

## Burnout and its relation to sociodemographic variables among education professionals working with people with disabilities in Córdoba (Spain)

Vicente J. Llorent <sup>1</sup>  
Inmaculada Ruiz-Calzado <sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** *The main objective of this study was to determine the level of burnout among education professionals working with people with disabilities in Córdoba, Spain and the association between these levels and sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age, marital status, and level of education). Design: descriptive, cross-sectional study to determine prevalence. Population: 157 professionals. Evaluation tools: questionnaire to obtain information on sociodemographic characteristics and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Statistical tests: Pearson's bivariate correlation, the Student's t-test, Levene's test, single factor ANOVA, and the post hoc multiple comparison test (Bonferroni). The findings of this study confirm the variety of variables that influence burnout and its dimensions. The study shows the incidence of burnout according to the sex, age, marital status, and level of education of the professionals who participated in this research. Based on an exhaustive scientific literature review on the topic and considering the findings of this study, there is an irrefutable need for further research into burnout among professionals who work with people with disabilities. It is hoped that the findings obtained by this study will help in the elaboration of future initiatives directed at the detection, early care, and reduction of this syndrome among this group.*

**Key words** *Mental health, Professionals, Education, Disability, Burnout*

<sup>1</sup> Universidad de Córdoba.  
Avd. Medina Azahara °5.  
14071 Córdoba España.  
vjllorent@uco.es

## Introduction

Burnout is the object of numerous studies given its great importance and high impact on workers. Stress within and outside the workplace, especially that caused by the demands of updating and professional training requirements during and outside working hours, is a prominent factor underlying this current trend.

Since its discovery, burnout<sup>1</sup>, also called job strain<sup>2</sup> and burnout syndrome<sup>3</sup>, is conceived as a response to interpersonal and emotional job stress in workers who provide specialist services. Burnout has become increasingly present in various professions and is increasingly recognized as a serious problem affecting the quality of life of many people<sup>4</sup>. This problem, intensified by poor and often abusive working conditions, can have serious effects on the mental health of education professionals. This situation is aggravated by salary reductions in times of economic crisis, longer working hours, and an increase in the demands placed upon the teaching profession by society, which in turn has a detrimental effect on the quality of academic life of students<sup>5</sup>.

In the middle of the 1980s, research revealed a number of crucial factors affecting the level of burnout among individuals and groups, such as social values, the moment in history, and economic status<sup>6</sup>. For this reason and given the existence of various theories explaining the appearance of burnout<sup>7</sup>, theorists and researchers have faced a number of difficulties in reaching consensus regarding the development process of this phenomenon<sup>8</sup>. However, it is generally agreed that the syndrome is associated with high levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment at work<sup>9</sup>.

As quality of life in more developed countries improves due to the expansion of social services, people begin to demand more and better services, particularly in the education sector, thus increasing the demands on teachers and requiring the constant investment of large amounts of emotional, cognitive and physical energy by teachers<sup>10</sup>.

Burnout among professionals working in health and social sciences has been a major focus of researchers' efforts, and studies have clearly shown that the teaching profession is one of the most affected by burnout. A series of important studies clearly illustrate the high levels of burnout among teachers in Spain<sup>11-17</sup>, while a number of recent international studies have also addressed teacher burnout<sup>18-23</sup>.

Further research is necessary to investigate the dimensions of burnout and the various personal characteristics associated with the syndrome among education professionals who work with people with disabilities, in settings where education and social services interlock.

The present study intends to provide information about burnout specifically among professionals who work with people with disabilities, a relatively narrow group of people who are significantly more vulnerable to the syndrome<sup>24</sup>. With this in mind, data was collected from residential care facilities and educational centers for people with disabilities, where learning processes are focused primarily on special basic education, personal autonomy programs, and transition to adult life and work programs. In line with previous research, this study analyzes the sociodemographic characteristics of these professionals focusing on the following variables: age, sex, marital status, and level of education<sup>8,18,21,25-27</sup>. The main aim of this research is to determine the levels of burnout among education professionals who provide direct care and services to people with disabilities in Córdoba, Spain, and explore the association between these levels and the abovementioned sociodemographic characteristics.

## Methods

### Design

This study addresses a matter of evident concern to contemporary society: burnout in professionals who work with people with disabilities. Given that this is a relatively new area of burnout research, the data collected and analyzed by this study illustrates the existing reality of a specific context (Córdoba) during a particular time period, thus facilitating the identification of the number of individuals who suffer from this syndrome within a population sample. This study is therefore an example of a descriptive cross-sectional study to determine prevalence of this condition.

### Population

The sample comprised 157 professionals from special education colleges and companies that provide care for people with disabilities. The sample covered a wide range of professionals: teachers, speech therapists, educationalists,

psychologists, educational psychologists, physiotherapists, auxiliary educational technicians, social educators, carers, and monitors. With respect to gender, 110 professionals were women (70%), while 47 were men (30%). The average age of the sample was 39 years (standard deviation of 13.25).

