SOCIAL SUPPORT, BURNOUT AND WELL-BEING IN TEACHING PROFESSIONALS. CONTRAST OF A DIRECT AND BUFFER EFFECT MODEL

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Abstract: The main aim of this investigation is to determine whether social support has a direct impact on well-being or a buffer effect, reducing the negative consequences of burnout on teaching professionals' health and well-being. The sample of the study was composed of 158 teachers. The instruments used for the measurement of social support, burnout and well-being were the Perceived Social Support Questionnaire (Herrero, Gracia, & Musitu, 1996), adapted to the work context; the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981); and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), respectively. Overall social support showed a significant main effect on teachers' well-being. Concerning the buffer effect model, significant interaction effects were verified between social support and burnout. Taking an applied perspective, the results obtained in the present study point out the relevance of interventions focused on social support and burnout coping strategies for teaching professionals.

Key words: Ex post facto study, social support, burnout, well-being.

Resumen: El objetivo principal de esta investigación es determinar si el apoyo social tiene un impacto directo en el bienestar o un efecto de amortiguación, reduciendo las consecuencias negativas del desgaste en la salud y el bienestar de los profesionales de la enseñanza. La muestra del estudio estuvo compuesta por 158 profesores. Los instrumentos utilizados para la medición del apoyo social, el desgaste y el bienestar son el Cuestionario de Apoyo Social Percibido (Herrero, Gracia, & Musitu, 1996), adaptado al contexto utilizado, el Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Maslach, & Jackson, 1981) y la Escala de Satisfacción con la Vida (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin,, 1985), respectivamente. En general, el apoyo social mostró un significativo efecto principal sobre el bienestar de los docentes. En cuanto al modelo de efectos de amortiguación, este efecto se verificó en la interacción significativa entre el apoyo social y el burnout. Adoptando una perspectiva aplicada, los resultados obtenidos en el presente estudio señalan la pertinencia de las intervenciones centradas en el apoyo social y las estrategias de afrontamiento del burnout para profesionales de la enseñanza.

Palabras clave: estudio ex post facto, apoyo social, burnout, bienestar.

Título: A*poyo social, burnout y bienestar en docentes. Contraste de un modelo de efectos directos y de amortiguación*

The role of interpersonal relationships, and particularly social support, on health and well-being has been widely evidenced in previous research (Barrón, 1996; Pozo, Alonso-Morillejo, Hernández, & Martos, 2005; Stroebe, 2000). House and his colleagues were pioneers in this field, showing how social support can lessen the negative consequences of illness and reduce the risk of mortality (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988).

More specifically, other researchers have analysed the relation between diverse

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aspects of social support and the following factors: mental health (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000; Paykel, 1994; Pierce, Frone, Russell, Cooper, & Mudar, 2000), physical illness (Dolbier & Steinhardt, 2000), the recovery of patients with diverse physical and psychological diseases (Fernández, Doval, & Edo, 1994), and well-being (Davis & Morris, 1998; Hernández, Alonso-Morillejo, & Pozo, 2006a, 2006b). It has been found that individuals with supportive relationships (a partner, family, friends, etc.) often have better physical and mental health, due to the emotional and/or material resources they obtain within their social network (Gerin, Milner, Charla, & Pickering, 1995). Therefore, the negative impact of illness is usually less severe among those individuals who receive (and perceive) higher levels of social support (Calvo & Alemán, 2006).

Social support may be considered a particular type of human interaction where social, emotional, instrumental and recreational resources are exchanged (Thoits, 1995). According to Lin (1986), a differentiation should be made between support resources and support processes. Taking this into account, Lin distinguishes two global components of social support: the social (structural) and the support one (process). The structural component is referred to social relationships (with the community, social networks, partner relationships). Regarding social support functions, three main types have been commonly distinguished: emotional, instrumental and informational. Although emotional support has been considered the main component of social support by some authors, the more effective type of support will depend on the situation where it is required, as it has been pointed out by the "support specificity theory" (Cohen et al., 2000; Kahn, Schneider, Jenkins-Henkelman, & Moyle, 2006).

