

MANAGEMENT AND PREVENTION OF BURNOUT IN TEACHERS THROUGH THE BIODANZA SRT EMBODIED TRAINING

GESTIONE E PREVENZIONE DEL BURNOUT NEGLI INSEGNANTI ATTRAVERSO L'EMBODIED TRAINING BIODANZA SRT

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Abstract

Several studies show that teachers are increasingly exposed to high stress conditions, and an increased prevalence of Burnout can be observed; it is a typical syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal achievement, affecting the emotional-relational-personal spheres.

Teachers are required to have skills and competences that go beyond the didactics, involving also those *related to the relational and many other spheres* contributing to place this profession among the so-called "*helping professions*", i.e., professions based on helping relationships (such as those of nurses, doctors, and psychologists).

How to encourage teachers to develop possible protective factors by facilitating the acquisition of tools and personal resources to deal with stressful events, and prevent/counteract the onset of *Burnout*?

Soft Skills play an important role in work performance, being them of an emotional nature capable of promoting personal well-being. Therefore, enabling the development of protective factors and positive skills useful to counteract work stress and the onset of Burnout means giving priority to the emotional support.

This paper aims to show how *the Biodanza SRT System*, a body-mediated social pedagogy, enhances emotional competencies and soft skills through the *Embodiment Training*, facilitating the development of personal empowerment and the acquisition of *Best Practices* to improve both the professional and the personal/social life of teachers.

Numerosi studi evidenziano che gli insegnanti sono sempre più esposti a condizioni di stress elevato nei quali si riscontra una crescente diffusione del *Burnout*, tipica sindrome di esaurimento emotivo, depersonalizzazione e realizzazione personale ridotta che coinvolge non solo la sfera emotiva ma anche quella relazionale e personale.

Attualmente agli insegnanti sono richieste molte competenze che non si limitano alle sole conoscenze didattiche ma coinvolgono anche ulteriori aspetti *di natura relazionale e numerose altre variabili* facendo collocare questa professione tra le "*helping profession*", ovvero professioni basate sulla relazione d'aiuto (come ad esempio quelle degli infermieri, dei medici, degli psicologi).

Come favorire negli insegnanti lo sviluppo di possibili fattori di protezione facilitando l'acquisizione di strumenti e le risorse personali per affrontare gli eventi stressanti e prevenire o contrastare l'insorgenza del *burnout*?

Le *Soft Skills* giocano un ruolo importante nella performance lavorativa rappresentando quell'insieme di competenze di natura emotiva capaci di promuovere il benessere personale. Consentire lo sviluppo di fattori di protezione e capacità positive utili a contrastare lo stress lavorativo e l'insorgere del *Burnout* significa quindi dare priorità al *supporto Emotivo*.

L'obiettivo di questo paper è evidenziare come il Sistema *Biodanza SRT*, Pedagogia Sociale a mediazione corporea, attraverso un *Embodiment Training* va a potenziare le competenze emotive e le *Soft Skills* facilitando lo sviluppo dell'*empowerment* personale e l'acquisizione di *Best Practice* utili a migliorare non solo la vita professionale degli insegnanti ma anche la loro vita personale e sociale.

Keywords

Teachers, Burnout, Soft Skills, Emotional Intelligence, Biodanza SRT
Insegnanti, Burnout, Soft Skills, Intelligenza Emotiva, Biodanza SRT

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Introduction

Following the European Council's *Europe 2020 education policy guidelines*, each State is required to focus on improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training, in order to “ensure high quality teaching, provide adequate initial education for teachers and continuous professional development for teachers and trainers, and make teaching an attractive career choice”.

Continued and rapid legislative changes to which teaching staff must adhere have not only made teaching a non-attractive career choice, but have also favored the depersonalization of the educational function, requiring teachers to perform tasks that go beyond the mere educational relationship and to deal with a demanding school organization, purely oriented to efficiency.

