

## Investigating the Relationship between Spiritual Intelligence and Burnout among EFL Teachers

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**Abstract** – Highlighting the key role of EFL teachers in academic performance of students in particular and the success of educational systems in general, the present study attempted to investigate the relationship between EFL teachers' spiritual intelligence and their burnout level. For this purpose, 100 EFL teachers (50 males and 50 females) working at different private language institutes in Mashhad, Iran participated in the study. Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SIRI) were used to gather the required data from the participants. The results revealed a significant negative relationship between the EFL teachers' spiritual intelligence and their burnout level. Furthermore, the correlations between the different subscales of the variables were reported. The results indicated that there were not any statistically significant differences between the male and female participants with regard to both their spiritual intelligence and their burnout.

**Keywords:** spiritual intelligence, burnout, EFL teachers

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is recognized that teaching is one of those jobs which is full of stress (Borg & Riding, 1991). Each year, a considerable number of teachers are inclined to quit their career due to their job's demanding nature (Brouwers & Tomic, 1999). When compared with people from other professions, teachers show more symptoms of burnout (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). Maslach et al. (1996) defined burnout as a state of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduction in individuals' professional efficacy.

Over the few last decades, human spirituality and its empowerment have been noticed as an important issue (Karami & Imani, 2014). The importance of spirituality has also been highly emphasized in recent studies conducted in educational psychology (Emmons, 1999; Vaughan, 2002; Zohar, 2005). Spiritual intelligence is explained by Zohar and Marshall (2000) as the intelligence which helps individuals to gain a better understanding of meanings and values, the intelligence which guides them to see actions and life from wider, meaning-based perspective, the intelligence which gives them the ability to evaluate different pathways in life and helps them to choose the more meaningful ones.

Furthermore, research has indicated that improving spiritual intelligence can lead to both personal growth and more psychological health (Vaughan, 2002). Therefore, it can mitigate the pressures and conflicts which may result in job burnout. Moreover, it is recognized that success or failure of educational systems and specifically the accomplishments of teachers in their professional life depends so much on their level of spirituality (Kaur, 2013). In spite of some claims about potential associations between burnout and spiritual intelligence, the span of research in this area is still very limited, especially with regard to EFL teachers. Therefore, in order to bridge this gap, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the possible associations between spiritual intelligence and burnout among EFL teachers.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1. Burnout**

According to Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach (2009), job burnout was introduced as a new concept in the 1970s which focused on the realities and burdens of work experience among people from different walks of life. Over the past 40 years, the concept of burnout has been an interesting topic of research, and contrary to previous beliefs about its restriction to Western communities, nowadays burnout occurs almost in every society (Schaufeli, et al., 2009). The term burnout was first introduced by Freudenberger (1974) to refer to a state of physical, emotional, and mental depletion resulting from work overload, and imbalance between expected and real job reward. The emergence of the burnout concept engendered enthusiasm in practitioners and researchers in different fields to probe into burnout's definition, its cause, and different ways of its prevention. Burnout is referred to as a prolonged stress happening in those people whose jobs require working with others in some way (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993). Burnout is "an issue of particular concern for people-oriented occupations in which (a) the relationship between providers and recipients is central to the work and (b) the provision of education, service, or treatment can be a highly emotional experience" (Maslach, 1999, p. 209). Farber claimed that that

'Burned-out professionals are more frequently absent or late for work than their non-burned out colleagues; they become noticeably less idealistic and more rigid; their performance at work deteriorates markedly, and they may fantasize or actually plan on leaving the profession" (1983, p. 3).

Burnout is metaphorically referred to by Schaufeli et al. (2009) as a fire or candle which does not burn brightly due to lack of sufficient energy and resources provided to it. When employees are inflicted with burnout, if they linger on their work, due to their inability to be as beneficial as they were before, their gain is more like candle's suffocation than its burning (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Friedman (2000) suggested that making teachers aware of the concept of stress and burnout prior to their job initiation or at the first few years of their teaching experience can be an effective factor in preventing burnout in them. Providing situations in which teachers can talk their expectations, their job stress, and their beliefs about themselves to their colleagues can provide useful experience for teachers in realizing that burnout is a widespread

phenomenon in which most of the teachers are entangled; therefore, they are not alone in this stressful situation (Friedman, 2000). Friedman (2000) explained that other reasons which aggravates burnout rate in teachers are parents' expectations from teachers, as well as blaming them for any problem occurring inside or outside of classrooms. Moreover, Balkin, White, and Bodey (2003) stated that burnout leads to less efficient teaching practice, indifference between colleagues, and relinquishing the job early. Regarding the mentioned issues, it can be concluded that teaching is a profession in which the occurrence of burnout is very extensive.

