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# School burnout, depressive symptoms and engagement: Their combined effect on student achievement



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## ABSTRACT

Prior studies have shown that student burnout becomes more prevalent during adolescence and is associated with both depressive symptoms and school engagement. Little is known about how burnout, engagement, and depressive symptoms jointly affect students' school achievement in terms of grades and skipping class. The main purpose of the current study was to analyse these variables within a full model in order to examine the direct and indirect effects of burnout, engagement and depression on student achievement, while controlling for gender and age. Participants were 210 Italian high school students aged 14 to 16. Student burnout was found to exert the strongest effect on school achievement, both directly, and indirectly via depressive symptoms and school engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade students' burnout has been introduced to explain the manifestation of maladjusted behaviour at school. Burnout has been found to affect several dimensions of schoolwork as well as students' later health as adults (Schaufeli, Martínez, Marqués-Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). In addition to psychological suffering, student's burnout is also associated with educational dimensions such as educational delays and low educational aspirations, academic achievement and educational track (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a, 2009b), school engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002), and depressive symptoms (Gerber et al., 2015). Given that high levels of school burnout and depressive symptoms, as well as low levels of engagement, predict poor long-term educational attainment (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; OECD, 2009, 2012; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012), it is crucial that student outcomes flagging an increased risk of maladjustment be identified early and teachers alerted accordingly. Although prior research has documented the independent effects of school burnout, school engagement and depressive symptoms on students' educational trajectories, little is known about the joint influence of these three variables on school achievement. The present study aimed to address this gap by focusing on a sample of Italian high-school students drawn from a population at high-risk of school maladjustment according to the OECD ranking (OECD, 2012). We argued that this research question is important for two reasons. First, depressive symptoms and school burnout are risk factors for lower school engagement and poorer academic achievement, which in turn may escalate depressive symptoms. Second, research findings should make teachers able to better address students' growing detachment

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from school life.

### 1.1. Italian students in the OECD's survey

An OECD survey (OECD, 2009) on student wellbeing conducted in 2009 found that the average level of wellbeing among young Italians was markedly lower than the OECD mean. With regard to school achievement, which is viewed as a key outcome reflecting students' overall school adjustment, the OECD findings suggested a systematic decline in both of these measures for Italian school between the ages of 11 and 15 years. In addition, the indicators for older Italian students who after compulsory schooling fail to find employment, training or further educational opportunities, were more negative than in other countries. Specifically, Italy is among five OECD nations with over 10% of young people out of education, training or employment between the ages of 15 and 19. Furthermore, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment survey (OECD, 2012), Italy has one of the highest rates of student absenteeism among PISA-participating countries.

The adverse picture emerging from the OECD surveys prompts us to seriously examine the high risk of drop out incurred by Italian students and the increasing tendency to engage in maladjusted behaviours over the long-term, both within and outside of the school context. This alarming trend encourages research on instruments for monitoring the school-related risk and protection factors associated with maladjusted behaviour in students.

### 1.2. Risk factors for students' academic wellbeing

Student burnout is a psychological syndrome caused by long-term exposure to school-related stress events and the pressure to achieve (Fiorilli et al., 2014; Di Chiacchio et al., 2016; McCarthy, Pretty, & Catano, 1990; Meier & Schmeck, 1985; Schaufeli et al., 2002). More specifically, students experiencing school burnout display a lack of interest in class activities, recurrent absences, chronic tardiness, and irresponsible behaviours. Furthermore, because of their sense of inadequacy they do not feel valued by teachers and frequently exhibit maladjusted behaviours at school with negative consequences for overall class atmosphere (Kwak, 2006; Yim, 1991). Recently, Salmela-Aro et al. (2009a) designed and validated the School-Burnout Inventory (SBI-9), which measures three dimensions of academic burnout syndrome, namely emotional exhaustion, cynicism and detachment in relation to the meaning of school, and a sense of inadequacy as a student. This instrument has been applied to many different academic populations, with the same three-factor structure being confirmed in Finland (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009a), Spain (Boada-Grau, Merino-Tejedor, Sánchez-García, Prizmic-Kuzmica, & Vigil-Colet, 2015; Moyano & Riaño-Hernández, 2013), Peru (Merino, Delgadillo, & Cabal-Iero, 2013), Columbia (Aguilar-Bustamante & Riaño-Hernandez, 2013), and Italy (Fiorilli et al., 2014) by means a short version of SBI.

Given that adolescence is characterized by increased vulnerability to depressive symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema & Gircus, 1994), which also interferes with school engagement, some authors have suggested that depressive symptoms are a risk factor for lower school involvement and poorer academic performance, which in turn may increase depressive symptoms (Chow, Tan, & Buhrmester, 2015; Humensky et al., 2010; Shahar et al., 2006; Verboom, Sijtsema, Verhulst, Penninx, & Ormel, 2014). However, other scholars have found that stressful experiences at school and the emotions they generate may predict depressive symptoms (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994). In line with this, a recent longitudinal study yielded two crucial findings: first, confirmatory factor analysis showed that two sets of items from the school burnout and depressive symptoms scales, respectively, did not load on the same factor; second, school burnout predicted depressive symptoms more strongly than vice versa (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009b).

Overall, the available evidence suggests that research and appropriate intervention addressing maladjustment at school may contribute to preventing depressive symptoms and thereby to significantly improving students' wellbeing when they reach adulthood. Assuming that burned out students will be significantly more at risk of depression as adults, with negative implications for their quality of life, and for public health, it is crucial to analyse the precursors of student maladjustment during the school-age years. Previous research has found that declines in behavioural and emotional engagement during adolescence are associated with lower grades and performance on tests of academic achievement (Eccles, 2004; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012) and are strong predictors of school dropout (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Im, Hughes, & West, 2016). Among students' grades and their academic achievement there are reciprocal relationships. For example, an active school engagement, a disposition to take risks, and the use of effective learning strategies are associated with those students who have high assessments (Ames & Archer, 1988). Recently, Wang and coll. (Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014) have identified contextual factors that influence students' academic achievement. More specifically, low performing students require greater support from their teachers in terms of expectations as well as less complex teaching strategies than higher performing students. Furthermore, a positive effect of school structure on academic self-concept is stronger for low achievers (Wang & Eccles, 2013). In other words to enhance students' academic engagement requires a school environment that responds to differing levels of their academic achievement (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

While students' grades, as a measure of academic achievement, have been viewed as one of the variables most strongly affected by student burnout, receiving deserved attention from scholars less is known about the strategy of absenteeism adopted by students to cope with school-related stressful events when they feel burned out. More specifically, for some students to skip the class may indicate a high over commitment with school work; while for some other students it may be a manifestation of lack of commitment to their academic life, which in turn increases their likelihood of engaging in maladjusted behaviours. Equally importantly, to skip school may serve as an indirect measure of students' disengagement from their schoolwork, as well as a key predictor of dropout.

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