Burnout Syndrome in Educators

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Abstract

Introduction: The intent of this paper is to communicate results of a study on the incidence of Burnout Syndrome in teachers of early childhood and primary education. An experience of constant unease is reflected in stress levels, dissatisfaction and the lack of strategies to adequately cope with problems that occur in the school context. The purpose of this research is to discover the perceptions of teachers.

Method: The methodology used was cross-sectional, with information collected through a survey. The response was 91 questionnaires reporting teacher perceptions.

Results: We found a high percentage of teachers that could come to suffer from Burnout. Results confirm that we face a growing problem.

Discussion or **Conclusion**: Some professional workers must necessarily be involved in the problems and concerns of the people they are working with, during many hours of the day. This is the case of teachers, whose professional activity centers on children and teenagers and particularly on their problems, difficulties and troubles. Present-day social and educational transformation brings about the need to reflect on how the body of educators is trained.

Keywords: Teachers, education, stress, *Burnout.*

Resumen

Introducción: Con este artículo se pretende difundir el contenido de un estudio sobre la incidencia del síndrome de *Burnout,* en los docentes de educación infantil y primaria. El constante malestar que se experimenta queda reflejado en los niveles de estrés, insatisfacción y ausencia de estrategias para poder abordar de forma adecuada los problemas que acontecen en el contexto escolar. El propósito de este trabajo es conocer las percepciones de los docentes.

Método. La metodología utilizada fue transversal o de corte y la recogida de la información se efectuó a través de una encuesta. La respuesta fue de 91 cuestionarios con las percepciones de los docentes.

Resultados: Hemos comprobado la existencia de un porcentaje elevado de maestros que podrían padecer *Burnout*. Los resultados confirman que estamos ante un importante problema que crece.

Discusión o **Conclusión**: Algunos profesionales se ven forzados a implicarse durante muchas horas en los problemas y preocupaciones de las personas con las que realizan su actividad laboral. Este es el caso de los maestros y docentes en general, cuya relación profesional se centra en el niño o el adolescente y, concretamente, en sus problemas, dificultades e inquietudes. Las transformaciones sociales y del propio sistema educativo, hacen necesaria una reflexión en torno a la formación del colectivo docente.

Palabras Clave: maestro, educación, estrés, quemado.

Introduction

The bibliography on sources of stress and burnout in teachers grows day by day. Analysis of educational practice and the issue of stress-causing factors is a broad field for researchers, but there are few studies that address this concern at the level of early childhood and primary education (Arís, 2008).

The ongoing practice of teaching produces an accumulation of feelings, as well as personal "wear and tear", that can lead to chronic stress and emotional fatigue, and eventually what we refer to as Burnout Syndrome. All this occurs in a well-defined setting[1]--the school, with its peculiaries and complexities, that can create ambiguous feelings and contradictory and/or frustrating responses (Abraham, 1984). The teaching role today has changed, profound changes are seen in the social context, and specifically in interpersonal relations formed within the educational sphere.

Teachers today find themselves in a complex, delicate situation. A brief glance at the media (television, press, etc.) is enough to observe how they are blamed for a variety of problems. These include issues within the school context, having to do with teacher-student relations (school conflict, lack of curriculum mastery among the students, etc.), as well as issues of a social nature (violence, belittling, adictions, bad habits, and so on). All of this can lead teachers to feel overwhelmed and perplexed, with strong contradictions between their rights and duties (Esteve, 2003). Despite the fact that, in a few short years, a new teacher, full of hopes can become frustrated and perplexed about the role he or she should take on, in this study we do not wish to take a strictly problematic view of education, but focus on perceived aspects to be overcome. The assumption is that knowing what these aspects are and using effective coping strategies is the best means for prevention.

As we look at the origins of this problem, we must explain something of the history of the Burnout Syndrome, a term that has emerged over the last few decades. The syndrome was described in 1974 by New York psychologist Herbert Freundenberger, who worked with groups of volunteers who manifest a set of well-differentiated physical and psychological

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[1] Considering the interrelationship between the different developmental spheres from an ecological perspective. Bronfenbrenner, V. (1979): *The Ecology of Human Development.* Harvard University Press.

symptoms: a perceived state of exhaustion, as a consequence of working intensely, without taking into account their own personal needs, and becoming "burned out". This refers to a strictly individual psychological perspective, understood as a response to an inadequate interaction found in professional workers who are overly zealous about their work and the needs and demands of their clients.