There are a number of studies conducted to investigate the effect of different personal and psychological factors of teachers on their burnout level. In 2014, Adilogullari, Ulucan, and Senel conducted a study to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and professional burnout level among high school teachers. The findings of the study revealed that emotional intelligence had a negative association with burnout rate among teachers. In other words, as teachers behaved more empathetically in workplace and managed their emotions in positive ways, the occurrence of burnout mitigated in them due to the fact that emotional intelligence lead to people's happiness in personal and professional life. In another study, Brouwers and Tomic (2000) investigated the relationship between self-efficacy in classroom management and different dimensions of burnout in secondary school teachers. The results of their study showed that the teachers' self-efficacy played an influential role in their depersonalization, and it also affected their sense of personal accomplishments which are both subcomponents of burnout. However, self-efficacy had a negative synchronous relationship with emotional exhaustion.

In 2013, Tabatabaee Yazdi, Motallebzadeh, and Ashraf conducted a study on EFL teachers in which they reached the conclusion that the self-efficacy of teachers had a reverse relationship with their burnout. Moreover, significant relationships existed between the teachers' age, gender, years of experience and their level of burnout. In another study done on EFL teachers in 2013, Mahmoodi and Ghaslani based on the results of their study reported that emotional intelligence and reflectivity had significant negative relationships with burnout in EFL teachers.

## **2.2. Spiritual Intelligence**

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Gardner introduced theory of Multiple Intelligence (MI) claiming that people have eight autonomous intelligences (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider & Gardner, 2001) which are classified as bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, linguistics, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences (Gardner, 1999). Interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are merged together as emotional intelligence and is subsequently defined as the ability to manage emotion of oneself and that of others in an interpersonal relationship. In 1997, Zohar introduced the concept of spiritual intelligence in her book *Rewriting the Corporate Brain*. Spiritual intelligence is defined by Wolman (2001) as an ability in human beings which helps them to ponder about meanings in life, as well as identifying themselves with the world around them. Recently, spiritual intelligence is renowned for being the ultimate and the most fundamental intelligence in human beings, capable of influencing proper functioning of both IQ and emotional intelligence and playing an integrative role,

making a linkage between individuals' IQ and emotional intelligence (Singh & Sinha, 2013). In contrast to IQ which is an innate capacity in human beings, emotional and spiritual intelligences can be developed through training and efforts (Singh & Sinha 2013).

According to Wigglesworth (2002), in his model of four intelligences, there is a hierarchy of intelligences starting from the physical and ultimately leading to the spiritual one. In this pyramid, the first one is physical quotient, essential for babies in controlling their bodies. The second one is intelligence quotient, necessary for developing linguistic and conceptual skills. The third one is emotional intelligence, required for handling interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, and the last one is spiritual intelligence, needed for searching meaning in life. Emotional and spiritual intelligences are suggested by Wigglesworth (2002) to be interconnected and reinforcing each other. The validity of rigorous research in areas such as spirituality is confirmed by studies in neuroscience in which the brain is examined for providing scientific answers to questions related to constructs such as spirituality (Cacioppo, Hawkley, Rickett, & Masi, 2005). The idea of God spot in the brain was introduced by Persinger (1996) and Ramachandran (1999) as a location in the brain working as spiritual functioning. The scientific examinations of the brain indicated that these neural areas of the brain are activated whenever subjects are engaged in spiritual discussions, resulting into a conclusion that the human brain is predisposed with locations specifically for cognitive constructs such as spirituality (Howard & White, 2009).

Until now, different research studies have been done to explore the effect of spiritual intelligence on teachers' personality traits and their accomplishments in their work. Aghaei, Behjat, and Rostampour (2014) reported that the higher the level of spiritual intelligence in teachers, the higher would be their English language proficiency and self-esteem. In another study, Kaur (2013) reported that the teachers' spiritual intelligence and their job satisfaction are positively correlated. Azizi and Azizi (2015) concluded spiritual intelligence was significantly correlated with critical thinking ability of the EFL teachers in a positive way. In another study done on female teachers, Mahmoodabadi and Sedrpooshan (2015) reported that some of burnout components such as emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were significantly correlated with spiritual intelligence in a negative way. They concluded that developing spiritual intelligence can mitigate occurrence of burnout in teachers.

