Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 11, 571-580
2025
Publisher: Learning Gate
DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v9i11.10919
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Burnout syndrome in secondary school teachers: The influence of psychological capital and school type

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Abstract: This study explores the joint influence of school type (public or state-subsidized private) and levels of psychological capital on teacher burnout. A cross-sectional study was conducted with a sample of 1,046 secondary school teachers (46.7% from public schools), using the Shirom–Melamed Burnout Measure and the reduced Ipsicap scale. Independent samples t-tests were performed to compare scores between teachers from different school types across each dimension of burnout and psychological capital. Additionally, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to assess the combined effect of school type and psychological capital levels on burnout. The results indicate that teachers in public schools exhibit higher burnout, particularly physical fatigue, compared with those in state-subsidized private schools. Both school type and psychological capital influenced burnout, with psychological capital acting as a protective factor. A significant interaction between the two variables was also observed. It is concluded that fostering psychological capital may serve as an effective strategy to prevent burnout, especially in contexts with higher demands or fewer resources. These findings suggest that enhancing psychological capital among teachers could be an effective approach for burnout prevention, particularly in educational settings with increased demands or limited resources.

Keywords: *Burnout, Educational context, Occupational health, Protective factors, Psychological capital, School type, Secondary schools, Teachers, Work-related stress.*

1. Introduction

Teaching has long been recognized as one of the professions with the highest exposure to occupational stress. In recent decades, the teaching profession has undergone significant transformations that have negatively impacted teachers' mental health and well-being [1]. Factors such as the increasing bureaucratic burden, classroom diversity, pressure for academic results, and lack of resources have contributed to the growth of psychosocial risks [2, 3].

In Spain, recent studies have indicated that a considerable proportion of teachers experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. Specifically, the International Barometer of Health and Wellbeing in Education Personnel, conducted by Education International, revealed that 40% of teachers in Spain report experiencing anxiety or depression, and 65% consider their work to be quite or very stressful [4]. These data reflect a concerning reality that cannot be dissociated from the structural conditions of

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History: Received: 15 September 2025; Revised: 16 October 2025; Accepted: 20 October 2025; Published: 7 November 2025
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the education system and which warrants in-depth investigation, particularly when considering the diversity of work environments within the same system.

The Spanish education system is characterized by the coexistence of public, state-subsidized private, and fully private schools. However, this article focuses exclusively on schools receiving public funding, either entirely (public schools) or partially (state-subsidized private schools). This delineation responds to the interest in examining the impact and scope of public education policies in relation to the issue under study.

Although public and state-subsidized private institutions share the objective of providing quality education, there are significant differences in terms of management, funding, organizational autonomy, allocation of resources, and teachers' working conditions [5]. Various studies have suggested that the structural and organizational characteristics of schools, such as contract stability, institutional support, or teaching load, vary considerably between these models, which could influence the emergence of psychosocial risks [6-8].

Psychosocial risks are defined as those aspects of work design, organization, and management, as well as the social context of work that have the potential to cause psychological or physical harm [9]. In the educational context, these risks heighten occupational stress, burnout syndrome, and anxiety, which have been strongly interlinked and consistently visible over the last decade [8, 10, 11].

Burnout syndrome, conceptualized as a state of physical, emotional, and cognitive exhaustion resulting from chronic work-related stress [12], has been one of the most widely studied indicators in educational contexts. Several comparative studies have identified differences in burnout levels between teachers in public and state-subsidized private schools, attributable to factors such as contract type, perceived autonomy, or pressure from families and academic results [13-15].

Conversely, psychological capital has been presented as a protective factor in organizational contexts. It comprises four key elements: self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience [16]. Recent research in academic contexts has shown that psychological capital acts as a buffer against the negative effects of stress and can foster better adaptation among teachers to the challenges of the work environment [6, 17].

In the Spanish context, studies have analyzed the relationship between burnout syndrome and psychological capital among education professionals; however, such studies do not typically differentiate results by institution type [18, 19], in contrast to analyses focused solely on burnout, as reported in the systematic review by Dávila et al. [13]. Moreover, to date, no research has been identified in Spain that jointly examines the influence of school type and level of psychological capital on the manifestation of burnout, highlighting a gap in the current literature and justifying the relevance of the present study.