Despite the diversity of studies and the different conceptualisations and measures of social support that have been employed (Dolbier & Steinhardt, 2000; Matud, Carballeira, López, Marrero, & Ibáñez, 2002), the specific mechanisms that explain the impact of social support on health and well-being are not precisely known. Explanatory theories of social support effects have been traditionally divided into two main categories: direct or main effect models, and protective or buffer effect models (Barrón, 1996; Cohen et al., 2000; Hernández, Pozo, & Alonso-Morillejo, 2004). The first ones establish a direct relation between social support and well-being, whereas buffer effect models suggest that social support protects individuals from the negative impact of certain conditions (particularly stress and burnout) on health and well-being.

In the specific case of the work context, a great deal of investigations have been developed during the last years in order to explain the influence of social support from different sources on well-being, health, work satisfaction and organizational results (Beehr, Farmer, Glazer, Gudanowski, & Nair, 2003; Deelstra et al., 2003; De Jonge et al., 2001; Landeta & Calvete, 2002; Pozo et al., 2005). Evidence has also been found on the positive role of social support in the interaction between work and burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In the particular case of teachers, our main focus in the present investigation, the social support system may play a key role in mitigating the negative effects of burnout. This effect has been found in professionals of the service sector and those whose work is directly related with people (Friedman, 1996; Kahn et al., 2006; Matud et al., 2002). Social support increases these professionals' self-esteem and promotes their ability to cope with problems in their work place. In line with this, Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen

(1987) found that teachers with high levels of support from their superiors were less vulnerable to experiencing burnout.

During the last years, it has been pointed out that many professionals face working conditions characterized by a high level of emotional involvement and strong interpersonal demands (Farrerons & Calvo, 2008). These conditions may lead to the burnout syndrome if professionals are unable to develop effective coping strategies and manage stress adequately (Carmona, Buunk, Peiró, Rodríguez, & Bravo, 2006; Durán, Extremera, & Rey, 2006; Gil-Monte, Carretero, & Roldán, 2005; Menezes, Fernández, Hernández, Ramos, & Contador, 2006; Moreno, Morett, Rodríguez, & Morante, 2006). Burnout is not a trivial matter and it can significantly alter people's behavior, impair their quality of life and damage their health, contributing to significant manifestations of disease (Farrerons & Calvo, 2008).

In accordance with the classic conceptualisation of Maslach and Jackson (1981), the burnout syndrome is characterized by a lack of personal accomplishment, high emotional exhaustion and a high level of depersonalisation (Maslach & Jackson, 1997). Burnout is usually the result of chronic stress at work, combined with other negative working conditions, such as limited promotion opportunities and lack of positive feedback (Carmona et al., 2006; Cooper, Dewe, & O' Driscoll, 2001; Elfering et al., 2005; Merino & Pedraza, 2007; Topa-Cantisano, Fernández, & Lisbona, 2005).

Existing burnout models have emphasized the role of mediating processes that may contribute to reduce the negative consequences of burnout in teachers. Some of these mediating factors are social support, psychosocial resources and coping resources (Luceño, Martín, Jaén, & Díaz, 2006); the effects of stress on health, and more specifically on chronic symptoms, are mediated by these coping mechanisms. Coping strategies, such as social support, may reduce perceived problems in stressful situations, protecting the individual from health deterioration. In this way, social support may buffer the negative consequences of burnout on teachers' health and well-being (Thoits, 1995). However, some authors consider that emotional exhaustion is the key feature of burnout, and that the use of coping strategies is not an effective way to reduce it (Anderson, 2000; Stevens & Higgins, 2002).

Although the role of social support as a coping strategy in the management of burnout has been widely investigated, there are still many key questions about how social support processes influence burnout and health, which types of support entail more positive effects, and which are the most effective sources of support. Taking this into account, the main aim of the present investigation is to examine to what extent, how and through what mechanisms social support works as a coping strategy to manage and lessen burnout (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993).

