

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effective strategies for coping with burnout. A study on Romanian teachers

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Abstract

Teacher burnout is a relevant concern for the educational environment. Understanding the mechanisms underlying this concept is essential to identify the adequate ways to manage it. The present study investigates the relationship between both relational (student mistreatment, supervisor undermining and parent pressure) and job demands (work overload and mental load), teacher burnout (i.e., exhaustion and cynicism) and coping strategies. Data were collected via paper-pencil questionnaires from 194 teachers employed in several schools from the Western part of Romania. Results showed significant positive correlations between specific work-related demands and teacher burnout. More specifically, only one relational dimension (student mistreatment) and one job demand (work overload) were positively associated with burnout. Importantly, we found that only proactive coping is negatively correlated with burnout, whereas emotional coping had no significant association. As expected, proactive coping mediates the relationship between student mistreatment and burnout, but this relationship does not hold true for the emotional coping strategy.

Keywords

teacher burnout, job demands; relational demands, coping, mediation

Introduction

For over 40 years, burnout has drawn the attention of researchers, practitioners and the general public around the world, as it is a phenomenon that occurs globally (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009) and affects both the individual (i.e., low job satisfaction and well-being) and the organization (i.e., low performance, organizational commitment, high turnover, absenteeism) (e.g., Bakker,

Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Wolpin, Burke, & Greenglass, 1991). Moreover, burnout is associated with higher costs and financial losses because of decreased quality and quantity of work (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

Regarding teacher burnout, there are several specific interpersonal stressors teachers are subjected to, such as the interaction with their principal, with colleagues, with students and their parents (Blase & Blase, 2003; Stoeber & Rennert,

2008; Sulea, Filipescu, Horga, Orțan, & Fischmann, 2012). These interpersonal factors were demonstrated to be relevant to the development of burnout symptoms (Fernet, Austin, Trépanier, & Dussault, 2013; Friedman, 1995). Importantly, the interaction with students is a consistent predictor of teacher burnout (Taris, Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2004; McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Friedman, 1995). Also, the impact of workplace demands on individual well-being is influenced by the way people cope with stress (Ángelo, & Chambel, 2012). Recent studies on school context and teacher stress took into consideration demands related to both work and interpersonal relations (Roeser et al., 2013; Brouwers, Tomic, & Boluijt, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Coping strategies can be essential resources, as they shape individuals' reactions to stressors and affect their well-being. (Lazarus, 2006). To deal with these demands, teachers need to employ an effective coping strategy, which is a cognitive and behavioral effort to handle external and/or internal demands appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the individual (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). However, to date, there are limited or inconsistent results on the types of coping that might mitigate the potential detrimental effects of specific job demands on teachers' burnout (Kyriacou, 2001; Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson & Rinker, 2014).

Thus, the current research aims at investigating the role of coping styles specifically, in the relationship between work-related demands (relational and job-related) and teacher burnout. This is important, considering that teacher's burnout affects not only the teacher, but it has consequences for the learning environment, school and students (Vlăduț & Kállay, 2011).

Burnout and Sources of Stress for Teachers

Burnout is a syndrome of physical, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion that develops from sustained interaction in situations that are emotionally pressing (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). It is the final step in the progression of unsuccessful attempts to cope with adverse stress conditions (Byrne, 1993).

Burnout comprises three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, referring to tiredness related to various work aspects, cynicism or depersonalization, referring to the way individuals are mentally distancing themselves from their work, and professional inefficacy, defined as a sense of low accomplishment at work (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005). For the present study, of interest are the two "core" burnout dimensions, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. We follow the argument offered by Schaufeli and Salanova (2007) that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are the central elements of burnout, and research suggesting that exhaustion and cynicism constitute one general factor, "core burnout" (Green, Walkey, & Taylor, 1991). Moreover, recent studies on teacher burnout follow these arguments, measuring burnout as one single factor (e.g., Alessandri et al., 2018; Maricuțoiu, Sulea & Iancu, 2017).

Previous studies showed that work stressors, such as workload are related to the emotional exhaustion dimension of burnout (e.g., Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Enzmann, 2005). Importantly, stressful interactions at work are central to the experience of burnout (Taris et al., 2004; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; McCormick & Barnett, 2011). Relational demands such as interpersonal conflict (Leiter & Maslach, 1988), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002) or workplace mistreatment (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Deery, Walsh, & Guest, 2011) were also found to play a relevant role for burnout.