Accordingly, the principal objective of this research is to compare the risk of burnout among teachers in public and state-subsidized secondary schools, analyzing the combined influence of school type and psychological capital level. Three hypotheses are proposed: (1) psychological capital will be negatively related to burnout, acting as a protective factor; (2) teachers in state-subsidized schools will exhibit higher levels of psychological capital and lower levels of burnout compared with teachers in public schools; (3) the interaction between school type and psychological capital will significantly influence burnout levels such that the protective effect of psychological capital will be stronger in state-subsidized schools.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure the representativeness of both groups (public and state-subsidized institutions). The study population comprised 214,000 teachers from public schools and 81,000 from state-subsidized schools in Spain [20]. A total of 1,046 respondents were obtained (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error), with 46.7% from public schools. Of these, 55.2% were women (n = 577) and 44.8% were men (n = 469), with a mean age of 43.06 years (SD = 8.76). Table 1 presents gender, age, and contract type by school type.

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DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v9i11.10919
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Table 1.
Sociodemographic information by percentage, divided by public and state-subsidized schools.

	Public school (%)	State-subsidized school (%)
Gender		
Women	54.1	61.9
Men	45.9	38.1
Age		
18–30 years	8	12.2
31–40 years	32	41.7
41–50 years	38	40.3
51–60 years	20	5.8
>60 years	2	0
Contract type		
Permanent	56.2	27.3
Open-ended	8.0	48.2
Temporary	4.0	2.2
Fee-based	0	10.8
Interim	31.2	11.5

2.2. Instrument

For the collection of sociodemographic data, an ad hoc section was included, containing questions on sex, age, type of school, and contract type. These variables also served as potential predictors or confounding factors in the analysis of burnout.

To evaluate burnout syndrome, the Shirom–Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) developed by Madigan et al. [21] was used. This 14-item scale is widely validated and has demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties, with an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.70, making it suitable for exploratory studies [22]. Burnout, the primary outcome of the study, was operationally defined according to the SMBM, which assesses three core dimensions: (1) physical fatigue; (2) cognitive weariness; and (3) emotional exhaustion. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = never; 7 = always), allowing the frequency of symptoms to be quantified. The SMBM has been validated in multiple occupational contexts, including education, and has shown significant correlations with other measures of occupational health [21, 23].

To assess psychological capital, the reduced Ipsicap instrument developed by Delgado-Abella et al. [24] was used. It consists of 24 items grouped into four fundamental dimensions of the construct: (1) hope; (2) optimism; (3) resilience; and (4) self-efficacy. Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). Psychological capital was considered an exposure variable and a potential protective factor against burnout. This instrument has demonstrated adequate validity and reliability indices, with Cronbach's alpha values above .80 for each dimension [24].

2.3. Procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Almería (reference [UALBIO 2023/005]), thereby ensuring compliance with ethical standards in research involving human participants.

In the initial phase, formal contact was established with the selected schools, both public and state-subsidized by sending a letter requesting participation to school management teams. The letter outlined the general objectives of the study, the proposed methodology, the voluntary nature of participation, and guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality.

Eligibility criteria for participation were established to ensure a homogeneous and relevant sample: teachers had to be currently employed at the selected secondary schools, have at least one year of

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teaching experience, and provide direct classroom instruction. Teachers on long-term leave or in administrative-only roles were excluded.

Once institutional authorization had been received, interested teachers were invited to an information meeting, either face-to-face or online, depending on the schools' availability. In this session, the objectives of the study, the methodological design, the instruments to be applied, and the intended use of the collected data were explained in detail. Any questions raised by participants were addressed to ensure informed and responsible engagement.

After this meeting, each teacher was given an informed consent form, which was signed individually prior to the administration of the instruments, in compliance with current regulations governing research in the social sciences.

