

The mediating role of burnout syndrome between regulatory focus/motivation and intention to leave in teachers

Mary Sandra Carlotto^{*id} / Sónia P. Gonçalves^{**id} / Rosa Lutete Geremias^{***id} / Sheila Gonçalves Câmara^{****id}

* UnB – Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, Brasil; ** Universidade de Lisboa, ISCSP – Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, Lisboa, Portugal / Universidade de Lisboa, CAPP – Centro de Administração e Políticas Públicas, Lisboa, Portugal; *** Universidade de Lisboa, CAPP – Centro de Administração e Políticas Públicas, Lisboa, Portugal; **** UFCSPA – Universidade Federal de Ciências da Saúde de Porto Alegre, Porto Alegre, Brasil

Abstract: Teachers are exposed to various occupational stressors which, if persistent, can lead to Burnout Syndrome and to recurrent thoughts of leaving the profession and culminate in total withdrawal. Thus, the objective of the present study was to evaluate the mediating role of Burnout Syndrome between the two dimensions motivational system that is constituted by the regulatory system with a focus on prevention and promotion and the Intention to Leave the profession among teachers in Southern Brazil. A total of 781 elementary school teachers from public and private schools participated in the research. The research instruments used included the Burnout Syndrome Questionnaire, the Regulatory Focus Scale, and a single item to evaluate the Intention to Leave the profession. The results obtained by Structural Equation Modeling confirmed the hypothesis that Burnout Syndrome plays a mediating role between promotion regulatory focus and the Intention to Leave the profession. The results reveal the importance of interventions that contemplate the reduction of occupational stressors for the prevention or rehabilitation of Burnout Syndrome in teachers.

Keywords: Burnout syndrome, Regulatory focus, Intention to leave, Teachers.

Introduction

The definition of Burnout Syndrome emerged in the 1970s and has since been extensively investigated, particularly regarding its prevalence and risk factors. One of the careers at high risk of developing the syndrome (Carlotto & Câmara, 2019; Guidetti et al., 2017), and which has been extensively investigated, has been that of teachers, due to the numerous stressors present in teachers' daily work.

The mediating role of Burnout Syndrome is still understudied, especially regarding motivational aspects and the Intention to Leave the profession. Therefore, to verify its mediating role between two motivational systems, the regulatory focus on prevention and the regulatory focus on promotion may be useful to better understand the behavior of these relationships to support interventions aimed at keeping teachers in their occupational activity.

The study outcome is justified because it represents a major international problem (Vekeman et al., 2017), whose concern has increased in recent years among researchers, international

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Mary Sandra Carlotto, UnB – Universidade de Brasília, Campus Universitário Darcy Ribeiro, Brasília-DF, CEP 70910-900, Brasil. E-mail: mscarlotto@gmail.com

organizations, educational managers, and the teaching profession itself (Lee et al., 2015; Madigan & Kim, 2021; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016) due to its negative implications for teaching quality, school performance, the community as a whole, as well as for its social and economic impact (Lee et al., 2015; Saltini et al., 2014; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] has indicated that to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4, related to inclusive and equitable quality education, the world needs to recruit 69 million new teachers by 2030 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016).

Burnout syndrome

Several models of Burnout Syndrome are found in the literature and the most known is the proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). This describes the syndrome in three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, a draining of emotional resources; depersonalization, a development of indifferent attitudes toward the job or the recipients of the service; and a low sense of personal accomplishment.

Recently a new model was developed by Gil-Monte (2005) as an alternative for non-English speaking countries for non-English speaking countries that showed better psychometric properties. According to the theoretical model developed by Gil-Monte (2011), Burnout Syndrome is the result of chronic job stress. It consists of a subjective experience of negative character composed of negative cognitions, emotions, and attitudes toward work.

The four-dimensional model of Gil-Monte (2005) consists of the dimensions of Enthusiasm toward the job, Psychic exhaustion, Indolence, and Guilt. The first dimension, which is inversely evaluated to characterize the syndrome, comprises the behaviors performed by the worker towards his or her goals at work, in which the worker feels enthusiastic and involved with work activities evaluating them as rewarding and as an important instance of personal and professional satisfaction. Psychic exhaustion is defined by the occurrence of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by interpersonal relationships in the work context, where the worker relates daily with people who have or cause problems. Indolence is marked by negative attitudes in the relationship with people, where the worker relates to the people he or she needs to relate to at work in an impersonal, indifferent, and aloof way; workers no longer have empathy for the problems presented by the people they work with. And guilt is defined as a social emotion arising from the attitudes and behaviors present in the Indolence dimension; the worker evaluates his behavior as if he were infringing some kind of ethical code or norm derived from the prescription of his professional role.