This study is focused on the analysis of direct and buffer effect models of social support. In the direct effect model, social support is expected to directly reduce the levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and directly increase personal accomplishment (Eastburg, Williamson, Gorsuch, & Ridley, 1994; Greenglass, Burke, & Konarshi, 1997; Zellars & Perrewé, 2001). The interaction effect model establishes that social support at the workplace influences the evaluation of burnout experiences, particularly regarding emotional exhaustion (Posig & Kickul, 2003) and depersonalization (Russell et al., 1987), buffering their negative impact on well-being.

Figure 1. Direct and buffer effect models of social support and the impact of burnout
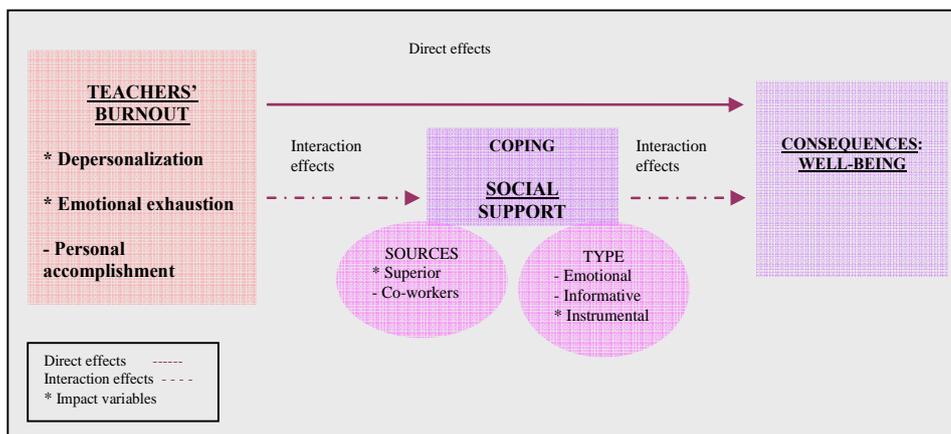
The present ex post facto study is oriented to clarify the relationship between social support (differentiating types of support –emotional, instrumental and informative- and sources of support –co-workers and superiors-), burnout (depersonalization, emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment) and well-being in teachers.

The objectives of this investigation are to: a) analyse the relationships between the variables under study, b) analyse the direct effects of both social support and burnout on teachers' well-being, c) verify if social support works as a coping strategy in the management of burnout and its influence on teachers' well-being, and d) examine the impact of diverse social support sources (co-workers and superior) and different types of support (emotional, informative and instrumental).

Hypotheses under study are:

1. Burnout (both overall and differentiating between each specific component) and well-being will be negatively related (Alonso-Morillejo, Pozo, & Hernández, 2002).

2. Social support (both overall and specific types and sources) and teachers' well-being will be positively related (Davis & Morris, 1998).

3. Negative effects of burnout and positive effects of social support on well-being will be found (direct effect model)

4. Social support will buffer the negative impact of burnout on well-being. Particularly, buffer effects will be found when:

a) Support is provided by superiors (Russell et al., 1987)

b) Social support is instrumental (Gerin et al., 1995), and

c) The burnout component under analysis is depersonalization and/or emotional exhaustion (Posig & Kickul, 2003; Russell et al., 1987).

The following model is suggested, where both social support and burnout have direct effects on teachers' well-being, and social support also works as a coping strategy to manage the negative impact of burnout on health. The analysis of buffer effects will be based in the conceptualisation of social support as a modulating va-

riable in the relation between burnout and teachers' well-being.

Method

Participants

The sample of the study was composed of 165 teachers: 26.6% men and 73.4% women; aged between 22 and 60 years (mean=44.28; S.D.=10.11). All participants were teachers at diverse Public Primary Schools in a Southern province of Spain. Eighty six point two percent were permanent civil servants and 13.8% were non-permanent teachers. Regarding time spent in the same profession, 16.3% of the participants had worked as teachers for less than 5 years, 17% between 5 and 15 years, 28% between 16 and 25 years, and 37.7% had been teaching for more than 25 years (Table 1).