Data collection was carried out through a self-administered digital survey using the LimeSurvey platform, hosted on a secure server at the University of Almería. The questionnaire was fully anonymized, requiring no personally identifiable information. Participants accessed the link via email or through the school's internal system and had two weeks to complete the survey.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for the scales used in the study. Tests of normality and homogeneity of variance were conducted, and once these assumptions had been verified, two-tailed Pearson correlation analyses were performed to explore relationships between the dimensions of each scale. Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare mean scores between groups (public vs. state-subsidized teachers). Finally, to examine the influence of psychological capital and school type on the manifestation of burnout, a two-way ANOVA (with Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons) was conducted. For this analysis, the psychological capital variable, initially continuous, was recoded into a categorical variable with four levels.

Missing data were assumed to be conditionally random (MCAR or MAR) and were managed using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) multiple imputation method in SPSS. Five independent imputed datasets were generated, incorporating sociodemographic variables as well as burnout and psychological capital scores. Statistical analyses were conducted separately on each dataset, and the estimates were subsequently combined using the weighted mean of the coefficients, with standard errors adjusted according to Rubin's rules to ensure valid inference. This procedure helped minimize bias and the loss of information associated with missing values.

3. Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for the three dimensions that comprise burnout and the four dimensions of psychological capital among secondary school teachers.

Regarding burnout, the dimension with the highest mean score was physical fatigue (M = 22.41; SD = 5.94), followed by cognitive weariness (M = 19.37; SD = 3.30), which reflects difficulties in concentration and in the mental processes associated with professional performance. Finally, although also notable, emotional exhaustion showed the lowest mean (M = 17.35; SD = 3.58), a dimension referring to the affective depletion derived from teaching activity.

With regard to psychological capital, teachers generally presented moderately high levels across all dimensions. The highest mean was observed for optimism (M = 33.77; SD = 5.77), followed by hope (M = 33.21; SD = 6.43), resilience (M = 28.81; SD = 5.05), and self-efficacy (M = 17.87; SD = 3.66).

Negative and significant correlations were identified between the burnout dimensions and the dimensions of psychological capital. Physical fatigue showed especially strong negative correlations with optimism ($r = -0.612$, $p < 0.001$) and resilience ($r = -0.498$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher levels of psychological resources are associated with lower physical exhaustion. Cognitive weariness was negatively associated with all dimensions of psychological capital, particularly with hope ($r = -0.530$, p

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< 0.001) and optimism (r = −0.513, p < 0.001). Emotional exhaustion also presented negative relationships with hope (r = −0.348, p < 0.001), optimism (r = −0.310, p < 0.001), and resilience (r = −0.336, p < 0.001).

Table 2.
Means (SD) and correlations among the analyzed dimensions

Variable	Mean (SD)	Physical fatigue	Emotional exhaustion	Cognitive weariness	Hope	Optimism	Resilience	Self-efficacy
Physical fatigue	22.41 (5.93)	1						
Emotional exhaustion	17.35 (3.57)	-0.127	1					
Cognitive weariness	19.37 (3.29)	0.661**	0.142	1				
Hope	33.21 (6.43)	-0.427**	0.348**	-0.530**	1			
Optimism	33.76 (5.76)	-0.612**	0.310**	-0.513**	0.771**	1		
Resilience	28.81 (5.05)	-0.498**	0.336**	-0.466**	0.747**	0.782**	1	
Self-efficacy	17.87 (3.66)	-0.449**	0.095	-0.379**	0.585**	0.597**	0.712**	1

Note: Pearson correlations shown below the diagonal. ** p < 0.01 (two-tailed); * p < 0.05 (two-tailed).
Source: Own elaboration.

3.1. Burnout: Differences between Groups

Regarding the t-tests applied to burnout (Table 3), statistically significant differences were found only in the dimension of physical fatigue, with higher scores among teachers in public schools (p < .001; d = .876). In contrast, no significant differences were observed for emotional exhaustion (p = 0.210) or cognitive weariness (p = 0.440), although in both cases the means were slightly higher among public school teachers.

Table 3.
Scores in burnout dimensions by school type.

Dimension	F	Sig.	t	P	Mean difference	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
Physical fatigue	1.366	0.245	4.378	<.001	4.78000	2.61317	6.94683
Emotional exhaustion	1.220	0.272	-0.809	0.210	-0.58000	-2.00220	.84220
Cognitive weariness	0.145	0.704	0.151	0.440	0.10000	-1.21577	1.41577

Note: t = Test statistic; p = Probability value; CI = Confidence interval.
Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. Psychological Capital: Differences between Groups

With respect to psychological capital (Table 4), the comparative analysis between teachers in public and state-subsidized schools showed no statistically significant differences for hope (p = 0.123) or self-efficacy (p = 0.082). Significant differences were found for optimism (p = 0.003) and resilience (p = 0.014), indicating that teachers in public schools scored lower than those in state-subsidized schools.

