Original article

Stress and burnout among French elementary school teachers: A transactional approach

Stress et épuisement professionnel des enseignants français en école élémentaire. Une approche transactionnelle

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Abstract

Teachers meet increasing difficulties in their work: overwork, students dropping out of the system, the discredit of the profession among users of the educational system. These problems are stressors which have an influence on the vulnerability of teachers and lead to burnout. The transactional model of stress by Lazarus and Folkman [Lazarus, R.S., Folkman, S., 1984. Stress, appraisal and coping, New York, Springer] emphasizes the importance of the activity expended by an individual in order to confront a stressful situation. We administered several questionnaires to 410 French elementary schoolteachers during the first term (T1) in order to evaluate: their sociobiographic characteristics; the frequency of professional problems; perceived self-efficacy; social support; and their coping strategies. The burnout of 259 teachers of the same cohort was evaluated during the third term (T2). The results of this research show the interest of taking into account transactional processes in order to study the effects of professional stress on burnout.
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Résumé

Les enseignants rencontrent de plus en plus de difficultés dans leur metier : surcharge de travail, élèves en rupture scolaire, profession discréditée auprès des usagers du système éducatif. Ces problèmes sont des sources de stress entraînant la vulnérabilité des enseignants à l'épuisement professionnel (*burnout*). Le modèle transactionnel du stress de Lazarus et Folkman [Lazarus, R.S., Folkman, S., 1984. Stress, appraisal and coping, New York, Springer] souligne l'importance de l'activité déployée par un individu pour faire face à une situation stressante. Nous avons administré à 410 enseignants français en école élémentaire plusieurs questionnaires au premier trimestre d'une année scolaire (T1) afin d'évaluer : leurs caractéristiques sociobiographiques, la fréquence des problèmes professionnels, l'autoefficacité perçue, le soutien social, leurs stratégies de *coping*. L'épuisement professionnel de 259 enseignants de la même cohorte a été évalué au troisième trimestre (T2). Les résultats de cette recherche montrent l'intérêt d'une prise en compte des processus transactionnels pour étudier les effets du stress professionnel sur le *burnout*.
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Keywords: Stress; Self-efficacy; Social support; Coping; Burnout; Elementary schoolteachers

Mots clés : Stress ; Autoefficacité ; Soutien social ; *Coping* ; Épuisement professionnel (*burnout*) ; Enseignants en école élémentaire

1. Introduction

The most stressful professions involve a "relationship of assistance and care" (doctors, nurses, dentists, etc.), a physical or material risk (policemen, firemen, transporters of funds,

air traffic controllers) or a "moral responsibility" towards others (Cherniss, 1980; Katz and Kahn, 1978 in Smylie, 1999; Truchot, 2004). The job of teaching, which accumulates some of these difficulties, would be particularly stressful (Borg and Falzon, 1989; Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1977, 1978, 1979; Laughlin, 1984; Solman and Feld, 1989, in Woods, 1999).

Moreover, teachers' working conditions would have a tendency to deteriorate. Teachers cite the lack of recognition of their work, poor material conditions, work overload linked to

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very heavy programs and a very heterogeneous level of students (Greenglass et al., 1997; Smylie, 1999; Woods, 1999). This is to be compared with the results of a survey carried out by the General Insurance of National Education (MGEN) (Kovess et al., 2001) on 6700 elementary and secondary level teachers, a group which shows a 31 to 45% rate of sick leaves per year (compared to 6 to 29% for other professions).

However, the difficulty of this work is often unrecognized. According to the general public, teachers are privileged. According to the parents, they would be the principal people responsible for the dysfunction of the educational system. They therefore feel degraded. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that the "malaise of teachers" has been raised (Estève and Fracchia, 1988, p. 47).

According to Rascle (2001a), the effects of professional stress are numerous. They can be of a somatic order (biological, physiological, medical) or of a psychological order (cognitive, emotional, behavioral). "Burnout" (professional exhaustion) would be one of the consequences of professional stress. The operational definition made by Maslach and Jackson (1984) is the principal reference in this field. According to these authors, burnout is *"an emotional state in which the worker loses his beliefs and positive feelings (optimism), his sympathy and his respect for the 'clientele'. This moral exhaustion is often accompanied by physical exhaustion, illness or disorders evolving in a psychosomatic mode"* (Maslach, 1999, p. 212). According to Rudow (1999), 30% of European teachers show symptoms of burnout.

