

Investigating the Views of Directors of Secondary Education Units About the Burnout Syndrome During the Three-Year Term (2017-2020)

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Abstract

Background and aim: The phenomenon of professional burnout has begun to be studied systematically in the field of education, particularly in those who serve in a managerial role in order to determine how the multilevel role affects the effectiveness and self-perception of individuals. This study was conducted with the aim of recording/investigating the symptoms of the phenomenon of burnout in the directors of school units serving in the Secondary Education of the Regional Units of Evros and Rodopi in Greece. **Methodology:** Literature review documented by sources of theoretical content guided the acquisition of empirical findings through quantitative research, a sample of which was responding 50 directors from 78 schools in urban, semi-urban and rural areas of the above regional units. Statistical data analysis was done using the google drive form and the possibilities provided by the excel program. **Results:** Data were analyzed according to variables of sex, type of residential area, number of students and years of experience. **Discussion:** Results indicated that secondary school directors do not experience burnout to a significant degree. Greater difficulty is reported in managing the time they spend due to their duties and bureaucracy. Further research is required to shed light on the aspects of the phenomenon and explore the psychological consequences and its management.

Keywords: director, secondary education, burn-out

1. Introduction

The burnout syndrome internationally is the subject of extensive investigation and scientific reflection due to the effects that often seem to affect the quality of life of employees. The World Health Organization (*Burn-out an 'Occupational Phenomenon'*, n.d.) (WHO) included "burnout" in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as "*an occupational phenomenon, resulting from chronic stress in the workplace that has not been successfully treated and as a syndrome characterized by three dimensions : feeling low on energy or exhaustion, increased psychological distance from one's work, or feelings of negativity or cynicism related to the workplace, and decreased professional effectiveness*".

Christine Maslach (1976) defined burnout "*as a negative individual experience concerning the individual's interpersonal relationships in his work environment*" (p.40), (Pines & Kafry, 1978) refer to individuals suffering from burnout as those, who are unable to adapt to the demands of their profession, because they are completely suffocated by work stress leading even to the point of collapse, Edelwich and Brodsky (1980), described the phenomenon of burnout as a progressive process, the result of chronic occupational stress, with the worker de-idealizing his/her work reality, due to not fulfilling his/her expectations and Cherniss (1980) described burnout as the individual's reaction to stressful work factors when his/her available sources of energy do not correspond to the demands of the workplace. The study of burnout has now become more systematic with quantitative research methods and the use of validated questionnaires (Antoniou & Dalla, 2010).

Maslach is considered to have given perhaps the most complete definition to the term burnout, describing it as "*a syndrome of physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion of the individual, which gradually leads to a loss of positive feelings for the people with whom he/she works, ceases to feel satisfaction from his/her work and is gradually led to a negative self-image*" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) defining it as a psychological process that affects the individual in terms of his/her attitudes, motivations and expectations, delimiting it mainly in relation to the employee's feelings

towards the beneficiary, referring to it as: "*loss of interest in the people one works with, including physical exhaustion*", characterized by emotional exhaustion where the professional no longer has any positive feelings of sympathy or respect for clients or patients.

Another definition focuses on the effects of burnout on the employee and refers to it as: "*a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term exposure and involvement in situations that have demands of emotional involvement*" (Pines and Aronson, 1988), characterizing mainly people who display professional ambitions with high goals which goals are thwarted along the way. As a result of a process, it indicates the existence of an initial state of high mobilization and involvement, which can lead to depression or a suicide attempt (Κάβρας, 1996). In the English language, etymologically, the Burnout syndrome is rendered as: "I am progressively consumed from the inside to the point of decarbonization" (Koutelekos & Polykandrioti, 2007).

The symptoms of burnout are divided into physical, psychological and behavioral. Physical symptoms include all the characteristics related to the typical manifestations of stress and anxiety such as: headaches, gastrointestinal problems, sleep difficulties, hyperactivity, sexual dysfunction, eating disorders and musculoskeletal pains (Tyler & Cushway, 1998).

