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BURNOUT EXPERIENCE AMONG TEACHERS: A CASE STUDY

Caruso A.L.,[1] Giammanco M.D.,[2] Gitto L.[3*]

[1]Dr in "Programmazione e gestione delle politiche e dei Servizi Sociali", University of Catania, Italy

[2]MA - DSPS, University of Catania, Italy

[3]* MSc, PhD - CEIS Sanità, University of Roma "Tor Vergata", Roma, Italy. Corresponding author: CEIS Sanità, Facoltà di Economia, Università "Tor Vergata", Via Columbia 2, 00133 Roma (Italy); Phone: +39 339 8958858;
E-mail: Gitto@CEIS.uniroma2.it

Abstract: Burnout is a psychological syndrome, stemming as a response to chronic interpersonal jobs stressor, characterized by three principal dimensions: Exhaustion (the state of depletion of the individual's emotional and psysical resources due to difficulties in facing customers' demands); Depersonalization (the negative, off-putting and eztremely distant reaction to diverse facets of the job); reduced Personal Accomplishment (referring to reduced self-esteem concerning competence, achievement and productivity at work, Maslach and Jackson, 1981) The stream of reforms that has recently changed the Italian School, by favouring educational deregulation and increasing levels of autonomy for school boards, has increased Burnout levels among teachers, who may feel thorn between their internal expectation (personal beliefs, motivations and professional style) and the external pressures emerging not only from students, but also from a more

demanding school organization, oriented toward efficiency. Various contributions have posited that in the Burnout prevention a pivotal role is played by the Interpersonal Trust at work both among teachers and between teachers and the School Manager (Ceyanes and Slater, 2005; Timms *et al.*, 2006; Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2014), and by a good School Climate perception (Aron and Milicic, 2000; Dorman, 2003; Grayson and Alvarez, 2008).
The present contribution aims at analyzing the relation between each of the three aspects of Burnout and, respectively, the diverse facets of Interpersonal Trust and the components of School Climate. Data have been collected by means of a survey encompassing three well-known instruments, namely the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach and Jackson, 1981), the Interpersonal Trust at Work (ITW; Cook and Wall, 1980) and the Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ-Revised; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). 120 teachers have been interviewed in six schools of Southern Italy, in the period between March and May 2014.
Globally, results suggest the importance of Interpersonal Trust and School Climate in the prevention of Burnout. Exhaustion was negatively and significantly correlated with the

dimension of Interpersonal Trust concerning the Faith in intentions of Peers, and with three dimensions of School Climate, namely, Student Relations, Instructional Innovation and School Resources. Depersonalization was negatively and significant correlated with three out of the four dimensions of Trust (with the exception of Faith in intentions of Management) and with two dimensions of School Climate, namely, Student Relations and School Resources. Finally, Personal Accomplishment was positively and significantly correlated with Faith in intentions of Peers and with Student Relations. Hence, support programs focusing on these crucial dimensions, might be helpful in increasing teachers'well-being and reducing the level of burnout.

Keywords: Burnout, Interpersonal Trust at school, School climate, Teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is not an easy task: during the last years, students and their families have become increasingly critical and demanding towards teachers; the students have being developing many expectations, classes are overcrowded, so that the workload of teachers has increased dramatically (Lodolo D'Oria *et al.*, 2003).

In Italy, another critical aspect is that teachers' salary is rather low compared with the retributions paid in other European countries (OECD Report-Talis, International Survey on Teaching and Learning carried out by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2014). Teachers are not highly considered by the public, rather they are seen as part-time workers, who can even enjoy three months of vacation per year (Lodolo D'Oria *et al.*, 2003). Because of these critical factors and others that will be examined later, teachers may experience tiredness, physical fatigue, and see their energies depleted: teachers hardly cope with this demanding situation and many gradually develop a state of Burnout.

The term "Burnout" was introduced for the first time in 1974 by Freudenberger, to describe the inability to work effectively, as a consequence of prolonged and extensive job related stress. Since that time, incidences of, and research into stress and Burnout, have been increasing, especially those concerning employees in services sector, including social workers, nurses, teachers, lawyers, medical doctors and police officers (Dorman, 2003).