Social psychologist Cristina Maslach followed up with research at the beginning of the 80s (Maslach, 1982), where she studied the emotional responses of employees in the helping professions, and used the same term "Burnout". This author defined the concept as an emotional fatigue syndrome that leads to loss of motivation and progresses toward feelings of inadequacy and failure (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). She considers that it is the product of personal stress related to a specific work situation and characteristic of the helping professions (teachers, educators, nurses, etc.). The big contribution from this new approach was addressing the problem of Burnout from a psychosocial perspective (Calvete & Vila, 2000).

The teacher who manifests Burnout syndrome is often unpredictable in behavior and contradictory actions are almost always the norm. At the same time that they feel an overriding need to blame someone for what is happening, they also need to get their mind off everything related to work – to teaching – to the greatest extent possible.

The manner or style that each person adopts in order to cope with these typical characteristics and symptoms will be crucial in whether or not they develop the syndrome, in whether effective, satisfactory performance ensues or whether it deteriorates, produces dissatisfaction, and finally Burnout. The process that involves burnout is variable and differs from one individual to another, both in its inception and in the way it develops, but we can examine the causes that are found at its origin (Manasero & coll., 1995 and 1997). As we confirmed earlier, Burnout is not something that appears suddenly as a specific response to a specific trigger, but it is a state that emerges gradually in a process of response to the daily work experience and to certain events. It is a deterioration in the health of professionals and in their interpersonal relationships, both within and outside of the work sphere, but which also has negative repercussions on the quality of teaching (Travers & Cooper, 1997).

In order to flesh out the profile of the affected teacher's behavior, we can classify symptoms of Burnout in four broad areas:

- Psychosomatic symptoms. These are usually the first symptoms to appear. Some examples are headaches, muscle pain, gastrointestinal complaints, insomnia, and so on.

- Behavioral symptoms. Described as a series of anomalous behaviors: work absenteeism, relationship problems, etc.

- Emotional symptoms. The most typical of these is affective distancing from the persons that he or she serves. The subject may become irritable and impatient, acting reluctant to relate with children, work mates, etc. Additionally, anxiety appears, bringing with it decreased concentration and job performance.

- Defensive symptoms. Used by subjects in order to to accept their own feelings. The professional denies emotions described above that may be disagreeable to him or her. These are displaced toward other situations or areas that are unrelated to the working situation. Cynical attitudes may also develop toward the client (in this case pupils), blaming them implicitly for being the cause of the teacher's troubles.

All of the above provides our motivation to carry out a research study, where we wish to find out the real incidence of this problem, how intensely it manifests. We seek to find answers to the following questions: to what extent does a certain group of teachers experience unease and Burnout?, what impression does this group of teachers have about the in-service training they receive?

We need to know the state of the matter at a given moment and at the same time detect possible relationships with dimensions of teacher training. It is our conviction that there is an evident relationship between both dimensions and taking this into consideration could be a key element in preventing the Burnout syndrome.

Method

Participants

Since it is too costly to carry out a study of the entire population of teachers who work in early childhood or primary education, a representative group was selected from schools in

the area of Vallés Occidental (Barcelona), establishing a random, stratified teacher sample, so as to avoid selection biases.

This area was chosen for reasons of proximity, but also of interest, due to its specific configuration (historical evolution, significant industrial presence, strong demographic growth, etc.), with varied, present-day educational and social contexts, offering rich experiential information and presenting characteristics that may trigger stress and Burnout.

We applied simple, stratified random sampling techniques, in order to guarantee, within an acceptable margin of error, that the sample obtained is truly representative of the population being studied and its characteristics.

Instruments

We designed a cross-sectional study using surveys, this being an appropriate procedure to describe and analyze information obtained on a single occasion, and we used two instruments to collect information.