2. Theoretical framework of the study

However, the relation between stress and burnout is neither simple, nor linear, nor unidirectional (i.e., cause → effect). Most authors currently agree on the necessity to *"multiply the investigations based on complex models taking into account the impact of a large number of variables"* (Guglielmi and Tatrow, 1998, p. 88).

We have chosen the transactional model of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to explain the processes involved in professional stress and burnout. According to this model, the activity expended by an individual (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physiological reactions) in order to confront a situation perceived to be stressful will or will not enable him to overcome this situation. This model emphasizes the importance of the evaluations which the subject makes of the situation (perceived stress[1]) and of his own resources (personal resources, social resources). It also insists on the influence of individual attempts to modify or support the situation or to modify himself (coping[2]) (Fig. 1).

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[1] "Stress is a particular transaction between the individual and the environment in which the situation is evaluated as exceeding his resources or threatening his well-being" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 19.).

[2] Coping is "all of the cognitive and behavioral efforts, constantly changing, expended (by one person) to manage the internal and/or external demands perceived as consuming or exceeding his resources" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p 141.).
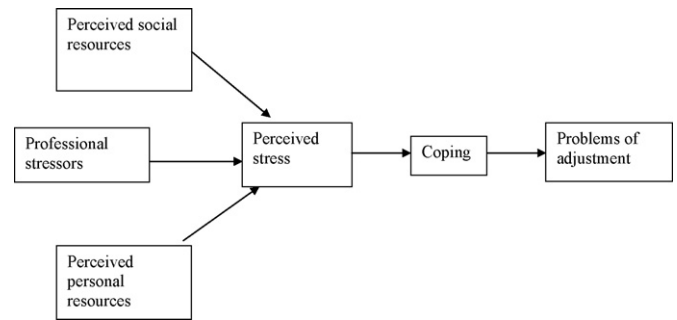

Fig. 1. A transactional model of stress.

The research that was done by our team on stress and burnout in diverse professional groups (teachers, instructors, nurses, doctors, dentists, etc.) has shown the relevance of such an integrative model for understanding the determinants of burnout. Some authors have shown that perceived stress has more important effects than the objective aversive characteristics of the work context on subsequent problems of physical and mental health: certain characteristics of the personality play a protecting role, others a pathogenic role; social resources as well as active coping strategies limit the effects of stress on burnout (Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2002a, p. 60; Rascle, 2001a; Rascle and Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2004).

Numerous studies have been carried out on professional stress among teachers. Several scales of specific stress have been developed such as the Sources of Teacher Pressure Scale (STPS by Travers and Cooper, 1994). Certain stress dimensions of teachers have thus been shown such as overwork, conflicts with parents and coworkers, the lack of career prospects, etc. Nevertheless, not all of the factors described in this research are applicable to French teachers since the Anglo-Saxon scholastic culture is different from ours (for example, there is no real statutory recognition of a school principal in the French education system).

In some of these studies, personality characteristics seem to have a direct effect on burnout. The feeling of self-efficacy limits, for example, the harmful effects of a stressful professional context on health and burnout (Brouwers and Tomic, 2000).

To our knowledge, there are only a dozen research studies devoted to coping strategies that teachers develop to confront professional problems (Brenner et al., 1985; Chan, 1998; Connolly and Sanders, 1988; Dewe, 1985; Gana and Boblique, 2000; Grimm, 1993 in Rudow, 1999; Kyriacou, 1980a, 1980b; Kyriacou and Pratt, 1985; Litt and Turk, 1985; Seidman and Zager, 1991). As a rule, these studies use general scales of coping. For example, Gana and Boblique (2000) have isolated three coping strategies among French teachers based on the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) by Folkman and Lazarus (1988):

- search for social support;
- coping centered on the problem;
- avoidance.

Similar results have been found in studies using nonspecific scales of coping (Laugaa and Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2005b).