Currently, teachers are constantly confronted with a myriad of sources of stress related not only to the educational relationship (learning difficulties of their students and their aggressive behavior, large classes, students with a wide range of Special Educational Needs) but also to problems caused by the relationship and conflict with their colleagues and students' parents, lack of social support and autonomy, poor correspondence with expectations, limited career opportunities, precariousness, poor social recognition of this profession, continuous school reforms, workload, low salary and continuous demand for professional updating that often does not meet their needs, resulting in falling self-esteem, feeling of helplessness and failure.

The ambiguity and the multiplicity of roles that the teacher is forced to manage (often incompatible with each other), in addition to didactics and the teaching activity (preparation of lessons, correction of homework, meetings, encounters with parents, extracurricular activities and projects, interaction with students), involve a high workload and an investment on an emotional and psychological level that is not limited to class hours, and can then trigger stress or lead into the Burnout spiral.

Recent studies confirm the stress to which the category of teachers is subjected by tracing the origin of various factors:

- the peculiarity of the profession (relationship with students and parents, large classes, unsatisfactory remuneration, lack of resources, precariousness, conflicts between colleagues, constant need for updating);
- the transformation of society towards a multi-ethnic and multicultural reality as an effect of globalization (increased number of non-EU students);
- the continuous evolution of the perception of social values (introduction of new policies in favor of disability and consequent inclusion of disabled students in the classes; families delegating schools to the education of their children due to cases of parents-workers or single-parent families; parents-children alliance to the detriment of the parents-teachers axis);
- scientific evolution (emergence of the computer age and new electronic communication technologies);
- the continuous succession of reforms (school autonomy, teamwork, raising of compulsory schooling age, early entry into the world of education);
- low social esteem by public opinion (Lodolo D'Oria, Pecori Giraldi, Della Torre, Iossa Fasano, Vizzi, Fontani, Vitello, Cantoni, Pascale, Frigoli, 2004).

Burnout syndrome in teachers has been recognized as resulting from four main elements:

- emotional exhaustion and fatigue;
- detached and apathetic attitude towards students, colleagues and in interpersonal relationships (depersonalization and cynical attitude);
- Feeling of frustration due to the lack of realization of their expectations (lack of personal accomplishment);
- Reduced self-control (Lodolo D'Oria, Pecori Giraldi, Della Torre, Iossa Fasano, Vizzi, Fontani, Vitello, Cantoni, Pascale, Frigoli, 2004).

Among the causes that contribute to the genesis of the syndrome we can find the emotional involvement with students and excessive workload (Cherniss, 1983; Farber, 1983).

This scenario leads to a teacher profile exposed to high risk of stress, dissatisfaction, work demotivation and *Burnout*. As a matter of fact, scientific data show that, among Italian teachers, the increase in emotional exhaustion and *Burnout* level is directly proportional to the increase in working years, but is also related to the lack of collaboration and adequate support by colleagues and managers, the work to be carried out in too many and difficult classes, complicated relationships with families, too much bureaucracy (Vianello, 2019), and the loss of social respect for the teachers' work.

The teaching profession is strongly exposed to Burnout Syndrome as it is considered a *Helping Profession*, just like that of professionals working in contact with suffering people (doctors, nurses, psychologists), which are subject to constant stress events and at risk of exhaustion. Moreover, this is the only profession in which professionals are with the same users (20 or 30 at the same time) for at least 4 hours a day, 5 days a week, for cycles that go up to 5 years. No other profession welcomes its users for so long.

The Burnout syndrome indicates a mismatch between what people are and what they have to do, and expresses a deterioration that affects people's values, dignity, spirit and will, in other words, a corrosion of the human soul (Maslach, 1982).

When the teachers are working in a situation where the demands are higher than what they can actually provide, they fall into a *form of defensive pathological adaptation*, characterized by a state of chronic exhaustion, lack of empathy, cynicism, physical and psycho-emotional detachment, disconnection from work, and diminished socialization. Burnout is an individual pathology that, involving the whole person, *damages* his/her psychophysical health, generating difficulties in working performance and effects on teaching, on the quality of the educational relationship and of the relational atmosphere within the classroom, on the didactic activity, and on the relationship between colleagues, managers and parents; in addition, it also affects the achievement of organizational goals that, in the long term, may be harmful for the organization in which he/she works.