The effects of the burnout syndrome in teachers appear with symptoms at the physical, mental and emotional level as well as at the level of individual behavior (Maslach et al., 2001) a categorization followed by most researchers (Rentzou, 2015; Delichas et al., 2012; Tyler & Cushway, 1998; Kantas, 1996; Maslach & Jackson, 1982). The physically exhausted teacher shows physical exhaustion, chronic fatigue, weakness and low energy (Kandas, 1996; Mouzoura, 2005), headaches, sleep disorders, respiratory, dermatological and gastrointestinal problems, increased blood pressure (Rentzou, 2015; Papastylianou, Kaila, & Polychronopoulos, 2009; Polychronopoulos, 2008; Mouzoura, 2005; Maslach & Jackson, 1982), dizziness (Koutrouvidis, 2013), difficulty concentrating and memory problems (Delichas et al., 2012), speech disorders (Polychronopoulos, 2008), while in extreme cases cardiovascular problems and coronary disease occur (Vassilopoulos, 2012; Polychronopoulos, 2008).

The importance of individual factors (motivation, ambitions) are particularly emphasized in the occurrence of this syndrome, supporting the view that burnout occurs as a result of a reaction to the difficulties that arise in the working reality, while an important role is played by the expectations that the individual has of himself/ herself and from his/her work environment. The syndrome depends on the way the employee interprets stressful work conditions and not on the conditions themselves (Antoniou and Dalla, 2010). Most researchers interpret the burnout syndrome in the context of a dynamic interaction between the employee and the work environment (Vachon, 1987), as they argue that burnout is due to demanding and stressful work conditions combined with the inability of the individual to control and deal with them (Antoniou & Dalla, 2010; Schaufeli et al, 2009; Cherniss, 1980; Maslach & Jackson, 1982).

The literature review demonstrated that the burnout syndrome is one of the serious social issues of the modern era (Schaufeli et al., 2009) and the important problem of the field of education (Koustelios & Koustelios, 2001). Its continuous and thorough investigation is imperative, especially due to the socio-economic developments of the last decade. Although there are several modern studies in Greece on the syndrome of burnout of teachers, nevertheless, studies that investigate the presence and evolution of the phenomenon among the director of Secondary Education units are much less, most of them of a quantitative approach and with the sample usually representing a certain prefecture that Rhodope and Evros are not among them. The further investigation of the phenomenon in other regions of Greece is imperative due to the fact that school directors are charged with a multitude of tasks, performing a complex and decisive role for the effectiveness of the educational organization (Friedman, 2002; Tsiakkiros & Pasiardis, 2002), thus leading often in work stress and burnout (Kouli, G. 2014. Tsiakkiros & Pasiardis, 2006). At the same time, in the Greek literature in recent years there have been studies focused on the effects of the financial crisis in the field of education (Poultidis, 2017; Sklavos, D. 2014), and linking these effects to the burnout syndrome of teachers (Anagnostou, 2018; Bitsakakis, 2018). Therefore, in order to cover at least the research gap in the burnout of secondary school directors, it was deemed important and necessary to investigate the opinions of school directors themselves, through a quantitative approach. The present work aspires to investigate the effects of the burnout of school directors for the period 2017-2020 and to create the addition of research to future investigators (Petridou G., 2014; Diamantopoulou, A. 2019)

2. Methods

Aims

The purpose of this paper is to record, investigate and interpret the level of burnout of school directors serving in the Secondary Education of Evros and Rhodope of the regional area of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, shortly before the end of their three-year term 2017-2020, for the burnout syndrome.

The objectives pursued are: a) the investigation of the existence and degree of burnout of the director of Secondary

Education schools, b) the investigation of the existence of the dimensions of "emotional exhaustion" and the feelings of mental and physical fatigue, as well as loss of energy and disposition and c) the investigation of the factors that lead to the appearance of the burnout of directors. In the present research, the quantitative approach is used through the use of a questionnaire, because it was considered that the basic purpose, the general objectives and the research questions that have been raised are better served. With the quantitative approach, objective results are ensured through the statistical analyzes of the responses of a large number of participants and at the same time, various variables are correlated with each other, there is an extraction of safe results and the generalization of the conclusions is possible (Creswell, 2011).