Burnout is a frequent and harmful phenomenon among Romanian teachers, with consequences for both teachers and students (Vlăduț & Kállay, 2011). Some of the adverse effects on teachers' health are increased levels of stress, depression and anxiety, reduced confidence in their teaching abilities and negative perceptions of the organizational environment they work in. Burnout was also found to affect the teachers' physical health (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Teacher burnout is directly related to teaching-specific stressors too. Previous research shows that teachers need to deal with several sources of interpersonal stressors, such as bullying from

principals (Blase & Blase, 2003), the pressure from student's parents (Stoerber & Rennert, 2008) and interaction with students in classroom (Taris et al., 2004; McCormick & Barnett, 2011). In a similar vein, Unterbrink and colleagues (2012) suggested that stressors teachers face are associated with classroom management such as the emotional climate, the teacher-student relationships, and the interpersonal conflicts with pupils, parents, or colleagues. Roeser and colleagues (2013) found that the main stressors for teachers are both related to work and interpersonal demands: the workload, the lack of cooperative time with colleagues, the lack of support from superiors, and the management of difficult students in the classroom. Another study found that workload, level of job control and social support, are significantly related to burnout among physical education teachers (Brouwers, Tomic, & Boluijt, 2011). Valuable information on teacher sources of stress is also provided in semi-structured interview studies (Shernoff et al., 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Shernoff et al. (2011), using a sample of 14 US teachers, found that some of the main sources of stress are excessive workload, role overload, student disruptive behaviors, accountability pressures, and lack of resources. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) interviewed 34 Norwegian teachers and retired teachers and found that more than half of the teachers identified stressors such as disruptive student behavior, workload and time pressure, problems and conflicts related to teamwork as being primary. Another essential job dimension relevant to teacher activity is represented by mental demands (Demerouti, & Bakker, 2011). Although the relationship between high psychological demands with increased burnout over time is well established (Seidler et al., 2014; Aronsson et al., 2017), only a few studies are testing this relationship for teachers (Lorente Prieto, Salanova Soria, Martínez Martínez, & Schaufeli, 2008). A recent survey on nurses from Poland working in chemotherapy wards (Dębska, Pasek, & Wilczek-Rużyczka, 2017) found that heavy mental and physical workload are the main factors causing dissatisfaction of the study participants. Another recent study found a positive and

significant correlation between mental overload and exhaustion in a sample of secondary school teachers from Spain (Ventura, Salanova, & Llorens, 2014). In other words, having too much to do, when too much is expected or when there is a constant pressure for teachers to keep working (excessive work demands), and spending too much of teachers attentional and memory resources (cognitive demands) leads to burnout.

Regarding relational demands teachers are experiencing, student behavior and principal's leadership behaviors were found to be particularly influential in the burnout process (Fernet et al., 2013). Mainly, the interaction with students was observed to often lead to stress and burnout among teachers (e.g., Friedman, 1995). Taris and colleagues (2004) found that the lack of reciprocity (inequity) teachers experience in their relationship with students, colleagues, and the school is related to teacher burnout. As deemed important for teacher burnout, in the present study we rely on the definition put forward by Duffy et al. (2002) when considering negative work interpersonal relationships and interactions, such as undermining from teachers' superior and from students' parents. According to the scholars, social undermining refers to behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation.

Tellenback and colleagues (1983), reviewing the sources of stress in a teaching context, observed that student behavior was often found to be an antecedent of teacher health and well-being, such as general strain, mental disorders, and psychosomatic symptoms. Specifically, students' misbehavior was found relevant for predicting each of the three dimensions of burnout: depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and low personal accomplishment (McCormick & Barnett, 2011). Student disruptive behavior mainly accounted for teachers' exhaustion, whereas depersonalization and reduced professional accomplishment were better explained by lack of support regarding disciplinary issues, and conflict management, respectively (Otero-Lopez et al., 2008).

Moreover, students' misbehavior was found to be related to teacher's burnout via external causal attributions on students' behavior (Bibou-Nakou, Stogiannidou, & Kiosseoglu, 1999). In the present study we use the conceptualization put forward by Friedman (1995), where student misbehavior is seen as student behavior patterns, involving disrespect to both teachers (e.g., interrupting teachers, talking out of turn, shouting, chatting in class) and members of their peers (e.g., pupils are arguing among themselves, they make fun of one another), as observed by teachers.

Considering the unique characteristics of situations in which teachers function, and the solid arguments that both job and interpersonal demands are relevant stressors for teachers' burnout, we expect that:

H1. Work demands (job and interpersonal) are positively related to teachers' burnout.

a) Cognitive demands are positively correlated with burnout;

b) Work overload is positively correlated with burnout;

c) Student mistreatment is positively correlated with burnout;

d) Supervisor undermining is positively correlated with burnout;

e) Pressure from student's parents is positively correlated with burnout.