The first empirical work on the subject is that by Maslach and Jackson (1981). The study showed how Burnout is a syndrome characterized by a series of psychological and behavioral manifestations that can be grouped into three components: Exhaustion, Depersonalization and reduced Personal Accomplishment.

There have been identified more than 40 causes from which Burnout can originate, grouped within two main categories (Lodolo D'Oria *et al.*, 2003; Swider and Zimmermann, 2010). The first category is related to subjects' individual factors, both social and personal, as age, gender, marital status, etc., the second one includes environmental factors, related to the workplace, and the modalities through which work is organized and managed.

All these factors have been investigated in several empirical studies on Burnout.

In what follows, after a brief review of the Burnout antecedents in diverse job environments, explicit references to the causes of Burnout among school teachers will be discussed.

The Antecedents of Burnout

The majority of works found a negative correlation between age and Burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Bellani *et al.*, 1996): while, at the beginning of their job, workers are more responsive to external pressures, as long as they proceed in their career, they get used to stress (Cherniss, 1980).
About gender, it has been shown how women are more vulnerable to Burnout for various reasons, such as the double workload (work and family) to which they are subjected (Bowman and Allen, 1985; Mc Craine *et al.*, 1987; Valerio *et al*, 1998; Lau *et al.*, 2005). Other studies (Dorz *et al.*, 2004; Lau *et al.*, 2005), demonstrated how male are more likely to develop high levels of Depersonalization, while females tend to suffer from Exhaustion, showing, as well, a reduced Personal Accomplishment.
About marital status, results are contrasting. While some studies did not show significant differences (Bellani *et al.,* 1996; Dorz *et al.*, 2004), others found a positive correlation between the level of Burnout and the circumstance of being unmarried with no children (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).
The education level is determinant in the development of Burnout: in fact, the lower the education level, the lower the probability of experiencing it. People who did not reach a high education level do not pose themselves any major goals to achieve, so that they do not perceive stress when performing their activities (De Felice and Cioccolanti, 1999) .
About the years of activity before getting retired, the literature studies focusing on this aspect led to discordant results. Some of them showed that the subjects most vulnerable to Burnout are those ones at the beginning of their career, who are more likely to develop stress because of lesser work experience (Seltzer and Numerof, 1988). On the contrary, other works showed that the probability to experience Burnout increases over the years because teachers boost the energy invested in their work (Vimercati *et al.*, 2011).
Many studies emphasized the relationship between personality and Burnout (as Fontana and Abouserie, 1993; Alarcon *et al.*, 2009; Swider and Zimmerman, 2010).

Among the environmental causes of Burnout, stress factors related to physical environment (such as noise, changes in temperature, ventilation, humidity, poor environmental hygiene), play an important role (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). These general factors of stress in the work were analyzed in many studies on Burnout.
Among the determinants of Burnout there are also the characteristics of the job tasks: many researchers (among others, Lee and Ashfort, 1993; Maslach *et al.*, 2001, Singh *et al*, 2012) considered the number of working hours and the number of customers. The results confirmed how the pressure due to the short time available to perform a certain task is an element strongly and consistently associated with Burnout.
The organizational stress factors include structural and organizational characteristics such as the organization of work, its temporal distribution, planning activities, upgrading and education, etc. (Del Rio, 1990). Maslach *et al.* (2001) have identified six types of organizational stressors: work overload, lack of control (conflict situations or role ambiguity), insufficient gratification, collapse of the sense of community and belonging (when teamwork is lacking and, consequently, there is lack of respect as well), unequal treatment within the same organization, etc..
Several authors (among the others, Cherniss, 1980; Pines *et al.*, 1981; Acker and Lawrence, 2009) showed that Burnout is related to the lack of social support. When there is not enough support from supervisors and co-workers, the chance of experiencing Burnout increases. On the contrary, a good relationship with the boss and colleagues may have an influence on all three dimensions of Burnout, inhibiting its onset (Consiglio and Borgogni, 2007). Even the opportunity to participate in decision-making protects from Burnout (Lee and Ashforth, 1993). The organizational challenges related to the proper management of human resources are, therefore, extremely complex, nevertheless they should focus on the. investment in human resources and in the promotion of innovation and wellness in the workplace.

