Burnout among teachers: theoretical setting, top-down innovation, and social relations
Evers, W.J.G.

Citation for published version (APA):
Evers, W. J. G. (2002). Burnout among teachers: theoretical setting, top-down innovation, and social relations
CHAPTER 7

Summary and general discussion

This dissertation's object was to elucidate some aspects of teacher burnout. The study consists of two parts. Part one discusses burnout, in particular teacher burnout in a framework of the self-efficacy and equity sensitivity theory, and ends in a brief survey of the possibility to prevent or mitigate burnout and resulting from that to suggest measures that might be useful in the development of an intervention program. Part two consists of five studies about topics related to teacher burnout. In this chapter the theoretical part, i.e. chapter one and the various studies will be summarized and commented on.

THEORY

The job of a teacher is a very important one in the education and instruction of new generations. Research reveals that teaching is a very demanding job. As a result of this many teachers appear to be dissatisfied and consider leaving the job. Rather a large number of teachers fall ill or are declared unable to work because of symptoms of burnout, especially when compared with other professionals.

Burnout is a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some respect. Emotional exhaustion is considered to be the first dimension of burnout. Emotional exhaustion appears to be attended by changes in the relation between the teacher and the students, i.e. depersonalization. This second dimension is characterized by professional detachment pushed too far. Students are treated in a distant, cold, and sometimes cynical way. The third dimension of burnout, i.e. reduced personal accomplishment refers to the teacher's negative self-evaluation in relation to his job performance.

Emotional exhaustion was originally looked upon as the beginning of the burnout process. Today, some researchers claim to have found indications that the process starts with the dimension of reduced personal accomplishment. It is necessary for burnout prevention or intervention programs to know which dimension appears first so that measures can be adequately tailored to the right dimension. According to the definition burnout is a syndrome
that occurs among human service professionals who work for and with people. Very often relations at work are demanding and emotionally taxing. Whether burnout research should be restricted to the human service professions is still an open question. There are studies that have examined burnout-like phenomena in non-human service professions. Research reveals that the symptoms of burnout appear in a developmental process. However, the symptoms of burnout do not develop in an irreversible process: at any stage of the process a return to a burnout free stage is possible.

In order to examine which of the three dimensions of burnout appears first among teachers involved in the implementation of educational innovations, we asked a group of respondents that participated at time 1, to also participate in a follow-up study on the same subject matter at time 2, eight months later. We assumed that burnout among this specific category of teachers would begin with feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. After all, these teachers had to change their mental as well as their behavioral approach to the educational process. Because of the absence of sufficient preparation the teachers may have experienced a lack of skills concerning the new way of teaching, which may have negatively influenced the judgment on their personal accomplishment. This assumption was not confirmed in our study. In agreement with some other longitudinal studies burnout among teachers in an innovative setting appears to begin with feelings of emotional exhaustion. After that the attitudinal dimensions depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment appear.

Our longitudinal examination of the sequence of the three dimensions of burnout supports other longitudinal findings suggesting that emotional exhaustion appears first and is then followed by depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. This finding suggests that the development of the burnout process starts with feelings of a depletion of one's emotional reserves irrespective of the job environment of the person afflicted. Our results are an important cue for the development of intervention programs to focus on the dimension that appears first, i.e. emotional exhaustion. Symptoms indicating that teachers feel emotionally exhausted should immediately be followed by interventions aimed at counteracting the beginning of burnout.

The self-efficacy theory is the point of departure in this dissertation for several reasons. First, it is advisable for psychosocial phenomena to be examined in a theoretical framework. Second, the self-efficacy theory offers an explanation for the results of the studies indicating that the level of burnout is significantly related to the way teachers perceive their work relationships as frustrating. Third, both correlational and longitudinal research shows
that a high level of burnout and the teacher's weak self-efficacy beliefs are significantly related. Bandura even speaks about the predictiveness of the self-efficacy beliefs, with the restriction that they are not about the result of a future action but about the belief to bring about a certain kind of behavior. Fourth, self-efficacy beliefs vary in strength, which means that they can be influenced according to the information received. The sources of information are enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasions, and physical and affective states. Using adequate information from these sources self-efficacy beliefs can be strengthened and thus help prevent the onset of burnout.