Table 4.
Scores in psychological capital dimensions by school type.

Dimension	F	Sig.	t	P	Mean difference	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
Hope	5.055	0.027	-1.167	0.123	-1.50000	-4.05094	1.05094
Optimism	7.734	0.007	-2.776	0.003	-3.10000	-5.31615	-0.88385
Resilience	9.787	0.002	-2.241	0.014	-2.22000	-4.18582	-0.25418
Self-efficacy	1.591	0.210	-1.400	0.082	-1.02000	-2.46627	0.42627

Note: F = Levene's test for equality of variances; t = test statistic; p = probability value; CI = confidence interval.

Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology
ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 11: 571-580, 2025
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Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. Influence of Psychological Capital and School Type on Burnout

Analyzing the influence of school type and psychological capital on the risk of burnout (Table 5), significant effects were observed for both school type ($F = 42.998$; $p < 0.001$) and psychological capital level ($F = 227.962$; $p < 0.001$). A significant interaction between the two factors was also found ($F = 54.954$; $p < 0.001$). The analysis of variance showed that the factors included in the model explained a significant proportion of the variability in burnout risk, with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.426$. This indicates that 43% of the total variance is explained by the factors analyzed, suggesting a moderate model fit.

Table 5.
Between-subjects effects. Dependent variable: burnout (total score).

Source	df	F	p	Partial η^2
School type (public vs. state-subsidized)	1	42.99	<0.001	0.397
Psychological capital (scores 1–4)	3	227.96	<0.001	0.040
School type × Psychological capital	2	54.95	<0.001	0.096

Note: df = degrees of freedom; Partial η^2 = partial eta squared.
Source: Own elaboration.

Multiple comparisons (Table 6) reveal that higher psychological capital scores act as a preventive factor for the development of burnout. Specifically, obtaining a score of 1 on psychological capital increased the risk of burnout compared with scores of 2 (MeanDiff = 36.95; $p = 0.001$), 3 (MeanDiff = 37.39; $p = 0.001$), and 4 (MeanDiff = 41.04; $p = 0.001$), showing an ascending trend. However, the mean differences between scores 2 and 3 were not significant (MeanDiff = 0.44; $p = 1.00$).

Table 6.
Multiple comparisons. Dependent variable: Burnout (total score).

Comparison	Mean difference (SE)	Adjusted p
Level 1 vs. 2	36.95 (1.68)	<0.001
Level 1 vs. 3	37.39 (1.58)	<0.001
Level 1 vs. 4	41.04 (1.64)	<0.001
Level 2 vs. 3	0.44 (0.67)	1.00
Level 2 vs. 4	4.10 (0.79)	<0.001
Level 3 vs. 4	3.66 (0.54)	<0.001

Note: Values adjusted with Bonferroni. Based on observed means. Error term: Mean Square (Error) = 43.944. * Mean differences are significant at the 0.05 level.
Source: Own elaboration.

In Figure 1, the estimated marginal means from the two-way ANOVA conducted to assess the effect of the factors under consideration on the risk of burnout among the surveyed teachers are shown. It can be seen that psychological capital has a significant effect, with marked differences chiefly between level 1 and the remaining levels (for teachers in public schools) and between level 2 and the remaining levels (for teachers in state-subsidized schools). By contrast, school type also shows a significant effect, albeit of smaller magnitude. These results are consistent with the values reported in Table 5 ($F = 54.95$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 4829.76$), which supports the presence of main effects and interactions.