Burnout at School

Regarding the causes of Burnout for teachers, it was seen how they experience a higher level of Exhaustion; male teachers, instead, express their discomfort with high levels of Depersonalization (Lau *et al.*, 2005; Sasso, 2009).

Concerning marital status, several studies (including Lau *et al.*, 2005; Kokkinos, 2007) showed that married teachers report a lower level of Burnout, while unmarried and divorced people are more exposed. The family might constitute an affective compensation, likely to provide emotional support (Contessa, 1987), whereas children makes teachers more resistant to stress and, overall, to the syndrome of Burnout (Dale and Weinberg, 1990) . This is in line with the evidence from the literature on Burnout in other professions.

Other significant individual factors are age and experience: Zabel and Zabel (1982) and Di Nuovo and Commodari (2004) observed lower Exhaustion and Depersonalization in older teachers. Di Maria *et al.* (2001), examining a sample of Sicilian teachers, found that subjects at the beginning of their careers are more dissatisfied than those teachers with more years of activity. Hence, those ones more exposed to high levels of Burnout are the teachers with greater enthusiasm and higher emotional resources: they have to deal with situations and challenges that are new for them, whereas their colleagues with many years of activity can master the work situation, relying on their own experience.

Fontana and Abouserie (1993), in a study carried out on 95 teachers, show a significant correlation between Burnout and introverted personalities. Recent researches (as Swider and Zimmerman, 2010) confirmed these results.

Developing coping strategies, may help teachers in facing problems, avoiding conflicts, keeping under control their emotions, recognizing their limits and planning efficiently their work (Borg and Falzon, 1990; Pithers and Soden, 1998; Travers and Cooper, 1996, Cockburn, 1996; Benmansour, 1998, cited by Sartori e Rappagliosi (2011).

Other causes of individual Burnout among teachers identified by the literature are the reduction of autonomy and of self-efficacy (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2010), *i.e.* the reduction of the self confidence is the ability to successfully master some situations (Bandura, 1993); the rigidity about standards, objectives, roles; the poor expectations towards school management and teaching organization, especially when the latter are associated with a school system that is "closed" to change and novelty (Lodolo D'Oria *et al.*, 2003).

About environmental factors, Burnout at school is often caused by frequent organizational changes, lack of motivation of the students and, especially, their aggressive and hostile behavior. Regarding this aspect, Kokkinos (2007) outlined how teachers experiencing high levels of burnout are less

tolerant towards hostile pupils: this creates a "vicious circle", in which the students' negative behaviors tend to increase, causing, in turn, an augmented distrust from teachers, so that the relationship between teachers and students become unfriendly to both of them.

Di Nuovo and Commodari (2004) stated how a higher level of Burnout for teachers supporting children with special educational needs is correlated with the students' degree of disability, but not with the number of disabled students followed. Other significant factors are the excessive workload and, together with the lack of social support, the poor administrative support (Kokkinos, 2007; Stoeber and Rennert, 2008), from colleagues and from the School Manager (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The relationships established with the students' parents may contribute to the onset of Burnout in teachers (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007; Grayson and Alvarez, 2008), given that teachers are the mediators between the parents and the school.

Finally, the width of the working environment, the limited amount of resources necessary to carry out the usual teaching practice, crowding and noise within the school, were also considered among the environmental factors determining Burnout (Botticelli et al.2012; Gremigni, 2012).

From this composite framework it does emerge the complexity of Burnout, especially in the field of teaching. There is the need to implement effective preventive programs against Burnout in school. In this regard, several studies showed how a highly significant role in the prevention of Burnout is played by the Interpersonal Trust (Ceyanes *et al.*, 2004; Timms, 2006; Van Maele and Van Houtte, 2014), that is the feeling that each one can count on the help from others, colleagues and the Management, (Confidence in Intentions) accompanied by the belief that they are competent in their work (Faith in Actions) (Cook and Wall, 1980).

Similarly, a significant role in the prevention of Burnout is played by the School Climate (Aron and Milicic, 2000; Dorman, 2003; Grayson and Alvarez, 2008), that is the psychosocial milieu in which teachers act which includes aspects such as collaboration, relationship with students, openness to innovation, participation in the decision making process and adequacy of School Resources (Johnson *et al.*, 2007).