The first instrument is widely used and highly recognized in the sphere of education and psychology, the *Maslach Burnout Inventory*, allowing us to determine the degree of stress and Burnout, collecting specific information about the teachers' perceived level of Burnout in their daily activity. Referred to as the MBI, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; official translation to Spanish by Seisdedos, 1997)[2], contains twenty-two items divided among three scales, each of which is associated with one of the three dimensions that these authors establish for defining the Burnout syndrome*:*

- Emotional Fatigue, (EF), containing nine items that assess experiences of emotional exhaustion due to work demands.
- Depersonalization, (DP), containing five items, measuring the degree of coldness and relational distancing.
- Personal Fulfillment, (PF), with eight items, evaluates feelings of effectiveness, competence and fulfillment of personal objectives.

In order to complete the information needed for our study, we had to construct a specific questionnaire that would also collect teachers' opinions and perceptions about professional training and effectiveness. Toward this end we developed our own questionnaire, comprising a series of short questions or items, to which each subject must respond in terms of their level of agreement or disagreement. The questionnaire contained fifteen items referring to the three dimensions of principal interest for the purposes of this study:

- the *personal relationships* that define relations within the social and specifically work-related contexts.
- *training* as an element that can shape and give meaning to professional work.
- *personal effectiveness* as the possibility for competence in how teaching and the school itself are managed.

Both instruments are presented in a Likert-type response format, and collect the frequencies of the situation described in each item during the last school year (all items can be found in Appendix 1).

Procedure

The research design rests on an empirical-analytical framework, where we use the survey modality to collect information within a descriptive model of research, to be followed in turn by statistical analysis of the dimensions being considered in the study. This research is not intended for generalization to any context, but aims to be useful in similar situations, wherefore we pose the following objectives:

- Determine the characteristics of teachers that make up the study sample.
- Make an estimate of the proportion of individuals in the study stample who, according to the MBI phases, presently manifest the state of Burnout syndrome, and also estimate the syndrome's intensity.
- Determine how these teachers perceive their own training, effectiveness and personal relationships.

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[2] SEISDEDOS, N. (1997): *Inventario Burnout de Maslach: síndrome del quemado por Estrés Laboral Asistencial.* Madrid: TEA Publishers.

The information obtained allows us to describe the incidence, frequency and distribution of the dimensions being studied, as well as to observe possible relationships among these. As for the response rate, 150 questionnaires were distributed and 91 questionnaires were completed and returned, representing a rate of 60.67%, although two cases were excluded due to errors in completion. Finally we obtained a real sample of eighty-nine subjects, a figure that can be considered more than acceptable.

Data treatment was carried out at two complementary levels. First, the socio-demographic profile was established, and afterward the data from the MBI questionnaire and the self-produced questionnaire were considered.

The entire statistical process was performed using SPSS. Finally, after reaching the end of this whole process, we were ready to initiate the next phase: the study and interpretation of results.

Results

Results are presented in two parts. The first block presents information on the socio-demographic profile, allowing us to establish the traits of the study sample (age, sex and years of experience). The second block focuses on results from the two instruments (the MBI and the custom-made questionnaire), and finally on establishing possible relationships between the two.

We begin descriptive analysis with the age variable:

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Age	89	22.00	59.00	40.34	8.39
valid N (acc'd to list)	89				

The mean age of teachers in the sample is 40.34 years, with a range of 22 to 59 years. The biggest age group, with 13.48% of the total, is *40 to 44 years of age,* followed by the group *between 38 and 40 years of age*. Thus, the block diagram reveals that 46.06% of the

teachers are between the ages of 38 and 46 years. Next we will consider the ages of men and women separately.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: male gender by age

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Age	14	30.00	57.00	43.14	8.97
valid N (acc'd to list)	14				

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: female gender by age

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Age	75	22.00	59.00	39.81	8.24
valid N (acc'd to list)	75				

Regarding age means according to gender, we note that although the two are similar, women occupy a wider range, from 22 to 59. In men we note that the minimum age is much higher, confirming the idea of "progressive feminization of the teaching function". We are looking at a largely young body of teachers, from the career point of view, which will remain on the job for many more years (approximately 20 to 30), and which must cope with multiple situations that may produce stress. Similarly, they will need effective, developmental in-service training and training for growth in personal self-efficacy.

