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# Well-being in Education Systems

Conference Abstract Book  
Locarno 2019

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# **Well-being in Education Systems**

Conference Abstract Book, Locarno 2019

# Stress on board the educational ship: How can we prevent students from emotionally drowning?

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## Introduction

Various researches (e.g. Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Simonsson-Sarnecki, 2011) show that a high proportion of secondary school students feel very stressed. Thus indicating that stress is not the preserve of active professionals, but also affects teenagers. Different stressors have been identified in various studies. This allows us to distinguish internal causes, which are particularly related to pubertal changes and external causes, such as the transition from primary to secondary school or parental pressure (Colten & Gore, 1991).

Among chronic stressors – the ones that have the greatest impact on teenagers – those that are directly (e.g. having too much homework) or indirectly (e.g. having quarrels with peers) related to school are preponderant (Plancherel, Bettschart, Bolognini, Dumont, & Halfon, 1997). Academic exigencies, as well as pressure from teachers, parents, and even from the student him or herself, may have a negative impact on both his or her psychological (Sim, 2000) and physical well-being (Meylan et al., 2014).

Just like in a professional context, the development of burnout can be a response to permanent stress at school (Salmela-Aro, 2011). In fact, while burnout syndrome has mainly been studied with workers in areas of care and services (such as teachers), it can also be present in pupils of all ages (Meylan, Doudin, Curchod, & Stephan, 2011). A three-dimensional model suggested by Maslach and Jackson (1981) is usually used to explain it: 1) emotional exhaustion characterized by intense fatigue and an inability to get involved in work; 2) cynicism or depersonalization, which accounts for the difficulty of maintaining empathy and distance in interpersonal relationships; and 3) the lack of personal accomplishment that brings an individual to a sense of failure in his work.

However, the transition from stress to burnout is not inevitable. Numerous studies have shown that people are not equal in the face of stress and have identified protective factors. Without listing them exhaustively, two categories can be made: (1) personal factors such as having effective coping strategies or particular emotional skills (Genoud & Reicherts, 2009), (2) contextual factors such as having social support in the professional, family or personal environment (Koniarek & Dudek, 1996). Such results have been clearly established regarding burnout at work. However, there are fewer similar findings in the school field. For example, Jacobs and Dodd (2003) note the importance of having supportive friends with a sample of

university students. In a younger sample, Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Pietikäinen and Jokela (2008) report: “The more negative the adolescents’ perception of the school climate, the less they felt they received support from school, and the less they felt they received positive motivation from teachers, the more burnout they experienced” (p. 20).

### Research question and objectives

The purpose of our contribution is to bring a better understanding of the links between the stressors perceived by students and the development of burnout. Our study aims to take into account moderating factors (buffer) related to perceived classroom climate in particular. We expect certain dimensions of the classroom climate to play a moderating factor in the development of student burnout.

### Methodology, methods and sample

Regarding the methodology, a questionnaire (paper and pencil) was submitted to 180 students (56% of girls) at the end of compulsory schooling (average age:  $M = 14.1$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) in the French-speaking (53%) and German-speaking (47%) parts of the canton of Fribourg. The questionnaires were filled in anonymously. The scales used are the following:

- (1) Daily Troubles during Adolescence scale (Plancherel et al., 1997) with 19 items presenting stressful situations in the school context (e.g. having too many homework) as well as in the personal context (e.g. having acne).
- (2) School Burnout Inventory (SBI) by Meylan, Doudin, Curchod-Ruedi, Antonietti and Stephan (2015) corresponding to the French version of the Salmela-Aro et al. (2009) questionnaire and evaluating three dimensions (emotional exhaustion, cynicism and decreased sense of personal accomplishment) with 18 items;
- (3) An ad hoc questionnaire including 36 items from the Moos and Trickett’s Classroom Environment Scale (Moos & Trickett, 1987), evaluating six dimensions in three domains: interpersonal relations (class cohesion and proximity to teachers), retention or change variables of the system (rules-organization and innovation), and orientation towards goals and personal development (difficulty and task orientation).

All the dimensions have a satisfactory to very good internal consistency.

### Analyses and results

Firstly, and as was expected, the analysis of the results shows a strong correlation between the level of stress and emotional exhaustion ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < 1\%$ ). This link is a little weaker – but still marked – with cynicism ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < 1\%$ ) as well as with decrease in the feeling of personal accomplishment ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < 1\%$ ). These coefficients only slightly differ according to gender. Similarly, when looking at stress and burnout levels by gender, there is no significant difference in comparing girls and boys.

Correlations between classroom climate perception measures and the three dimensions of burnout are generally weak. Difficulty is the exception, the correlation amounting to  $r = .50$

on average. However, our results highlight the fact that the dimensions of interpersonal relationships play a moderating role between stress and burnout, but only in boys. Indeed, this effect is very pronounced regarding teacher proximity in this group as the prediction of emotional exhaustion from stress varies by more than 15% ( $\Delta R^2 = .15$ ;  $p < 1\%$ ) according to perceived proximity. This factor is therefore able to lessen the development of burnout.

The same is true for class cohesion, since this dimension appears to be a buffer factor in boys, with a marked moderating effect ( $\Delta R^2 = .11$ ,  $p < 1\%$ ).

## Discussion

Although links between stress and burnout no longer need to be demonstrated given the abundance of publications in this area, the identification of ways to prevent students from experiencing emotional exhaustion remains an important goal. In addition to the effectiveness of different personal coping strategies to reduce the impact of stress (e.g. Seiffge-Krenke, 2011), some contextual factors may also have a significant influence. Indeed, our results show that classroom climate proves to be a moderating factor in the development of burnout in boys. More specifically, the quality of relations within the class (felt cohesion) as well as those developed with the teacher (including its perceived proximity).

Despite various limits that will be presented in parallel to the analyses, our results highlight the need for teachers to be attentive to the climate they establish in their classroom. Indeed, although students partially shape the atmosphere of the classroom, the influence of teacher behavior and classroom management (which in turn impacts interpersonal relationships) remains predominant in creating a climate conducive to student learning and well-being. Many approaches – especially those involving active participation of students (e.g. Makela, Helfenstein, Lerkkanen, & Poikkeus, 2018) – can be implemented to improve the social climate in the classroom.

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This book collects the contributions presented at the 2nd International Conference on Well-being in Education Systems, held in Locarno on 12-13-14 November 2019 and organized by the *Competence centre for Innovation and Research on Education Systems* (CIRSE). The 49 contributions are research papers, theoretical dissertations and field interventions of academic researchers and practitioners from 10 countries around the world. They cover four areas: student well-being, burnout and teacher well-being, well-being promotion and well-being and academic achievement.

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