Thus, from the assessment of the dimensions of Burnout Syndrome, the theoretical model allows the identification of the prevalence of two differentiated profiles, Profile 1 and Profile 2 (Gil-Monte, 2005; Guidetti et al., 2017). Profile 1 is characterized by a set of feelings and behaviors linked to work stress that impact worker well-being. This discomfort does not impair professional practice; however, it negatively affects the productivity and quality of their work. Profile 2 presents the same characteristics as Profile 1, added by the Guilt dimension. Professionals who suffer from this profile blame themselves for feeling worn out and having less physical and emotional capacity to deal with the job demands, and for the distant behavior of interpersonal relationships at work. Professionals affected by Profile 2 present serious problems in the execution of their work, greater cognitive, emotional, and behavioral deterioration with increased health problems (Bouza et al., 2020; Diehl & Carlotto, 2014; Gil-Monte, 2005).

Burnout Syndrome can lead to recurrent thoughts of leaving the profession and culminate in total withdrawal (Diehl & Carlotto, 2014; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Rumschlag, 2017; Wang et al., 2022). Several studies have proven the relationship between Burnout Syndrome and professional abandonment (Leung & Lee, 2006; Sillero-Sillero & Zabalegui, 2020), as well as its mediating role between certain constructs such as emotional intelligence (Kartono & Hilmiana, 2018),

interpersonal conflicts (Shaukat et al., 2017), self-efficacy and intent to leave the job (Mir et al., 2021) as well as compromised integrity and Intention to Leave (LeClaire et al., 2022).

The concept of Intention to Leave introduced by Mobley (1977) is characterized as a psychological process of cognitive and affective nature that begins with the evaluation/satisfaction of the job, market alternatives, and costs/benefits of the decision to leave the profession or the workplace. The intention to quit is understood as a form of psychological abandonment, in which there is an emotional withdrawal from the demands of the job, a form of withdrawal, without occurring its formal resignation, but which tends to lead to the definitive quitting of the workplace or the career (Carlotto & Câmara, 2020).

The thought or Intention to Leave the profession can be considered a special kind of withdrawal, one of its most challenging forms since it represents giving up the teaching profession without leaving it. In this type of abandonment, the teacher attends school, teaches classes, and fulfills bureaucratic obligations, but performs these activities within a limit that represents the minimum necessary to keep the job (Lapo & Bueno, 2002).

Quitting is the result of a process of discontent, fatigue, and interruption of commitments to the school, and may be a consequence of the lack or weakening of bonds (Lapo & Bueno, 2001). Teacher dropout is a multicausal phenomenon that encompasses a set of factors influenced by conditions external to the educator associated with their motivations (Saltini et al., 2014).

Regulatory focus/motivation

The teaching profession is an activity that requires a lot of preparation, responsibility, commitment, focus, and high motivation (Medina-Carls, 2020). According to the author, teacher motivation plays an important role in the success of the teaching-learning process, as it allows for a better acceptance and coping with different professional demands.

In Higgins's (1997), model, all behavior is directed toward goals regulated by two motivational systems called regulatory focus for prevention and regulatory focus for promotion. In the former, individuals seek growth and ways to approach ideal situations, that is, based on their aspirations of how they would like to be. In the second, people are mobilized by security needs and seek to conform to norms based on duties and responsibilities. The pursuit of gain and success predominate for promotion-focused people while vigilance and behaviors to avoid loss and failure characterize prevention-focused people (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Higgins, 2012; Higgins & Pinelli, 2020). Promotion Focus and Prevention Focus are self-regulation systems that everyone experiences at different times in life and may have a circumstantial or more stable nature (Higgins, 2012; Higgins & Pinelli, 2020).

