Identifying and Preventing Educators' Burnout Using a Microblogging Community

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Abstract

This paper is a result of the ongoing Grundtvig Project "SU-TRA - SUpporting TRAiners working with people with mental / cognitive difficulties". It will present the conclusions of a study carried out to identify the burnout factors and levels of teachers, trainers and social workers. In order to prevent and support educators in burnout, we have built and facilitated a community of practice on a microblogging platform. The community has also as aims to offer guidance for organisations in preventing and coping with burnout, and to be a collaborative space for exchanging and improving daily practising and for continuous social learning.

Keywords: burnout, educators, community of practice, microblogging

1. Introduction

"SU-TRA – SUpporting TRAiners working with people with mental / cognitive difficulties" is a two years project funded within the EU Grundtvig Programme, which started in September 2011, and is coordinated by Aletheia, Italy, having partners from six countries.

The project is aimed at advancing knowledge processes management in organisations dealing with social inclusion and entering in labour market of adults with mental / cognitive difficulties. The main areas of intervention refer to: improve active social inclusion and entering in labour market of adults with mental and / or cognitive difficulties by enhancing efficacy and effectiveness of daily practices through peer to peer exchange of trainers and social workers, and improve management of own adult education organisations facing the stress of social work plaid with suffering people and preventing workers burnout syndrome. The two areas are strictly linked because stressing
situations (and possible related burnout syndrome) not well managed, can hardly affect efficiency of social interventions and well-being of social workers.

The Romanian partner Timsoft, a company specialized in eLearning and mobile applications, together with the supporting partner RD Profil Consult, started to build a community of practice, with members from the Romanian institutions which are implied in the project activities, mobilities and dissemination: universities, organisations of social protection and firms of consultancy / training. Most of the members are educators – university teachers, trainers, psycho-pedagogues, but also managers.

This paper will present the activities run in the community in order to support the members in burnout and stressed states and to offer guidance for improving the organization's management to prevent and cope with such situations.

2. Burnout among educators

2.1. Burnout definition

The term burnout in psychology was coined by Freudenberger (1974), labeling a particular state of exhaustion, characterized by a gradual energy depletion and loss of motivation and commitment, usually accompanied by a wide array of mental and physical symptoms. Maslach (1982) defined burnout as "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind", which means that this syndrome appears especially for professionals whose work implies direct contact with other people: teachers, social workers, nurses, or workers with persons with mental difficulties.

Burnout has been the central topic of a lot of books, conferences, studies and articles (BOIT, 2010), and a major issue in many projects and organizations because as Potter (2005) said: "Burnout is job depression, a malaise of the spirit. No one is immune from job burnout". To prevent, to assess and to deal with the burnout level of employees is important not only for organisations and institutions, but also for the belonging families and communities. Currently the entire spectrum of workers' well-being is studied, starting from the negative (burnout) states to their positive antithesis (job engagement) states (Maslach et al., 2001; Martin et al., 2012).

Educators are a category strongly exposed to burnout, and the subject of many studies, most of them measuring the levels by administering the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey – MBI-ES (Maslach et al. 1996). The burnout levels were assessed not only for teachers from schools and universities (Vandenberghe and Huberman, 1999; Klassen et al., 2010; Watts and Robertson, 2011; Sas et al., 2011), but also for specific subcategories of educators, such as teachers implementing an innovative educational system (Evers et al., 2002), university online instructors (Hogan and McKnight, 2007), teachers of students with learning disabilities (Nichols and Sosnowsky, 2002), trainers (Waugh and Judd, 2003) or academicians (Karabiyik et al., 2008).