Coping and Burnout

Although the primary causes of burnout seem to be found in the work environment (i.e. interpersonal and job demands), the experience of burnout, its duration or intensity is affected by individual variables, such as personal resources (Matheny, Gfroerer, & Harris, 2000). The authors argue that in the same environment some workers respond to stressors with only slight psychological arousal, whereas others may experience substantial arousal and distress.

Coping strategies can represent a valuable resource for individuals dealing with stressors and for improving their levels of well-being. Previous research has focused on coping strategies and how they can alleviate stress levels and promote a higher quality of life at work (Acker, 2018; Parker & Martin, 2009; Cancio, Larsen, Mathur, Estes, Johns, & Chang, 2018). One of the most influential

definitions of coping is that of Folkman and Lazarus (1988), describing coping as the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage specific demands of external or internal nature evaluated as exceeding the individual's resources.

Given the widespread prevalence of stress and the need to reduce it, there has been a proliferation of coping research during the last three decades. Coping strategies play a critical role in an individual's physical and psychological well-being when faced with challenges, negative events, and stress. Coping may also be conceptualized more broadly as part of an approach to life in which an individual's efforts are directed towards goal management and the identification and utilization of social resources to achieve one's goals (Greenglass, 2002). The present research employs two theoretical frames to explain the proposed perspective on burnout, namely the Conservation of Resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) to clarify the role of coping, as a personal resource, in the stress-burnout relationship and stress-strain-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), for the argument that coping is essential in the relationship between work demands (job-related and relational) and burnout. These approaches can be integrated into the general perspective of the job demands-resources model (JD-R; Demerouti et al., 2001).

According to Hobfoll (1989, 2001), individuals strive to acquire, develop and protect their resources and stress appears as a reaction when there is a threat of a loss, an actual loss, or lack of an expected gain in resources. Burnout emerges when individuals are confronted with the continued loss or danger to resources. The COR theory also highlights the importance of resources to avoid burnout. Individual differences, such as different coping styles, can be treated as resources which may affect how individuals react to stress. The idea that personal resources play a crucial role in the stress process ties in with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). According to this model, each occupation may have its own specific factors related to occupational well-being, whether negative or positive, which fall

under two broad categories: job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The stress-strain-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) indicates that without adequate coping skills, elevated levels of stress may lead to increased symptoms of burnout. Coping strategies play an essential role in both physical and psychological well-being (Endler & Parker, 1999). Meeting the environmental stimuli, the individual first evaluates if the stimulus is relevant for well-being (i.e., is there something to gain or to lose) and afterwards assesses if and what can be done. By doing so, the individual evaluates various coping options, such as altering the situation, accepting it, seeking more information or holding back from acting impulsively and in a counterproductive way (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Based on Lazarus and Folkman (1984) work, several specific frames were developed and many distinct coping inventories were created (e.g., problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping; for reviews, see Latack & Havlovic, 1992; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In the current study, we focus on proactive coping theory introduced by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002). The authors emphasized that the temporal aspect of coping has often been neglected, and that one can cope before a stressful event takes place, while it is happening (e.g., during the progress of a disease), or afterwards. Specifically, proactive coping consists of efforts to build up general resources that facilitate the promotion of challenging goals and personal growth, and which entails perceived control (Greenglass, 2002).

Proactive coping is a complex construct with several dimensions (Greenglass, 2002): proactive, reflective, strategic planning, preventive, instrumental support, and emotional support seeking. In this research, we focus on two strategies, namely proactive and emotional support seeking. Considering the specific dimensions, in proactive coping, people have a vision, see risks, demands, and opportunities in the far future, but they do not appraise them as a threat, harm, or loss. Instead, they perceive demanding situations as personal challenges. It combines autonomous

goal setting with self-regulatory goal attainment cognitions and behavior. Previous studies showed that proactive coping plays an essential role in reducing burnout symptoms (e.g., Greenglass, 2005; Chang, 2009; Chang & Chan, 2015). Emotional support seeking aims at regulating temporary emotional distress by disclosing feelings to others, evoking empathy and seeking companionship from one's social network. This coping strategy is relevant, as cognitive changes can occur in one's perception of a stressful situation because of affective support that can happen in an emotionally supportive relationship.

A limited number of studies have tested the relationship between proactive coping strategies and burnout (e.g., Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002; Chang, 2009). For example, Chang and Chan (2015) found that proactive coping, along with optimism, play a role in burnout prevention. Also, the study conducted by Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) showed that highly proactive teachers reported less emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and more personal accomplishment than low proactive ones. In a similar vein, Greenglass (2005) found that proactive coping contributed to greater professional efficacy, and to less emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

Recent studies also found a direct link between coping and burnout, where the role of coping is to alleviate the levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Gonzalez-Morales, Rodriguez, & Peiro, 2010; Lewin & Sager, 2008; Yip, Rowlinson, & Oi Ling Siu, 2008).

