



Burnout among high school students: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

Burnout among adults in professional situations is well-known and widely described (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter 2001). According to Schaufeli et al. (2002) burnout syndrome is also found among university students. More recently, burnout has also been identified in high school student populations. The aim of this study is to explore current research concerning school-related burnout among high school students. Sixteen studies concerning school-related burnout and academic stress among high school students were reviewed. The review of these publications has highlighted a number of risk factors and mental health consequences concerning burnout in an adolescent population. Gaps regarding research in this field have also emerged, in particular the need for screening scales and repercussions on mental health. Implications for future studies include developing prevention with attention to feelings of self-efficacy and solution-oriented coping.

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1. Introduction

Several previous studies have been carried out concerning burnout among adults in stressful work situations. According to Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, and Backer (2002) burnout was originally assumed to occur only in professions but recently it has been extended to all activity domains. Burnout is defined as a three-dimensional construct including exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and inefficacy or reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). More precisely, exhaustion involves feelings of strain and chronic fatigue. Cynicism consists of an indifferent or distant attitude toward work, losing interest in one's work, or not seeing work as meaningful. And lack of professional efficacy refers to reduced feelings of competence, achievement, and accomplishment. According to the results of these studies it should be noted that burnout has important consequences on mental health among adults in professional situations, such as higher risk for depression (Mutkins, Brown, & Thosteinsson, 2011), low self-esteem (Eriksson, Engström, Starring, & Janson, 2011), and a higher suicide risk (Pompili et al., 2010). The concept of burnout was extended to university students, indeed Schaufeli et al. (2002) showed in their study, carried out among 1661 undergraduate students from Spain, Portugal, and Netherlands that burnout is inversely correlated to university engagement and performances, independent of country of origin. Recently, some research was published exploring burnout among secondary and high school students (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, & Nurmi, 2008; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikinen, & Jokela, 2008; Silvar, 2001). As previously mentioned, burnout in adults increases the risk of mental disorders such as depression, low self-esteem and a higher risk of suicide; these disorders are also particularly highly prevalent in adolescents (Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006; Jiang, Perry, & Hesser, 2010; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008). Given the importance of these disorders in adolescents it appears useful to examine the impact of burnout in a population of high school students. The purpose of this review is firstly to synthesize existing research concerning risk factors and mental health

consequences already identified in the current research about academic stress and school-related burnout; and secondly to highlight gaps of knowledge in this field. The procedural modalities for literature research will be presented followed by the review itself grouped according to three categories: 1) results providing a definition of school-related stress and burnout, 2) research concerning risk factors, and 3) mental health consequences. The concluding section of the article will provide a synthesis as well as highlight considerations for further research.

2. Method

2.1. Literature search strategy

A computerized research of the literature through the EBSCO search engine including the Pubmed, PsychINFO and Science Direct databases was performed between June 2011 and December 2013 using the term “burnout”, “academic stress”, “adolescents” and “high schools”. Reference lists of all identified publications were checked to retrieve other relevant publications not identified by means of the computerized search.

2.2. Selection criteria

Studies that met the following criteria were included; 1) study objectives included describing burnout or academic stress among adolescents, 2) publication was an original research article, 3) publication in peer-reviewed journals, and 4) publication was written in English. The described inclusion criteria were applied to the initial 80 hits. Sixteen studies were selected for the review. The 64 studies not retained for this review were excluded for the following reasons: 1) the publication

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was not about school related stress or burnout 2) the publication concerned other aspects of school maladjustments and 3) the publication was a literature review. These studies were conducted between 2001 and 2013.

3. Research concerning burnout among high school students

3.1. Definition of burnout and academic stress in the literature

Referring to the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) stress represents a physical and emotional state of being exhausted and overwhelmed during which the demands exceed the internal and external resources of an individual to cope with the situation. Therefore, *academic or school related stress* refers to stress states among students based on student statute or academic demands. *Burnout* concerns an emotional state of exhaustion, cynicism and depersonalization engendered by an exposure to a high level of chronic stress.

Ang and Huan (2006) in their study carried out in Singapore with 1108 adolescents (596 boys and 508 girls) aged from 12 to 18 with mean age 14.33 (SD = 0.93), defined academic stress as chronic stress feelings among students with high academic self-expectations or high academic expectations from others such as parents and teachers. A multiple regression analysis in four steps showed that depression was a partial mediator between academic stress and suicidal ideations among adolescents. Indeed, by including depressed mood in the model a previously established significant relationship between academic stress and suicidal ideations was significantly reduced.

For Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, and Nurmi (2009) school-related burnout is described as being composed of exhaustion due to school demands, cynical and detached attitudes toward school, and feelings of inadequacy as a student. The same author also described burnout as a continuous phenomenon of academic stress to major burnout. This study was conducted with a total of 1418 participants (709 girls, 709 boys) from 13 post-comprehensive schools (6 upper secondary high schools; 7 vocational schools), the mean age of participants was 16 years (SD = 1.73). The aim of this study was the goodness-of-fit of the three-factor model: exhaustion at school, cynicism toward the meaning of school, and sense of inadequacy. The results indicate that school burnout was best described by three positively correlating factors encountered in the school setting including: exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy. Depression was associated with all three factors of school burnout. Lower academic achievement and lower school engagement encouraged more cynicism toward school and a sense of inadequacy.

Additional studies provided some indications for academic stress and school-related burnout such as Yusoff (2010) who described academic stress as result of inappropriate workloads or assignments, examinations, and inappropriate treatment by teachers; or Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, and Salmela-Aro (2008) who proposed that school-related burnout is caused by a lack of fit between student's internal resources, school workload, personal expectations of school results, or expectations held by teachers or parents. Silvar (2001) defined school-related burnout as a consequence of excessive school demands, lack of control, lack of recompenses for high achievement, lack of interpersonal relationships, and high expectations from significant others like teachers and family members.

Thus, the literature provided a specific definition of academic stress and school-related burnout placed in the in the context of school environment, differing sensibly from the adult context.

3.2. Risk factors

Some studies aimed to describe risk factors for burnout and academic stress. The longitudinal study conducted by Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, and Nurmi (2008) with 773 participants (297 girls and 314 boys) observed

the evolution of burnout during the transition from comprehensive school to senior high schools (vocational or academic-oriented). The results show that adolescents in senior high schools (academic track) experienced more exhaustion than those in vocational schools (professional track). Similarly, scores of cynicism and feelings of inadequacy increased after transitioning to high school for adolescents on academic tracks whereas these scores decreased especially for boys on vocational tracks. Girls experienced a higher level of all three burnout components (exhaustion, cynicism and inadequacy) than boys.

In the same vein the study of Bask and Salmela-Aro (2013) focused on the link between school burnout and school dropout rates. This longitudinal study focused on the transition to post-comprehensive school as for the previous study. A total of 878 ninth-grade Finnish students participated in the study and data collection was done in 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2009. The average age of participants was, respectively, 16, 17, 18 and 21. The results of this study indicated that all the components of burnout tend to increase over time. It was especially the cynical aspects which best predicted school dropout.

Also related to this transition period from secondary school to upper-secondary school, the study done by Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen (2012) focused specifically on the effect of gender on school-related burnout during this transition. The study took place in four steps and the overall sample was 954 participants: time 1 occurred at the beginning of the ninth grade which is the last secondary school class, including 687 participants (327 girls, 360 boys; response rate 72%); time 2 at the end of the ninth grade included 642 participants (317 girls, 325 boys, response rate 67%); time 3 took place six months after the transition where 818 participated (396 girls, 422 boys; response rate 86%). Finally, time 4 was one year later and included 749 participants (368 girls, 381 boys, response rate 79%). The results demonstrated an increase of all three school burnout components among high school boys and an increase in school-related burnout among high school girls, particularly concerning feelings of inadequacy. For students on the vocational track no changes were observed; cynical aspects tended to decrease overall among girls.

Another study carried out by Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikinen, Jokela (2008) was collected from two samples in Finland. In sample 1, participants were 58,657 students from 431 schools, aged from 14.3 to 16.2, including 29,420 boys and 29,237 girls. In sample 2 responders were 29,515 students from 228 schools, aged from 16.3 to 18 years, 12,903 boys and 16,612 girls. The major findings in this study were that negative school climate was positively related to school-related burnout, whereas support from school and positive motivation received from teachers was related to a low level of school-related burnout. Concerning background variables, girls and those with a lower grade point average experienced more school-related burnout. Nevertheless, socio-economic status and family structure were not related to school-related burnout.

A study carried out by Silvar (2001) in Slovenia was carried out on 1868 Slovene high school students aged from 15 to 18 years, 58.3% girls and 41.7% boys. This study highlighted the fact that school-related burnout is related to poor family relationships and emotionally-oriented coping. Moreover, girls indicated higher academic stress, which was related to anxiety and 6.8% of the participants in this study experienced a high level of school-related burnout.

The study conducted by Yusoff (2010) involved 100 secondary school students from a Malaysian government secondary school located in Kota Bharu. The authors found a high prevalence (26.1%) of school-related stress among their students. School stress factors concerned academic matters (university admission, school subjects, and workload). The most frequent coping strategies found in this study were positive coping strategies (religious, active coping, positive reinterpretation, planning, and use of instrumental support).

A study carried out in Turkey in ten high schools in Eskisehir by Aypay (2011) included 691 students (371 girls and 360 boys). Among these participants, 261 (38%) were in the 6th grade, 236

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