IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE BURNOUT SYNDROME AMONG TEACHERS[*]

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic represents, at the same time, a global public health problem, as well as a health problem of each individual, including mental and emotional well-being. From the outset, the pandemic generated a general state of alert, at all levels, including education. In most areas of activity, this period has required greater involvement and more sustained efforts to mitigate the disadvantages and risks caused by the pandemic.

The current paper aims to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the phenomenon of burnout. Has this phenomenon emphasized lockdown and triggered a change in the way of performing the activities? Is there a relationship between the psycho-emotional effects of the pandemic and the burnout syndrome? These are the main questions that we intend to answer, following literature review and an investigation carried out on a sample of pre-service teachers, who participated in a focus-group interview.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic; Lockdown; Stress; Emotion management; Burnout; Strategies and techniques to prevent / reduce burnout.

1. Introduction

Beginning in late 2019 in mainland China, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread rapidly around the world, causing major problems and changes across countries, with respect to their structures and systems. Every society tried to identify quick and, as efficient as possible, solutions to reduce the spread of the virus, to secure the health of the population, as well as the functionality of all social, economic, educational mechanisms, etc.

The effects of lockdown were equally felt on the education systems, as a result of closing schools and other educational institutions and of the relocation of the

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entire formal learning and teaching process, alongside non-formal or informal education, in the online environment.

The categories of people directly or indirectly involved in the teaching and learning activities were deeply affected by these changes. Both teachers and students were forced to adapt their way of working to a new context, to a new framework, to such educational resources. For many of the teachers and students, digital literacy was required, being mandatory for carrying out the activities. It was also a challenge for the school management to find viable solutions for quality teaching. One of the categories most actively involved was represented by the students' parents, who sometimes assumed the role of "teachers" for their children.

An analysis of how education systems around the world coped with the situation would certainly reveal a common ground and similar ways of acting. We are particularly interested in the situation of the Romanian education system during the pandemic, focusing on the analysis of the emotional effects on the people pertaing to the education system.

At the European level, in March and April 2020, many countries decided on full or partial school closure. In Romania, the decision to close the schools was taken in March 2020. This decision led, in most cases, to the organization of online teaching activities, of the distance learning type, in extremely diverse conditions, exploiting, more or less, digital means of teaching and communication.

Under the circumstances, teachers had to adapt their teaching methods, to make radical changes, with regard to the teaching style, the strategies used, the resources used, the ways of interacting with students. All this involved additional efforts, a larger budget of time allocated to the preparation of activities, their development, evaluation of students, stressors that accentuated the emotional discomfort. Can all these effects of the pandemic be a source of burnout? Our investigation aims to clarify this issue.

2. Is there a link between the effects of the pandemic and the burnout syndrome?

The burnout phenomenon is a psychological response to chronic stress caused by work, professional activity performed intensely or in conditions that affect the person's health and emotional balance (Halbesleben, Osburn, Mumford, 2006); Ahola, Toppiner-Tanner, Sepännen, 2017). Hayes, Priestley, Ishmakhametov, Ray (2020, p. 8), drawing on previous research (Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), define the burnout syndrome as a "psychological syndrome emerging as a prolongued response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. The three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment".

In another definition, Maslach, Leiter, Jackson (2012, cited in Balode, 2016, p. 72), "the burnout syndrome is a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, which occurs among individuals who work in direct contact with clients and/or with patients".

According to Maslach (1982, apud Tuna, Özdin, 2021, p. 2), the burnout syndrome is composed of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low level of personal accomplishment.

The phenomenon of occupational burnout can affect any professional category, but it is specific to those that involve, in a significant proportion, human interaction. The teaching profession is one in which the mental overload is significant.

As in the case of any imbalance, the first mode of action to be considered is that of prevention, based on the use of certain methods and strategies to prevent its occurrence.

In what follows, we shall present some **prevention strategies**, which can be adapted according to each profession (see *Ghid privind evaluarea şi prevenirea lucrătorilor la riscuri psihosociale* - the *Guidance on the assessment and prevention of workers from psychosocial risks*, 2013):

• Actions to eliminate or reduce psychosocial risk: organizational change; redesign of the activity; ergonomic optimization of the environment and of the workplace; training employees in decision making;

• Actions to train stress adaptation strategies (coping mechanisms): relaxation techniques; biofeedback; diet; occupational therapy).