In order to cope with Burnout syndrome, based on their personal empowerment level, teachers implement *coping strategies* in an attempt to react to a situation which, if not dealt with properly and in time, could degenerate into psycho-physical illness.

A classification of coping strategies was proposed in a study carried out in the United Kingdom, diversifying them into:

- direct actions, aimed at positively addressing the situation;
- diversionary actions, aimed at avoiding the event by assuming an apathetic, impersonal and detached attitude towards third parties;
- withdrawal actions or abandonment of the activity, in order to escape the stressful situation;
- palliative actions, focused on the use of substances such as coffee, smoking, alcohol, drugs (Cooper, 1993).

Some studies have found out that teachers with a hardy personality (having greater individual resilience) and "*a high level of self-efficacy, have a low level of Burnout, while teachers with high levels of Burnout live in a negative school climate*" (Vianello, 2019). The latter include those people who are strongly exposed to regressive or palliative coping strategies (negative adaptation reactions) such as drinking, smoking, and assumption of psychotropic drugs, resulting from behaviors that deny, minimize, hide or avoid stressful events.

Recent studies, besides investigating the *Burnout* levels of teachers and their respective risk factors, have also highlighted their well-being levels by analyzing the *protection factors*, i.e., all those personal resources useful to face problems compromising personal well-being and career path (anxiety, irritability and lowered self-esteem), and to guarantee better psychophysical-affective, relational and social conditions (Albanese, Fiorilli, Gabola, Zorzi, 2008)

Starting from this bio-psycho-social vision, the focus moves to the promotion of well-being by privileging the interest on protective factors useful to develop the potential of the subjects, rather than focusing on discomfort, deficiencies and pathologies of the human being.

Adopting a positive perspective in the school life of teachers also means referring to those cross skills useful for a positive evaluation of their existence.

Knowing how to understand, use and manage one's own and other people's emotions proves to be fundamental not only when dealing with stress or commitment caused by work, but also and above all in the daily confrontation with students and their parents, colleagues and school manager.

In the majority of teachers who are not sufficiently trained in these skills (emotional, cognitive, social) and in communication and relational strategies, it is easy to trigger the inability to adapt to rapid and continuous changes in methods and didactics, to excessive emotional involvement in the management of one's work and relationships, to the monotony of work and, no less important, to a sort of identity crisis.

It is essential to carry out processes of humanization and re-humanization by promoting well-being among teachers, in order to favor not only an adequate organizational climate, but also the ability of all the school staff to implement effective and ecological forms and interventions, facilitating collaborative work in the face of competition or lack of interest among teachers.

Health is understood as the progressive integration of biological, psychological and social aspects into the personal growth, which generate the condition of existential well-being.

Through appropriate training, it is necessary to strengthen teachers' personal strategies (*coping, resilience, empowerment*) by developing emotional and soft skills to prevent and counteract psychosomatic illnesses, work-related stress and burnout syndrome, and to promote the re-appropriation of the meanings related to their profession and the well-being resulting from their feeling good in the world.

It becomes essential to structure interventions within school and educational contexts aimed at increasing personal resources that develop in people the ability to recognize those protection factors useful to make people protagonists of their own health and well-being management.

1. Burnout: Theoretical Framework

Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome resulting from a condition of prolonged and intense work stress, which determines a psychophysical and emotional exhaustion characterized by three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, (Maslach, 1982) followed by de-motivation, inner emptiness, disinterest and sense of ineffectiveness for the work activity with reduced productivity.

The term *Burnout* (meaning being burned out, exhausted) was used in sports to indicate the phenomenon in which an athlete, after years of success, becomes exhausted and can no longer give anything from the competitive point of view. Currently, it is also used in the workplace when work, although initially considered important, meaningful and exciting, becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling and meaningless over time.

Burnout syndrome is a condition of maladjustment that occurs especially in the helping professions, due to an intense emotional and motivational involvement from which a physical and psychological exhaustion is generated, in addition to a cold and depersonalized attitude in relationships with others and a feeling of inadequacy to the tasks to be performed, coupled with physical complaints, frustration, behavioral and relational problems.