Someone's self-efficacy beliefs are not only prospective by nature, they are also known for their malleability. It means that weak self-efficacy beliefs can be molded into strong self-efficacy beliefs. Moreover, it is important for interventionists to realize that teachers having weak self-efficacy beliefs appear to have greater behavioral plasticity than their counterparts with stronger self-efficacy beliefs. The first category of teachers is very likely to take greater advantage of attempts to have their self-efficacy beliefs strengthened than the second. As self-efficacy beliefs are domain specific, research e.g. for reasons of intervention should measure self-efficacy beliefs separately for each domain.

We can conclude that the self-efficacy theory appears to be a workable framework for the study of the burnout syndrome among teachers. The literature consulted sufficiently indicates that burnout and in particular burnout among teachers can be discussed within the framework of the self-efficacy theory. Guglielmi and Tatrow (1998) assert that a shared theoretical framework would promote consistency in measurement practices, and help suggest meaningful research questions and organize research findings. However, as the results of our studies are found in correlational studies they need to be re-examined in longitudinal follow up research.

**INNOVATION**

We specifically examined burnout related to the self-efficacy theory in an innovative educational setting. Chapter two is about self-efficacy beliefs of teachers working in the upper classes of HAVO and VWO implementing educational innovations in the Netherlands, commonly called the "studyhome". Burnout among these teachers is examined in relation to the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs about guiding groups of students according to the differentiation principle, involving students with tasks, and the use of educational innovative practices. At the same time we examined whether there was a correlation between burnout and the teachers' attitudes in respect of the usefulness and effectiveness of the studyhome. The
results show that there is a negative correlation between the self-efficacy beliefs in the domains involved and depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, whereas there is a positive correlation between these beliefs and personal accomplishment. We also found a significant correlation between the level of the teachers' attitudes towards the studyhome and the three dimensions of burnout. In agreement with previous research it seems to be justified to state that burnout is significantly related to the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers involved in the implementation of educational innovations. The results are also indicative of a significant correlation between the level of self-efficacy beliefs and the willingness to take part in educational experiments and following on this to implement these innovations.

We furthermore conclude that teachers should become owners of the innovations, i.e. they should develop, implement and evaluate the innovations together with theoreticians in a bottom-up process ("grass-roots planning") that is supported and stimulated in a top-down process, known as collaborative planning (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). Teachers should be looked upon as professionals who are quite capable to adapt education to new societal, pedagogical, and didactical developments. Ownership of innovative practices appears to enhance the successful implementation of educational innovations, whereas top-down instigated innovations breed resistance (Eisner, 1992) and may consequently endanger the implementation of the innovations (Corbett, Firestone, & Rossman, 1987).

**SOCIAL RELATIONS**

Teachers are professionals daily working with young people that are often not only intellectually but also behaviorally exploring their limits, which may end up in disruptive behavior that is found to be related to burnout. Teachers especially get frustrated when this behavior interferes with their academic goals. However, teachers who know how to manage classroom processes in the present student-focused setting appear to be less vulnerable for the development of negative stress and burnout. For that matter, they seem to be less confronted with disruptive student behavior and can spend more time trying to achieve their educational goals. It is important for both the teacher and the students to recognize and observe positive mutual relationships that serve as the basis of disciplined classroom behavior. Discipline that requires slavish student behavior only breeds resistance among them and will certainly lead to low academic achievements.

In spite of the rapid educational changes in the Netherlands, we conclude (see also chapter 6) that discipline should still be looked upon as an indispensable feature of modern education. In order to adapt discipline to our modern views on educating young people the
concept of humanistic pupil control ideology, viewing students as cooperative and self-disciplined individuals, should replace the custodial pupil control ideology (Lunenburg & Cadavid, 1992).

