



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

### Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

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**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

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# **From Burnout towards Pedagogical Teacher Education. A communities perspective**

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## **Abstract**

From a psychodynamic perspective, the burnout construct can be understood as a response to chronic interpersonal stressors experienced at work, with consequent deterioration in psycho-physical well-being. Although burnout has mainly been studied in the psychological field, it has recently attracted increasing interest from the educational field.

This paper aims to explore the burnout construct from a community pedagogical perspective. Particular attention will be paid to the current prevalence of burnout syndrome, especially in the school context, with specific reference to the figure of the teacher. Furthermore, the focus is on pedagogical training courses aimed at rediscovering one's professional vocation, increasing emotional-relational competences and building educational alliances in order to reduce the risk of burnout at schools.

**Keywords:** burnout; school; teacher education; pedagogical perspective; communities pedagogics.

## 1. Work today: some data

Numerous emerging phenomena characterize late modernity. Over the past 30 years, Italian society has undergone significant transformations, particularly in terms of increased job insecurity, fragmentation, and flexibility in the labor market (Vinciguerra, 2022).

The general crisis of certainties has also affected the ways, places, and times of work.

The transition into the labor market already appears uncertain.

In fact, according to ISTAT data, in 2023, the employment rate in Italy grew significantly, becoming comparable to that of other European economies. Compared to 2019, employment has increased by 2.3%. However, Italy still maintains a high share of workers in vulnerable conditions. This vulnerability is primarily linked to the number of involuntary part-time workers, low wages, and short contract durations.

In 2023, the percentage of workers engaged in involuntary part-time jobs amounted to 17.6% of the population. Italy ranks last among European countries in terms of average wage levels.

According to the Indagine sul Reddito e le Condizioni di Vita (EU-SILC), in 2022, 8.5% of workers, equivalent to 11.5% of the population, lived in households at risk of poverty. These conditions are closely associated with education levels, which significantly influence individuals' economic stability. The data paints a picture of generalized uncertainty in which job and economic precariousness fuel emotional and relational instability. This situation fosters a new attitude toward the future, marked by a decline in hope, which manifests itself primarily in the difficulty of formulating a life project. Based on the observations presented so far, it is evident that the discrepancy between striving for the future and uncertainty about tomorrow perpetuates a dynamic of anxiety and distrust. This often translates into forms of stagnation and immobilization. Such processes determine the future as an unattainable utopia, with an increasing loss of hope replaced by resignation (Bauman, 2006, tr. it., 2009). This phenomenon also affects current work dynamics, contributing to the growing risk of burnout.

Amid this precariousness, young people face significant challenges in transitioning to adulthood. Traditionally, this developmental phase is characterized by achieving economic independence, leaving the family of origin, establishing a family of one's own, and formulating a personal life plan. However, in the national context, in addition to job insecurity, there is a significant percentage of young people classified as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) individuals seemingly unable to cultivate personal projects.

More broadly, this condition appears to have caused widespread disaffection toward work. In this regard, the 2024 Censis Report highlights a "downgrading of work's value, no longer the epicenter of lives and aspirations, but relegated to being just one of many activities that form the daily puzzle of individual lives" (Censis, 2024, p. 5).

Despite the increase in the employment rate in Italy, greater professional stability, and a rising female workforce presence, the relationship with work remains ambiguous and contradictory. This paradox, as the report indicates, stems from changing habits and lifestyles, which have created a tension toward pursuing subjective well-being. Within this framework, work, on the one hand, represents an expression of individual potential and a rewarding, meaningful experience. On the other hand, it is perceived as an obstacle to achieving personal well-being, seen as overwhelming and insufficiently fulfilling.

## 2. The contemporary proliferation of Burnout Syndrome

The current contradiction in the perception of work as both a value and a disvalue for individuals is mainly attributable to the profound social, cultural, and economic changes that have reshaped individual and organizational perceptions of work (Maslach, Leiter, 1997, tr. it. 2000). Today, many workplaces prioritize short-term economic and financial profits over investing in the growth of their resources and the long-term improvement of work environments. Instead of focusing on excellence in products and fostering a sense of community, there is a preference for investing in cash flow (Rossi, 2008).

Some of the driving forces behind these changes in the world of work include the globalization of the economy, technological advancement, shifts in power distribution within workplaces, and the decline in the sense of belonging (McMillan, Chavis, 1986). The acceleration of globalization since the 1980s has led to the decentralization of industrial production away from local communities. Expanded communication and transportation systems, the removal of trade barriers, and the pressure exerted by multinational corporations have been key factors in a complex process that has redefined the concept of work.