The three-dimensional model on Burnout Syndrome, worked out by Maslach (1982), highlights its manifestation through three main factors:

- *Emotional exhaustion and fatigue*, understood as a dysfunctional adaptive response to excessive demands due to the contact with people, in which the individual feels overwhelmed and fails to regain emotionality. This dimension is linked to psychophysical and emotional well-being more than the others, is characterized by emotional overload, inability to accept new emotions, lack of energy, frustration or tension.
- *Depersonalization and cynical attitude*, characterized by a detached and lethargic attitude in interpersonal relationships, together with a cold indifference also towards the

work itself, as well as estrangement from the relationship with the other, and distance from personal involvement in relationships with others through a process of de-humanization, expressed by treating others as objects.

- *Lack of personal accomplishment*, due to a feeling of frustration from which stems a decrease in motivation for success, a sense of inadequacy in which self-esteem diminishes. It is the feeling of effectiveness of one's work, competence and self-esteem, or even (depending on the positive or negative side) feelings of lack of confidence in one's own abilities and general inadequacy.

Subsequently, Folgheraiter (1994) introduced a fourth element described as reduced self-control, or the loss of that critical sense allowing the working experience to be given the right dimension. As a result, the profession ends up taking on a disproportionate importance, leading the individual to no longer be able to mentally release himself or herself by dealing with emotional, impulsive and violent reactions too.

Stress can be considered an essential ingredient of our daily life, both at home/within the family context and in the workplace. In addition, it also brings positive effects: being a stimulus to the action, it is above all the individual ability to adapt to it (reactivity) that enables the subdivision of episodes into *distress* (harmful stress) and *eustress* (positive stress).

One or more stress conditions, if particularly intense or prolonged in time, can lead to Burnout syndrome characterized by:

- particular moods (anxiety, irritability, tiredness, fatigue, asthenia, panic, agitation, guilt, negativism, reduced self-esteem, empathy, listening skills, and others),
- somatization (migraine, sweating, insomnia, organic disorders, and others)
- behavioral reactions (frequent absences or delays in the workplace, defensive closure to dialogue, emotional detachment from the interlocutor, reduced creativity, and adoption of stereotypical behavior).

While stress can be defined as a state of activation enabled by the organism when dealing with an unforeseen situation (whether positive or negative), *Burnout* is the result of a lack of stress management from which the growing psycho-physical emotional exhaustion originates, which, even when the stress reaches high levels (in which one *explodes*, or burns out) one hardly realizes to be affected by it.

2. Emotional Intelligence and Soft Skills: from Burnout to Well-being

If Burnout is a syndrome that involves both the emotional and the personal-relational spheres, the promotion of *Soft Skills* (WHO, 1993) and of *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1998) plays an important role in work performance. They represent a set of cognitive, emotional and relational skills that can promote personal well-being, as they enable the development of protective factors and positive abilities useful in counteracting work-related stress and the onset of Burnout.

Soft Skills (personal, social, and methodological skills) contribute to the perception of self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence, and play a major role in promoting personal and occupational well-being. *Emotional intelligence* refers to a set of social and personal skills and to all those individual characteristics, personality traits, skills and competencies which are fundamental to emerge and succeed.

When we speak of skills in the workplace, we distinguish between *Hard Skills* – including knowledge and technical skills applicable to a given task - and *Soft Skills* - relational skills and personal characteristics of an individual applicable in the interpersonal relationships, more related to what we are rather than what we know, and representing a person's working style (the way he or she performs the assigned tasks and role).

The World Health Organization, in its *Skills for Life* (1993) policy document, defines Soft Skills as “*a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life*”.

In the workplace, developing *Soft Skills* means acquiring those skills that lead to positive and adaptive behavior and *enabling* the individual to “know what to do and how to do it” by effectively face the demands and challenges of everyday life and turning knowledge, attitudes and values into real skills.

Soft Skills contribute to perceiving self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence, play an important role in promoting well-being, by increasing motivation to take care of oneself and others in order to prevent discomfort and health and behavioral problems.