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The present study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between EFL teachers' spiritual intelligence and their burnout level?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female EFL teachers with regard to their spiritual intelligence?
3. Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female EFL teachers with regard to their burnout level?

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Participants

The study used a convenience sample of 100 teachers (50 females and 50 males) who were teaching English as a foreign language in Mashhad, Iran. The participants' age ranged from 23 to 41 years old. They were chosen from 10 different language institutes from different parts of the city in order for the sample to be appropriate representative of all EFL teachers in this city. Additionally, the participants had at least 3 years of experience in teaching English to speakers of other languages.

### 4.2. Instruments

The respondents were asked to complete the following questionnaires: The Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SIRI; 2008), and Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

#### 4.2.1. Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SIRI)

The Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory is a 24-item scale developed by King in 2008. The scale comprises four subscales of *Critical Existential Thinking* including 7 items, *Personal Meaning Production* including 5 items, *Transcendental Awareness* including 7 items, and *Conscious State Expansion* including 5 items. In 2008, King reported Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of 0.92 for the total questionnaire. He also reported Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of 0.78 for the subscale of critical existential thinking, 0.78 for the subscale of personal meaning production, 0.87 for the subscale of transcendental awareness, and 0.91 for the subscale of conscious state expansion. In the current study, the Persian adaptation of the scale was applied. Responses are graded on a 5-point continuous Likert scale ranging from *Not at all true of me* (1) to *Completely true of me* (5). Respondents' higher scores represent higher levels of spiritual intelligence. Raghibi, Bakhshani, and Moallemy (2010) reported Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of 0.88 for the Persian questionnaire.

#### 4.2.2. Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a self-test 22-items scale, is the most extensively used instrument for measuring burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The scale measures three components of *Emotional Exhaustion* including 9 items, *Depersonalization* including 5 items, and *Personal Accomplishment* including 8 items. The responses to the questionnaire are graded on a 7-point continuous Likert scale ranging from *Never* (0) to *Everyday* (6). The respondents' higher scores in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization sections, and their lower score in personal accomplishment/achievement section may indicate their high burnout level (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In the current study, the Persian adaptation of MBI was used to measure burnout in EFL teachers. In Iran, Filian (1993) reported Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients of 0.78 for the Persian questionnaire.

### 4.3. Procedure

The 100 EFL teachers were given the two questionnaires simultaneously. Since the mother tongue of all the teachers were Persian, the Persian versions of the two questionnaires were distributed among them. Responding to the questionnaires was not compulsory, that is, the teachers were first asked whether they were willing to participate in the study or not. Before responding to the questionnaires, one of the researcher explained about the purpose of the study to the respondents and gave them a broad definition of the two constructs of the study which were spiritual intelligence and burnout. The participants were also informed of how to fill out the questionnaires. During the respondents' answering to the scales, one of the researchers was present at the place of data gathering to respond to the participants' questions regarding the instruments. The participants were also reassured about the confidentiality of the data they had provided. Finally, the completed questioners were gathered and prepared for statistical analysis.

Having collected the data, it was entered and processed with SPSS 16 program. In order to analyze the data regarding the first research question of the study, Pearson correlation was used to explore the relationship between spiritual intelligence and burnout among EFL teachers. In order to analyze the data related to the second and third questions of the study, independent samples t-test was used to explore whether male and female EFL teachers were significantly different with regard to both their spiritual intelligence and burnout level.

## 5. RESULTS

The first research question was concerned with whether there was a significant relationship between the teachers' spiritual intelligence and their burnout level. Therefore, this relationship was computed through Pearson correlation. Table 1 indicates the results of the correlational analysis.