Whereas employing poor coping strategies (e.g., avoiding the stressful situation) exacerbates stress, resulting in the increased likelihood of burnout, engaging in constructive coping strategies (e.g., dealing directly with the stressful situation) reduces stress, thereby leading to a decreased risk of burnout (Wilkerson, 2009). Leiter (1991) provided evidence in this respect, confirming that burnout is best considered a function of coping patterns as well as a function of organizational demands and resources. In his study on mental hospital workers, control coping cognitions and actions were associated with decreased

burnout, while escapist coping strategies were associated with increased burnout.

The two coping strategies included in the current study, namely proactive coping and emotional support seeking are considered constructive, as proactive coping consists of efforts to build up general resources and social support seeking is aimed at regulating temporary emotional distress caused by the stressor (Greenglass, 2002). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2. Coping is negatively associated with burnout.

a) Proactive coping strategy is negatively correlated with burnout;

b) Emotional support-seeking coping strategy is negatively correlated with burnout.

Coping Strategies and their Role in Teacher Burnout

Mediating Role of Coping Strategies in the Relation between Work Demands and Burnout

For the mediation effect of proactive coping on burnout we base our arguments first on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory assumption that well-being is determined by both environmental and individual factors (Hobfoll, 1989) and secondly on the Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theoretical assumption that coping mediates the relationship between the individual's distress experience and psychological well-being. Furthermore, regarding the type of coping examined in our study, Greenglass' theory (2005) states that proactive coping strategies reduce stress at work by having a positive approach to dealing with stressors, more specifically, that proactive coping mediates the relationship between work conditions and burnout. These perspectives suggest that proactive coping might be an important variable in addressing work-related stress and its outcomes, such as burnout. The underlying process consists of the individual's appraisal of demands as challenges through the use of proactive coping strategies that prevents the depletion of resources (burnout). Thus, the underlying mechanism is that high levels of perceived workplace demands would not be

associated with burnout when these demands trigger an individual perception that one has high control like a proactive copier (Ângelo & Chambel, 2012).

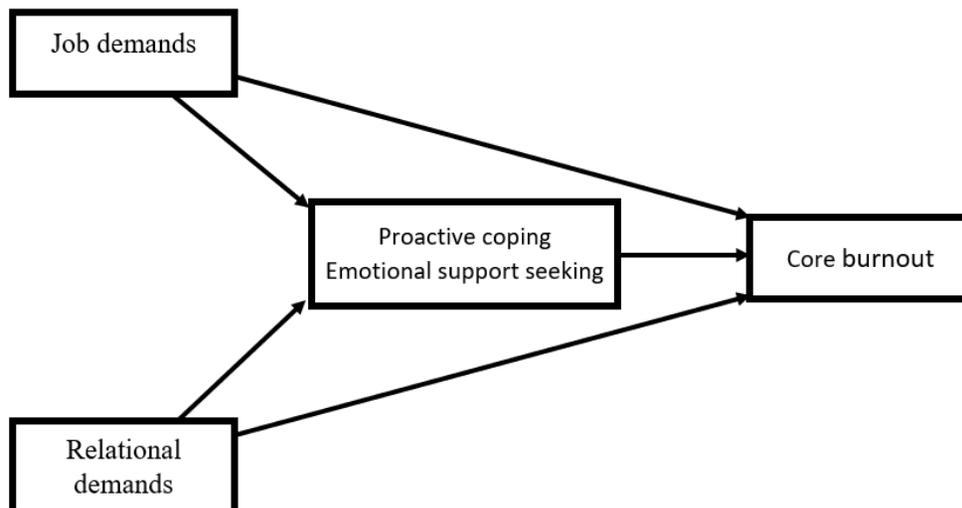
Several studies tested the role of coping in the relationship between different stressors and burnout development (e.g., Bowden, 1994; Carmona, Buunk, Peiró, Rodríguez, & Bravo, 2006; Montero-Marin, Prado-Abril, Demarzo, Gascon, & Garcia-Campayo, 2014). Whereas some studies found coping as a mediator (indirect effect) in the relationship between job demands and burnout (Chen & Curandi, 2008; Hill, Hall, & Appleton, 2010), other studies consider it to have a moderating (interactive) effect (Yip et al., 2008; Searle & Lee, 2015). Specifically, in the study conducted by Alarcon, Edwards, and Menke (2011) coping partially mediated the relationship between demands (developmental challenge and time pressure) and burnout in a sample of college students. In a similar vein, Greenglass (2005) showed that proactive coping mediates the relationship between work conditions and burnout. Moreover, a literature review on teacher burnout revealed that between student behavior in class and teacher well-being may not be a direct link, thus being important to consider additional variables when studying this relationship (Chang, 2009).