As for composition by gender, our sample is made up of 75 women and 14 men, representing percentages of 84.3% and 15.7%, respectively. This concurs with data provided by the Department of Education of the Regional Government of Catalonia.

Table 3. Sample distribution by gender

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	male	14	15,73
	female	75	84,27
	Total	89	100.00

There is clear confirmation of the historical trend in this sector of a strongly female teaching function. This may be explained by deeply rooted cultural trends in our society, where the care and education of children, particularly at the stages of early childhood and primary education, is attributed to the female population.

Next we will consider the number of years that teachers have been practicing their profession (seniority), where we observe that the mean value for our sample falls at 16.44 years. Most subjects fall between 10 and 25 years of professional practice.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics (seniority)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
No. of years in practice	89	1	34	16.44	9.35
valid N (acc'd to list)	89				

The data allow us to speak of a rather experienced group, meaning that for the most part, their perceptions and feelings have been developing over time. This also assures us that the responses given are not the product of insecurity typically found in the early stages of a teaching career.

The second block of our study was to determine descriptive parameters (*minimum value, maximum value, mean, standard deviation*) of each of the three subdimensions[3] of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory.*

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the dimensions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
Emotional fatigue	89	.00	46.00	20.66	9.15
Depersonalization	88	.00	20.00	3.85	4.07
Personal fulfillment	87	20.00	48.00	38.13	7.27
valid N (acc'd to list)	86				

Descriptive statistics show that for the *Emotional Fatigue* and *Personal Fulfillment* subdimensions, scores fall in the middle zone, and that for *Depersonalization,* in the lower zone. As for standard deviation, if we take into account the minimum and maximum scores for each of the three MBI subdimensions, we observe that emotional fatigue has a higher variance, individual scores are more variable, that is, we have a less uniform group, with greater response variation. While it is true that the subdimensions of *depersonalization* and low *personal fulfillment* did not show a high incidence, we did detect evidence that points to their incipient presence in the reality of the participating teachers. While scores falling currently around the middle range are not important, they may indicate that our sample of teachers is

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[3] Recall that the MBI contains 22 items of which 9 belong to the **Emotional Fatigue** subdimension, 5 to **Depersonalization** and 8 to **Personal Fulfillment**. This uneven distribution among the subdimensions implies differ-

not free from problems and tensions. At the present time their job-related health is only moderately affected, but these tensions are a clear indicator[4] of a possible progression toward feelings of stress and to Burnout syndrome. We perceive that reiterated effort points to continued development in this direction, since the mean age of these teachers indicates that they must continue in professional practice for many years.

As for the dimensions of the second instrument, the custom-made questionnaire, some of the data from the *in-service training* dimension is noteworthy. Especially in response to the statement "In-service training is sufficient in terms of teaching skills", the majority tends to consider that the more applied aspects and teaching-related skills are not totally satisfactory, even if in general there is adequate offering and accessibility to in-service training.

Table 6. Assessment of the sufficiency of in-service training for teaching skills

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Totally disagree	7	7.87
	Mostly disagree	33	37.08
	Mostly agree	46	51.69
	Agree strongly	3	3.37
	Total	89	100.00

It is interesting to realize that the tendencies toward agreement or disagreement are not particularly differentiated. That is, if we sum the percentages for *totally disagree* 7.9%, and *mostly disagree* 37.1%, we obtain 45% that do not agree with the statement, as compared to 51.7% who claim to at least *mostly agree*.

This suggests to us that certain problems in the plans for in-service teacher training, whether in terms of organization or content, have kept them from meeting teachers' expectations. All this, once again, leads us to think that the system of in-service training must be improved or the training plans reformulated from their current state.

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ent scales of measurement; thus, the minimum and maximum scores for each are: 0 to 54 **EF**, 0 to 30 for **DP**, and 0 to 48 for **PF**.

