

CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE: PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING AND BURNOUT AMONG EDUCATORS IN THE LEPS PROGRAMME IN ITALY

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that care work and educational support, which unfold within complex emotional landscapes, are among the professions at risk of burnout. This vulnerability is closely linked to the centrality of interpersonal relationships in educational practice, particularly in contexts characterised by high relational intensity. The contribution focuses on the experience of LEPS, namely the minimum levels of social services and provisions that public administrations are required to provide nationwide. In particular, the focus is on LEPS PIPPI Programme aims to guarantee every child the right to harmonious development within stable, safe, and supportive family environments through educational support for parents. Engaging with, observing and managing situations involving vulnerability, suffering and material and non-material poverty exposes care professionals to significant emotional, cognitive, psychological, behavioural and identity-related risks. Based on this premise, this paper presents the results of a questionnaire given to educators and social workers involved in implementing the LEPS PIPPI programme. The aim is to investigate the emotional and relational impact of educational work within an intervention model that focuses on relationships with families, home-based work, co-constructing educational support pathways and integrated work within multidisciplinary teams. The study specifically explores perceptions of emotional workload, professional satisfaction, stress, and protective factors, as well as formal and informal support networks. The questionnaire consists of both closed and open questions and seeks, on the one hand, to capture practitioners' perceptions of care work within the LEPS PIPPI framework and, on the other, to encourage reflection on ways to strengthen organisational and training provisions focused on the well-being of care workers. Indeed, caring for those who care represents an essential component of educational welfare policies and practices. This is to prevent the risks inherent in the educational profession and enhance the effectiveness of interventions for families and children in vulnerable contexts, in line with a community empowerment and educational sustainability perspective.

Keywords: *Educational care, burnout, professional wellbeing, community pedagogy, prevention.*

1. Introduction

The concept of burnout has been extensively studied within both national and international scientific communities, particularly in the field of psychology (Maslach, 1982; Figley, 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2006). In recent years, however, increasing attention has been devoted to its application within the field of education (Coppola, 2025).

It is well established that professions involving care and educational support, which unfold within complex and multifaceted emotional contexts, are particularly exposed to burnout. This vulnerability is closely linked to the centrality of interpersonal relationships in educational practice. Educators, in particular, engage daily with human conditions marked by fragility, suffering, and poverty, which expose them to significant emotional, cognitive, psychological, and behavioural risks (Bobbo & Ius, 2021).

One context in which the risk of burnout appears widespread yet still underexplored is that of public welfare services, which include educational and support interventions for children and families in vulnerable situations. In Italy, the welfare system has been structured around the LEPS (Essential Levels of Provision) since 2001, through which the State guarantees minimum levels of services and civil and social rights to all citizens through specific interventions, services, and programmes.

Building on this framework, an exploratory study was conducted to investigate stress levels among educators involved in the implementation of the LEPS PIPPI (Programme for the Prevention of Institutionalisation). The programme aims to guarantee every child the right to harmonious development

within family environments characterised by stability, safety, and adequate emotional support, through targeted parenting support interventions (Milani, 2017).

2. Design, objectives, methods and tools

The exploratory study was conducted using a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (Bellingreri, 2017), which allows researchers to access and interpret participants' lived experiences, providing a "first-person perspective" on the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, applying a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach to field research enables us to move beyond an evidence-based approach (Biesta, 2017). This reduces the risk of over-generalisation and oversimplification.

The study aimed to:

- investigate the emotional and relational impact of educational work within an intervention model focused on relationships with families, home-based care, the co-construction of educational pathways, and integrated multidisciplinary teamwork;
- capture perceptions of stress and burnout among professionals involved in the LEPS PIPPI programme.

The study was carried out in February and March 2026 and involved ten participants (seven women and three men) aged between 27 and 45. All participants were members of a psycho-pedagogical team involved in a pilot programme that had been running for 14 months at the time of the study.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Participants completed the Italian adaptation of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Sirigatti & Stefanile, 1993), consisting of 22 items measuring three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "every day".

To complement the quantitative data and deepen understanding of the phenomenon, an open-ended questionnaire with five prompts was administered. The narrative material was analysed by identifying meaning units and subsequently grouping them into thematic labels (Sità, 2012), that is broader categories useful for highlighting core interpretative patterns in participants' representations (Mortari, Ghirrotto, 2019).