Globalization drives increasingly competitive production methods, creating additional pressures on workers. To keep up with the relentless pace demanded, workers often extend their working hours and take on more tasks, which are frequently ungratifying.

The challenges associated with the decentralization of work and the conditions of workers inevitably contribute to the erosion of the sense of belonging. This disconnection fosters disengagement and a loss of trust in the organization a process further exacerbated by technological advancements. The increased use of sophisticated machines and software reduces interpersonal interactions and the human resources employed in organizational contexts. Many tasks are now performed with the aid of technology, to the detriment of human labor, which is often deemed less efficient and more costly.

This reliance on technology frequently coincides with inadequate training for employees on using new tools, slowing down task execution due to the misalignment of human and technological timelines. Another significant factor contributing to the transformation of workplace dynamics is the redistribution of power. Human resource management has become increasingly rigid, focusing exclusively on economic productivity. Systems have grown more self-centered and hierarchical, leading to a decline in professionals' autonomy (Leiter, Maslach, 1999). This is compounded by the diminishing power of labor unions, which struggle to adequately address workers' needs and rights under the growing pressures from companies and their managers.

Against this backdrop of significant changes in the world of work, there has been a proliferation of burnout syndrome (Maslach, Leiter, 2006), primarily caused by a disconnect between economic and productive values on one side and human values on the other. The rapid adaptation required to these changes, often without adequate training, negatively impacts the individual well-being of human resources and the overall health of the workplace.

This issue is particularly relevant in today's education system, which is increasingly focused on pursuing success (in terms of education) and measurable outcomes (in learning achievements), while paying insufficient attention to the holistic flourishing of individuals (Nussbaum, 2010, tr. it. 2011) and the processes involving adult educators.

### **3. Burnout at school: a pedagogical interest**

As is well known, burnout is a psychodynamic construct that can be understood as a response to chronic interpersonal stressors experienced in the workplace. It goes beyond the concept of stress, a term widely used even in common language. While stress involves a resistance and adaptation response to a challenging situation in an attempt to regain equilibrium, the experience of burnout entails a state of exhaustion caused by prolonged exposure to the stressor, where the individual's energy investment proves insufficient to cope with the intensity of the stimulus (Selye, 1976). Unlike stress, which is temporary, burnout is characterized by a prolonged, chronic condition of vulnerability resulting from the inability to adapt to external demands, sometimes leading to the onset of psychopathologies.

What decisively differentiates these two experiences is the interpersonal dimension present in burnout. Burnout specifically affects help professions, those occupations centered around human relationships with others.

For this reason, although this construct has been extensively studied in psychological literature, it has recently attracted growing interest from pedagogical perspectives. This interest is supported by a gradual departure from the tendency to pathologize human behavior and the emergence of a new, more holistic and community-oriented approach to social phenomena.

In this framework, risk conditions, specifically referring to burnout in educational professions, are no longer attributed to subjective variables but rather to the complex interplay of environmental and relational factors.

In educational accompaniment and caregiving work, relationships—both as a determinant of and determined by educational practice—are essential, providing the ground for nurturing new and unprecedented existential possibilities. However, these relationships also pose potential risks. According to Figley (2002), in caregiving relationships, educators experience tension from the other's experiences and emotional overload, leading to a loss of personal and professional equilibrium and the depletion of cognitive, emotional, and physical energy.

Sandrin (2004) identifies four phases in the onset of burnout in caregiving professions: unrealistic enthusiasm, a state resembling infatuation, characterized by strong idealization of work, significant group belonging, and mechanisms of identification with the client; stagnation, arises when signs of fatigue begin to appear due to a process of disillusionment; frustration, marked by the emergence of feelings of helplessness and guilt; disengagement, the final phase, involving a gradual emotional and professional detachment and a loss of work affection, accompanied by feelings of suffering, cynicism, and indifference.

At the root of these phases lies the centrality of the emotional dimension, particularly the concepts of emotional dissonance and emotional involvement.

These considerations become even more significant when focusing on the work of teachers, those professionals of educational care whose roles unfold within the dimensions of teaching and educational accompaniment. Teaching, and the school system more broadly, have undergone profound transformations in response to the significant social and cultural changes of the past century.