This model has been used in studies that seek to explain behaviors considered positive such as those focused on health (Li & Hu, 2019; Liang et al., 2012), well-being (Koopmann et al., 2016), work engagement, and innovation (Vasanthi & Geetha, 2021). It has also been considered to explain negative outcomes such as occupational stress (Zhang et al., 2019), workaholism (Zardo & Carlotto, 2019), Burnout Syndrome (Dai et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2015; Silbiger et al., 2017) and intention to quit (Lee & Sturm, 2017; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Relations between the constructs

Promotion-focused workers experience more positive emotions and have higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, which can help them to be more resilient in the face of difficulties at work. On the other hand, prevention-focused employees report more negative emotions and have lower perceptions of self-esteem, which can lead to or even worsen health problems (Lanaj et al., 2012). A systematic literature review conducted by Lichtenhaler and Fischbach (2019) identified that

promotion-focused work was negatively related to burnout, while prevention-focused work was positively related to burnout. Workers with a regulatory focus on promotion tend to be more dedicated to their work, carefully review their tasks after completing their work, and tend to have less work overload and Burnout Syndrome (Dai et al., 2021).

Concerning Intention to Leave, Prevention Focus is associated with a commitment to stay, which may reduce the likelihood of turnover. Promotion-focused people may be more likely to leave their organizations as they seek better opportunities elsewhere to achieve their desired goals (Andrews et al., 2014).

Most teachers who leave the profession before retirement do so due to physical and psychological wear (Ingersoll, 2011), which often leads to Burnout Syndrome (O'Brien et al., 2008). This issue takes on greater gravity to the extent that Burnout Syndrome has been shown to affect teachers with high motivation and strong investment in the profession (Pines et al., 1981).

In summary, our current study contributes to the literature in three respects. First, the proposed cohesive model combines the theory of Regulatory Focus with the Burnout Syndrome to better explain their relationships with the intention to leave professional specifically in teachers. Second, it is among one of the first studies to demonstrate the relevance of the regulatory focus theory for managing motivation as a way to prevent teacher loss when mediated by the burnout syndrome. In previous studies, most models described such relationships with direct relationships which may be overly simplistic. Third, it seeks to fill an important gap in knowledge, in this case the regulatory focus, as a variable that can be developed through local interventions.

Given the above, this study aimed to evaluate the mediating role of Burnout Syndrome between the two dimensions of regulatory/motivation focus (prevention and promotion) and the Intention to Leave among teachers. Thus, considering the literature review, this research investigated the following hypotheses:

- H1: Prevention regulatory focus relates negatively to Intention to Leave;
- H2: Prevention regulatory focus relates positively to Burnout Syndrome;
- H3: Burnout Syndrome mediates the relationship between Prevention Focus and Intention to Leave;
- H4: Promotion regulatory focus relates positively to Intention to Leave;
- H5: Promotion regulatory focus is significantly and negatively associated with Burnout Syndrome;
- H6: Burnout Syndrome mediates the relationship between Promotion Focus and Intention to Leave.

Context of the study

In Brazil, in 2021, there were 26.5 million students and 2.2 million teachers distributed in 178,370 schools of basic education (Ministério da Educação do Brasil, 2022). In this country teaching is marked by poor working conditions, high student numbers, exhaustive workload and lack of planning time within the work day. This forces teachers to take school activities home, though receiving low wages (Ferreira, 2019). The study was carried out in a medium-sized municipality of the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre, Brazil. It has 240.378 inhabitants and 69 city system schools. There are around 1.534 teachers who teach 28,486 basic education students (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020).

Method

Participants

The study included 781 elementary school teachers. Most participants were women (91%), married (56%), with children (73%), with graduate-level education (72%) with ages between 18

and 70 years old ($M=43$ and $SD=8.52$), with working experience between 1 and 46 years ($M=17.28$, $SD=8.63$).

Instruments

Questionnaire of sociodemographic and labor data: a self-administered instrument to identify the variables: sex; age; marital status (with or without a partner); children (yes or no); academic background (undergraduate, graduate); type of school/institution (public or private); weekly workload; time working in the teaching profession; and whether they have another job.

Cuestionario para la Evaluación del Síndrome de Quemarse por el Trabajo – CESQT (Gil-Monte, 2005), version translated and adapted to Brazil by Gil-Monte et al. (2010). The instrument consists of 20 items distributed into four subscales named: Enthusiasm toward the job (5 items, $\alpha=.72$); Psychological exhaustion (4 items, $\alpha=.86$); Indolence (6 items, $\alpha=0.75$); and, Guilt (5 items, $\alpha=.79$). Items are assessed with a five-point Likert-type frequency scale (0 “Never” to 4 “always”).

General Regulatory Focus Scale, developed and adapted for organizational contexts by Lockwood et al. (2002) and adapted for use in Brazil by Carlotto et al. (2020). It assesses how the subject regulates his or her focus for goal attainment: focus on promotion, the extent to which a person is focused on achieving positive outcomes (9 items; $\alpha=.81$), and focus on prevention, the extent to which a person is focused on avoiding negative outcomes (9 items; $\alpha=.75$). The scale is evaluated by a Likert-type scoring system ranging from 1 (very false about me) to 5 (very true about me).