[4] Chermiss, C. (1992): *Long-term consequences of Burnout: an exploratory study.* In Massanero, M. & colls. (1994). *Burnout en los profesores: impacto sobre la calidad en la educación, la salud y consecuencias para el desarrollo profesional.* Final research report. Madrid: MEC-CIDE.

Finally, other data collected from the custom questionnaire indicate certain less pronounced findings but still worthy of mention: a positive perception of personal competency, as well as a strong component of vocational calling.

Conclusions

Results from our research indicate moderate levels in a *Burnout* profile for the sample of teachers analyzed. At the same time, some aspects are detected that may be considered warning signs, since there were a high percentage of teachers that we could consider susceptible to suffering from *Burnout*. We find that this sample of educators is not free from problem issues and tensions. Presently their job-related health is affected only moderately, but there is clear indication of a possible progression toward feelings of stress and to Burnout syndrome.

Among noteworthy aspects of the MBI, we found that for the subdimensions of *depersonalization* and low *personal fulfillment,* while a high incidence is not present, there are indications pointing to their incipient presence in the experience of teachers in this sample. Results obtained on the *emotional fatigue* subdimension were more pronounced, being highly significant and conveying an obvious feeling of physical and emotional fatigue. Our perception is that reiterative effort may lead to further evolution of these subdimensions, since the mean age of these teachers indicates that they will continue practicing as teachers for many more years.

As for the three subdimensions that form the first part of the custom questionnaire (*in-service training, personal relationships* and *professional self-efficacy),* we wish to highlight that the profile gathered indicates a young sample in terms of their careers, but with more than a few years experience, having had the opportunity to acquire broad professional experience through the accumulated practice of teaching. The majority tends to agree that, while there is an appropriate offering of *in-service training* and appropriate accessibility, the more applied aspects and coverage of teaching skills are less than satisfactory.

With all due restraint, in the light of results obtained, we wish to indicate that the teachers themselves, along with the institutions and the administration, should be aware of the

importance of teacher health for quality education. We would recommend a preventive focus directed toward the need to develop a new culture of training and shared management, in the framework of the schools themselves, with greater contextualization and the search for specific responses to specific realities at each school, in its neighborhood, in its urban district, with its own real, precise environment. From this conception of school, there is a special sensitivity to the environmental reality, since collaboration leads to processes of participation and the welcoming of new ideas, both on the students' part as well as in the rest of the educational community.

We wish to conclude by emphasizing the need to encourage training in broad general knowledge, placing the emphasis *on* and *from* the practice of teaching and *for* the practice of teaching, promoting the development of basic competencies of a social or emotional nature and having to do with self-directed learning.

Cooperation and collaboration come to express a global, holistic culture, as compared to individualism, competitiveness and endemic professionalism. We refer to learning at the corporate or group level, based on emotional education and self-knowledge. This way, educators will be able to develop effective professional competence based on the contexts that shape their teaching practice, going further than the classroom. An interactive, contextualized approach, in our view, would represent the core principles of teacher training in order to meet the demands of the information and knowledge society, with its constant, whirlwind change. All this from the perspective of constructive criticism, plurality of options and respect, and a creative spirit in facing future challenges of a society that "claims to be and should be" better and more just.

By way of final reflection, we underscore that a model of training for life satisfaction involves a series of dimensions and aspects that offer us a way of working that in itself is a factor in prevention of Burnout, in increasing the work-related and personal satisfaction of education professionals, as well as their physical and mental health.