Today, teachers face numerous demands, not only related to the teaching-learning process but also increasingly centered on the educational relationship. A teacher's work is characterized by a multitude of relationships and interactions within their environment. In this context, Brown and Ralph (1998, cited in Botticelli et al., 2012) highlight that teachers' primary psychosocial risks stem from their relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and the broader community.

According to the authors, the risk of teacher burnout is closely linked to the multiplicity of relationships at various levels within the school context and organizational factors that do not always promote individual and community well-being.

#### **4. Towards communities pedagogical teacher education**

The social and cultural changes that have impacted and continue to influence the school system, the evident struggles of educational institutions, and the increasing difficulties faced by adults have fueled the national and international pedagogical debate about the need for adequate training to define a new profile of teacher identity (Tempesta, 2018). Although studies in Teacher Education have identified the factors contributing to this professional identity, there remains a significant challenge in applying these principles to training processes.

Training programs for teachers in the Italian school system remain anchored to inductive and applicative models, neglecting the cyclical framework of intentionality in teaching, which is founded on pragmatic, epistemic-methodological, and educational-relational dimensions. Schools and therefore teacher training remain focused on students' learning outcomes while neglecting the teacher, who is often seen solely as the "holder-reproducer of disciplinary knowledge" (*ivi*, p. 57).

Institutionalized forms of initial teacher preparation, in-service training, and systemic actions in continuous professional development remain disorganized and contradictory. They primarily aim to improve student learning outcomes, inadvertently increasing teachers' stress and job dissatisfaction while acronyms that dominate ministerial initiatives proliferate.

Even today, training initiatives appear not only fragmented but also primarily focused on the individual dimension of teacher burnout. Burnout is treated as a personal problem, and the primary goal of educational and training initiatives is the enhancement of knowledge and skills, with little attention paid to processes and environmental or relational variables.

More than ever before, the focus on the community dimension in understanding social phenomena calls for designing teacher training programs that center the relationship between individuals and their context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, tr. it. 1986).

Teacher training programs should pursue three main objectives, each tied to a distinct dimension:

- individual dimension: this involves guiding teachers toward rediscovering their professional vocation and ethos. The aim is to foster a professional life that highlights the most intrinsic characteristics of the individual (Stein, 1959, tr. it. 2012) and that directs their personal and professional choices and practices;
- interpersonal dimension: this focuses on the relational dynamics within the school environment. Training initiatives should enhance emotional-relational competencies (Simeone, 2017) not only for teachers but for all members of the school community. Given the central role of emotional and relational dimensions in burnout, there is a need to establish authentic relationships based on empathy and mutual recognition (Bellingreri, 2017). Training programs should include tools for assessment, enabling the evaluation of abilities to perceive, understand, use, and manage emotions at both individual and relational levels. Additionally, they should offer training activities aimed at learning and strengthening emotional skills (D'Addelfio, 2022);
- community dimension: this reflects a fundamental principle of schools: being a community of people and practices. Social education becomes central as an indispensable endeavor without which the ultimate goal of human flourishing cannot be achieved (Stein, 1926-1933, tr. it. 2017). This principle can be operationalized through initiatives that foster virtuous alliances among schools, families, and the broader community (Pati, 2019).

The concept of shared responsibility refers to “the personal, group, and institutional capacity to autonomously and creatively engage in various formal and informal experiences, contributing to the ideation and implementation of new development and action models” (Pati, 2011, p. 25 ff.). This can be achieved through pedagogical actions aimed at community development, which base educational practices on the involvement of all stakeholders in the school community and the creation or maintenance of a shared vision and collective sentiment.

The pedagogical training of teachers requires not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also a methodological orientation that guides professional practice. The primary objective is to train adult educators to be reflective professionals capable of acting through a problematic and complex approach to reality (Schön, 1993). Pedagogical training therefore takes the form of a continuous reflection on practice, so that the acquired competences can be put into practice under different conditions. This is possible through the interweaving of learning and experience in training courses. The pedagogical training of teachers is based on a community approach, understood as a methodological direction for education. This means that pedagogical training is based on the interdependence between the person and the context, making use of the relationships that develop in the school context. In fact, from a pedagogical point of view, it does not seem sufficient for teacher education to work exclusively on the professional with an individualistic approach. To be truly pedagogical, it requires the involvement of the whole school community and the development of relational, social and emotional skills. The basic assumption is that the community, as a constitutive part of the human structure, represents both a direction of meaning and a method for education (Stein, 1922, tr. it. 1996).

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