The core task teachers are trained for is to help students understand academic subject matter. Education used to be teacher-centered and the student was looked upon as "the duck to stuff". Today education is viewed as a student-focused activity. Moreover, innovations have to be viewed as inevitable and continual changes in a teacher's life. We conclude from the theoretical part that was supported by our study in chapter two that future teachers should be made acquainted with the self-efficacy concept in relation to the variable character of modern education. Teachers implementing innovative educational changes appear to benefit from strong self-efficacy beliefs especially in the domain of classroom management activities (Fritz, Miller-Heyl, Kreutzer, & MacPhee, 1995). We suggest training prospective teachers in flexibility in regard of these domains, which is to become the guiding principle in their professional development. Flexibility may help promote positive evaluations about job performances, which is an important source of information for generating strong self-efficacy beliefs (Smylie, 1990).

We also examined the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in eliciting support from colleagues and principals so as to provide a relevant framework for explaining the relationship between perceived lack of social support and burnout (chapter 4). Teachers work together in joint efforts to achieve educational goals. However, burned out teachers not only withdraw from their students but from their colleagues and principals as well, whereas they are in need of support. We assumed that teachers having strong self-efficacy beliefs in acquiring social support from colleagues and principals would show lower levels of burnout. The results of this study reveal that teachers who perceive a lack of support from colleagues and principals really lose confidence in their own abilities to elicit the support that they need from them. These teachers also report higher levels of burnout, implicating that the lack of confidence in these capabilities is related to the burnout process. So, the assumption posed in chapter four was confirmed, suggesting that self-efficacy in eliciting social support is a mediating variable in the relationship between perceived lack of social support and burnout. Our conclusion is that there is a significant relationship between the presence of strong self-efficacy beliefs to elicit social support and burnout. It would be helpful if educational managers and school boards took measures to advance the teachers' cooperation within their actual work environment and with the school management (Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991). They should realize that teachers are "the working capital" of their organization. In order to
break teacher isolation (Eisner, 1992; Englert & Tarrant, 1995) it would also be helpful to
give teachers employee participation in matters of their daily routine, and the distribution of
additional tasks (Doyle & Ponder, 1977-78). Moreover, "...a democratic structure may make
employees happiest since the more people that are involved in aspects of change that will
affect them, the more receptive and positive they will become to the change itself..." (Huston,
1989, p.76).

The equity theory is often used in research about the relation between employees and
conditions of work. The equity theory posits that every individual evaluates his input/outcome
ratio against the input/outcome ratio of a comparable other person. If the perceived
input/outcome ratio of the individual and comparable other person appears to be unequal
inequity exists, which leads to feelings of distress. Initially it was assumed that every
individual evaluated his input/outcome ratio according to one and the same cultural norm.
Later it became clear that every person uses his own individual norms. The individual
difference on evaluations of equity is called equity sensitivity. Individuals can be categorized
on an equity sensitivity continuum as Benevolents, Equity Sensitives and Entitleds. The
Benevolents or "givers" seem to prefer inputs to outcomes in a relationship with comparable
others. The Equity Sensitives conform to the general assumptions of the equity theory and
prefer inputs to be equal to outcomes in a relationship with comparable others. The Entitleds
or the "takers" prefer outcomes to inputs in the relationship with comparable others. The
assumption that individuals would prefer a particular input/outcome ratio appeared to be
misleading and was replaced by the qualification that they show a greater tolerance to a
particular input/outcome ratio.

Equity sensitivity appears to show significant relationships with the work conditions in
education, but not with respect to the relation between teachers and students. It means that
burnout research among teachers should not only focus on the self-efficacy beliefs but on the
equity sensitivity of the teachers as well. Teachers, who have become burnout for reasons of
inequity with the organization and weak self-efficacy beliefs, have to restore their feelings of
inequity first before interventions on strengthening self-efficacy beliefs are to be considered.

Chapter five examined the role of equity sensitivity in the relation between self-
efficacy beliefs and burnout. Although teachers work in the same organization under the same
work conditions it is a striking finding that some of them suffer from burnout whereas others
do not. The self-efficacy theory can partly account for the differences. However, we assumed
that measuring the teacher's equity sensitivity would help acquire a better understanding of
the burnout process, in particular burnout due to frustrated relations with students and the organization.