2.2. Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey

The MBI-ES is designed to measure educators' perceived levels of feelings of depleted emotional resources and difficulties with psychologically available to others: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), cynical and detached attitudes toward students, Depersonalization (DP), and feelings of reduced Personal Accomplishment (PA) on the job. Individuals respond to 22 items divided into three dimensions (EE, DP, and PA), for each item indicating the frequency in which they experience the described feelings (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burnout dimensions</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Exhaustion (EE) (9 questions)</td>
<td>0 ... 16</td>
<td>17 ... 26</td>
<td>27 ... 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depersonalization (DP) (5 questions)</td>
<td>0 ... 6</td>
<td>7 ... 12</td>
<td>13 ... 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Accomplishment (PA) (8 questions)</td>
<td>39 ... 48</td>
<td>32 ... 38</td>
<td>0 ... 31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The frequency is a Likert-type seven-point scale ranging from zero (never) to six (every day), thus 0 to 6 points correspond to each item of MBI-ES. By summating the specific responses, for each of the three dimensions (EE, DP, and PA) the corresponding level of burnout will be found: Low, Moderate or High.

3. Methodology

3.1. Aims and activities of the microblogging community

The community facilitated by Timsoft and RD Profil Consult is hosted in a private group of the Cirip.eu microblogging platform (Holotescu and Grosseck, 2010) and has as scopes:
- to be a source of real-time information on burnout theme and of SUTRA results;
- to participate in the SUTRA project activities, studies and dissemination;
- to identify the burnout factors and levels of members;
- to support the participants in burnout and stressed states;
- to support the improving of institutions management in order to prevent and to cope with such situations;
- to offer a collaborative space for exchanging and improving daily practising, enlarged with connections to the foreign partners participating in the SUTRA project;
- to offer a space for strengthening knowledge in burnout domain and for continuous social learning of participants;
- to be a space for future research and reflections.

Besides the multimedia notes sent by the community members, the group also collects:
- tweets referring to burnout imported using the Twitter search API;
- news about SUTRA activities and results.

The content of the group and its information flow is enlarged also with feeds/search feeds on burnout monitored by the group members using the platform corresponding facility.

In order to assess the members' burnout levels, the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey – MBI-ES (Maslach et al. 1996) was conducted during the first week of February, 2012. The survey required also information on participants' gender, age and work profile, and was published online in the community group. The members were solicited to respond and also to send invitations to colleagues from their institutions. The scope and findings of this descriptive-explorative study are presented below.

3.2. Findings of survey

The survey was completed by 59 individuals, a number relatively small, even if higher than the community dimension, but representative for the Romanian organizations taking part in the SUTRA project. The survey results can not be generalized for a specific profile of educators, but there are starting points for finding solutions in reducing burnout and for future investigations and research.

In the tables below, for each subcategory, there are specified the number and percentage of respondents belonging to that subcategory. Also, for each of the three dimensions, Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA), the average value and the corresponding level are listed, together with the number and percentage of respondents having respectively a Low, Medium, and High level of burnout.

The average results for the 59 respondents indicate a Low level of Emotional Exhaustion (EE) (average number of points is 11.1), and Depersonalization (DP) (average is 4.8), and a Medium level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) (average is 33.6) (Table 2).

There was assessed a Low level of Emotional Exhaustion (EE) burnout for the high majority of respondents (86%), so almost all respondents experience in a reduced way a depletion of emotional resources and the feeling that they have nothing left to give, while only 5% have a High level.
Table 2. Distribution of respondents by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE Mean</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE Low</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE Medium</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE High</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP Mean</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP Low</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP Medium</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP High</th>
<th>PA Mean</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>PA Low</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>PA Medium</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>PA High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34 (58%)</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>28 (82%)</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>(6%)</td>
<td>24 (70%)</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>10 (29%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>9 (29%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>6 (18%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>18 (53%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 (42%)</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>23 (92%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>16 (64%)</td>
<td>9 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>9 (36%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7 (28%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59 (100%)</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>51 (86%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
<td>40 (68%)</td>
<td>18 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>19 (32%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>15 (25%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>25 (43%)</td>
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</table>

The percentage with Low level of Depersonalization (DP) is smaller – 68%, so two third of participants develop at a reduced scale negative and cynical attitudes towards their students and trainees, and all the other respondents - 31%, except one person, have a Medium level of DP.