Variables and Instruments

The Perceived Social Support Questionnaire (Herrero et al., 1996), adapted to the labour context, was used in order to measure social support. This questionnaire is composed of two scales: one assesses perceived social support from the immediate superior and co-workers, and the other measures support reciprocity (the latter will not be considered in the present study). The perceived social support scale is composed of 6 items for each support source (superior and co-workers): 2 items for emotional support, 2 for informative support and 2 for instrumental support. Respondents recorded their answers on seven-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Thus, a high score translates into a high perceived social support.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1997; Seisdedos, 1997) was used to measure burnout. This inventory is integrated by 22 items that measure three factors: emotional exhaustion (9 items), de-

personalization (5 items) and lack of personal accomplishment (8 items). A seven-point Likert-type scale was again administered to respondents, with answers ranging from 1 (totally disagree), to 7 (totally agree), with a higher score meaning a greater level of burnout.

Two scales were used for the measurement of well-being: one single item measure, by Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff (2002), where participants evaluate their life globally during the last seven days, using a seven-point scale form 1 (the worst life possible), to 7 (the best life possible); and the Satisfaction with Life Scale, by Diener et al. (1985).

Procedure

After designing the questionnaire, Public Primary Schools were selected through stratified random sampling by area. Permits required for data gathering were obtained in collaboration with the Labour Risk Prevention Centre. Questionnaires were distributed, filled in and collected at the previously selected Primary Schools. Finally, data were codified, introduced in SPSS files and analysed.

Analysis

Taking into account the objectives of the study, the following analyses were conducted, using the SPSS for Windows (version 15) statistical programme:

1. Descriptive analysis.

2. Bivariate correlations between sources and types of social support, burnout dimensions and well-being.

3. Analysis of variance with the aim of examining both the main effects of social support and burnout on well-being, and the interactive effects of social support and burnout on teachers' well-being.

Results

Descriptive analyses of the scales (see Table 1) show that teachers have a moderate level of subjective well-being, with a mean value of 4.68 (S.D.=1.19) over a maximum of 7 points. Regarding overall social support, the mean score is also adequate (mean=4.66; S.D.=1.40), with higher values for co-workers (mean=4.95; S.D.=1.35) and emotional support mean=4.96; S.D.=1.37). Finally, the mean in burnout for this sample of teachers is not particularly high (mean=3.11; S.D.=.89), with higher values for emotional exhaustion (mean=3.54; S.D.=1.22).

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted in order to examine the relations among the variables under study, between teachers' burnout (overall and its three components) and well-being, between social support (differentiating type and source of support) and well-being, and finally, between burnout and social support. A significant negative correlation was obtained between burnout and well-being (r=-.60; p<.01), confirming our first hypothesis. Emotional exhaustion is the burnout component that correlates more strongly with subjective well-being (r=-.49; p<.01), although the other two components also have a significant negative correlation with well-being (r=-.31, p<.01 for depersonalization; and r=-.47, p<.01 for lack of personal accomplishment).

Significant positive relations between social support and well-being were also found (r=.46, p<.01), thus confirming the second hypothesis of the study. Regarding source of support, superior support shows a higher correlation with well-being (r= .49, p<.01); and concerning type of support, informative support obtained the strongest relation with well-being (r=.47, p<.01).

Finally, in accordance with our expectations, a significant negative correlation was found between social support and teachers' burnout (r=.-35, p<.01). Only if all types and sources of support and the three components of burnout are considered, some correlations are not statistically significant (see Table 2). This is the case of emotional exhaustion, the burnout component that reveals a weaker relation with the rest of variables under study.

A two-way analysis of variance was conducted in order to verify both a direct effect model (direct impact of social support and burnout on well-being) and an interaction effect model (role of social support as a stress buffer). For this analysis, the total mean values of social support and well-being were considered, together with the specific mean values for the three burnout components, the three types of social support and the two support sources under study.

