

# Years of Work Experience, an Important Predictor of Burnout in Special Education

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## Abstract

Professional burnout is a syndrome associated with a group of symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishments. The main definition of emotional exhaustion as the main symptom of burnout according to Maslach is the reduced energy level or extreme fatigue. Maslach states that teachers working in special education services perceive low levels of job satisfaction and negative evaluation of job outcomes. Most teachers of special education experience high levels of depression, psychological dysfunction and role conflict. The aim of this study is to investigate whether years of work experience, seen as a demographic variable are an important predictor for experiencing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as the main symptoms of professional burnout. This data were collected in special education schools of Tirana, Shkoder, Durres, Vlora, Korça and Elbasan. A total number of 115 subjects participated in this study. There were found significant correlations among years of experience, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Years of experience may be considered as a mediator variable among these three variables. It is an important predictor for emotional, exhaustion and depersonalization.

**Keywords:** professional burnout; years of experience; special education teacher.

## 1. Introduction

Professional burnout is a syndrome associated with a group of symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishments. The main definition of emotional exhaustion as the main symptom of burnout according to Maslach is the reduced energy level or extreme fatigue.

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According to the authors in [6], job stress begins with emotional exhaustion which is the first reaction accompanied life events changes. Depersonalization is associated with negative emotions toward students or colleagues. They may feel guilty regarding their work performance. Reduced self efficacy, is defined as negative self-evaluation or minimizing personal accomplishments. It's a self-evaluation process, which people use during their work. Maslach states that teacher working in special education services perceive low levels of job satisfaction and negative evaluation of job outcomes. According to the authors in [6], people experiencing burnout are more cynic, stressed and see the worst in everything. Various studies indicate, teachers working with students with special needs are more prone to experience job burnout. Most teachers of special education experience high levels of depression, psychological dysfunction and role conflict. One of the most important factors of professional burnout is direct contacts with students with special needs and perceived lack of job success. Special education teachers have to complete several additional duties and responsibilities comparing to those of mainstream schools [7]. Coping strategies emerge from feelings of emotional exhaustion and low personal accomplishments. According to the model of these authors, coping strategies influence emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishments through a reciprocal relationship between these two dimensions. ( as cited in [4], the authors stress that:

Proactive people do not consider situations as harmful, loss or threat. They consider risks or demands as resources to help them toward promotion and personal growth. They see challenges not demands, they see goals attainment not risks. Due to this they increase their quality of functioning [1:9]. Different studies have been conducted in Germany, Poland and Canada to examine the relationship between proactive coping and job burnout. These studies show that proactive coping correlates negatively with job burnout in different professions. According to these studies proactive teachers perceive stress as challenging and less threatening than their reactive counterparts [1,5].

### ***1.1 The aim of the study***

The aim of this study is to investigate whether years of work experience, seen as a demographic variable are an important predictor for experiencing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as the main symptoms of professional burnout.

### ***1.2 Research questions***

1. There are negative correlations between emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and proactive coping subscales.
2. There are significant correlations between years of experience, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.
3. Years of work experience predicts better emotional exhaustion and depersonalization than proactive coping subscale.

## **2. Research Methods**

### ***2.1 Sample***

These findings are part of the final data of professional burnout and proactive coping in special education research in Albania. This data were collected in special education schools of Tirana, Shkoder, Durres, Vlora, Korça and Elbasan. A total number of 115 subjects participated in this study. Subjects are all special education teachers, in special schools. A great part of the respondents are all females, due to the fact that the most special education teachers are females. The way of cluster selection is with convenience. Their work experience varies from less than 5 years to 40 years of experience.

## **2.2 Instruments**

### **2.2.1 Maslach Burnout Inventory**

The items for the Maslach Burnout Inventory were designed to measure hypothesized aspects of the burnout syndrome. The scale is labeled at each point and ranges from 1 ( a few times a year or less), to 6 ( every day). A zero value is given if the respondent has never experienced the feeling or the attitude described [2]. Items are divided in three subscales; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishments.

Internal consistency is evaluated by Cronbach Coefficient's alpha. The reliability coefficients for the subscales were: for emotional exhaustion 0.89, for depersonalization 0.90 and for personal accomplishments is 0.85.