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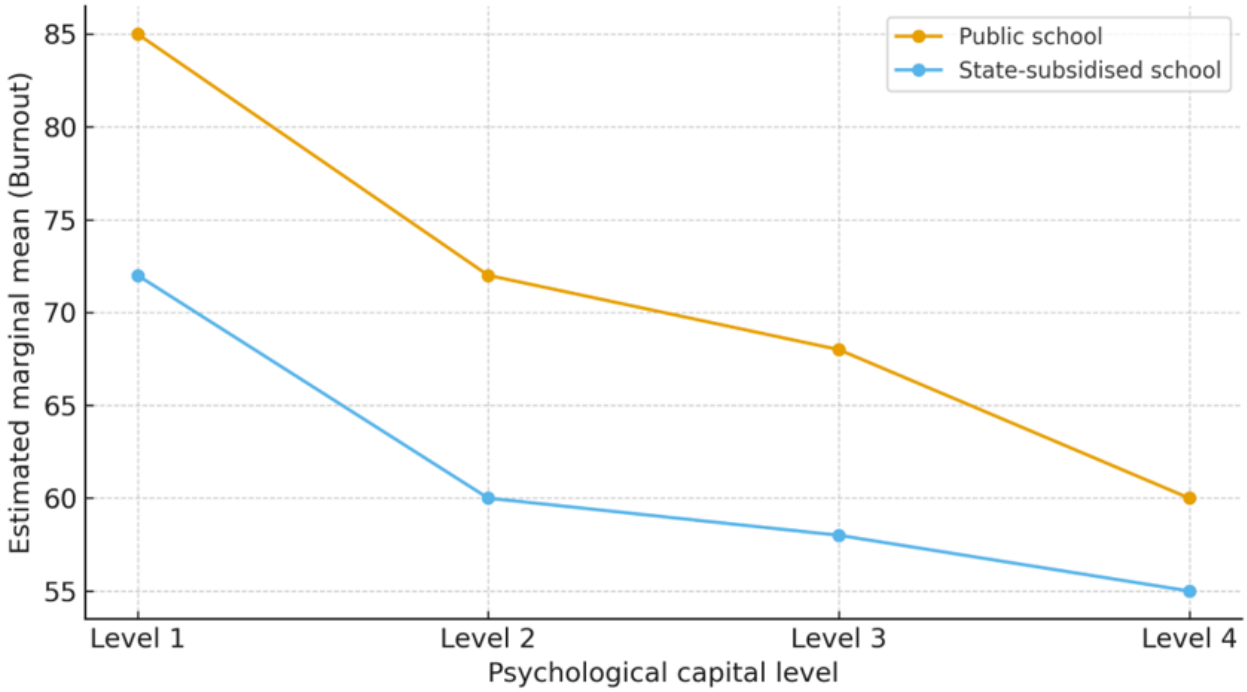

Axis labels: X = Psychological capital level (1–4), Y = Estimated marginal mean (Burnout).

Figure 1.
Estimated marginal means of Burnout (Template).
Note: The figure is recreated with English labels. The plotted values are placeholders reflecting the relationships described in the study. Replace with actual marginal means if available.

4. Discussion

The main objective of the present research was to compare the risk of burnout among teachers in public and state-subsidized secondary schools, analyzing the combined influence of school type and psychological capital level. According to the results obtained, lower psychological capital scores were associated with a greater risk of burnout in both groups, which is in line with our first hypothesis and supports previous research, such as Extremera et al. [6] and Vizoso-Gómez [17], which emphasizes the buffering effect of psychological capital against psychosocial risk factors in teaching.

Overall, secondary school teachers reported high and consistent levels of positive psychological resources, particularly in relation to maintaining an optimistic and hopeful attitude in the face of challenges. However, self-efficacy, while positive, showed comparatively lower values. This finding may indicate a specific need to strengthen perceptions of personal competence in the face of the demands of the educational environment. Several studies have highlighted self-efficacy as a central dimension of psychological capital and a significant predictor of effective coping with occupational stress [16, 19]. In teaching contexts, low self-efficacy may be associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and lower professional commitment [25], underscoring the importance of implementing interventions that promote self-efficacy beliefs among teachers, particularly in more demanding or resource-constrained educational contexts.

Specifically, significant differences were found according to school type with respect to burnout scores, thus confirming our second hypothesis: teachers in public schools presented higher levels. This finding is consistent with studies such as Martínez et al. [7], which also observed greater symptoms of anxiety and burnout in public schools.