Procedure

A questionnaire with closed-ended questions was used as a research tool, as it belongs to the most popular research methods characterized by several advantages and being particularly easy to use in the case of sample descriptive survey research. Some of the advantages of the questionnaire are the lack of cost, collecting responses from a large sample of the population, ensuring the anonymity of the participants as well as collecting a lot of information in a short time. In addition, the easy coding and processing of responses through statistical analyzes allows the extraction of objective results (Vamvoukas, 2007).

At the beginning of the questionnaire, there was a cover letter to the directors participating in the research regarding the context of the research implementation, the conceptual clarification of the term, the structure of the questionnaire, the time required to complete it, the importance of their participation in completing it, guaranteeing their anonymity, instructions for completing it and with the identities of the researchers.

Materials

The questionnaire used was the burn-out questionnaire from the Support and Monitoring Unit "Psyhargos" - Phase II" of the Research University Institute of Mental Hygiene (EPIPHSY) of the University of Ioannina, School of Medicine and Psychiatric Clinic and the National Center for Social Research SUPPORT & MONITORING UNIT " PSYCHARGOS – PHASE 2 Research University Institute of Mental Hygiene (EPIPSY) University of Ioannina – School of Medicine – Psychiatric Clinic National Center for Social Research (EKKE) Research & Development Planning Group (OMAS SA).

Participants

The sample of our research was the directors of secondary education units who served in general (day and evening), professional (day, evening and after-school) and special schools of the regional units of Evros and Rhodope as well as in the minority high school and the Muslim Seminary of Komotini. The directors of the two regional units were in their third and final year of office having been selected in July 2017.

3. Results

Questionnaires were sent by e-mail to 78 principals of secondary schools in Evros and Rhodope. A total of three courtesy reminders were sent. 50 of the 78 answered, a percentage that is 64%. Of these, a percentage of 54% were men (27/50) against 46% who were women (23/50). The age distribution was 48% from 56-65 years old, 42% were from 46-55 years old and 10% were from 35-45 years old, thus reflecting that the vast majority are over 45 years old.

In their additional studies, only one (1) (2%) female director had a "Doctoral degree" in Education, while 3 (6%) had a "Master's" degree in their Subject of study. 7 (14%) directors had a Master's degree in education, 11 (22%) directors answered that they had a Master's degree in School Management, and 12 (24%) had a Master's degree in their subject of study. 40% (20) had "Seminars in the administration of school units" while 62% (31) had "Other types of seminars", 18% (9) of Principals had a "Second degree" and 12% (6) had an "ASPAITE" degree.

Regarding their marital status, 76% were married with children and 6% were married without children. 8% were single, 6% were divorced and the remaining 4% were widowed. The location of the school was 70% in an urban area and 30% in a rural area. Analyzing demographic data, the majority of women (19/23) choose or had the option - possibly due to their high quota - to be placed in an urban area.

Table 1. Sex distribution by type of residential area

SEX	SCHOOL HEADQUARTERS AREA		TOTAL
	URBAN	RURAL	
Women	19	4	23
Men	16	11	27
			50

The number of students in schools was 30.6% from 1-100 students and 12.2% from 150-200, 200-250 and >400 students.

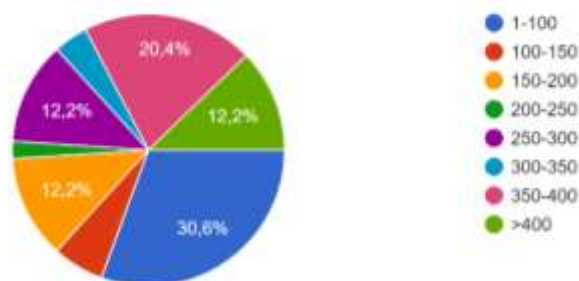


Figure 1. Diagram of distribution of school unit by total number of students

The length of service of directors is split 32% from 31-35 years, 26% from 26-30 years, 20% from 15-19, 16% from 20-25 and 6% from 9-14 years, thus placing 58% in a mature service situation of more than 25 years.