**Table 1: The results of the correlation analysis between Burnout and Spiritual Intelligence among EFL teachers**

|                               | Burnout | Emotional Exhaustion | Depersonalization | Personal Accomplishment |
|-------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Spiritual Intelligence        | -.24*   | -.58**               | -.43**            | .60**                   |
| Critical Existential Thinking | -.16    | -.38**               | -.35**            | .44**                   |
| Personal Meaning Production   | -.27**  | -.55**               | -.40**            | .49**                   |
| Transcendental Awareness      | -.18    | -.53**               | -.40**            | .62**                   |
| Conscious State Expansion     | -.19    | -.43**               | -.25*             | .38**                   |

\*  $P < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

As Table 1 indicates, there exists a negative significant correlation between the teachers' spiritual intelligence and their burnout ( $r=-.24, p<.05$ ). Among the subcomponents of burnout, there exist negative significant correlations between spiritual intelligence and emotional exhaustion ( $r=-.58, p<.05$ ), and depersonalization ( $r=-.43, p<.05$ ). However, there exists a significant positive correlation between spiritual intelligence and personal achievement ( $r=.60, p<.05$ ). Regarding the subscales of spiritual intelligence, there is no significant correlation between burnout and critical existential thinking ( $r=-.16, p>.05$ ). There exist significant negative correlations between critical existential thinking and emotional exhaustion ( $r=-.38, p<.05$ ) and depersonalization ( $r=-.35, p<.05$ ). However, there is a significant positive correlation between critical existential thinking and personal achievement ( $r=.44, p<.05$ ). There are also significant negative correlations between personal meaning production and burnout ( $r=-.27, p<.05$ ), emotional exhaustion ( $r=-.55, P<.05$ ), and depersonalization ( $r=-.40, p<.05$ ). However, a positive significant correlation exists between personal meaning production and personal achievement ( $r=.49, p<.05$ ). There is no significant correlation between transcendental awareness and burnout ( $r=-.18, p>.05$ ). Also, there are significant negative relationships between transcendental awareness and emotional exhaustion ( $r=-.53, p<.05$ ), depersonalization ( $r=-.40, p<.05$ ). However, a positive significant correlation exists between transcendental awareness and personal achievement ( $r=.62, p<.05$ ).

There is no significant relationship between conscious state expansion and burnout ( $r=-.19, p>.05$ ). There exist significant negative correlations between conscious state expansion and emotional exhaustion ( $r=-.43, p<.05$ ), and depersonalization ( $r=-.25, p<.05$ ). However, there is a significant positive correlation between conscious state expansion and personal achievement ( $r=.38, p<.05$ ).

Subsequently, independent sample t-test was used to see whether there was a significant difference between the male and female teachers regarding their Spiritual intelligence. Table 2 shows the results of the t-test for the male and female teachers.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics for comparing male and female teachers' spiritual intelligence components**

|                        | Gender | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|------------------------|--------|----|-------|----------------|
| Spiritual Intelligence | male   | 50 | 3.365 | .445           |
|                        | female | 50 | 3.205 | .737           |

As Table 2 indicates, the mean of the males' SQ is 3.365 ( $SD=.445$ ) and that of the females is 3.205 ( $SD=.737$ ) meaning that males have a higher SQ than females. In order to check whether this difference was statistically significant, an independent samples t-test was utilized. Table 3 depicts the results of the t-test.

**Table 3: Independent Samples T-Test: Gender with SQ**

|                        |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |       |      |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|-------|------|
|                        |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df    | Sig. |
| Spiritual Intelligence | Equal variances assumed     | 15.07                                   | 0.00 | 1.31                         | 98.00 | 0.19 |
|                        | Equal variances not assumed | 15.07                                   | 0.00 | 1.31                         | 80.54 | 0.19 |

As Table 3 indicates, there was not a statistically significant difference between male and female teachers with regard to their spiritual intelligence ( $t=1.31, p> 0.05$ ).

The third research question is concerned with potential difference between male and female EFL teachers with regards to their burnout level. Table 4 depicts descriptive statistics of these two groups.

**Table 4: Descriptive statistics for comparing male and female teachers' burnout**

|         | sex    | N  | Mean  | Std. Deviation |
|---------|--------|----|-------|----------------|
| Burnout | male   | 50 | 2.544 | .649           |
|         | female | 50 | 2.615 | .534           |

According to Table 4, the mean of the males' burnout is 2.544 ( $SD=.649$ ) while that of the females is 2.615 ( $SD=.534$ ) meaning that the female teachers have a higher rate of burnout than the male teachers. In order to check whether this difference was a statistically significant one, t-test was calculated. Table 5 depicts the result of the t-test.