Thus considering, the current research aims at investigating the role of helpful coping strategies when experiencing relevant stressors for teachers' burnout (i.e., job and relational demands). Specifically, we aim at testing the potential indirect effect of proactive coping strategies for teachers' burnout, when confronted with work-related demands as illustrated in Figure 1. Therefore, we expect that:

H3. Proactive coping strategies (proactive coping and proactive emotional support seeking) mediate the relationship between work-related demands and burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) such as:

H1: Job demands positively relate to proactive coping strategies which, in turn, negatively relate to burnout;

H2: Relational demands positively relate to proactive coping strategies which, in turn, negatively relate to burnout.

Figure 1. *Study model.*

Method

Procedure

Using a cross-sectional design, data was gathered through a set of questionnaires sent to different schools from a county from the Western part of Romania. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants also filled out a consent form. From a total number of 350 sets, we received 231 valid forms, from which 33 cases were removed due to missing values and additional 4 cases were identified as outliers and removed. The questionnaires were administered and recovered during the first school semester.

Participants

The present research includes a sample of 194 teachers from primary, secondary, and high-schools from Romania. All the participants have given their written consent to participate in the present study. Most of the teachers in the sample are women ($n=162$, 83.5%, men $n=29$, 14.9%, did not declare their gender $n=3$, 1.5%), with ages ranging between 20 to 63 years old (mean age = 39.5; SD = 10.15). Regarding teacher's educational attainment, 113 finished their university studies (58%), 60 have a postgraduate degree (31%), 4 have a

PhD diploma (2%), and 9 reported other studies (5%). Eight teachers did not report their level of education. Regarding their work experience, most of the teachers have more than 11 years in general work tenure ($n= 121$, 62.4%, less than 5 years $n= 29$, 14.9%; 6 - 10 years $n= 34$, 17.5%), with a tenure at the current school ranging from a couple of months to 37 years.

Instruments

Teachers completed the given questionnaire containing four main sections. The first three sections addressed the key variables of the present study (coping strategies, burnout, and work-related demands), and the last part focused on demographic details, gathered to account for some characteristics of the targeted population such as gender, age, educational level and tenure. Considering work environment, we measured for both relational and job-related demands. For relational demands, we measured student misbehavior, supervisor undermining, and parent pressure. Regarding job-related demands, we took into consideration both mental (cognitive) demands and excessive work demands.

Student misbehavior. The nature of student behavior in the classroom was measured using Pupil Behavior Patterns (PBP) Scale (Friedman, 1995). This questionnaire was originally designed to consist of three subscales: disrespect (11 items, $\alpha = 0.87$), attentiveness (8 items, positive behaviors, $\alpha = 0.85$), sociability (8 items, positive behaviors, $\alpha = 0.81$). For the present study, the disrespect subscale of the questionnaire, that refers to disrespect towards the teacher, was used (e.g., "I demand silence in class and students go on making noise"). The Cronbach's alpha for the student misbehavior scale was .90.

Supervisor social undermining. Supervisor undermining was assessed by the subordinate participants (teachers) with 12 items from the Duffy et al. (2002) supervisor undermining scale. The answers ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (always). Participants were asked to indicate how often their immediate supervisor has intentionally engaged in some behaviors, with answers ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (always). Sample items include "Put you down when you questioned work procedures?", "Talked bad about you behind your back?" and "Delayed work to make you look bad or slow you down?". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .89.

Pressure from students' parents. The relationship with the students' parents was assessed with four items adapted from the social undermining scale regarding the supervisor, developed by Duffy et al., (2002). The responses ranged between 1 (never) to 6 (always). The participants were asked to indicate how often the parents of their students have intentionally engaged in some behaviors, in a similar way they responded to the supervisor undermining scale. Sample items include: "Insulted you?", "Let you know they did not like you or something about you?" and "Put pressure on you?" The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .68.

Excessive Work Demands. One subscale referring to Excessive Work Demands from School Organisational Health Questionnaire, developed by Hart, Wearing, Conn, Carter, & Dingle, (2000) was used to measure specific teacher work demands. Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement with each of the four items on a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Sample

items include "Teachers are overloaded with work in this school" and "There is constant pressure for teachers to keep working". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .90.

Mental demands. Teacher's mental demands was assessed in this study based on the work of van Veldhoven, de Jonge, Broersen, Kompier, & Meijman (2002). More specifically, we used the subscale regarding mental load at work, comprised of five items. We asked the participants to answer on a five-point scale (1= never; 5 = always) to questions such as "Does your work demand a lot of concentration?". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .83.