### **2.2.2 Proactive Coping Inventory**

The Proactive Coping Inventory consists in seven scales and 55 items; one scale with 14 items measures exclusively proactive coping; the other six scales focus on positive facets of coping that strengthen coping initiative. The other six subscales are reflective coping, strategic planning, preventing coping, instrumental support seeking, emotional support seeking and avoidance coping. Answer scoring ranges from 1 (not at all true), 2 (barely true), 3 (somewhat true), to 4 (completely true). Three items of the proactive coping subscale have reverse scoring, "I like challenges and beating the odds", "I turn obstacles into positive experiences", and "When I have a problem, I usually see myself in a no win situation" [2]. It was used alpha Cronbach coefficient for the reliability analysis. The reliability coefficients for Proactive Coping subscales in total is: 0.7.

## **3. Analysis Results**

### **3.1 Correlation results**

According to the results gathered from the self-reported questionnaires, there is a strong correlation among years of experience, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Years of experience correlate with emotional exhaustion:  $r = .307$ , at the significant level  $p < .01$  and also there is a positive correlation between years of experience and depersonalization:  $r = .273$  at  $p < .05$  level. Years of experience do not correlate with proactive coping subscales except avoidance coping,  $r = .279$ ,  $p < .05$ . Proactive coping correlates negatively with emotional exhaustion,  $r = -.491$ , and also with depersonalization,  $r = -.434$ , at  $p < .01$  level.

### **3.2 Regression analysis**

It was used linear regression to analyse which of the correlated variables best predicts emotional exhaustion, years of experience or proactive coping. According to the results, the two predicted variables were years of experience ( a demographic variable) and proactive coping. 28.9 % of the total variance is explained by these two variables.  $R^2=.289$ . the table above shows that the main predictor of emotional exhaustion is years of experience  $\beta=.223$ , and the second predictor is proactive coping variable  $\beta=-.450$ . both of these two variables are statistically significant. Years of experience is the first predictor of emotional exhaustion at  $p<.05$  and proactive coping is significant at  $p<.001$ .

The same prediction was executed to predict depersonalization. Results show that the first predictor is years of work experience,  $\beta=.206$ , the second predictor is proactive coping  $\beta=.293$ . this prediction is significant at  $p<.05$  level. The other three variables: reflective coping, preventive coping and strategic planning are second predictors of depersonalisation but their prediction are not statistically significant,  $p>.05$ .

#### **4. Discussion**

As was provided from the literature, there is strong relationship among emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and proactive coping variables. There is a strong negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and proactive coping. Subjects working in special education settings, feel drained from their work and also do not use proactive coping strategies. Proactive coping also correlates negatively with depersonalization. Subjects scoring high in depersonalization receive low scores in proactive coping. They don't use proactive coping strategies during their work and are more possible to feel depersonalized. Lack of proactive coping strategies influences their feelings toward themselves, others and their relationships. They experience negative emotions and have a negative self-evaluation about their work.

Years of experience was another demographic variable during my analysis. It was hypothesized that increasing years of work experience is related with feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Subjects working for a long time in special education reported more exhaustion, more negative emotions toward their work and less perceive of success. During this long time of work they don't use proactive strategies to overcome the challenges they face every day. At this point they feel tired, exhausted and depersonalized. Which of the variable best predict emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, years of experience or proactive coping? This was another research question of my study. Results showed that years of experience was a strong, significant predictor for both variables. We can predict emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as the main constructs of burnout, from the years of experience. Over the years special education teachers, do not use proactive coping strategies, do not cope with stress, they may feel every difficult situation as harmful, they are not goal attainment directed and so they may begin to feel tired. This feeling increases more turning to exhaustion and depersonalization.

Depersonalization and emotional exhaustion correlates negatively with proactive coping. Years of experience correlates positively with each of these three variables. So, from this point of view may be concluded that years of experience may be considered as an mediator variable among emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and proactive coping.

## **5. Conclusion**

There are significant correlations among emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and proactive coping subscales. The first aim of this study was to investigate significant correlations between these variables mentioned above and years of experiences as an important demographic variable in this study. There were found significant correlations among years of experience, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. At the other side emotional exhaustion and depersonalization have a strong negative relationship with proactive coping. Years of experience may be considered as an mediator variable among these three variables. It is an important predictor for emotional, exhaustion and depersonalization.

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