively correlate with the

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burnout symptoms emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness have shown moderate negative correlations (Alarcon, Eschleman, & Bowling, 2009; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). These relations may be mediated by the association of personality traits with coping mechanisms (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995): Especially neuroticism is associated with supposedly less functional coping behavior, such as wishful thinking or focusing on negative emotions. In contrast, extraversion and conscientiousness are positively correlated with problem-solving behavior and cognitive restructuring (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). However, previous research also suggested that relationships between personality traits and coping might be moderated by contextual factors. For example, stronger correlations between personality traits and a set of coping mechanisms were observed in samples reporting high stress levels than in those estimated in average-stress groups (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) further argued that the context of stressors influences the relevance of personality traits for stress coping. In this sense, the impact of personality on work-related coping behavior may not be comparable across occupational groups. Thus, it seems particularly important to identify personality traits that are predictive of specific work-related coping behavior and experience patterns in teacher education. Another promising predictor of burnout symptoms was identified by studies on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the context of academic training: Psychology students who were intrinsically motivated to learn, to accomplish things, and to experience stimulation reported lower levels of stress than students who were extrinsically motivated (Baker, 2004). Moneta and Spada (2009) further reported findings of intrinsic motivation being related to approach coping among undergraduate students, whereas extrinsic motivation was associated with avoidance coping.

These findings suggest that the high levels of burnout among teachers might partially be due to the fact that some individuals already show unfavorable characteristics at the beginning of teacher education. In the present study, we therefore focused on identifying factors by which an individual's risk of ineffective stress coping and vulnerability to burnout could be detected at an early stage. For this purpose, the work-related coping behavior and experience patterns (WCEP; Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008; Schaarschmidt & Fischer, 2008) offer a useful conceptualization of the interplay between vocational engagement and individual coping capacity. Subscales measuring the three dimensions professional commitment, coping capacity, and subjective well-being (in the context of work) are used to derive typical work-related coping behavior and experience patterns, namely, healthy-ambitious (type H), unambitious (type U), excessively ambitious (type A), and risk for burnout (type B).

The aim of the present study was to identify correlates of stress-related coping behavior patterns that are specific for teacher students at the beginning of their academic studies. By identifying correlates of ineffective coping behavior and experiences such as personality traits or motives for career choice, it may be possible to detect burnout risk at an early stage before prospective teachers even take up their studies. We assumed that neuroticism and extrinsic motives for choosing teacher education would be positively related to the stress-related risk patterns of types A and B. In contrast, extraversion, conscientiousness, and intrinsic motives should be related to the favorable type H. To verify these assumptions, we analyzed two models. First, we tested for the effects of personality (Five-Factor model) on the four WCEP types (H, U, A, B) and for the moderating role of field of study (teaching versus psychology). Psychology students were thought to represent a suitable control group for two reasons: On the one hand, the samples share important characteristics. Both first-year teacher students and first-year psychology students face academic stressors and need to socialize and identify with their student roles. Moreover, students of both groups have chosen occupations that are characterized by interpersonal interactions (teaching; caregiving). Due to the emotional challenges associated with working with people, a large body of burnout research has focused on professions in human services and the educational sectors (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). On the other hand, the sample of teacher students differs from the sample of psychology students as regards the occupation-specific challenges they face during studies and internships (e.g., coping with pupil misbehavior; learning how to teach). Second, we investigated whether motivation for enrolling in teacher education studies was incrementally related to work-related coping behavior and experience patterns beyond the influence of personality.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample and procedure

The data were derived from the German research project SioS-L (Study on the impact of individual and organizational variables on academic achievement in teacher education). First-year students majoring in teacher education and psychology were invited to participate in the study. Participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and that participation was voluntary. Study attendance was rewarded by credit points or payment. Data were gathered in two consecutive sessions, the first one taking place about three months after semester begin and including the assessment of motivation for choosing teacher education, work-related coping behavior, and demographic information. The personality inventory was administered during the second session shortly afterwards.

In total, complete datasets are available from 559 first-year teacher students (sample 1: 350 females and 209 males) and 150 first-year psychology students (sample 2: 108 females and 42 males). Participants' age ranged from 17 to 44 years with an average of 21.16 years ( $SD = 3.16$ ) in sample 1 and from 18 to 54 years with an average of 21.89 years ( $SD = 4.10$ ) in sample 2. Relative to the total number of students enrolling in teacher education and psychology, the participation rate was 64.70% and 62.50% in samples 1 and 2, respectively.

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