Intention to Leave the job was evaluated with a single item according to studies by Janssen et al. (1999) and Lavoie-Tremblay et al. (2016). According to Zambaldi et al. (2014), a single item can be used due to the clear significance of the construct.

Data collection procedures

After disclosure of the objectives and authorization from the Municipal Secretariat of Education, these were presented to the school principals to obtain support and define the logistics of data collection. The instruments were applied in a teachers’ meeting and were collected after they were completed. Teachers were informed that this was a survey without any individual and/or institutional evaluative effects, with anonymous and confidential responses. The ethical procedures were performed according to resolution 466 of the Brazilian National Health Council (CNS). The study was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University [name of the institution omitted to preserve the double-blind review system] under approval number [number omitted to preserve the double-blind review system].

Data analysis procedures

The data were entered and later analyzed by SPSS, version 25, and Amos, version 24. External analyses were previously performed. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency were also analyzed. With the purpose of testing the factor structure of the scale, confirmatory factor analyses of the scales were performed. Finally, to perform hypotheses testing, structural equation models were developed.

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis

In order to strengthen the metric quality of the Burnout Syndrome measure, we decided to develop a confirmatory factor analysis of the instruments using Amos, version 24. The confirmatory factor analysis performed for the Burnout Syndrome scale allowed us to obtain adequate values. Initially, the Burnout Syndrome model without the Guilt dimension presented the following indices: $\chi^2(87)=399.727$; $p<0.001$; TLI=.930; CFI=.942; GFI=.931; SRMR=.068; RMSEA=.068. In measuring this basic model, we obtained an acceptable fit on the indexes TLI, CFI, and GFI and a poor fit in the indexes SRMR and RMSEA. For this reason, covariations between the errors of items BS18 and BS 17 were established to optimize and strengthen the measurement model. Therefore, the final model shows good fit indices: $\chi^2(86)=293.768$, $p<.001$; TLI=.953; CFI=.961; GFI=.948; SRMR=.059; and RMSEA=.056.

As for the Prevention Focus scale, the analysis allowed obtaining adequate values. The final model presents good fit indices: $\chi^2(8)=38.573$, $r<.001$; TLI=.941; CFI=.969; GFI=.983; SRMR=.036; RMSEA=.070. For the Promotion Focus, we obtained adequate values. Initially, the model showed the following indices: $\chi^2(9)=87.358$, $p<.001$; TLI=.893; CFI=.936; GFI=.964; SRMR=.057; and RMSEA=.106. After performing different covariates suggested by the modification indices, the final model showed excellent fit indices: $\chi^2(6)=22.914$, $p<.001$; TLI=.965; CFI=.986; GFI=.991; SRMR=.036; and RMSEA=.060.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlations of the variables under study. According to Table 1, the correlations between the variables under study are, in general, statistically significant.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables

Study variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Max	Min	1	2	3
1. Burnout	1.99	0.39	3.57	0.84	-		
2. Prevention Focus	2.56	0.75	5.00	1.00	.27**	-	
3. Promotion Focus	3.42	0.70	5.00	1.00	.04	.31**	
4. Intention to Leave	2.01	1.84	6.00	0.00	.30**	.13**	.12**

Note. ** $p\leq 0.01$.

Mediation analysis

Regarding the measurement model, the analysis process began with the measurement of the complete model as mentioned by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). This process is characterized by the latent variables (Burnout Syndrome, Prevention Focus, Promotion Focus, and Intention to Leave) with the respective directly observable items. The final model showed the following fit indices: $\chi^2(338)=1116.182$ $p<.001$; TLI=.898; CFI=.909; SRMR=.036; RMSEA=.054.

Regarding the hypothesis test, the results pointed out that the relationship between Prevention Focus and Intention to Leave was negative and not statistically significant ($\beta=-.023$; $p=.521$), therefore hypothesis H(1) was not supported. The relationship between Prevention Focus and

Burnout Syndrome was positive and statistically significant ($\beta=.309$; $p<.001$), supporting H(2). Burnout Syndrome showed a positive and statistically significant influence on Intention to Leave ($\beta=.741$; $p<.001$). Also, the results showed that Burnout Syndrome mediates the relationship between Prevention Focus and Intention to Leave (indirect effect=1, 167; 90% confidence interval [CI], 0.787-1.670), supporting hypothesis H(3), as shown in Figure 1.