Burnout. The two core dimensions of burnout were measured with a slightly adapted version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (the MBI-GS; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). Cynicism and emotional exhaustion were measured by 5 items each. Answers ranged from (0), "never" to (6), "every day". A high degree of burnout is reflected in high scores on Exhaustion and Cynicism. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the current study were satisfactory ($\alpha = .83$)

Coping strategies. To measure the coping strategies for teachers, the Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI; Greenglass, 2002) was used. On a four-point scale (1=not at all true, 4=exactly true), participants rated positively and negatively keyed items describing the coping reactions. The inventory is a multi-dimensional instrument that contains 52 items and six subscales. For the present study, ten items of the Proactive Coping subscale were used for measuring the proactive coping for teachers (sample item: "I turn obstacles into positive experiences."). Emotional Support Seeking was measured using the respective subscale of PCI (sample item: "When I'm depressed, I get out and talk to others.").

Demographic data were collected with eleven questions, asking for information regarding the participant's age, gender, general work tenure, tenure in educational field, tenure at the current school, what subject teaches and at what class(es), the position, whether the teacher has other roles in the school, whether or not the job involves management, and the participants level of education.

Data Analysis

SPSS was used to treat the data. For each instrument, reliability coefficients (Alpha Cronbach) were calculated. Descriptive statistics and analysis of correlation were conducted to examine the relations between work demands (relational and job-related), burnout and coping strategies, as the examination of the relationships between variables enables comparability of findings within this sample to previously reported studies. A descriptive analysis of participants' sociodemographic and occupational characteristics was made using means and percentages according to the nature of the variables.

To address the primary research question, an analysis of correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between demands and burnout. To test the mediation model, Hayes's (2013) PROCESS Macro for SPSS was used.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and correlations were calculated for each variable. The results are shown in Table 1. All scales had acceptable reliabilities.

For work related demands, both job and relational demands were considered. Excessive work demands were the only job-related demand that significantly correlated with core burnout variable, suggesting that teachers who perceive that have excessive workloads are more likely to feel burned-out ($r(194) = .28, p < .001$) (H1b). No significant correlation was found between mental demands and burnout (H1a). Student misbehavior was significantly correlated with burnout variable, suggesting that teachers who perceive that their students are disrespectful in class, are more likely to feel emotionally exhausted and more cynical ($r(194) = .41, p < .001$) (H1c). No significant correlation was found between the other two relational demands, supervisor undermining (H1d) or pressure from students' parents (H1e) and burnout. These results offer partial support to the first hypothesis (H1).

A negative correlation was found between burnout and proactive coping ($r(194) = -.25, p < .001$) (H2a), but no significant correlation was found with emotional support seeking coping strategy (H2b), even if the relationship was in the expected direction. Therefore, when teachers use proactive coping strategies, they are less likely to feel emotionally drained and cynical towards their work. The second hypothesis (H2) is also partially confirmed.

Table 1. Correlations matrix, means and standard deviation

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Student misbehavior	1.87	.61	(.90)							
2. Proactive coping	3.02	.45	-.26**	(.83)						
3. Emotional support seeking	2.83	.64	-.10	.39**	(.79)					
4. Supervisor social undermining	1.17	.28	.07	-.05	-.04	(.89)				
5. Pressure from students' parents	1.17	.30	.11	.03	.07	.18*	(.68)			
6. Excessive Work Demands	2.64	.83	.21**	.02	-.14	.23**	.20**	(.90)		
7. Mental demands	4.37	.64	-.22**	.28**	.07	-.03	-.11	.15*	(.83)	
8. Burnout	1.48	1.01	.41**	-.25**	-.05	.14	.11	.28**	-.07	(.83)

Note. $N=194$; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$

To investigate Hypothesis 3, we examined whether job and relational demands were related to burnout through proactive coping

and emotional support seeking. Out of the four demands variables included in the study, only student misbehavior and excessive work

demands had a significant correlation with proactive coping and were included in the mediation model. Additionally, the correlation between emotional support seeking and demands, respectively burnout was not statistically significant and, as a result, emotional support seeking was not included in the mediation model (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The model is illustrated in Figure 2. We used PROCESS Macro with Model 4 to test the mediation and obtain 95% bias-corrected intervals (with 5000 bootstrap samples). The estimates of the total, direct and indirect

effects could be found in Table 2. The indirect effect of student mistreatment on burnout through proactive coping was significant. Concurrent, the direct effect of student mistreatment on burnout is still significant in the mediation model, showing that proactive coping partially mediates the relationship. The indirect effect of excessive work demands on burnout was not statistically significant, indicating that proactive coping doesn't mediate the relationship. As a result, Hypothesis 3 is partially confirmed.