Soft Skills can be divided into three categories: personal, social, and methodological skills. More in detail:

1. Personal Skills include all the skills that distinguish each individual: self-awareness, emotion management, self-control, optimism, resilience, motivation, flexibility/adaptability, self-reflection, self-confidence, and strong feeling of initiative.
2. Social skills indicate the ability to establish interpersonal relationships and to possess communication skills, empathy, effective communication, effective relationships, conflict management, teamwork and leadership spirit.
3. Methodological Skills are among the most immediate professional skills, and are expressed as specific skills: autonomy, problem solving, stress management, decision-making, critical thinking and creative thinking, result orientation, planning and organization

Soft Skills have the following features:

- At the level of personal effectiveness, they develop gifts such as creativity and balance, fundamental factors in the work environment and necessary for solving problems even in case of static task;
- In the relational sphere, they increase the ability to work in a team and cooperate to achieve goals. Among them, ethics and tolerance make it possible to manage stress caused by dysfunctional relationships, and to adopt behaviors appropriate to shared norms and values;
- They represent the ability to make decisions and negotiate, which improves through the development of flexibility, empathic listening and rational detachment.
- Those oriented towards personal accomplishment, on the other hand, mainly concern the evaluation ability, from which results the selection, correct management and valorization of information.

Starting from this vision, the new measure of excellence of the working world is no longer based only on what one is prepared for or experienced in, but “*focuses mainly on personal qualities such as initiative and empathy, the ability to adapt and to be persuasive*” and therefore on the ability to “*work with emotional intelligence*” (Goleman, 1998)

Emotional intelligence refers to a set of social and personal skills, and includes all those individual characteristics, personality features and skills/competences essential to emerge and succeed; as a matter of fact, Emotional Competence “*is a learned ability grounded in emotional intelligence, which results in an excellent professional performance*” (Goleman, 1998).

Goleman’s *emotional competence structure model* (1998) summarizes two types of competences, i.e., those personal and social, to which 5 dimensions are related:

1) Personal competence:

1.1. Self-awareness (knowledge about one’s own emotions, preferences, resources and intuitions);

1.2. Self-regulation (ability to manage one’s own emotions, impulses and resources);

1.3. Motivation (emotional trends that drive or facilitate the achievement of goals).

2) Social competence:

2.1. Empathy (awareness of the feelings, needs and interests of others);

2.2. Social awareness (ability to induce desirable responses in others)

Soft Skills are acquired throughout personal and work life experiences but can be acquired during a quality educational and training course: they cannot be learned from books.

It becomes essential to plan training programs in the workplace adjusted to teachers so as to develop emotional, social and social skills; all this because good knowledge and skills in the domain of emotional intelligence determines positive effects in communication, stress management and positive climate at school.

To counteract the onset of Burnout, it is important to own and develop transversal skills, often defined as *Soft*, related to emotional intelligence and having the peculiarity to be modified, developed and learned.

Promoting the development of new resources and potentials to increase the well-being of teachers means activating person-centered pathways aimed at changing the subject, facilitating individual growth, and changing the environmental situation by humanizing the work context and refining communication, relational and professional skills (*Soft Skills*).

3. Biodanza SRT and Burnout: innovative Embodiment Training developing protective factors in Teachers

This contribution proposes Biodanza SRT (Rolando Toro's system) as an innovative experiential methodology, to be employed as a possible training intervention for the development of protection factors useful to face the onset or reduction of Burnout. By means of the Embodied Training, it favors the strengthening of emotional competences and soft skills, reinforcing *coping strategies, resilience and empowerment*, thus consolidating a positive way of facing Burnout.

Biodanza SRT system is a body-mediated Social Pedagogy (Toro Araneda, 2007), and is based on the embodied cognition perspective according to which "every form of human cognition is embodied, and therefore 'rooted in the corporeal experience'" (Gallese, 2016); through the experience of the expanded corporeality (mind-body-emotions) and the learning-by-doing approach it facilitates heuristic learning, influencing and guiding the change of behavior and identity of every human being.

It is an innovative methodology proposed through experiential workshops (ideal-affective-expressive-motor workshops) lived in groups, working on the healthy part of the person using a Gestalt generated by the interaction between music (universal language), emotional dance/movement (natural expression of the human being) and group meetings inducing *Integrated Vivencias* (experiences lived with great intensity in the here-now), in order to stimulate human potentials and enhance talents.