### Tool

Data was collected using a questionnaire to obtain information on sociodemographic characteristics and the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).

The questionnaire was based on similar questionnaires used in previous studies on burnout<sup>8,13,18,21,25-30</sup> and comprised nine items with open-ended and closed-ended questions to obtain information on the study variables: sex, age, marital status, level of education, years of experience, type of contract, length of time in current position, and length of time spent working at the company. Given the wide range of variables, this article focuses on the personal characteristics of the simple members (sex, age, marital status, and level of education).

To assess burnout levels, the study used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)<sup>31</sup>, which finds considerable consensus in the scientific community and has been used in various studies addressing the issue<sup>11,14,15,19-22,32</sup>. The MBI consists of 22 items scored on a seven-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (everyday) that assess the syndrome's three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment.

### Procedure

After obtaining authorization from the special education colleges and companies, an ethical agreement was signed preserving the anonymity of individuals and institutions. The questionnaires were then distributed to the professionals, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Three days later the questionnaires were collected.

### Statistical tests

The data was grouped, tabulated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software package. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted to compare the sociodemographic characteristics of the re-

spondents. Inferential statistical analysis was then performed using inductive methods and procedures (sampling, variables, hypothesis testing) to determine the statistical properties of a population based on a sample data set and using various statistical tests such as Pearson's bivariate correlation, the Student's t-test, Levene's test, single factor ANOVA, and the post hoc multiple comparison test (Bonferroni).

## Results

The following sections outline the results of the data analysis. Burnout and its three dimensions were analyzed in relation to four sociodemographic variables: sex, age, marital status, and level of education of the professionals.

### Analysis of the prevalence of burnout

Table 1 shows the National Burnout Scale<sup>33</sup>, which is used as a point of reference to compare the average MBI scores observed in the present study in order to determine the level of burnout and its three dimensions (low, medium, high) among the sample members.

It can be observed that, based on the National Burnout Scale<sup>33</sup>, the level of overall burnout among sample members is high (69.91), while the level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment was medium (16.55), very high (12.36), and very low (43.01), respectively.

Using the SPSS 19 software package, individuals were grouped into three level categories (high, medium, and low) according to their average scores. The results show that 70% of individuals suffered from high levels of overall burnout, while 30% experienced medium levels. Levels of emotional exhaustion were very high in 14% of the professionals and low in 51%, while levels of depersonalization were very high in 95% of individuals and medium in only 5% of cases. Levels of personal accomplishment were very low in 80% of the sample, while only 8% of professionals felt highly fulfilled.

### Descriptive statistics

This section describes levels of burnout and its three dimensions in relation to the four sociodemographic variables mentioned above. Various statistical tests were used to determine the association between average levels of burnout

and its three dimensions and the variables and homogeneity of variances.

### Burnout and sex

It is important to consider the relationships between burnout and its three dimensions and sex in the light of previous research<sup>21,27</sup>.

It can be observed from the results of the Student's t-test shown Table 2 that there was a statistically significant relationship between sex and overall burnout ( $p = 0.039$ ), and sex and emotional exhaustion ( $p = 0.045$ ). No significant relationship was found between sex and depersonalization ( $p = 0.570$ ) and sex and personal accomplishment ( $p = 0.517$ ). Levels of overall burnout and emotional exhaustion are higher in men (71.57 compared to 62.20 and 16.74 compared to 13.61, respectively).

### Burnout and age

This section outlines the relationship between burnout and its dimensions and the age of the professionals, furthering previous research concerning burnout<sup>18,21,34,35</sup>.

Table 3 shows the results of the bivariate Pearson correlation, indicating that there is a positive correlation between age and overall burnout ( $r = 0.253$ ;  $p = .001$ ) and age and emotional exhaustion ( $r = 0.297$ ;  $p = .001$ ). The results also suggest that levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion are greater in older professionals.

Student's t-test was performed to corroborate these findings and, at the same time, determine at what ages these relationships take place. Aged was classified into two time intervals whose point of reference was 50 years<sup>21</sup> (professionals aged 49 years and under; and those aged 50 years and over).

Table 3 shows the results of this test, highlighting that there was a significant relationship between age and burnout ( $p = 0.000$ ) and age and emotional exhaustion ( $p = 0.000$ ). However, no significant relationship was found between age and personalization ( $p = 0.315$ ) and age and personal accomplishment ( $p = 0.864$ ).

The results also clearly show that professionals aged 50 years and over suffer from much higher levels of burnout (73.74) than those aged 49 years and under (68.47). It is also important to highlight that the level of emotional exhaustion in professionals aged 50 years and over is medium (18.79), while in those aged 49 years and under it is very low (12.95).