3. Discussion

The data clearly indicates that professionals experience significant physical strain in their work. The fact that 60% report feeling physically exhausted at the end of the day and 40% feel tired upon waking suggests a considerable workload. However, this fatigue does not appear to translate into psychological collapse: only 50% report ever feeling unable to cope.

Fatigue thus seems to represent more a physiological consequence of demanding fieldwork than a symptom of chronic burnout. Professionals perceive the strain of their work but appear to possess adequate resources to manage it.

One of the most significant findings concerns the high level of perceived professional efficacy and value. Eighty per cent of participants report dealing effectively with service-related challenges, and 70% believe they have a positive impact on people's lives.

Depersonalisation—typically a key component of burnout—is notably low. Ninety per cent strongly reject the idea of treating service users as objects, and 80% do not fear becoming emotionally desensitised. This suggests a strong capacity to maintain an empathic stance without emotional detachment.

Additionally, the ability to understand both families' and colleagues' perspectives (reported by 80% of participants) indicates strong relational and teamwork skills. Despite the demanding nature of the work, a noteworthy degree of emotional self-regulation emerges, with 50% reporting that they manage problems calmly.

A strong sense of organisational belonging is also evident: 90% express deep concern for the organisation's well-being and report low levels of perceived blame.

Qualitative analysis outlines a professional profile characterised by a dynamic balance between resilience and vulnerability. Key themes include:

- operational stress and the complexity of educational work;
- professional recognition and satisfaction;
- vulnerability and protective factors;
- the role of support networks.

Burnout risk is perceived as moderate and situational rather than constant, emerging primarily in response to complex cases or excessive workloads. Contributing factors include emotional involvement, organisational pressures, and occasional feelings of professional isolation.

Protective factors include multidisciplinary teamwork, supervision, peer support, and meaningful relationships outside of work, all of which mitigate isolation and enhance resilience.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that professionals involved in the PIPPI programme are not currently experiencing high levels of burnout, despite operating within a demanding and emotionally intense work environment.

While physical fatigue emerges as a consistent element, it does not appear to evolve into chronic psychological distress. Instead, it is counterbalanced by strong protective factors, including high levels of professional fulfilment, a clear sense of purpose, and the ability to maintain meaningful and empathic relationships with families.

These elements highlight a crucial aspect: burnout should not be interpreted solely as an individual condition but as a phenomenon deeply embedded within organisational, relational, and cultural contexts. The PIPPI model, with its emphasis on co-construction, teamwork, and relational proximity, appears to foster a professional environment that supports resilience and mitigates the risk of depersonalisation.

At the same time, the presence of physical exhaustion and situational stress signals the need for continuous attention to practitioners' well-being. Preventive strategies should not be considered optional but rather integral to the design of educational and welfare services. In particular, structured supervision, ongoing professional development, and organisational practices that promote recognition and participation are essential.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of investing in collective and community-based approaches to professional well-being. Supporting educators means strengthening not only individual coping strategies but also the relational and organisational ecosystems in which they operate.

From a policy perspective, "caring for those who care" should be recognised as a strategic priority within welfare systems. Enhancing the well-being of professionals directly contributes to the quality and sustainability of interventions aimed at children and families in vulnerable contexts.

Finally, given the exploratory nature of this study and the limited sample size, further research is needed to deepen understanding of burnout dynamics within the PIPPI framework. Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs, involve larger samples, and explore the impact of specific organisational practices on professional well-being.

In conclusion, the results point to a promising balance between challenge and resource: a demanding professional context in which, however, meaning, competence, and relational depth act as powerful buffers against burnout. Maintaining and strengthening this balance represents a key challenge for both research and practice in the field of educational care.

From this perspective, prevention plays a central and decisive role. On the one hand, it prevents stress and burnout among care workers. On the other hand, it supports the quality of educational provision by strengthening professional and interpersonal skills. To this end, training programmes that foster an "ecological culture of care" (Mortari, 2006) are needed. These programmes should support education professionals through meaningful relationships, spaces for reflection, and institutional support mechanisms.

Thus, prevention is not merely a protective measure, but a genuine cultural investment in the quality of education.

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