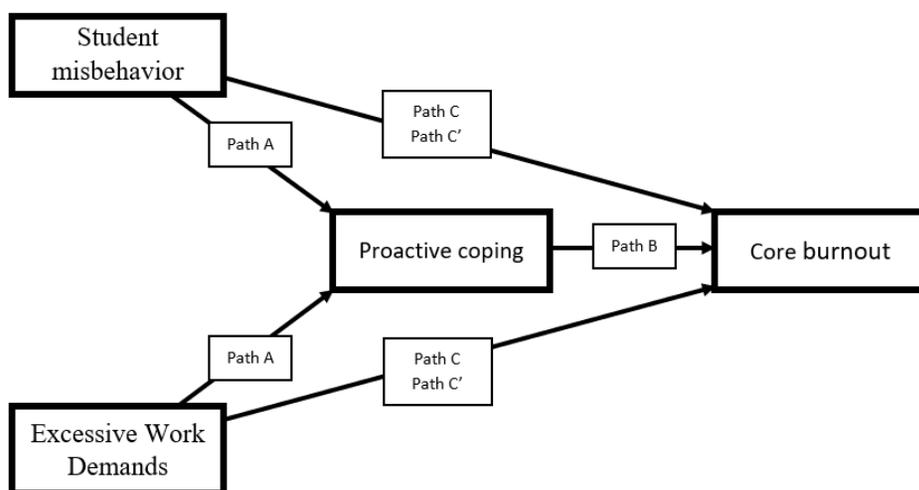


Figure 2. *Mediation model*

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to investigate the relationship between work-related demands and teacher burnout and the mediating role of two coping strategies: proactive coping and proactive emotional support seeking. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies in Romanian context that analyzed both types of demands (i.e., relational and job-related), although they are analyzed in previous research as essential stressors for teachers (Taris et al., 2004; McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Bermejo-Toro,

Prieto-Ursúa & Hernández, 2016). Moreover, our approach offered a more complete perspective on how the connection between these stressors and burnout may be altered by beneficial coping strategies. Thus, we also tried to clarify the nature of the relationship between work-related demands for teachers and teacher burnout.

Besides its contribution to the body of research on teacher stress and burnout, the present study contributes to COR theory and the JD-R model by the inclusion of two proactive coping strategies as personal resources.

Table 2. Results of the mediation model analyses

	Burnout			
	Coefficient	SE	<i>p</i>	Bootstrap 95% CI
A path (IV to Mediator)				
Student misbehavior	-.20	.13	.000	
Excessive Work Demands	.04	.04	.287	
B path (Mediator to DV)				
Proactive coping	-.40	.15	.007	
C path (Total effect of IV on DV)				
Total effect of Student misbehavior	.60	.11	.000	[.39; .81]
Total effect of Excessive Work Demands	.24	.08	.003	[.09; .41]
C' path (Direct effect of IV on DV)				
Direct effect of Student misbehavior	.52	.11	.000	[.30; .74]
Direct effect of Excessive Work Demands	.26	.08	.001	[.11; .42]
Total indirect effect of IV on DV through mediator				
Student misbehavior	.08	.04	.030	[.02; .18]
Excessive Work Demands	-.02	.02	.331	[-.06; .01]

Note. $N=194$; * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$

The results showed that student misbehavior in class is associated with burnout for Romanian teachers and we found support for the mediating effect of one of the analyzed coping dimensions — the proactive coping strategy — for the relationship between student misbehavior and burnout. Contrary to our expectations, proactive coping strategy demonstrates no meditational effect in the relationship between any other proposed relational (supervisor undermining and pressure from students' parents) or job-related demands (cognitive demands and work overload) and burnout. Similarly, we found no support for the mediating role of the proactive emotional support seeking strategy in the relationship between any of the analyzed work demands and burnout.

First, the results showed that student behavior in the classroom is an important demand for Romanian teachers. Teachers who experience student misbehavior feel more exhausted and more cynical, which is in line with previous research (Friedman, 1995; Taris et al., 2004; McCormick & Barnett, 2011). This result raises significant concerns because when teachers are exposed to prolonged disrespect from their students, they become more and more depleted of energy (Otero-Lopez et al., 2008) and less responsive to the students' needs. Moreover, as teachers

become more cynical, the teachers put distance between them and their students, ignoring those qualities that make them unique and engaging, and potentially considering them impersonal objects of their work. In doing so, teachers might become prone to lose sight of what may be a source of engagement, their students (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In short, as Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach (2009) noted, it is difficult for teachers to feel accomplished and energized in their work with students when they come to feel indifferent towards the “object” of their work.