Counseling activities can also be helpful in this situation. Butnaru (2008, pp. 640-653) describes a number of strategies and techniques for counseling people at risk of burnout or even when it occurs:

• Problem-solving strategies - aiming to foster the skills of creative problem-solving, by developing creative, lateral thinking;

• Counseling focused on solutions - aiming to find effective solutions for the various problems analyzed;

• Strategies for positivizing thoughts and attitudes towards learning;

• Strategies to control stress and anxiety in educational contexts, such as: work or physical effort; finding causal explanations; learning to accept what we cannot change; sufficient rest; doing only one thing at a time; being available to others, etc.;

• Behaviour modeling techniques: to develop a new behaviour (successive approximation; continuous reinforcement; negative reinforcement; modeling; signal; discrimination), to reinforce a behaviour (decrease reinforcement; variable reinforcement), to stop an appropriate behaviour (saturation, extinction , punishment), etc.;

• Techniques for developing assertive communication skills: concrete description of the other person's behaviour; objective description of the negative consequences of his/her behaviour on the subject; accurate description of feelings associated with consequences, etc. Assertive behaviour develops by practising, by contextualisation work in numerous and varied situations;

• Conflict management techniques, either to avoid or to manage conflict.

At the same time, an important step to be taken in the prevention / intervention in cases of burnout is to identify the causes that customarily contribute to the onset of burnout syndrome.

According to Halbesleben, Osburn, Mumford, (2006), some of the possible causes may be:

• Low social support;

• Group dynamics, interpersonal conflicts;

• Role stress (insecurity, ambiguity, conflict, overload);

• Unfulfilled expectations.

Maslach (2012, apud Balode, 2016, pp. 75-77) considers that the occurrence of the burnout syndrome is determined by the degree of fit/ mismatch between a person and 6 areas of work:

• **Workload** - The discrepancy in the workload area is determined by the need to fulfill an excessive workload in a limited amount of time and with limited resources, which can irreversibly deplete the employee's energy. The incongruity can also come from the lack of the necessary competence or the attraction / vocation for accomplishing the tasks, even if their volume is reasonable.

• **Control** – It refers to the employee's perception of his / her ability to influence decision-making at work, to access the resources necessary for the efficient performance of the tasks and to have autonomy at work.

• **Reward** - This discrepancy is felt when remuneration, either social or material, does not meet expectations.

• **Community** – It involves social interaction that occurs at the workplace. This refers to the relationships of mutual support, conflict, empathy / closeness, ability to cooperate and teamwork.

• **Fairness** – It represents the appreciation / perception of the employees of the fairness of the approved decisions and of the respect shown towards the employees.

• **Values** – They represent the employee's ideals and the reasons that determined him / her to choose the profession. The conflict between personal and institutional values or between declared institutional values and those manifested in practice (for example, declarative quality services and saving resources in practice), lead to situations in which the employee is forced to reach a compromise between how he / she wants to do his / her job and how he / she is forced to do it.

Figure no. 1 presents the relationship between two categories of factors involved in the onset of the burnout syndrome, professional and individual in nature, and the health condition, the physical and mental comfort of the individual:
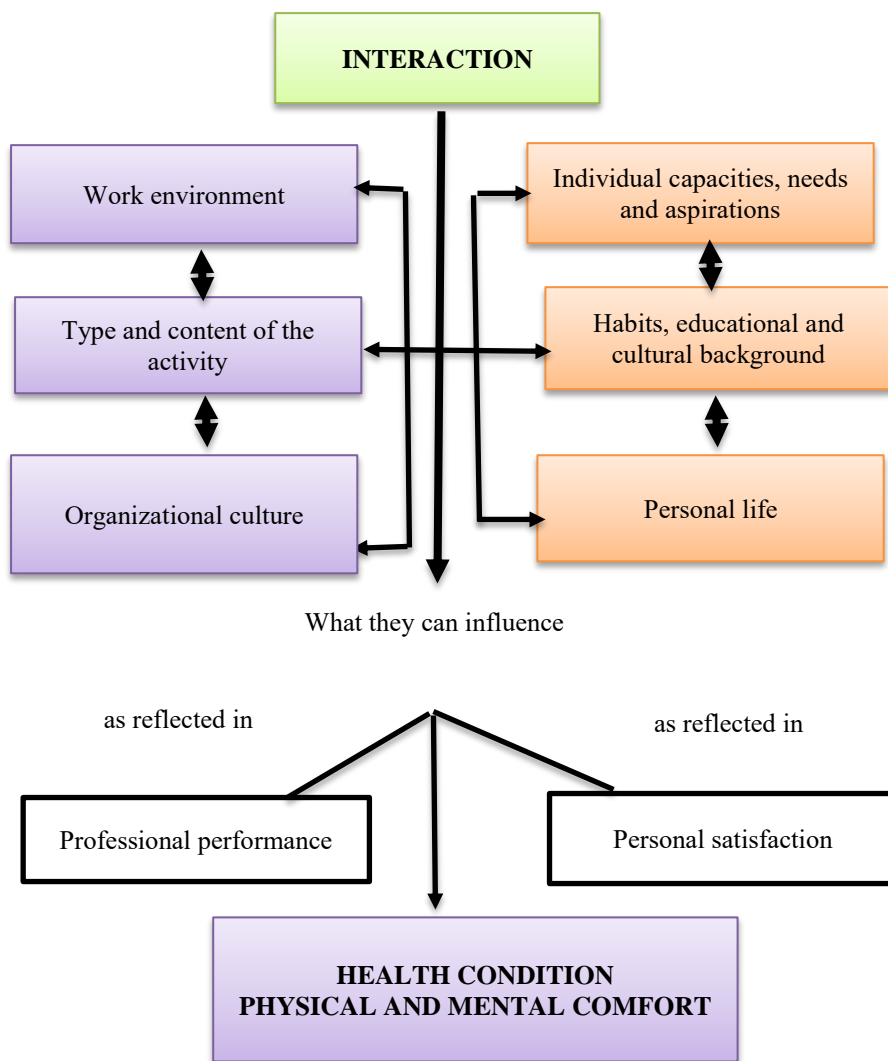
Figure 1. Interaction between professional and individual factors and health condition (Ghid privind evaluarea și prevenirea lucrătorilor la riscuri psihosociale. Guidance on the assessment and prevention of workers from psychosocial risks-our translate, 2013, p. 2)