This study aims at contributing to the above mentioned strand of Burnout research at school by simultaneously analyzing the relationships between Burnout, Interpersonal Trust and School Climate in a sample of teachers in Southern Italy.

The paper is organized as follows: first, the tools employed for the measurement of Burnout, Interpersonal Trust and Climate are described; then, the results concerning the verification of internal consistency of all the dimensions for each tool and the analysis if correlations are presented. Some suggestions and implications for future research conclude the work.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The present study has enrolled 120 teachers working in the six schools of a municipality located in Southern Italy, with a population of 47.539 inhabitants. The interviews have been collected in the period between March and May 2014, by means of a survey made up of four sections, each collecting data respectively on:

1. Demographics.
2. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI, Maslach and Jackson, 1981), in the Italian version proposed by Sirigatti and Stefanile (1993) for the assessment of Burnout levels among school teachers. The questionnaire is made up by 22 items grouped in three sub-scales: Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment.

Exhaustion refers to the deep feeling of deprivation from energy and to the complete inability to face any possible job challenge. Depersonalization depicts an attitude of detachment and refusal towards colleagues and Reduced Personal Accomplishment depicts the reduced self-esteem concerning competence, achievement and productivity at work customers (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).

3. The Interpersonal Trust at Work (ITW, Cook and Wall, 1980), modified to the school setting, to measure Trust in peers and in the School Manager.

The instrument is made up of 12 items and measures two diverse facets of Trust: the feeling that one may count on somebody (Faith in intentions) and the belief that somebody is competent in his job (Confidence in actions). These two aspects are considered with respect to the peers and the School Manager. The ITW has therefore for sub-scales, namely, Faith in intentions of peers; Faith in intentions of the School Manager; Confidence in actions of peers; Confidence in actions of the School Manager.

4. The Revised School Level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ-Revised, Johnson *et al.*, 2007), to assess the School Climate. It is made up of five sub-scales with a total of 21 items: Collaboration, that measures the degree of mutual aid among the school members; Student relations, referring to the teachers' perception of their students behaviour and study attitude; School

Resources, that refers to the perception of availability and appropriateness of the school material, resources and school infrastructure; Decision Making, concerning the teachers' perception of their actual degree of participation to the decision process within the school; Instructional Innovation, assessing the teachers' perceptions relative to the penchant of the school towards innovation and experimentation.
The administration of the questionnaire has been authorized by the School Manager of each institute participating to the survey. It has been carried out in the school meeting room, during teachers' spare time between one class and the following. Only in one school, the Manager chose to explain the purpose and the methodology of the research in an institutional meeting.
The average administration time of the questionnaires was of 20 minutes.

RESULTS

The majority of the people interviewed (109 out of 120 individuals, 90.83%) were females, and their average age was 49.2 years. As far as the marital status was concerned, 97 individuals (80.83%) were married or lived with somebody, 2 of them were widowers (1.66%), 15 single (12.5%), 6 separated or divorced (5%). 48% of the people interviewed worked in the same town where they resided.
As far as the school order, 4 people taught in the Nursery School (3%), 72 in the Primary School (60%), and 44 (37%) in the Lower Secondary School.
The majority of the interviewed teachers, 108 (90%), were tenured ones. Of the remaining 12 individuals who were substitute teachers (10%), 10 were enrolled for the whole school year (8.3%), while 2 would have worked in that school only for a short length of time (1.7%). As far as the teaching task was concerned, 95 teachers were curricular ones (79.2%), while the institutional task of the remaining 25 teachers was to support children with special educational needs (20.8%).
Table 1 reports some descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: frequencies and percentages

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage

Gender		
Male	11	9.17 %
Female	109	90.83 %
Total	120	100 %
Age		
31-35	3	2.5 %
36-40	7	5.83 %
41 – 45	22	18.33 %
46-50	30	25 %
51-55	26	21.66 %
56-60	19	15.83 %
>60	3	2.5 %
No answer	10	8.33 %
Total	120	100 %
Municipality of residence	58	48.33 %
The same of the school	62	51.67%
Different	120	100%
Total		
Marital status		
Married or living with somebody	97	80.83%
Single	15	12.5
Widow/widower	2	1.66
Separated	6	5%
Total	120	100 %
School Order		
Nursery School	4	3%
Primary School	72	60%
Lower Secondary School	44	37%
Total	120	100%
Teaching task		
Curricular teachers	95	79.2%
Teachers supporting children with special educational needs	25	20.8%
Total	120	100%
Teaching position		
Tenured Teachers	108	90%
Substitute Teachers (one year enrollment)	10	8.3%
Substitute Teachers (short term enrollment)	2	1.7%
Total	120	100%