The relationships within this model are shown graphically in the following figure:
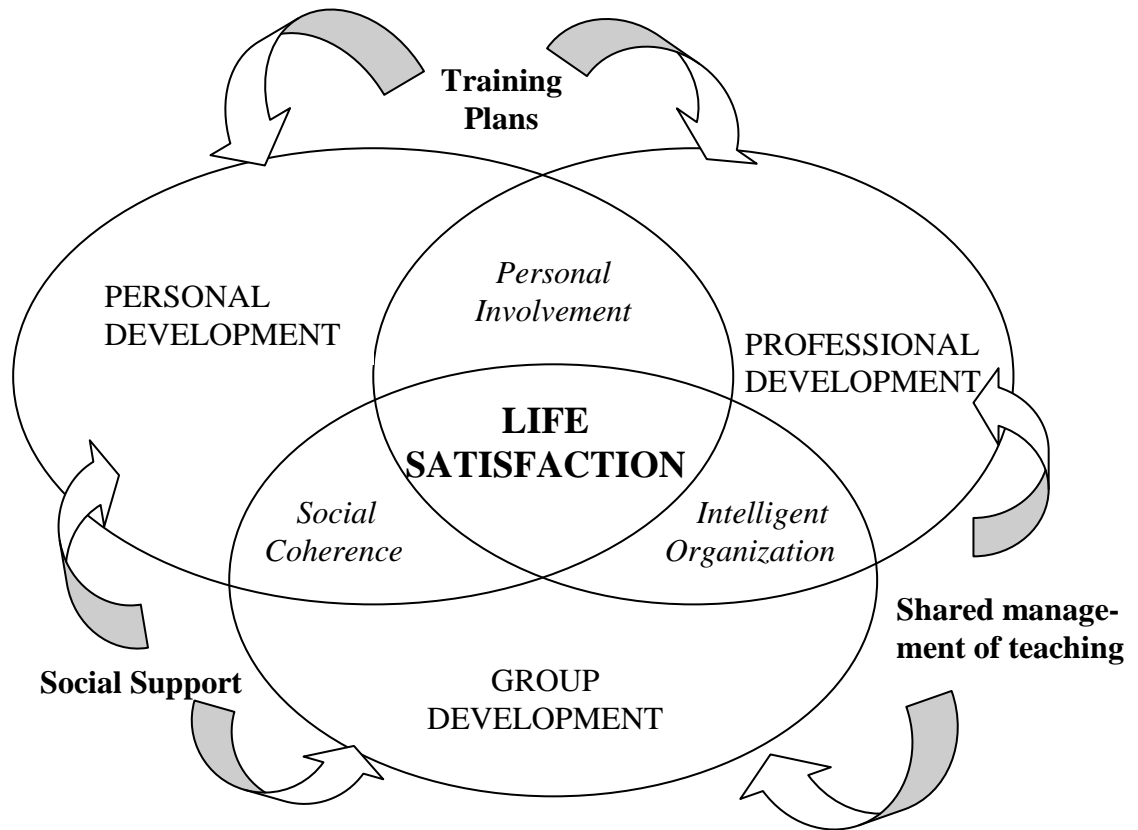

Figure 1. Relationships within the Life Satisfaction model

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Appendix 1

Items from the custom-made questionnaire:

Personal relationships
There is a good working atmosphere at my school.
I have easy communication with my co-workers.
I actively participate in the organization of the school.
I am able to share and collaborate with my co-workers.
My relationships with pupils get more and more complicated.

In-service training
The day-to-day reality matches my professional expectations.
I have had access to all the in-service training that I desired.
In-service training addresses my real needs.
In-service training is sufficient in terms of content.
In-service training is sufficient in terms of teaching skills.

Professional self-efficacy
I believe I have good qualities for teaching.
I feel that I have given my best as an educator.
I believe that I am more competent today than when I began to work as a teacher.
I would like to work in education but not leading a class group.
I would like to change professions.

Items from the MBI questionnaire:

Emotional Fatigue
I feel emotionally worn out from my job.
I feel tired at the end of the workday.
I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day of work.
Working with people all day is an effort.
I feel burned out from my job.
I feel frustrated at my job.
I think I work too much.
Working directly with people is stressful for me.
I feel depleted.

Depersonalization
I think I treat some people as if they were personal objects.
I have become insensitive to people since practicing this profession.
I'm concerned about the fact that this job hardens me emotionally.
I'm not really concerned about what happens to some of the people I serve.
I think that the people I deal with blame me for some of their problems.

Personal Fulfillment
I can easily understand how people feel
I deal with people's problems very effectively
I feel that in my work I am positively influencing the lives of others
I feel very active
I can easily create a relaxed climate with the people I serve
I feel stimulated after working in contact with people
I have achieved many useful things in my profession
I deal quite calmly with emotional problems at work

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