A serious problem seems to be the High level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) burnout, encountered for a percentage of 43%, so almost half of respondents percent in a high degree a loss of effectiveness, success and personal fulfillment in performing their duties, and for the other two levels, Low and Medium, the percentages are close, almost one third – 32% and 25%.

The levels of burnout are similar for the female (58% of respondents) and male (42%) respondents, the women having a lower value of Depersonalization (DP) (4.4 points versus 5.3 points), while men experience lower values for Emotional Exhaustion (EE) (9.5 versus 12.2) and Personal Accomplishment (PA) (36.5 versus 31.6). While more than half of women (53%) were assessed as having a High level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) burnout, only a quarter of men (28%) have this level.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male) (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE Mean</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE Low</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE Medium</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>EE High</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP Mean</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP Low</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP Medium</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>DP High</th>
<th>PA Mean</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>PA Low</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>PA Medium</th>
<th>Number (Pct.)</th>
<th>PA High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>12 (8/4) (20%: 14%/6%)</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>9 (75%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>8 (66%)</td>
<td>4 (34%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>30 (H)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>2 (16%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7 (59%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>23 (14/9) (39%: 24%/15%)</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>21 (92%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>15 (65%)</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>31.6 (M)</td>
<td>5 (22%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>11 (48%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>19 (10/9) (32%: 17%/15%)</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>16 (82%)</td>
<td>2 (12%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>13 (68%)</td>
<td>6 (32%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>37.2 (M)</td>
<td>9 (48%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>5 (26%)</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>5 (26%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Above</td>
<td>5 (2/3) (8%: 3%/5%)</td>
<td>6 (L)</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4 (80%)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>38.2 (M-L)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>(M-L)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>(M-L)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The burnout levels corresponding to different groups of ages (Table 3) are similar for the people with ages between 26-55 years, while the individuals over 55, with their tolerance, wisdom and endurance gained during a life experience, register the lowest rate burnout on all the three dimensions (similar with findings of Watts and Robertson, 2011). It is also the only subcategory having a Low level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) burnout (the
average value is 38.2, values over 38 indicating a Low level of PA burnout), thus appearing to find more personal accomplishment in their work.

The assessment relative to work profile can be followed in Table 4. Respondents were teachers of Faculties of Economics Sciences (EcS), Exact Sciences (ExS), Engineering Sciences (EnS), Social and Political Sciences (SPS), Medical Science (MS), Human Sciences (HM), Natural Sciences (NS) and trainers from Consultancy and Training Firms, and psychopedagogues from Social Protection Organizations.

Although the reduced sample doesn't allow us to generalize the survey results, one can note that the lowest value of Emotional Exhaustion (EE) (8.5) burnout characterizes the teachers from the Faculties of Economics Sciences (ECs), while the highest value (13) (still Low level) is for those in the Faculties of Exact Sciences (ExS) (even if they have the lowest value of DP) and of Social and Political Sciences (SPS), all the subcategories having a Low level of EE.

Table 4. Distribution of respondents by work profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>EE Mean</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>EE Low</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>EE Medium</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>EE High</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>DP Mean</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>DP Low</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>DP Medium</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>DP High</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>PA Mean</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>PA Low</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>PA Medium</th>
<th>Number (Female/Male)</th>
<th>PA High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty EcS</td>
<td>2 (2/0)</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty ExS</td>
<td>3 (2/1)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty EnS</td>
<td>18 (11/7)</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty SPS</td>
<td>11 (6/5)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty MS</td>
<td>8 (5/3)</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty HS</td>
<td>5 (3/2)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty NS</td>
<td>1 (0/1)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultancy Firm</td>
<td>4 (2/2)</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Training Firm</td>
<td>2 (0/2)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Protection</td>
<td>5 (3/2)</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>32.6</td>
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<td>3</td>
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Related to Depersonalization (DP), the lowest value (3) corresponds to teachers from Faculties of Exact Sciences (ExS) and the highest (12) to Faculties of Natural Sciences (NS) (but only one respondent was with this work profile), all the other work profiles having a Low level of DP burnout.