It appears from the results of this study that equity sensitivity is a significant though weak moderating variable in the relation between self-efficacy beliefs and two dimensions of burnout, i.e. emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, but not in respect of depersonalization. We can conclude that someone's equity sensitivity is a significant moderating variable between self-efficacy and burnout. The relation found is weak and results could be improved in longitudinal follow-up studies. We suggest applying two equity sensitivity questionnaires. One questionnaire is to measure equity sensitivity in relation with organizational aspects and the second one in relation with the teacher pupil interactions. The reason is the finding that teacher burnout may develop through two main pathways, i.e. one owing to the organizational environment of the teacher (Leiter & Maslach, 1988; Maslach, 1999) and one owing to the relation with students (Brouwers, 2000; Greenglass, Fiksenbaum, & Burke, 1994).

In our last empirical study (chapter 6) we examined the possible role that students could play in the acquisition of data on teacher burnout because of the following reasons. First, it is a well-known fact that data on teacher burnout are more often than not obtained through self-report questionnaires that are known for their social desirable answers. Second, students have intense social relations with their teachers, and they are keen observers of their teachers' behavior. We examined our assumption among students of a Regional Training Center (RTC). With respect to our hypothesis, we also assumed that in agreement with other studies there would be significant differences between female and male students. Our respondents filled out adapted questionnaires on teacher burnout, on perceived disruptive student behavior, and on perceived teachers' competence to cope with this kind of behavior. The results show that the teachers' burnout levels are low. We also found that female students reported significantly lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among their teachers than male students did, but there was no difference in respect of personal accomplishment. Female students reported significantly more cases of disruptive student behavior. As teaching is an interactional activity, both students and teachers should be asked to disclose their perceptions on this process, which will improve the assessment of burnout and related aspects of classroom practices.

Resulting from this, our next conclusion refers to the acquisition of data on the teachers' well-being. Education is an interactional process and consequently information about the process should be acquired from both teachers and students. Students' reports on
perceived teacher behavior appear to contribute valuable information about the educational process and the way the teachers interact with them. We advise using this source of information in order to further the reliability of information acquired by teacher self-report questionnaires. Asking students to give information about classroom practices may advance their involvement in matters promoting discipline and academic activities (Brophy, 1998; Haroun, & O'Hanlon, 1997).

**INTERVENTION**

The self-efficacy and the equity sensitivity theory were not only discussed to provide a theoretical framework for burnout research. The literature supports our conclusion that both the self-efficacy and the equity sensitivity theory can have useful practical implications in education. Self-efficacy beliefs are found to be domain and situation specific and they vary in strength. In contrast to many other personality variables self-efficacy beliefs are malleable, i.e. they can be strengthened so as to optimize the teacher's functionality. Burned out teachers appear to have weak self-efficacy beliefs in various domains, so it is a matter of course to posit that self-efficacy beliefs should be a target in the intervention of teacher burnout. Our conclusion is that the literature sufficiently supports the importance of the self-efficacy theory in respect of attempts to develop prevention- and intervention programs (Van Dick & Wagner, 2001). We also found the equity sensitivity theory to be important in the restoration of feelings of inequity workers harbor in respect of the organization they work for. This finding is supported by an intervention program based on the equity sensitivity theory claiming positive results in alleviating symptoms of burnout (Van Dierendonck, Schaufeli, & Buunk, 1998). *In conclusion we assert that intervention programs will benefit from a multi-theoretical approach based on the self-efficacy and equity sensitivity theory.* Theory-based programs can draw from international research, which adds to their effectiveness. Moreover, program exchange between research centers will reduce developmental costs, and international scientific agreement will probably sooner convince authorities of the value of these programs.