During a Biodanza session, the group constitutes to all effects an intersubjective space facilitating contact with one's emotions, awakening sensitivity, empathy, self-confidence, listening skills, empathy and socialization, stimulating the acquisition of intelligences and promoting the enhancement of positive identity, self-esteem, and the harmonious development of the person.

Biodanza contributes positively to develop:

- 1. Personal skills:** Self-awareness, emotional literacy, empowerment, sense of individual responsibility;
- 2. Social skills:** Empathy, pro-social, cooperative and inclusive behaviors;
- 3. Professional skills:** emotional management, stress management, conflict mediation, ecological communication, sustainable relationships, resilience.

Scientific evidence has shown that Biodanza SRT is an important strategy for the prevention of emotional distress, with significant variations on Alexithymia and emotional illiteracy (Giannelli, Giannino, Mingarelli, 2015); it also represents a good method to improve emotional intelligence, self-esteem, sense of competence and effectiveness, as well as to improve one's own mood (Castañeda, 2009, Villegas, Stuck, 1999), reduce stress and implement emotion recognition, concentration and enhancement of social skills (Stueck, Villegas, Terren, Toro, Mazzarella, Schroeder, 2008). It is a system that succeeds in changing the stress pattern by replacing it with a harmony-based one, producing psychophysiological effects (Villegas, Stuck, 1999): for the reduction of psychosomatic discomfort (headache, back pain, etc.) due to increased self-regulation; for the positive interpretation of crisis states, resulting in a change in cognitive

interpretation; and for increasing sense of competence, efficiency and self-awareness.

The Biodanza System uses appropriate strategies and methods to develop skills and competences useful to consolidate a *positive coping* mode towards Burnout, and therefore to consider it as a possible line of intervention in the prevention of risk factors associated with Burnout.

Through the experiences lived in Biodanza, the learning of new forms of ecological communication and affective relationship is facilitated; these are useful to overcome depersonalization in the professional task, and stimulate resilience processes so that everyone is able to resist, in a flexible way and with no frustration, to the adversities of life.

The introduction of *Biodanza SRT* training-experiential paths in educational institutions would reduce those sources of risk that have been identified as indicators of the *Burnout* syndrome in various scientific researches, because, as an operational strategy for the emotional, relational and social re-education, it can significantly change the health of workers and affect the risk factors underlying the teaching profession.

The transformative, educational and didactic potential of Biodanza SRT is based on body-mediated training processes capable of triggering an existential change that is closely linked to the enhancement of social skills, which contribute to personal evolution, to develop social relationships and improve the quality of life.

Conclusions

Faced with the current critical historical, social and political moment of the teaching profession, also in relation to the new teaching methods used as a consequence of the health emergency, national and international communities are urgently called upon to adopt interventions to counteract the growth and spread of Burnout at school, by responding to the need - still little investigated in the literature - of finding out how to provide teachers with the tools and resources to deal with stressful events, and to cope with negative emotional reactions through the development of protective factors.

Burnout in teachers necessarily requires further investigation and reflections suggesting operational solutions to the different aspects of such a multi-faceted problem.

Therefore, it is essential to envisage prevention interventions aimed not only at the cognitive detection of the Burnout phenomenon and at the monitoring of the teacher's health/well-being (with respect to the incidence and/or risk of Burnout), but above all at implementing interventions intended to improve the quality of the relational life in the school.

Our contribution proposes Biodanza SRT as an innovative experiential methodology to be considered as a possible line of intervention in the prevention of risk factors associated with Burnout. This methodology aims at orienting subjects towards the learning-to-be and at the learning-to-live through an *Embodied Training*, which employs strategies and methods suitable to strengthen and develop skills, competences and personal strategies (protection factors) useful to consolidate a positive coping approach towards Burnout.

Through continuous training, centered on the development of skills that are increasingly essential and important in the world of work and implemented through innovative workshop methodologies, it is then possible to create an eco-sustainable school life starting from the development of the human potential of each one, while stimulating the promotion of teachers' *Well-Being* that aims at their *Well-Teaching* as well.

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