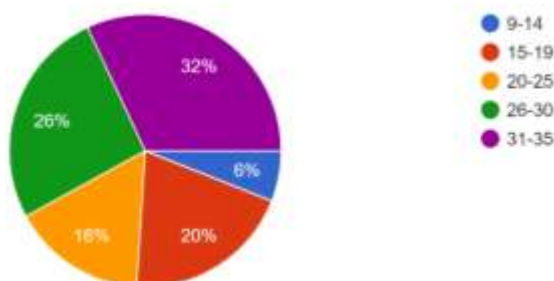


Figure 2. Diagram of years of work experience

In general, from the sum of the responses of each subject based on his ranking, the majority of respondents 28/50 (56%) - women at a rate of 13/23 (58%) and men 16/27 (62%) - are in 1st category "There are some signs of burnout" and in the 2nd category "There are some signs of burnout, but some factors may be particularly serious", 17/50 i.e. 34% (women 7/23 and men 11/27) are in the 3rd category "Be careful – you may be on the verge of burnout, especially if some scores are very high" while only 5/50 (3 women and 2 men) are in the penultimate category "You may be at serious risk of burnout – do something about it urgently".

The cases of women showing a result in category 4 both belong to the age group 56-65. One has advanced academic qualifications (doctorate in education) while the second has simple seminars, both serve in an urban area and belong to the same category of years of service. The third states that she has seminars in management and other subjects, belonging to the age group 46-55, also serving in an urban area demonstrating no correlation of academic qualifications with the degree of burnout with age and years of service. Similarly, for men, one has a master's degree in the subject of study and the other a master's degree in the management of school units, but there are subjects who have corresponding or even additional qualifications, being in better categories.

In general, there does not seem to be a great relationship between academic qualifications, age group and gender (women in the age group 56-65 and qualifications: other types of seminars show a range from 24 to 56 and respectively for men of the same age group, same qualifications from 18 - 49) demonstrating that personal factors enter into the issue of coping with work and workload and demands. Also men in the age group of 56-65 both serving in a rural area and with the same years of service (from 31-35) show a wide range in their answers (from 21 to 40).

Women in the 46-55 age bracket also with increased qualifications are from between 2 and 3, with the only note that here there are no subjects in 4, so maybe age plays a factor but we can't say for sure as we don't we have recorded how many years they have been in the specific position of the director. The same pattern is repeated in men with only one exception and that confirms the view of personal characteristics involved in the process.

Table 2. Years of service and total scores

Total scores	Years of working experience					Total
	9-14	15-19	20-25	26-30	31-35	
15-18	0	0	1	0	0	1
19-32	2	3	3	7	11	26
33-49	0	6	4	3	5	18
50-59	0	1	0	3	0	5
60-75	0	0	0	0	0	0
						50



Figure 3. Distribution chart of working experience (in years) and total scores

4. Discussion

From the analyzes of the answers we come to the following conclusions based on the purpose and objectives of our research.

The majority of respondents by 56% (women 58%) are in the category "There are some signs of burnout, / There are some signs of burnout, but some factors may be particularly serious". Therefore the syndrome is present although not in a large percentage, confirming the research of Kantas (1996).

58% of respondents do not lose their rhythm and physical or emotional energy, 74% have "never" or "rarely" negative thoughts about their work, 86% do not think they show cruelty or lack of patience towards people", 78% are not easily irritated by small problems or by their colleagues, 74% answered that there is understanding and appreciation from colleagues and partners, 64% "not at all" feel that they do not have someone to talk to. 18/26 men and 20/24 women (88% overall) responded that they do not try less than they should. So the majority of respondents experience low physical and emotional exhaustion and burnout.