Mediating Effects of Coping Strategies

With regard to the mediation hypothesis, our analyses indicated that proactive coping strategy mediates the relationship between one of the analyzed work demands – student misbehavior – and burnout.

These results suggest that using a proactive coping strategy might help ease the perceptions of work demands as stressors and thus decrease the depletion of resources and consequently the increase of emotional exhaustion and cynicism. In other words, proactive teachers see the misbehavior of their students more as a challenge to be faced and

less as a demand, thus preventing the depletion of resources and burnout. These results are in line with previous findings that for teachers, a proactive approach to stress is more desirable than a reactive one (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002; Yip et al., 2008; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). The explanation relies on the assumption that an effective coping strategy alters the experience of stress, thereby leading to a lower probability of burnout symptoms (Leiter, 1991; Endler & Parker, 1999).

Also, the results are supported both by the COR theory explaining that individuals invest their resources to deal with threatening situations and to prevent adverse outcomes, and also that the resources are essential to avoid burnout in general and exhaustion in particular (Hobfoll, 1989; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). The results also are in line with Lazarus and Folkman's 1984 stress-strain-coping theory. In a stressful situation, the individuals first evaluate if the encounter with the environment is relevant for their well-being, more specifically, if something is to be gained or lost, and then they assess various coping options, such as altering the situation, accepting it, seeking more information or holding back from acting impulsively and in a counterproductive way (Folkman et al., 1986). As Richards (2012) noticed, teachers might not alter the conditions that are causing them a lot of stress, as they are beyond their power to control (e.g., how many students are in a classroom), but they can choose the coping strategy most beneficial for them.

Putting together the perspectives of the two theories, a reasonable interpretation is that when facing an environment that is not easily nor rapidly changed, altering the perception of misbehavior by transforming this stressful relational demand in a personal challenge, could be a relevant strategy for preventing ill-being.

Practical Implications

The current research has several implications. It expands the knowledge on the underlying mechanism in the relationship between work-related demands and burnout, since the perception of work demands may activate proactive coping strategies, which in turn are negatively associated with burnout.

What is critical is not just that teachers have to deal with misbehavior from their students, or that they might experience burnout as a consequence. It is important to consider that teachers perception of the mistreatment from their students influences their burnout levels through proactive coping strategy. The outcomes of this research can be used as a guideline to reduce work-related stress in teaching activities, especially considering that in this field the working context can be quite difficult to change, or to minimize work demands.

Individually oriented approaches such as in-house organizational training for effective coping strategies are suggested, alongside other methods, including changing the perceptions of situations (i.e., student misbehavior is more of a challenge). Therefore, we should invest in the promotion of coping strategies adapted to the work context and roles, such as proactive coping in the case of teachers. This could represent a parallel path to promote organizations' occupational health, with a beneficial impact on burnout.

Limitations

Certain limitations of this research should be discussed. First of all, the data were collected from a convenience sample of teachers from Timis County. Future studies should employ larger samples from more geographically diverse areas.

Second, the present study relies exclusively on self-reported measures and therefore subjected to self-report bias. As the subject is under debate, some authors suggest that using self-report measures as indicators of an actual environment may be inappropriate (Taber, Spector, & Taylor, 1990), others believe that perceptual measures of work variables reflect the objective environment to a large extent (Spector, 1992). Moreover, Boumans and Landeweerd (1993) found correlations between 'objective' and 'subjective' measures that were moderate to high. We should take into consideration that the self-report bias may tamper with the results, and keep in mind that it results in the underestimation rather than the overestimation of the interaction effect (Santavirta,

Solovieva, & Theorel, 2007). Nonetheless, we acknowledge the use of self-report measures as a limitation to the present study.

Another limitation of the present study represents the diversity of the sample. More specifically, the teachers from primary, secondary and high schools were collapsed together, in one sample. Even if we took into consideration the relational and job-related demands cited in the literature as being right for teachers from all levels, it is possible that teachers from primary school face more of some demands than others in comparison with high school teachers, for example. Thus, by collapsing all levels of education in our sample, we could miss essential specificities and different underlying mechanisms from a specific level of education. The present study also bears the limitations that characterize cross-sectional research, namely the inability to determine the direction of causality. The hypothesized relationships (mediation effects) are conceptualized as causal, yet the data does not allow tests of causality. This means that it cannot be ruled out the possibility that these relationships might work in the opposite direction to the suggested one. Although, given theory and past empirical research, the path presented is plausible. Further research using longitudinal design replicating the present findings is suggested.

Conclusions

We believe that the present study is an important contribution to explain the underlying mechanism in the relationship between teacher's work demands and burnout. The results suggest that when facing student mistreatment in class, teachers see them more as a challenge than a demand and thus decreasing their levels of emotional exhaustion and cynicism.

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