Role Seniority		
< 3 years	0	0 %
from 3 to 10 **years**	4	20 %
from 11 to 15 **years**	7	35 %
> 16 **years**	9	45 %
Total	20	100 %

The internal consistency of all the scales of Burnout, School Climate and Interpersonal Trust has been calculated by means of the Chronbach's Alpha.
The internal consistency of the three dimensions of Burnout was good only for Exhaustion (0.761), but it resulted below the threshold of 0.60 for the remaining two scales, Depersonalization (0.498) and Personal Accomplishment (0.490). Given the exiguity of the sample size, we have chosen to take a conservative approach by also considering these two Burnout sub-scales in the analysis of correlations, whose results must, nevertheless, considered with caution.
All the four scales of the construct Interpersonal Trust (Faith in intentions of Peers, Faith in intentions of School Manager, Confidence in actions of Peers, and Confidence in actions of School Manager) showed a high internal consistency (> 0.80).
The internal consistency of the five dimensions of the SLEQ-Revised was high for the Student Relations (Alpha = 0.89); good for School Resources (Alpha = 0.70); good enough for Collaboration (Alpha = 0.65) and Decision Making (Alpha = 0.67).
Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the scores attributed to the diverse dimensions of MBI, ITW and SLEQ.

Table 2. Median, Standard Deviation, Average, Minimum Value e Maximum Value of the dimensions of MBI, ITW and SLEQ

	Variable	Median	Standard Deviation	Average	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Possible Range
MBI	Exhaustion	15	7.78	1.48	6	43	0 ─ 54
	Depersonalization	0	3.09	1.63	0	18	0─ 30
	Personal Accomplishment	36	5.38	35.82	20	46	0 ─ 48
ITW	Faith in intentions of Peers	15	4.02	14.92	5	21	3─ 21
	Faith in intentions of the	10	2.98	9.85	2	14	2 ─ 14

	School Manager						
	Confidence in actions of Peers	16	3.61	15.72	7	21	3 ─ 21
	Confidence in actions of the School Manager	17	4.39	15.56	3	21	3 ─ 21
SLEQ	Collaboration	24	5.02	24.01	13	33	6─ 36
	Student Relations	15	3.86	14.90	5	24	4─ 24
	School Resources	13	4.39	12.95	2	22	4─ 24
	Decision Making	11	2.98	11.08	4	18	3 ─ 18
	Instructional Innovation	14	3.74	14.18	6	23	4─ 24

The analysis of the pair-wise correlations between the scores of MBI, ITW and SLEQ has been performed in order to investigate if teachers' Burnout is correlated to their perception of interpersonal Trust and of School Climate. Pair-wise correlations, that can be seen in Table 3, have been calculated by means of the Pearson's correlation coefficient using the program SPSS22 (IBM Corp. Released, 2013). As far as the three dimensions of the MBI are considered, a positive and highly significant correlation has been found between the global score of Exhaustion and that of Depersonalization. There was a negative and highly significant correlation between Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment. This is consistent with the literature findings (Maslach and Jackson, 1981; Lee and Ashforth, 1996; Taris *et al.*, 2005), according to which Depersonalization is positively correlated with Exhaustion and negatively correlated with Personal Accomplishment: the higher the level of Depersonalization, the higher that of Exhaustion and the lower that of Personal Accomplishment.

There was also a significant correlation between Exhaustion and Depersonalization (0.245).

The significant positive correlation between Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment (0.275), is consistent with the findings of Taris *et al.* (2005).

The four dimensions of Interpersonal Trust were all significantly correlated among them. This result is consistent with the fact that the four dimensions are sub-scales of a unique construct.

On the contrary, out of the five dimensions of School Climate, Collaboration was neither significantly correlated with Student Relations nor with School Resources, and these last two dimensions were not significantly correlated between them. These results call for a further investigation concerning the uniqueness of a school climate construct made up by different subscales.