64% consider that their work offers them what they wanted, what they chose. 68% stated that they do not feel pressured by the need to succeed, while here the tendency of women to show a greater desire to succeed in their work develops since both 7/23 versus 2/27 state in the options "often" and "very often". From the results of the answers to the question if they feel they are in the wrong place or doing the wrong profession, it was found that 70% of the respondents do not feel that they have chosen the wrong profession or are not in the right position. Feelings of personal accomplishment are at moderate to relatively high levels.

56% answered that "not at all" or "rarely" they are more or less irritated by various issues at work. 48% responded that they feel problems in the organization of their work or bureaucracy prevent them from working properly and 28% (14 CEOs) responded that these problems "sometimes" affect them.

64% do not consider their work to be more demanding than they can handle. While in the investigation, if they feel they

don't have time to do important things for their work, about 1/3 of the respondents answered that they feel they have time to do important things for the quality of their work. The other 1/3, stated "sometimes" considers that the time is not enough. The last 1/3, i.e. 34%, feel that they "often" or "very often" do not have time to improve the quality of their work. In this question 10/23 women, i.e. 41% compared to 34% of the general population, are on the "never" or "rarely" scale.

6/27 men and 7/23 women are on the "often" or "very often" scale for the question of whether their time is enough, indicating that women would like more time to plan their work. Women and men with high qualifications (Ph.D.) report that their work does not offer them what they would like or that they feel in the wrong profession

In general, there does not seem to be a great relationship between academic qualifications, age group and gender and the area of service, demonstrating that personal factors enter into the issue of coping with work and workload and demands. Women in the 46-55 age bracket also with increased qualifications are from between the 2 and 3 category, with the only note that here there are no subjects in the 4, so maybe age plays a significant factor but we can't say for sure as we have not recorded how many years they have been in the specific position of the director. The same pattern is repeated for men with the exception of only one and which confirms the view of personal characteristics involved in the process.

The level of occurrence of depersonalization is low with an average value of 1.9 on a scale of 1-5. The level of emotional and physical exhaustion appears low to moderate with an average value of 2.45, while the personal achievements factor shows a slightly lower average value of 2.3.

The syndrome of burnout in the field of education has been the subject of research by the international scientific community in recent decades. An extensive literature review was undertaken through which researches were identified that study the syndrome of professional burnout of school principals in the context of the changes that have taken place in the last decade (2008 - 2018) in Greece.

In 2018, Ioannou, in his own research finds low levels of burnout among the education directors of another regional area of Greece and that "in terms of the correlation between the three dimensions of burnout, it was statistically found that a) depersonalization is positively related to emotional exhaustion, b) personal accomplishments are negatively related to emotional exhaustion and c) personal accomplishments and depersonalization do not have a statistically significant relationship'.

They are of particular interest and it is necessary to explore the views of school directors themselves (through qualitative research) on the issue of burnout, relating it to the transformations at the social, economic and work level as a result of the changes brought about by the economic and by extension social crisis in Greece in the last decade.

The electronic sending of the questionnaire is a fast, inexpensive and reliable process, but it involves the risks of non-response, a risk that became a reality in our case since 28 of the directors did not respond to our telephone calls citing reasons of lack of time and inability to complete the duties. It may also have deterred some for fear of using the data despite our assurance in the embedded letter that the responses will be used solely for statistical analysis without individual labeling or due to a lack of desire to self-report.

Possibly a second sending of a richer questionnaire accompanied perhaps by a semi-structured interview would have shown more evidence about seniority in the managerial position and the effects on burnout. Of course we could have a larger sample and extract more data, if we involved the school units of a wider regional area.

From the sample collected, one could express the opinion that with regard to the syndrome of burnout in the directors of the secondary education units of the Evros and Rhodope regional units, the factor personal characteristics - individual characteristics as mentioned by Freudenberger is the one that probably plays the decisive role, a factor that needs further investigation ('Freudenberger on Staff Burnout', 1976).

It would be challenging to continue the research by expanding the questionnaire to detect the effects of the whole situation on the psychology of directors. To investigate the effect of the administrative act and everything that followed during the imposition of the measures and with the introduction of tele-education, synchronous and asynchronous.

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