Teachers from Faculties of Natural Sciences (NS) and trainers from Consultancy Firms reported a Low level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) burnout, while a High level can be noted for teachers from Faculties of Economics Sciences (EcS), of Social and Political Sciences (SPS) and of Human Sciences (HM).

4. Discussions

4.1. Factors for burnout and possible measure for reducing it

After running the survey and publishing the results in the microblogging group, members were invited to discuss them and to share their opinions related to factors generating problems, stress and exhaustion at work. A lot of interesting answers, tagged with #factors, were posted, which can be categorized as following:

- **Teaching/Training Workload**: "too many courses and subjects", "often I have to work after hours to respond to my work requirements", "sometimes the extra hours are not paid or payment is delayed", "too close deadlines", "too many simultaneous projects".
- **Overwhelming information/documentation sources**: "(auto)pressure to keep up with the news in domain", "too many sources of information to follow", "the need to be active in professional networks and social media".
- **Too high expectations**: "external pressure and also own wishes to do everything perfect in order to remain on the market", "need to cope with a continuous change in my domain".
- **Low salaries**: "too low salaries for the high qualified work".
- **Too few development and research funds**: "too low funds for research", "lack of funds for participation in conferences and in continuous training".
- **Lack of reward from organizations and society**: "lack of respect for the work well-done", "educators’ status is not enough respected in society”.
- **Poor work environment**: "too small and crowded offices, not very well equipped", "lack of (efficient) communication and collaboration between colleagues", "too many bureaucratic tasks", "nepotism and corruption", "students lack motivation".
- **Inefficient management**: "lack of good and coherent educational policies at the ministry level", "instable legislation", "poor organization management", "ambiguous defined professional tasks", "lack of tasks prioritization", "lack of a coherent motivation system", "leaders not enough prepared".
- **Too demanding evaluation and promotion criteria**: "too high requirements for academic positions", "the variety of work done by teachers are not totally evaluated and recognized for promotion”.

4.2. Possible measure for reducing it

A large and interesting debate, tagged with #measures, was registered in the community group for the proposed measures which can be taken:

- **By individuals**: "a better balance work-relaxation", "more sport and free weekends", "learn relaxation techniques", "learn how to deal with stressful situations", "tasks prioritization", "ask for extension of deadlines when needed", "try to communicate better with colleagues and students", "try to collaborate better";
- **By organizations**: "better organizational management and strategy", "provide an environment that motivates, and encourages creativity and innovation", "integrate new educational technologies", "assure continuous training opportunities for educators", "team building and time management sessions", "personal coaching".
5. Conclusions and future work

Our descriptive study shows that the work profile, age and gender influence in a way the degree of Emotional Exhaustion (EE) and Depersonalization (DP) burnout, but for most of subcategories the Low Level was assessed. A serious problem seems to be the High level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) burnout, encountered for a percentage of 43%, so almost half of respondents perceive in a high degree a loss of effectiveness, success and personal fulfillment in performing their duties. While more than half of women (53%) were assessed as having a High level of Personal Accomplishment (PA) burnout, only a quarter of men (28%) have this level.

The measures proposed by the community members together with those resulted from the SUTRA partners experience will compose a guide for individuals and institutions in preventing and coping with educators' burnout, which will be discussed in the microblogging group and during meetings with institutions managers in order to find the best solutions.

The facilitation and monitoring of the community sharing in the microblogging group will demonstrate if there will be benefits of assessing burnout and of implementing measures to reduce it.

The authors intent to extend their studies in universities and companies, and to compare the results with other reference findings.

One of the factors of burnout revealed by the participants was the overwhelming information sources and the need to be active in professional networks on different social media platforms, so a dedicated study of “connected educator burnout” or “social media burnout” is envisaged.

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References

Sutra web site available at http://edivers.ro/sutraproject
The microblogging group of the project available at http://cirip.ro/grup/sutraproject