The MBI dimension Exhaustion exhibited a highly significant negative correlation with Faith in intentions of Peers, Student Relations and Instructional Innovation, and significant ($p<0,5$) negative correlation with School Resources. From this, it follows that, in order not to fall into Exhaustion, it is crucial to set a positive relationship not only with the peers but also with the students (Dorman, 2003). It is also important that the school is endowed with the necessary equipment and that it is open to teaching innovation.

The score of the scale Depersonalization was negatively and significantly correlated with three out of the four dimensions of Trust (no correlation was found only with Faith in intentions of the School Manager) and with two dimensions of School Climate, namely, Student Relations and School Resources. This suggest that a good relationship with the colleagues, with the students and the availability of adequate school equipment are critical to avoid Depersonalization. Personal Accomplishment presented a positive significant correlation with Faith in intentions of Peers and with Student Relations.

Overall, the conclusions concerning Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment confirm the pivotal role of Trust and School Climate in the prevention of Burnout.

The sub-scales Faith in intentions of Peers and Confidence in actions of Management were strongly significant and positively correlated with all the dimensions of School Climate (with the only exception of the correlation between Faith in intentions of Peers and Student Relations, that was only significant at 0.05).

These results hint that a good School Climate is positively affected not only by the possibility of relying on the colleagues but also on the professional capability of the Management. Moreover, the dimension of Trust that has the biggest impact on the scale Student Relations is Faith in intentions of Peers: this result may be explained by the fact that the school job is a team job and trusting the intentions of peers is at the basis of a good team-work that may stem in good teacher-student relations.

The pairwise correlations between each scale of, respectively, MBI, ITW and SLEQ, and demographic and professional variables resulted not statistically significant, with the exception of the negative correlations between Personal Accomplishment and gender (male) and Collaboration and Marital Status (married or living with someone), and positive between Faith in actions of Peers and years of role seniority. However, this result,

that would imply a relevant role for the family environment, must be considered with caution because of the small sample size.
The negative correlation between Personal Accomplishment and the male gender could be explained by the fact that teaching for male teachers is seldom the only occupation. It could well be, especially in Southern Italy Regions, that the main attraction of teaching is represented by the "secure" job, that leaves room for other and more remunerative professional occupations. Men who, often in the social context, do not have to deal with the double workload (family and work) as women, might, therefore, choose this career.

CONCLUSIONS

The present contribution has investigated the existing correlations between the three sub-scales of Burnout à *la Maslach* and Interpersonal Trust at school and School Climate.
From the results it emerges a correlation between Student Relations and each of the three Burnout components, with a negative sign for Exhaustion and Depersonalization and a positive sign for Personal Accomplishment.
These findings suggest a twofold perspective in the evaluation of the relevance of the teacher-student interchange. It is a widespread idea that a solid teacher-student relationship is the base of the students' well-being at school, as it makes pupils feeling more secure and more capable, and allows them to achieve better academic objectives, building, at the same time, stronger and positive links with their schoolmates (Hamre and Pianta, 2006). A good teacher-student relation is also related to the well-being of the teachers, that is inversely correlated with Burnout.
These results are not conclusive: in fact, we found a correlation between Burnout and Student relations, but there is still room for investigation, concerning the direction of causality between the two variables. While Burnout could be reduced by a positive teacher-student relation, it could be, at the same time, that the less "burnt" teachers are those who are more capable to built a solid relations with their students.
The inverse relation between School Resources and, respectively, Exhaustion and Depersonalization suggests that the School Management should focus its financial effort in efficiently enlarging school resources (purchasing electronics as computers, allowing the use of multimedia whiteboards, etc.) and not only demanding increased efforts to its teachers.

This study also outlines a negative correlation between Depersonalization and three out of four dimensions of Interpersonal Trust at school, which are, in turn, correlated with a Positive School Climate. This suggests that the School Management should also devote resources in designing interventions in ameliorating team-building and internal communication.
Our results must be taken with caution, because of the small sample size.
Reiterating the analysis with a larger sample is the next step to do: this would allow not only to check for the existence of the uniqueness of a School Climate construct, but also to verify the internal consistency of the other two Burnout constructs.

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