As depicted in Table 3, the whole model was statistically significant (F=6.29,

Table 1. Descriptive results and internal consistency of the scales

Variables	Num. items	Mean	S.D.	α
Well-being	5	4.68	1.19	.88
Social support	12	4.66	1.40	.95
Support from co-workers	6	4.95	1.35	.93
Support from superior	6	4.36	1.77	.96
Emotional support	4	4.96	1.37	.83
Informative support	4	4.64	1.51	.89
Instrumental support	4	4.36	1.54	.83
Burnout	22	3.11	0.89	.86
Depersonalization	5	2.40	1.10	.70
Emotional exhaustion	9	3.54	1.22	.86
Personal accomplishment	8	3.00	1.06	.78

Table 2. Correlations between well-being, social support and burnout

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Well-being	1									
2. Social support	.46**	1								
3. Co-workers sup.	.31**	.87**	1							
4. Superior sup.	.49**	.92**	.61**	1						
5. Emotional sup.	.44**	.96**	.83**	.90**	1					
6. Informative sup.	.47**	96**	.84**	.88**	.91**	1				
7. Instrumental sup.	.40**	.94**	.81**	.88**	.86**	.85**	1			
8. Burnout	-.60**	-.35**	-.29**	-.34**	-.38**	-.38**	-.26**	1		
9. Depersonalization	-.31**	-.18*	-.18*	-.15	-.18*	-.21**	-.12	.74**	1	
10. Exhaustion	-.49**	-.13	-.040	-.17*	-.14	-.17*	-.05	.85**	.47**	1
11. Accomplishment	-.47**	-.53**	-.50**	-.46**	-.55**	-.51**	-.45**	.71**	.38**	.24**

** Significant correlation at a 0.01 level (bilateral) * Significant correlation at a 0.05 level (bilateral).

p<.001). Overall social support showed a significant main effect on teachers' well-being (F=4.77; p<.01). This result partially confirms the third hypothesis of the study. Regarding types and sources of social support, only informative support was found to have a significant direct effect on well-being (F=10.34; p<.001). Overall burnout did not have a main effect on well-being; the only dimension with a significant direct effect was depersonalization (F=7.73, p<.001).

A significant interaction effect was also observed for overall social support and burnout (F=2.66; p<.05). Therefore, according to our fourth hypothesis, social support buffers the negative impact of burnout on teachers' well-being. To conduct this analysis both social support and burnout were divided in low score (between 1 and 3), moderate (between 3.1 and 5) and high (between 5.1 and 7). As shown in figure 2, burnout has a negative impact on subjective well-being: teachers with less burnout are the ones who experience the highest level of well-being. This negative impact is buffered by social support, particularly among those teachers with moderate levels of burnout. Social support is less effective as a buffer strategy in the group scoring high levels of burnout.

Regarding source of support, significant interaction effects were observed between support from co-workers and depersonalization (F=2.58; p<.05), and between support from co-workers and emotional exhaustion (F=3.64; p<.01). No significant interaction effects were found between support from superiors and burnout. As a consequence, our hypothesis was not confirmed. Contrary to the results obtained elsewhere (Pozo et al., 2005; Russell et al., 1987), social support from co-workers buffers the negative effects of burnout on well-being more effectively than support from superiors.

As far as type of support is concerned, significant interaction effects were observed between informative support and emotional exhaustion (F=3.76; p<.01), informative support and low personal acco-

Table 3. Two-way analysis of variance for burnout, social support and subjective well-being in teachers

