



How to mobilize social support against workload and burnout: The role of organizational identification



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A mediational model with two mediator in series is proposed.
- The relation between school identification and teachers well-being is explored.
- Identification is positively related to support and negatively related with teachers burnout.

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ABSTRACT

Recent theoretical and empirical research outlined the role of organizational identification in the stress process. We provide an empirical test of the social identity model of stress by testing a two-step mediation model of the identification-burnout link. We hypothesize that strongly identified teachers will receive more support from colleagues which, in turn, relates to perceptions of reduced workload, which finally leads to both lower work- and student-related burnout. We tested our model in a large cross-sectional sample of 2685 Swiss teachers representing half of the teacher population of Ticino Canton. Hypotheses were supported. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Teacher burnout represents not only a problem for the individual teacher but also for schools and for the educational system in general (Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014; Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). On the one hand, there are human and economic costs associated with burnout, for example in terms of increased teachers' absenteeism, turnover, health problems and job dissatisfaction (Carson, Baumgartner, Matthews, & Tsouloupas, 2010;

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Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Van Dick & Wagner, 2001, 2002), and, on the other hand, teacher burnout relates to lower student performance and lower teacher self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Shoji et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Teacher burnout indeed may have negative repercussions on student learning and achievement because exhausted teachers tend to detach themselves from their work and their students and to have reduced self-efficacy beliefs (Avanzi, Balducci, & Fraccaroli, 2013; Brouwers & Tomic, 2000).

Burnout is a psychological reaction to exposure to a chronically demanding workplace characterized by physical, emotional and mental exhaustion and fatigue (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005; Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001). When demands are perceived as exceeding resources, teachers feel exhausted and workload represents one of the most important precursors of

burnout (Alarcon, 2011). Workload represents a challenge stressor, that is, it is potentially associated with both gains and losses for workers. Prolonged exposure to high workload, however, is strongly associated with physical and emotional depletion. In contrast, social support represents an important resource to cope with both work overload and burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Building on previous work by Avanzi, Schuh, Fraccaroli, and van Dick (2015) and integrating it with findings of a recent meta-analysis (Luchman & González-Morales, 2013), we propose a mediational model. More specifically, in the present paper we will outline the important role of organizational identification for the mobilization of social support. There is substantial evidence that workers with a strong organizational identification tend to receive more social support from colleagues (Van Dick & Haslam, 2012). These employees can mobilize social relations to obtain help from their coworkers, and there is also evidence demonstrating that the activation of social support is an adaptive strategy to cope with work stressors (Halbesleben, 2006; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Thus, we hypothesize that teachers' sense of belonging to their school should increase the support received by colleagues, which in turn should reduce both workload and burnout. We will test this model in a large sample of Swiss teachers.

1.1. Burnout in school context

Burnout represents “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding” (Schaufeli & Greenglass, 2001, p. 501). Research on this topic has revealed that while burnout can occur in every profession, it is more prevalent across the so called “helping professions”, such as employees in health and social services, nurses, and teachers. In particular, teaching represent a very stressful profession (Kyriacou, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Putting together findings of 43 studies published in US, Schaufeli and Enzmann (1998) reported the highest levels of emotional exhaustion for teachers compared to other important helping professions, such as employees in social services, nurses, or counselors (see for another comparative study: Kristensen et al., 2005). The consequences for teachers' health are massive. For example, Lodolo D'Oria et al. (2004) analyzing 3447 medical examinations performed to certificate incapacity to work from 1992 to 2003 in a health district in Northern Italy found that teachers were between two to three times more likely to develop a psychiatric disorder than other professionals such as clerks, health care professionals, or blue collar workers. Shin, Noh, Jang, Park, and Lee (2013) conducted longitudinal analyses of depression and burnout in Korean teachers and found that teachers' initial levels of burnout led to subsequent depression symptoms 18 months later. Teachers suffering from burnout tend to be less effective and less satisfied with their job, and there is evidence that burnout is negatively related to self-efficacy, especially in the teaching occupation (Shoji et al., 2016).

Teachers generally start their careers in an enthusiastic way, dedicating their energy and commitment to student achievement, but, at a certain point, many teachers “lose interest, become cynical, and distance themselves from colleagues” (Tomic & Tomic, 2008, p. 12). At this stage, teachers experience fatigue, nervousness, and emotional depletion, and develop self-doubts (Kyriacou, 2001). The problems are amplified by expectations by parents and the wider society which considerably increase professional and emotional demands (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). As reported by many teachers interviewed in a recent qualitative study, student misbehavior or discipline problems represent “the most serious problem in school”, because they make “teaching difficult to conduct” and

also because the management of classroom discipline is “extremely energy intensive” (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015, p. 185). While the role of student misbehaviors and ineffective classroom management is generally recognized in teachers' burnout in theory, the link has been less clear in empirical studies to date (Betoret, 2009; Moreno-Abril et al., 2007). Teachers who have to manage students who show poor motivation and disruptive behaviors could continuously experience feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety and these could in turn lead to or exacerbate emotional exhaustion (Aloe et al., 2014). Furthermore, as it was shown in a qualitative study on teachers who left their profession after only one year, along with difficulties with students and low salary, “teachers experienced a clear lack of support” (Gonzalez, Brown, & Slate, 2008, p. 9). As a consequence, teachers might reduce job engagement and show lower patience for students' misbehaviors or finally decide to leave their profession (Gonzalez et al., 2008; Kyriacou, 2001).

1.2. The social identity approach to stress

Organizational identification represents “the perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Following social identity theory, social groups such as organizations, schools, or work teams are not only features of the external world, but they are also internalized by the individual, contributing to a person's sense of self (Haslam, 2004). Hence, when a specific membership becomes salient in a certain context, employees should show favoritism for their organization, in terms of more engagement and collaboration (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Indeed, there is strong empirical evidence for the positive link between organizational identification on the one hand and extra-role behaviors, including helpful behavior toward colleagues, on the other (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015; Riketta, 2005). More recently, several authors used the social identity approach as a framework to understand the process of work stress and employees health (Van Dick & Haslam, 2012). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) argued that stress occurs only when individuals perceive a stressor as potentially harmful and exceeding their coping abilities. Despite its great merit, a limitation of this conceptualization is to think of the stress process only in terms of individual dynamics. However, evidence suggests that people in the same work context “often come to share complaints relating to their work experience, and hence it is at the group (and not just the individual) level that such processes need to be understood and tackled” (Van Dick & Haslam, 2012, p. 5). Organizational identification should relate to (lower) stress and strain in both direct and indirect ways. Directly, because a strong sense of belonging helps satisfy important human needs, such as the need for safety and belonging (Ashforth et al., 2008). Indirectly, because people who feel a strong sense of organizational membership will tend to perceive their colleagues more positively, which helps to be more collaborative and supportive to each other (Haslam, 2004).

Consistently, a strong sense of organizational identity is positively related to job satisfaction and negatively related to stress and burnout (Avanzi, Fraccaroli, Sarchielli, Ullrich, & van Dick, 2014; Bizumic, Reynolds, & Turner, 2009; Steffens, Haslam, Schuh, Jetten, & Van Dick, 2017). There is also some evidence of the positive effect of school teachers' social identification on their well-being. For example, Van Dick and Wagner (2002) found that teachers' identification with their school, teams, or occupational groups were negatively related to teachers' physical symptoms, such as headaches and shoulder pains, and Bizumic et al. (2009) found a negative correlation between teachers' identification and depression. Recently, Avanzi et al. (2015) found a negative indirect effect of school identification on burnout, via social support and collective efficacy.

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