### Burnout and marital status

The marital status categories were chosen based on previous studies<sup>18,21</sup>: 1. With a steady partner – has been in a relationship for over six months; and 2. Without a steady partner – have been in a relationship for six months or less.

Table 4 shows the relationship between marital status and burnout and its dimensions. A significant relationship was only found between marital status and depersonalization ( $p = 0.004$ ), showing that levels of depersonalization are higher in professionals with a steady partner (12.75) than in those without (11.62). No significant relationship was found between marital status and overall burnout ( $p = 0.758$ ) and the other dimensions, emotional exhaustion ( $p = 0.158$ ), and personal accomplishment ( $p = 0.464$ ).

### Burnout and level of education

The following outlines the relationship between burnout and its three dimensions and level of education. First, the professionals were

**Table 1.** National Burnout Scale and average MBI<sup>33</sup> scores obtained in the study.

	Study			N= 157
	Low	Medium	High	
Burnout	< 33	34 to 66	> 67	69.91
Emotional exhaustion	< 15	16 to 24	> 25	16.55
Depersonalization	< 5	4 to 8	> 9	12.36
Personal accomplishment	< 40	39 to 34	> 35	43.01

Note:  $p < 0.050$

Source: authors' elaboration.

**Table 2.** Burnout and its dimensions by sex.

	Men	Women	t	p
	A (SD)	A (SD)		
Burnout	71.57 (6.81)	62.20 (8.22)	1.87	.049
Emotional exhaustion	16.74 (9.40)	13.61 (8.65)	2.03	.045*
Depersonalization	12.19 (2.88)	12.43 (2.13)	.570	.570
Personal accomplishment	42.64 (5.18)	43.17 (4.51)	.650	.517

Note:  $p < .050$  / A = average/ SD = standard deviation

Source: authors' elaboration.

grouped according to their level of education (1. Basic education: *Educación General Básica; Educación Primaria Obligatoria; Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* (equivalent to Primary or Elementary School and Middle School and the first two years of High School or Secondary School); 2. Secondary education: *Bachillerato Unificado Polivalente, Curso de Orientación Universitaria, Bachillerato* (equivalent to the final two years of Secondary School); and 3. Higher education: *Ciclos Formativos de Grado Superior* and university). Various tests were used to measure association, including Levene's test, single factor ANOVA, and the post hoc multiple comparison test (Bonferroni).

Levene's test showed that there was an interesting relationship between level of education and emotional exhaustion ( $p = 0.044$ ) and level of education and personal accomplishment ( $p = 0.008$ ). However, no significant association was found between level of education and overall burnout ( $p = 0.647$ ) and depersonalization ( $p = 0.655$ ).

Single factor ANOVA was performed to corroborate these findings. The results shown in Table 5 indicate that level of education is associated with overall burnout ( $p = 0.003$ ), emotional exhaustion ( $p = 0.003$ ), and personal accomplishment ( $p = 0.011$ ). No significant association was found between this variable and depersonalization ( $p = 0.372$ ).

A post hoc multiple comparison test (Bonferroni) was also performed to determine which level of education category is most affected by burnout and each dimension. The results showed that professionals who had completed only basic education were more affected by burnout than those who had completed secondary (difference between means = 6.64;  $p = 0.020$ ;  $d = 0.864$ ) and higher education (difference between means = 7.62;  $p = 0.002$ ;  $d = 0.864$ ).

With respect to the dimensions, levels of emotional exhaustion were higher in professionals who had completed only basic and secondary education than in those who had completed higher education (difference between means = 7.07,  $p = 0.014$ ,  $d = 0.864$  and difference between means = 4.24,  $p = 0.042$ ,  $d = 0.45$  respectively). Furthermore, professionals who had only completed secondary education feel more professionally fulfilled than those who had completed higher education (difference between means = 2.70;  $p = 0.010$ ;  $d = 0.864$ ). No significant association was found between level of education and depersonalization ( $p = 0.372$ ).

It is important to highlight that, in comparison to the National Burnout Scale (Table 1), the level of burnout was particularly high in all groups: basic education (76.64), secondary education (70.00), and higher education (69.03). It is also important to note that levels of emotional exhaustion were medium in professionals

**Table 3.** Burnout and its dimensions by age.

	49 years and under A (SD)	50 years and over A (SD)	t	p
Burnout	68.47 (7.76)	73.74 (6.91)	3.90	.000*
Emotional exhaustion	12.95 (8.62)	18.79 (8.58)	3.79	.000*
Depersonalization	12.47 (2.13)	12.05 (2.92)	1	.315
Personal accomplishment	43.05 (4.57)	42.91 (5.13)	.172	.864

Note:  $p < .050$  / A = average/ SD = standard deviation

Source: authors' elaboration.