Source	DF	Quadratic mean	F
Social support	2	1.76	4.77(**)
Support from co-workers	2	.37	1.01
Support from superior	2	.78	2.12
Emotional support	2	.02	0.05
Informative support	2	3.83	10.34(***)
Instrumental support	2	.21	0.57
Burnout	2	.08	0.23
Depersonalization	2	2.86	7.73 (***)
Emotional exhaustion	2	.84	2.27
Personal accomplishment	2	.05	0.14
Support * Burnout	4	.98	2.66(*)
Co-workers support * Depersonalization	4	.96	2.58(*)
Co-workers support * Emotional exhaustion	4	1.38	3.64(**)
Co-workers support * Personal accomplishment	4	.90	2.43
Superior support * Depersonalization	4	.29	0.77
Superior support * Emotional exhaustion	4	.22	0.60
Superior support * Personal accomplishment	4	.80	2.15
Emotional support * Depersonalization	4	.55	1.49
Emotional support * Emotional exhaustion	4	.34	0.91
Emotional support * Personal accomplishment	3	.67	1.82
Informative support * Depersonalization	4	.46	1.24
Informative support * Emotional exhaustion	4	1.39	3.76(**)
Informative support * Personal accomplishment	3	1.29	3.48(*)
Instrumental support * Depersonalization	4	1.98	5.36(***)
Instrumental support * Emotional exhaustion	4	.24	0.65
Instrumental support * Personal accomplishment	4	.71	1.91
Corrected model	83	2.33	6.29(***)
Error	70	.37	
Total	154		

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Figure 2. Interaction effects of social support and burnout on well-being
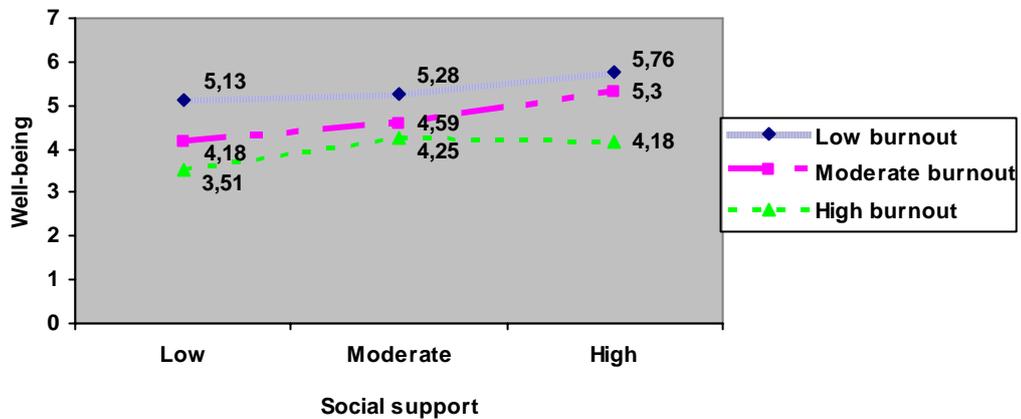
mplishment (F=3.48; p<.05), and between instrumental support and depersonalization (F=5.36; p<.001). These results partially confirm our hypothesis about the impact of different types of support, such as instrumental support, together with informative support, that buffer the negative consequences of some burnout components on well-being. The hypothesis in relation to the effect of social support on specific burnout dimensions was not confirmed either. According to our results, the role of

social support as a burnout buffer was not particularly strong for depersonalization, as suggested by previous studies. On the contrary, different types of support buffer the negative impact of the three burnout dimensions on teachers' well-being.

The mean values on subjective well-being for all the groups under study are shown in Table 4. Regarding social support, significant differences were found between the low and high support, and between the moderate and high support

Table 4. Mean differences in well-being for types and sources of support and burnout dimensions

	Mean	*S.D.*	*n*	*F*
Overall support				
Low	4.07	1.08	49	
Moderate	4.61	1.11	52	16.74***
High	5.32	1.07	53	
Support from co-workers				
Low	4.17	1.08	46	
Moderate	4.76	1.01	43	7.21***
High	5.00	1.28	65	
Support form superior				
Low	3.95	1.23	47	
Moderate	4.62	0.97	54	23.61***
High	5.40	0.96	53	
Emotional support				
Low	3.90	1.10	49	
Moderate	4.86	0.96	50	21.40***
High	5.23	1.12	55	
Informative support				
Low	4.07	1.03	49	
Moderate	4.59	1.16	53	17.94***
High	5.35	1.05	52	
Instrumental support				
Low	4.18	1.11	51	
Moderate	4.34	1.20	46	21.49***
High	5.41	0.89	57	
Burnout				
Low	5.55	0.80	51	
Moderate	4.55	1.17	51	33.24***
High	3.97	1.00	54	
Depersonalization				
Low	5.25	1.36	46	
Moderate	4.60	1.02	57	9.72***
High	4.26	1.01	53	
Exhaustion				
Low	5.44	0.89	50	
Moderate	4.57	1.13	49	22.13***
High	4.09	1.12	57	
Accomplishment				
Low	5.48	1.04	52	
Moderate	4.47	0.80	46	25.07***
High	4.11	1.19	58	