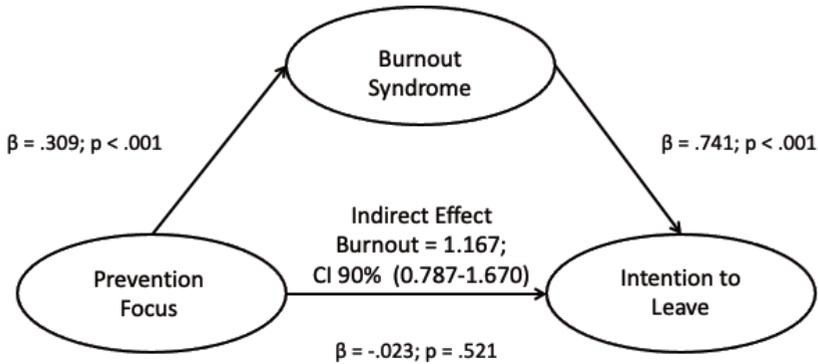


Figure 1. Final model

Analysis of the relationships between Promotion Focus and Intention to Leave was positive and statistically significant ($\beta=.094$; $p=.013$). These results support H(4). Promotion Focus was significantly and negatively associated with Burnout Syndrome ($\beta=-.398$; $p<.001$), supporting H(5). Burnout Syndrome was significantly and positively associated with Intention to Leave ($\beta=.741$; $p<.001$). In addition, the results showed that Burnout Syndrome mediates the relationship between Promotion Focus and Intention to Leave (indirect effect=-1.060; 90% CI, -1.462 to -0.758), supporting hypothesis H(6), as shown in Figure 2.

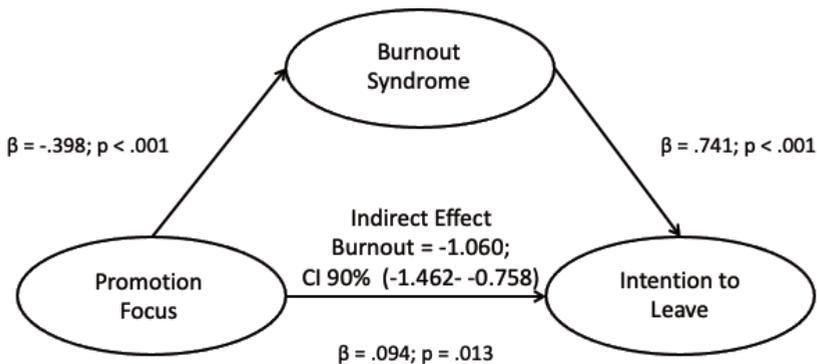


Figure 2. Final model

Discussion

The present study sought to evaluate the mediating role of Burnout Syndrome between the two dimensions of Regulatory/motivation Focus (prevention and promotion) and Intention to Leave among teachers. The results partially supported the hypothesized model. The Regulatory Focus type

emerged as a significant predictor of Intention to Leave. Burnout Syndrome mediated the relationship between promotion regulatory focus and Intention to Leave. Having a Promotion Focus reduced Intention to Leave in the presence of Burnout Syndrome. The mediating effect of Burnout Syndrome suggests that a Promotion Focus may help decrease Burnout Syndrome directly and indirectly.

Teachers are considered a high-risk population for Burnout Syndrome, which, in turn, may lead to thoughts of quitting the profession and even leaving it permanently. The results obtained support the hypothesis that Burnout Syndrome plays a mediating role between regulatory focus in its dimension of focus on promotion, and the Intention to Leave the profession. Promotion-focused teachers experience more positive emotions and have higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, which may help them cope better with the difficulties of the profession, have lower levels of Burnout Syndrome, and remain in the profession.

When teachers are working in a Promotion Focus situation, their aspiration-based beliefs are activated. With these beliefs, their aspirations are for advancement purposes rather than obligation or necessity. Good behaviors are the ultimate goal and students are expected to strive toward the achievement ceiling. Teachers, therefore, tend to choose strategies such as praise and rewards to encourage their students to meet expectations (Leung & Lam, 2003).

Also, according to the authors, the same principles of regulatory focus apply to teachers when they select strategies to manage student behaviors and when they find fault with their strategies. We predict that teachers in a Promotion Focus condition designed to achieve positive outcomes will adopt more approach strategies (e.g., reinforcing good behaviors) than avoidance strategies (e.g., punishing bad behaviors) in classroom management.