As seen in Figure 1, personal and individual factors (educational and cultural background, needs, aspirations, habits, abilities, skills) contribute to the health of each person, alongside organizational factors (work environment, interpersonal relationships with superiors / subordinates or colleagues, organizational culture, characteristics of institutional management / leadership). It is also worth mentioning

the relationship between the activity carried out and the reward obtained, i.e., the satisfaction, as a result of the reward.

The multitude of risk factors in the onset of the burnout phenomenon makes it necessary to group them into categories for a better understanding of the cause and effect mechanisms and for allowing for a better intervention. Table 1 describes some categories of risk factors.

Table 1. Main categories of risk factors (adapted from Ghid privind evaluarea și prevenirea lucrătorilor la riscuri psihosociale. Guidance on the assessment and prevention of workers from psychosocial risks – our translate, 2013, p. 2)

No.	Psychosocial risk factors	Details
1	Cognitive effort due to the nature, characteristics and content of the workload	- variety of behaviour types - the duration of the cycle and the number of operations per cycle - memorization efforts - speed in execution - the required level of attention - degree of precision, requiring the marshalling of conscious participation
2	Type of tasks	- tedious, little stimulating tasks, perceived as meaningless - lack of variety - unpleasant tasks
3	Time-related factors	- repetitive or non-repetitive operations - free or imposed pace - the salary system (which sometimes indirectly imposes a fast pace) - break planning -possibility to leave, if necessary, the workplace, outside the breaks - daily, weekly, monthly, annual working hours - shifts - night shifts
4	Organisational and management factors	- specific organizational culture - ambiguity of roles or tasks (division of labour) - conflict between different professional requirements - duties and responsibilities towards equipment, people and their security or, on the contrary, lack of responsibility -lack of consultation and participation in decision making -unjustified restrictions in relation to behaviour at the workplace - lack of appreciation and reward - lack of job security - lack of autonomy and control - unclear or unfair performance evaluation system - lack of knowledge or agreement on the objectives of the organization

5	Interpersonal relationships	- difficult relationships with superiors, colleagues and / or subordinates - lack of sense of belonging to the group -social or physical isolation - lack of sense of security - lack of self-confidence - lack of appreciation, recognition and support from others - discrimination, intimidation, aggression, harassment, violence at work
6	Career development	- career stagnation or uncertainty, job insecurity, lack of career prospects -insufficient or excessive promotion - low salary - low social appreciation of the work performed - overqualification or underqualification
7	Work-family interface	- conflicting work-family requirements - lack of family support
8	Workplace and equipment	Potential hazards: -noise, vibration, microclimate, lighting, station planning, chemical noxious substances, radiation, etc. - factors with objective harmfulness or perceived as harmful - risk of injury

These listed categories of risk factors become customized, of course, depending on the specificities of each profession. Moreover, during the pandemic, they became individualized, and new categories of factors that intensify occupational burnout emerged.

Most studies published during this period analyze the relationship between the effects of the pandemic and burnout for health care workers, in which the demands were intense, irrespective of their country of origin. However, there is also research targeting other professional categories that had to make major changes to their work (style).

Thus, Pânișoară, Lazăr, Pânișoară, Chirca, Ursu (2020) examine the relationship between technostress and burnout, referring to the professional category of teachers, forced, during the pandemic, to carry out their activity mainly by using communication technologies.

In the same context, Hayes, Priestley, Ishmakhametov, Ray (2020) discuss the link between burnout syndrome and remote, home-based work in the aftermath of the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

3. Research design

Our investigation **aimed to** identify the relationship between the affective-emotional effects of the pandemic on the burnout syndrome among teachers.