***p<.001

groups. As for burnout, the most significant differences were observed among the groups with low and moderate burnout.

Discussion and conclusions

The first conclusion of our study is the moderate levels of burnout experienced by the sample of teachers under study. As previous research suggests, higher levels of burnout are expected due to the particular characteristics of the work developed by this group of professionals: high emotional involvement, daily contact with students, strong interpersonal demands, etc. (López-Araújo, Osca, & Peiró, 2007; Moriana & Herruzo, 2004).

A second line of conclusions concerns the important relationships found between burnout and well-being, social support and well-being, and burnout and social support. Teachers with high levels of burnout show lower levels of well-being and scarce social support. On the contrary, teachers with important levels of social support experience higher levels of well-being.

The analysis of a direct effect model of social support evidences clear differences depending on the type of support, underlining the significant function of advice and information as the sole modality of social support with a direct impact on well-being. This may be explained by the nature and types of problems teachers usually encounter, and the notable usefulness of information and advice for solving daily problems within this context. The source of social support has no direct impact on teachers' well-being. However, in accordance with the third hypothesis under study, a direct and positive influence of overall social support on teachers' well-being is evidenced. These results are consistent with those obtained in previous investigations that have shown a strong relation between social support and subjective well-being (Cohen et al, 2000).

Once again, in regards to our third hypothesis under study, a direct influence of burnout on psychological well-being is confirmed, but only for a specific component of burnout: depersonalisation. This finding is inconsistent with the results obtained in previous research, where emotional exhaustion was the key dimension in the direct and negative effect of burnout on well-being (Maslach, 2001). This finding may be due to the particular characteristics of this group of professionals, where burnout is usually based on isolation, feelings of incompetence and inferiority, cynical attitudes, irritability and negative work orientation. All these characteristics are clearly associated with depersonalisation (Gil-Monte, Carretero, & Roldán, 2005). Finally, the direct effect model does not show a direct influence of overall burnout on teachers' subjective well-being.

As far as the interaction effect model is concerned, our results evidence that social support has a protective or buffer role, reducing the negative impact of burnout on teachers' well-being (Avison & Gotlib, 1994). However, it is important to emphasize that this buffer effect is only observed when the level of burnout is not very high. Social support is not effective for those teachers with high levels of burnout. In extreme conditions of burnout, help and support provided by co-workers and superiors at the workplace may be hardly perceptible. Furthermore, strategies of support mobilization and support seeking may not be useful when elevated levels of burnout have resulted in strong feelings of depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion (Payne, 2001). These findings stress the importance of developing and implementting preventive programmes oriented to promote and increase social support in situations of low or moderate levels of burnout, when support may be more effective.

Regarding sources of support, help provided by co-workers has a buffer effect on emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation in the sample of teachers under study. Contrary to our predictions (Russell et al., 1987), co-workers (and not superiors) are main sources of help and support in difficult situations at the workplace. In accordance with this, only social support provided by co-workers has a buffer effect in the population under study. Support from co-workers seems to be particularly important in negative working conditions, playing a crucial role as a coping strategy in the work context. In line with this, past research has revealed that co-workers are the first source of help in conflictive situations at the workplace (Pozo et al., 2005). Teachers may experience feelings of identification and understanding when exchanging opinions, information and advice. When they acknowledge that their problems are common to other colleagues, they strengthen their companionship, which enables them to acquire further resources to successfully cope with difficult situations present in the classroom (Moriana & Herruzo, 2004).