People who predominantly use the promotion-focused regulatory system are more daring to take risks because they are diligent, ambitious, and want to go beyond the minimum standards of their performance to demonstrate their effectiveness (Adil et al., 2018). A promotion-focused orientation tends to focus on hopes and aspirations when regulating behavior, resulting in motivation for achievement and salient outcomes of gains (positive and desired) or non-gains (negative and unwanted). These individuals do not consider potential losses when striving for their goals; instead, they move strategically toward desired (and away from undesired) end states, maximizing their chances for a match between their current states and the actual outcome, ensuring that they do not make errors of omission. In other words, they actively pursue goals by trying various behaviors to see what works (Brockner & Higgins, 2001).

It is possible to think that teachers focused on promotion will work with their students, believing in the good performance of their class and deal better with the stressors present in daily life, reducing Exhaustion and Indolence, dimensions of Burnout Syndrome. Therefore, they relate their success to their professional career and develop feelings of professional accomplishment, which can function as a protective factor against the development of Burnout Syndrome and, therefore, to remain in the profession.

Conclusion

Teachers are considered one of the careers that experience high stress and are highly prone to Burnout Syndrome. The shortage of teachers is a significant threat to the future of the educational system in Brazil. The results reveal the importance of the regulatory focus on prevention as a protective factor of Burnout Syndrome and the Intention to Leave the profession.

It is important to note that many other variables may play an important mediating role between the regulatory focus and the intent to leave the profession, such as strategies to deal with stressors, autonomy, professional self-efficacy, and job satisfaction, among others.

The study has some limitations that should be pointed out. First, self-report measures may contribute to potential sources of bias such as social desirability response set, and lead to some inflation of the observed relationship between the measured constructs. Second, the cross-sectional research design does not allow confident causal conclusions. Finally, the third limitation concerns the type of non-probabilistic sample from institutions located in a specific region of Brazil, and therefore, cannot be generalized to other countries, institutions or professionals. Thus, additional methodologies will be required to fully test our hypotheses, including multilevel analyses to discern the individual and group level of influence of leader behaviors related to security provision. We also indicate new studies with random samples and longitudinal studies to evaluate the stability of the results obtained in the model.

As implications for practice, we suggest focusing more attention on the motivational aspects of the teaching profession. Since the regulatory focus is easily malleable (Johnson et al., 2015), school institutions can develop programs to manage teachers' regulatory focus. Group interventions can help teachers recognize what their predominant focus is, raising awareness for change in the case of Burnout Syndrome prevention. Behaviors aimed at managing staff prevention and promotion foci may allow schools to not only increase teacher performance but also assist in the prevention of Burnout Syndrome and increase teacher retention in the profession.

Declaration of conflicting of interests

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Authors contribution

Conceptualization: MSC, SPG, RLG, SGC; Data curation: MSC; Formal analysis: MSC, SPG, RLG, SGC; Methodology: MSC, SPG, RLG, SGC; Investigation: MSC; Writing – Original draft: MSC; Writing – Review and edit: MSC, SPG, RLG, SGC.

All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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O papel mediador da Síndrome de Burnout entre o Foco regulatório/motivação e a intenção de abandono profissional em professores

Resumo: Os professores estão expostos a diversos estressores ocupacionais que, se persistentes, podem levar à Síndrome de Burnout e a pensamentos recorrentes de deixar a profissão e culminar no abandono total. Assim, o objetivo do presente estudo foi avaliar o papel mediador da Síndrome de Burnout entre as duas dimensões do sistema motivacional que é constituído pelo sistema regulatório com foco na prevenção e promoção e a intenção de abandono profissional em professores. Participaram da pesquisa 781 professores de ensino fundamental de escolas públicas e privadas. Foram utilizados como instrumentos de pesquisa o questionário para avaliação da Síndrome de Burnout, a escala de Foco Regulatório e um item único para avaliar a Intenção de abandono profissional. Os resultados obtidos por meio da Modelagem de Equações Estruturais confirmaram a hipótese de que a Síndrome de Burnout desempenha um papel mediador entre a dimensão do Foco regulatório promoção e a intenção de abandono profissional. Os resultados revelam a importância de intervenções que contemplem a redução de estressores ocupacionais para a prevenção ou reabilitação da Síndrome de Burnout em professores.

Palavras-chave: Síndrome de burnout, Foco regulatório, Intenção de abandono profissional, Professores.

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