In this sense, we sought to decide on the truth value of the following **hypotheses**:

The Covid-19 pandemic and the need to carry out online teaching activities have intensified teachers' efforts, thus accentuating feelings of energy depletion **or** *exhaustion*.

The investigation consisted in conducting a focus-group interview, in which 12 Master's students participated, all of them being 1st-year students at the Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova, and being enrolled, in parallel to the Master's, to the teacher training programme, level 2, enabling them to be employed as high school or post-secondary or university teachers. Of the 12 participants in the interview, 5 are in-service teachers.

The interview was conducted online, during a meeting on the Google Classroom platform and lasted for one hour. The interview guide included 5 questions, which aimed to identify the opinion of the subjects on the psycho-emotional effects of the pandemic, on the types of additional requirements in relation to the transfer of the teaching activity from face to face instruction to the virtual environment, on the existence of possible links between the stress caused by the management of these situations and the phenomenon of burnout.

The 5 questions of the interview guide are presented below:

1. What are the consequences, the emotional effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on teachers?

2. How did the teachers manage the situation during the period?

3. Can you argue or exemplify whether the online activity was more demanding than face-to-face instruction?

4. What are the common causes of burnout syndrome in general? What about the pandemic period?

5. How can the burnout syndrome be prevented for teachers?

4. Results and discussion

The data collection and interpretation, based on the interview, allowed us to validate our hypothesis: *The pandemic and the need to carry out online teaching activities intensified teachers' efforts, accentuating the phenomenon of occupational burnout*.

We summarize the answers of the participants in the discussion.

Among the common causes of teacher burnout, presented and described by participants, we list:

• the management / leadership promoted at the level of the institution;

• the rapport with the school manager or with the head of the department;

• the rapport with colleagues or the relationships with students' parents;

• allocating too much time to the drafting of all the curriculum-related documents or to collecting evidence of the activity carried out;

• the time spent evaluating all outputs of the students' activity;

• differentiated attitude towards the school-based tenured teachers, and towards the part-time teaching staff, respectively.

To these are added recent sources of work overload in the Covid-19 context:
• more time allocated to the preparation of activities;
• the need to be trained for the use of educational platforms or resources;
• the need to adapt the methods to online teaching;
• the hybrid model / blended learning, adopted by some schools;
• the lack of direct interaction with students and the need to redesign the interaction patterns;
• the lack of direct interaction with students' parents;
• finding new ways to motivate students to learn;
• the need to provide emotional support to students and, sometimes, to parents;
• the difficulty of educational intervention, especially in the case of children with special needs.

As ways to prevent the phenomenon of burnout, participants mentioned:
- observance of rules of intellectual psychohygiene: getting sufficient and adequate sleep, a healthy work-life balance, relaxation and fun;
- ensuring emotional comfort, well-being on a daily basis;
- healthy eating habits;
- isolation avoidance;
- prioritization of tasks;
- virtual socialization, by integrating to virtual communities or groups, allowing for the share of ideas, practices, experiences.

Although the participants in the interview also highlighted some positive aspects of the work carried out by teachers during the pandemic, which are likely to persist in the future, the conclusion was that this period involved additional efforts of teachers, both at the cognitive and emotional levels. Likewise, the time needed to prepare the activities increased considerably, which accentuated their fatigue.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic, caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has affected people globally, created panic and major imbalances at the social and individual level alike. In addition to the health threat, there have been important challenges related to the need to adapt to the new conditions in order to continue the professional activity. For teachers, school closure and suspension of face-to-face instruction resulted in continuing the activity in the online environment, which triggered a rethinking of the teaching process, the identification of other educational resources, available to them and students. It also represented a significant pressure, requiring flexibility and adaptation, creativity in identifying the best working options. Especially for teachers trained in the traditional style, it was necessary, first of all, to develop digital skills and, moreover, to be able to teach with technology.

It took a much more intense effort, which often accentuated fatigue, exhaustion of energy, the teachers being overwhelmed with the demands of a still bureaucratic system. The management of the stress and emotions generated by the general context added up to the occupational one or to the one caused by the

excessive use of new technologies. Each teacher discovered their own ways of managing the situation, of self-control, ensuring their own well-being.

Our research has not only identified the main effects of the pandemic on teachers, but also the coping mechanisms that they have developed, including those related to maintaining emotional balance.

Beyond the pandemic period, however, the syndrome of occupational burnout is a reality of every profession, including teaching, and therefore action should be taken especially to prevent its occurrence or reduce its effects when it occurs.

In conclusion, in line with V. Gorincioi (2013, p. 124), we can conclude that, in spite of the threats at the individual, institutional, professional and social level that can compromise and endanger the teaching career, many teachers feel happy, satisfied with the work done and with the outcomes.

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