Concerning the type of support, both informative and instrumental seem to buffer the negative effects of burnout on teachers' subjective well-being. Emotional support has shown no significant effect as a modulator of the negative impact of burnout on teachers' well-being. Our fourth hypothesis is thus confirmed, as instrumental support was expected to buffer the negative consequences of burnout in the sample of teachers under study (Gerin et al., 1995). An unexpected result found was the buffer effect produced by informative support.

The latter results are also consistent with past research that has shown the importance of social support as a coping strategy, buffering the negative impact of specific burnout dimensions, particularly emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Posig & Kickul, 2003; Rusell et al., 1987), as it was predicted in our hypothesis. Surprisingly, our results indicate that informative support also has a buffer effect on personal accomplishment.

In sum, it can be concluded that the results obtained in the present investigation are consistent with the model suggested and, in general, with the hypothesis under study. Although overall burnout does not have a direct negative effect on well-being, social support does have a significant direct impact on teachers' well-being. Furthermore, social support also buffers the negative consequences of burnout on well-being, playing an important role as a coping strategy at the workplace. More specifically, according to our predictions, instrumental together with informative support are the types of support with stronger buffer effects on burnout. As far as source of support is concerned, our results are not consistent with previous studies where support from superiors was usually the main modulator of the negative effects of burnout on well-being (Russell et al, 1987). In our investigation, support from co-workers is a powerful burnout buffer. And finally, depersonalisation and emotional exhaustion are the burnout components where social support shows to have a more effective impact.

Due to the serious consequences of burnout at the personal, family, labour and social level, prevention is an essential prerequisite in order to reduce and debilitate the negative effect of this syndrome on health and well-being (Moriana & Herruzo, 2004). However, investigations focused on intervention in this field are often imprecise, ambiguous and rather contradictory (Kelchtermans & Strittmatter, 1999; Kyriacou, 2003; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999). Taking an applied perspective, the results obtained in our study point out the

importance of developing interventions focused on social support and coping strategies to deal with burnout, specifically designed for teaching professionals. These strategies should be focused on social support seeking and mobilization at different levels (family, friends and co-workers, support groups, listening and technical support), as key dimensions for the prevention and treatment of burnout (Kyriacou, 2003). Furthermore, primary prevention should be emphasized with individuals with low or moderate levels of burnout, taking into account that social support may not be effective for teachers with high burnout.

Taking the perspective of the support specificity theory (Cohen et al., 2000) and our own results, instrumental and informative support, particularly from co-workers, may be the most effective resources to deal with burnout at schools. In line with this, the findings of the present investigation highlights the need and pertinence of interventions oriented to prevent and reduce teachers' burnout at the workplace together with all its negative consequences. In sum, it is essential to prevent the psychosocial risks that teaching professionals must face, in order to promote a better health, well-being and quality of life at work, to reduce costs derived from work absenteeism, and to improve efficacy and teaching quality at schools (Jenaro-Río, Flores-Robaina, & González-Gil, 2007).

To conclude, some limitations of the present investigation should be underlined. Firstly, the cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow us to establish causal relationships among the variables under study. For this purpose, longitudinal investigations would be necessary. These would enable us to verify the direct effects of both burnout and social support on teachers' well-being over time. Secondly, our study was limited to primary school teachers. Other teaching professionals, different to the sample under study, should also be examined, such as university professors. Thirdly, there is the problem of teachers whose burnout levels are so high that social support does not serve as a coping strategy; this issue must be further investigated in order to determine which mechanisms could be used in this specific situation. Finally, in future investigations we will take into account teachers' gender within the sample in order to analyse the existing differences in social support or burnout, as some studies have shown.

In summary, both the theoretical and practical relevance of this topic stresses the need of carrying out further investigations in order to use the consequent findings as the basis for designing and implementing new, empirically based, interventions oriented to promote teaching professionals' health and well-being.

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