Taken together, the results indicate that burnout among teachers is primarily expressed through physical and cognitive symptoms, particularly in public schools, with variability in the perceived

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ISSN: 2576-8484
Vol. 9, No. 11: 571-580, 2025
DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v9i11.10919
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intensity by each individual; heterogeneity in cognitive weariness is especially notable. This is relevant when considering its strong negative correlation with optimism and resilience, suggesting that the physical symptoms of burnout may be closely related to perceptions of inefficacy or lack of hope when facing professional challenges. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Edú-Valsania et al. [8], who suggested that physical exhaustion is an early manifestation of burnout when emotional and cognitive resources are depleted?

The interaction between school type and psychological capital revealed a significant effect on the risk of burnout, confirming our third hypothesis. Specifically, high psychological capital mitigates burnout risk, and this protective effect is more pronounced among teachers in state-subsidized schools. This finding reinforces the idea that the organizational context may facilitate or limit the expression of personal resources such as resilience or self-efficacy [26].

It is also noteworthy that the lowest dimensions of psychological capital were self-efficacy and resilience, two aspects particularly sensitive to institutional support, professional recognition, and job stability. In this regard, the lower scores in resilience and optimism among public-school teachers may be linked to a weaker perception of control over their working environment, as noted by García-Arroyo and Osca [14] and Carmona-Halty et al. [27].

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening teachers' psychological capital through intervention programs focused on promoting optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy may be an effective way to reduce the incidence of burnout, particularly in structurally more vulnerable educational contexts.

4.1. Limitations

Several limitations must be recognized, as they may have influenced the results and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Firstly, the research used a cross-sectional design, which prevents the establishment of causal relationships between the variables studied. Although significant associations were identified between psychological capital and burnout syndrome, it cannot be stated with certainty that the former acts as a direct cause or moderator of the latter.

Secondly, the use of self-report questionnaires may involve biases related to social desirability or subjective perception. Some participants may have responded more favorably or negatively depending on their momentary emotional state or their perception of the work context.

Another limitation lies in the possible internal heterogeneity of the schools included in the sample. Although stratified sampling was conducted to ensure representativeness, factors such as socio-economic environment, specific teaching load, or the organizational culture of each school were not controlled for and could have influenced the scores obtained. Furthermore, while the total sample size was statistically sufficient, more detailed regional or educational-level breakdowns could have yielded additional nuances.

Finally, it should be noted that the instrument used to measure psychological capital, whilst validated and reliable, is not specific to educational contexts. Future research could therefore consider more contextualized adaptations or complement the instrument with qualitative interviews to enrich understanding of the phenomenon.

5. Conclusions

In light of the results obtained, several conclusions can be drawn that allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between psychological capital and burnout syndrome among secondary school teachers, as well as the role played by school type in this dynamic. The findings indicate that burnout is most intense in the dimension of physical fatigue, particularly among teachers working in public schools. In this context, psychological capital emerges as a key protective factor, showing a negative and significant relationship with all dimensions of burnout. In addition, significant differences were observed between public and state-subsidized schools regarding levels of psychological

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ISSN: 2576-8484
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DOI: 10.55214/2576-8484.v9i11.10919
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capital, with higher values reported by teachers in state-subsidized schools. The interaction between school type and psychological capital level contributed significantly to explaining burnout risk, highlighting a clear moderating effect of psychological capital. These results suggest that fostering the development of psychological capital among teachers may constitute an effective strategy for preventing burnout, particularly in educational settings characterized by higher demands or limited resources.

Funding:
The authors declare that they have received financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article through the call for innovative research on occupational risk prevention issued by the Andalusian Institute for Occupational Risk Prevention [grant number PII/2024/0006].

Institutional Review Board Statement:
The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Almería (reference [UALBIO 2023/005]), thereby ensuring compliance with ethical standards in research involving human participants.

Transparency:
The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Consent to Participate:
All participants received detailed information about the objective, procedures, and possible implications of the study, including the eventual publication of the results in scientific journals. Before completing the questionnaires, participants signed an informed consent form after resolving any questions they had. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality and anonymity of responses were guaranteed at all times.

Data Availability Statement:
The data supporting the findings of this study are deposited in the Zenodo repository. To ensure traceability, transparency, and open access, the following persistent identifier is provided: DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17213104

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