The final section of chapter one examined the possibility of developing adequate burnout intervention programs. In general, burnout research appears to be of a theoretical nature. Descriptions of practical interventions are rarely found in the literature, and if so they deal with small groups. Moreover, the interventions described are mainly examined cross-sectionally, lacking a sound theoretical framework and a control group. We conclude that *it is advisable for the development of burnout programs to stimulate cooperation between the*
For instance, the development of an intervention program for teachers may benefit from a study on a burnout intervention program for dentists in the Netherlands (Gorter et al., 2001). In this study control groups are used, and an individual approach is combined with group sessions. Moreover, this quasi-experiment was followed by a sequel intervention one year later (Te Brake et al., 2001). Studies like these help partly solve the question whether the program should consist of individual or group sessions. These studies also learn that a theory based program might have offered additional opportunities to grade up the effectiveness of the program: the authors consider partaking in the intervention program as an investment of the participants, which refers to the equity sensitivity theory.

In view of the seriousness of the consequences of teacher burnout more vigorous attempts should be made to prevent the onset of the syndrome e.g. by introducing the topic of burnout on the curriculum of teacher training institutes. Pre-service teachers thus confronted with the syndrome may be prevented from cherishing unrealistic expectations of their future job. Burnout being a point of issue in teacher training may influence the school management's self-evaluation with respect to their own proceedings. In this instance the management should be governed by the central question whether managers have done their utmost to monitor the teacher, to support him and to discuss his work in an equal and open atmosphere. This procedure may facilitate attempts to find solutions for work related problems, e.g. to have the teacher participate in an intervention program. The last statement may seem rather trivial, but is in fact very important. If the cloak of anonymity will be removed, the response rate and thereby the willingness to participate in an intervention may shrivel up.

Finally, we suggest the following procedure in case the onset of burnout is suspected. First, the level of burnout should be accurately diagnosed. Second, equity sensitivity has to be measured. Third, the teacher's weak self-efficacy domains have to be ascertained. Fourth, the findings will decide on the kind of intervention the teacher should attend, i.e. aimed at restoring equity sensitivity and strengthening self-efficacy, or aimed at only one of the two. The last suggestion implies that the burned out teacher gets the opportunity to individually attend the program, but due to the importance of social support the program could also include group sessions. Pre- and posttests have to be used to measure the effectiveness of the intervention program.

In sum, this dissertation's object was to elucidate some aspects of teacher burnout, and resulting from this to suggest measures that might be useful in the development of an intervention program. Our procedure started with the examination of teacher burnout in an
innovative setting. We consider this to be an outstanding feature of modern education. After that we examined the sequence of the three burnout dimensions in an innovative setting so as to enable interventionists to develop programs tailored to the existing symptoms. As education is an interactional process in which various categories of individuals take part, we examined the importance of the self-efficacy beliefs to elicit social support in relation to burnout. And finally, we attempted to find ways to try and refine the diagnosis of burnout first by measuring the teachers' equity sensitivity and second by acquiring data from students that provided us with additional information on the teachers' well-being. Except for the study on the sequence of the dimensions of burnout, we used the self-efficacy construct as the theoretical framework for explaining burnout in our studies.

The various limitations of the empirical part of this dissertation have already been mentioned in the separate studies. In addition we like to refer to two statements from the literature articulating our doubts on the reliability of self-report questionnaires. "Genau die älteren, noch im Dienst befindlichen Enttäuschten und vom Ausbrennen Gefährdeten, die wir gerne befragt hätten, neigen zur Antwortverweigerung..." (Schmitz & Leidl, 1999, p.309). And arising from this the authors refer to the difference in burnout level between participating and non-participating teachers. "Doch diese Fähigkeit zur Selbstkonfrontation ist bereits ein Schritt gegen das Ausbrennen.... Das bedeutet daß wir die wirklich Ausgebrannten selten befragen können bzw. anderenorts suchen sollten" (Schmitz & Leidl, 1999, p.309). We believe we have met with the same problems as so aptly worded in these quotes. New ways of seeking cooperation with future respondents may solve part of the problem mentioned. We suggest starting with bottom-up research, with the teachers as co-initiators for "they are able to define their feelings and perceptions of work more easily than many other groups" (Cox & Brockley, 1984, p.86).
REFERENCES


