



# Emotional intelligence and teacher burnout: A systematic review



Sergio Mérida-López, Natalio Extremera\*

Department of Social Psychology, University of Málaga, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

The association between emotional intelligence and teacher burnout has received increasing attention in educational settings. However, theoretical and measurement diversity make it difficult to summarize this relationship. Therefore, the main purpose of our study was to systematically review the current evidence on Emotional Intelligence and burnout in teaching professionals. MEDLINE, PSYInfo and Scopus databases were examined and 13 eligible articles were identified. The reviewed studies pointed to negative associations between emotional intelligence and burnout dimensions and highlighted several involved mechanisms. Finally, future research, practical implications and limitations are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Teaching is considered a high-risk profession due to the high impact of occupational risk factors on educators' health (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Kyriacou, 2001; Papastylianou, Kalia, & Polychronopoulos, 2009). Teachers are required to cope with a wide diversity of stressors including workload, role ambiguity, lack of workplace social support or classroom management difficulties, among others (Alarcon, 2011; Chang, 2009; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Therefore, teaching professionals tend to report high levels of occupational stress and burnout (Garrick et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2005; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Burnout syndrome has become an important research topic in decades (for a review, see Chang, 2009; Maslach et al., 2001). According to Maslach and Jackson (1986), burnout is characterized by three symptoms: (1) Emotional Exhaustion (EE), conceived as the feeling of being physically and emotionally overextended; (2) Depersonalization (DP), defined as a distant attitude toward students; and (3) a loss of self-confidence and lack of Personal Accomplishment (PAC). These dimensions have been mostly assessed using self-report measures, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). In teaching, burnout has been related to higher absenteeism (Dick & Wagner, 2001), intention to quit (Leung & Lee, 2006; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012) and lower job satisfaction (Durán, Extremera, Montalbán, & Rey, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). Moreover, several studies have found a consistent and deleterious impact on health outcomes (Bauer et al., 2006; Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Kovess-Masféty, Rios-Seidel, & Sevilla-Dedieu, 2007).

An active field of research on burnout is related to sociodemographic and personal correlates associated with this phenomenon, which might interact with organizational risk factors and either exacerbate or act as a buffer against their effects (Chang, 2009, 2013). Consequently, the analysis of individual differences in this syndrome has led to numerous studies on the relationship of burnout to age (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Vlachakis, 2006; Maslach et al., 2001) and gender (Purvanova & Muros, 2010). Additionally, researchers have shown interest in psychological resources for alleviating burnout, such as appraisal, coping or personality traits (Chang, 2013; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Langelan, Bakker, Van Doornen, & Schaufeli, 2006; Trépanier, Fernet, & Austin,

\* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Psychology, University of Málaga, Campus de Teatinos s/n, Málaga, 29071, Spain.  
E-mail address: [nextremera@uma.es](mailto:nextremera@uma.es) (N. Extremera).

2013). Consistent with this view, in recent years studies of personal resources such as emotional intelligence have proliferated in educational research (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012; Lopes, 2016; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008).

### 1.1. Emotional intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is referred to as the extent to which a person adequately deals with affective information (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016). Some have conceptualized this construct as a trait, and others have conceptualized it as an ability (Lopes, 2016; Mayer et al., 2008). Trait EI (or mixed EI) is defined as a lower-order personality construct. Self-reported questionnaires, such as the *Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory* (EQ-i; Bar-On, 1997), are primarily used by those who adopt this approach. Ability EI refers to a set of abilities related to emotional information processing (Mayer et al., 2016; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Although self-reported instruments have been developed from this approach (Mayer et al., 2008), measuring ability EI requires the use of maximum-performance tests, such as the *Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test* (MSCEIT 2.0; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003). In summary, EI instruments have been classified into three categories: (1) self-report mixed EI, (2) self-report ability EI and (3) performance-based ability EI tests (Fernández-Berrocal & Extremera, 2016; Sánchez-Álvarez, Extremera, & Fernández-Berrocal, 2015).

Criticism of the construct EI has led to much controversy concerning its existence and validity (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005; Cherniss, 2010). However, a number of studies have provided evidence of the positive relationship between EI and psychological adjustment (Extremera and Rey, 2015), social functioning (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011), quality of interpersonal relationships (Brackett & Caruso, 2007), well-being (Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2015) and health indicators (Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). Moreover, EI has also been shown to have a positive impact on job performance (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011). Specifically, the EI-job performance association has been found to be stronger in jobs with higher emotional labor demands (Joseph & Newman, 2010). As noted above, there is a mounting body of evidence lending support to the key role of EI on both personal and work-related outcomes.

### 1.2. Emotional intelligence and burnout

Prior research has underlined the effects of EI on decreased occupational stress, reduced negative moods levels and experiencing positive emotional states (Keefer, Parker, & Saklofske, 2009; Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2012). In addition, a recent meta-analytic review has shown a consistent link between EI and different attitudes toward one's work (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2016). In light of this evidence, EI training has increasingly been considered as a helpful way to enhance stress resilience (Brackett & Katulak, 2006) and well-being among teachers (Augusto-Landa, López-Zafra, De Antoñana, & Pulido, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Vesely, Saklofske, & Leschied, 2013; Vesely, Saklofske, & Nordstokke, 2014).

These accumulated findings show that different conceptualizations of EI and specific emotional skills measured by different EI tests are related to lower burnout symptoms. However, it is still unclear how distinctive forms of EI differentially influence the development of burnout symptoms. The development of a number of instruments which include distinct dimensions (for a review of instruments, see Mayer et al., 2008) has been based on trait and ability models. Consequently, the heterogeneity of measures makes it difficult to synthesize the current understanding of research in this field (Landy, 2005; Mérida & Extremera, in press). In addition, meta-analytic reviews relating EI to health, well-being and performance indicators have shown dissimilarities regarding self-report and performance EI tests (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Martins et al., 2010; Miao et al., 2016; Sánchez-Álvarez et al., 2015). Therefore, the lack of reviews addressing the links of EI with teacher burnout implies a significant challenge to future research and practical directions.

Given the aforementioned considerations, we undertook a systematic review of the existing literature in order to examine the relationship between EI and burnout among teaching professionals. Hence, our purpose was to comprehensively assess the current state of the art.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Literature search

We attempted to explore the associations between both trait and ability EI and burnout in teaching professionals. PSYCINFO, MEDLINE and SCOPUS databases were searched exhaustively over the period of 2–9 July, 2016. We conducted a computerised literature search, locating articles published in English or Spanish between 1990 and June 2016 that contained “emotional intelligence” as a keyword or a term in the title or abstract together with the following expressions: “burnout”; “teacher”; “teaching professionals”; “emotional exhaustion”; “depersonalization” and “personal accomplishment”. Additionally, manual searches of reference lists allowed us to complement our database of studies.

### 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Identified articles were included in our review if they met the following inclusion criteria. The first criterion for inclusion was that it be an empirical study, such that theoretical studies and reviews were excluded. The second criterion was that articles include EI and burnout as related variables. Given the broad range of different concepts understood under the term burnout (emotional exhaustion,

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