**Table 4.** Burnout and its dimensions by marital status.

	Steady partner A (SD)	Without steady partner A (SD)	t	p
Burnout	69.77 (8.29)	70.18 (7.12)	.308	.758
Emotional exhaustion	13.80 (8.36)	15.93 (9.94)	1.42	.158
Depersonalization	12.75 (2.03)	11.62 (2.77)	2.94	.004*
Personal accomplishment	43.22 (4.46)	42.64 (5.18)	.734	.464

Note:  $p < .050$  / A = average/ SD = standard deviation

Source: authors' elaboration.

who had completed basic (20.07) and secondary (17.24) education and low among the higher education group (13.00). Furthermore, level of personal accomplishment was low among all professionals regardless of the level of education: basic education (43.73), secondary education (40.88), and higher education (43.58).

## Discussion

The scientific literature on burnout produced in recent decades highlights that the teaching profession is one of the most affected by this syndrome. For this reason, the intention of this study from the beginning was to determine the level of burnout among professionals who work specifically with people with disabilities in Córdoba, and the influence of the sociodemographic variables sex, age, marital status, and level of education.

One of the most alarming findings from this study is that 70% of the professionals suffer from high levels of burnout. This finding corroborates the results of previous studies conducted at national and international level<sup>36-39</sup>, which show that the prevalence of burnout in study samples was over 50%.

This study also shows there are clear gender differences in burnout levels, whereby men experience higher levels of burnout than women, as found in previous studies<sup>27,28</sup>. Likewise, men experience higher levels of work-related emotional exhaustion than women.

The present study also highlights that age is a relevant social variable, since professionals aged 50 years and over suffer from very high levels of burnout, corroborating the findings of several studies<sup>21,35</sup>. This may be due to the fact that age and outdated knowledge and skills may result in an accumulation of work and non-work-related fatigue, which together lead to the appearance of

and gradual increase in burnout. However, other studies on burnout place maximum levels of burnout on other age groups<sup>16,29</sup>, which may be related to level of experience and training.

With respect to age, professionals aged 50 years and over suffered more from depersonalization than those aged 49 years and under. This finding reinforces similar results from previous studies<sup>25</sup>. This may be due to the fact that, over time, professionals who have been working with people on a daily basis for many years can begin to lose empathy. As a result, older people may change their attitude and tend to become more emotionally detached from other people's problems and concerns on a professional level<sup>35</sup>. Along these lines, this study confirms that professionals aged 50 years and over experience higher levels of burnout and, notably, emotional exhaustion than those aged 49 years and under, who experience very low levels.

The study findings show that there is no significant association between burnout and marital status. Thus, whether or not the professional has a steady partner is irrelevant to the appearance and development of the syndrome. However, further analysis showed that there is an association between marital status and depersonalization, whereby professionals with a steady partner feel more depersonalized than those without.

With respect to education level, the results show that professionals who have only completed basic education suffer higher levels of burnout than those who have completed secondary and higher education. It is also interesting to note that those who have only completed basic education suffer from higher levels of emotional exhaustion than professionals who have completed secondary education, while those who have completed secondary education experience greater levels of emotional exhaustion than those who have completed higher education. This may be related to work expectations, which are inversely

**Table 5.** Burnout and its dimensions by level of education.

	Basic A (SD)	Secondary A (SD)	Higher A (SD)	F	p
Burnout	76.64 (6.97)	70.00 (8.33)	69.03 (7.48)	6.18	.003*
Emotional exhaustion	20.07 (4.65)	17.24 (10.21)	13.00 (8.55)	6.19	.003*
Depersonalization	12.79 (2.52)	11.88 (2.50)	12.45 (2.31)	.994	.372
Personal accomplishment	43.73 (2.08)	40.88 (5.52)	43.58 (4.52)	4.66	.011*

Note:  $p < .050$  / A = average/ SD = standard deviation

Source: authors' elaboration.

proportional to emotional exhaustion. With respect to personal accomplishment, it is interesting to note that professionals who have completed secondary education feel more professionally fulfilled than those who had completed higher education.

The conclusions drawn from this study underscore the need for further research into burnout in professionals who work with people with disabilities, a group that is severely affected by this syndrome<sup>40</sup>. This meticulous scientific contribution seeks to nourish scientific knowledge

about burnout within education, an area that demands greater research attention, not only at the individual level, but also for the benefit of the teaching-learning process for people with disabilities, enabling greater understanding in such a specific area. With this in mind, further research along these lines is recommended to facilitate the development of future programs directed at the prevention, early care, reduction and elimination of this syndrome, to ensure the prosperity of these professionals in the workplace and, ultimately, benefit students and service users.

## Collaborations

This research was conducted jointly in all sections. It highlights a VJ Llorent in methodology, drafting, critical review and approval of the final version. I Ruiz Calzado has focused more on collecting and tabulating data, introduction, results and conclusions.

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