**Table 5: The results of Independent Samples T-Test for burnout in male and female EFL teachers**

|         |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |       |      |
|---------|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|-------|------|
|         |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df    | Sig. |
| Burnout | Equal variances assumed     | 0.87                                    | 0.35 | -0.59                        | 98.00 | 0.55 |
|         | Equal variances not assumed | 0.87                                    | 0.35 | -0.59                        | 94.48 | 0.55 |

As indicated in Table 5, there was not a statistically significant difference between the male and female teachers with regard to their burnout ( $t=-0.59, p> 0.05$ ).

## **6. DISCUSSION**

As mentioned previously, the study sought to answer three research questions. The first research question was about the relationship between burnout and spiritual intelligence in EFL teachers. The second research question examined the possible difference in spiritual intelligence between male and female EFL. Finally, the third question explored the potential difference in burnout between male and female EFL teachers.

Regarding the first research question, it was found that there was a negative significant relationship between the teachers' spiritual intelligence and their burnout level. Spiritual intelligence, which is of paramount importance for its being the ultimate and the most fundamental intelligence in human beings, is capable of influencing proper functioning of both IQ and EQ (Singh & Sinha, 2013). In contrast to IQ which is fixed and innate, spiritual intelligence can be trained and developed (Singh & Sinha, 2013). The findings of previous studies also approved that improving spiritual intelligence led to both personal growth and more psychological health (Vaughan, 2002). Therefore, burnout which is a state of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduction in professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 1996) can be reduced through spiritual intelligence growth. In addition, the results of the present study was in line with the findings of Captari (2010) who reported the existence of a small correlation between spiritual intelligence and burnout among the resident assistants. He reported that those with higher level of spiritual intelligence are more tolerant in the face of difficult situations; therefore, burnout symptoms may be less found in these people. Tasharrofi, Hatami, and Asgharnejad (2013) also reported similar findings. They stated that spiritual intelligence and spiritual well-being were among the most important variables mitigating and preventing the occurrence of occupational burnout among nurses. In addition, Zohar and Marshal (2000) stated that spiritual intelligence acts as a shield against disasters and hardships in life and makes one more tolerant of life's difficulties. In another similar study done on primary school teachers, Kordestani Abdoli and Sheikhi (2013) reported that high spiritual intelligence would lead to less occurrence of job erosion.

In addition, the results indicated that out of the subscales of burnout, personal achievement was found to be highly correlated with spiritual intelligence in a positive way. Personal accomplishment is defined as one's feelings of being self-competent and capable of achieving worthwhile things in dealing with people in workplace (Maslach, 1982). Based on this definition, it can be concluded that the higher one's level of personal achievement, the higher will be his ability to find meaning in life and find solutions for problems.

Moreover, out of the subscales of spiritual intelligence, only personal meaning production was significantly correlated with burnout. Personal meaning production which is defined as the ability to make meaning and purpose in different life experiences (King, 2008) helps one to find reasons for pressures and conflicts at workplace and find solutions to problems instead of magnifying them. Therefore, it can be concluded that higher levels of personal meaning production can reduce the possibility of burnout occurrence in teachers.

Regarding the second and third questions of the study, the findings showed no significant difference between the male and female teachers with regards to both their spiritual intelligence

and burnout level. In other words, the male and female teachers were rather similar in terms of spiritual intelligence and burnout.

The outcomes of this study indicated that spiritual intelligence was significantly related to burnout in a negative way among the EFL teachers. It was also indicated that gender did not play any role in the teachers' spiritual intelligence and burnout level. Furthermore, personal achievement was highly correlated with spiritual intelligence, while personal meaning production was significantly related to burnout.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Based on these results, the following implications can be put forward. First of all, the role of spiritual intelligence as an influential factor in all aspects of people's lives is to be highlighted in workplace contexts, especially in educational contexts and more specifically in EFL contexts. The managers of institutions and schools can increase work efficacy of their teachers by familiarizing them with spiritual intelligence and developing this construct in them. According to Vaughan (2002), spiritual intelligence is connected with emotional; therefore, one way of developing spiritual intelligence for teachers would be to become more empathetic toward others and take into account others' feelings. Spiritual intelligence can also be developed through taking responsibility for ones' actions, perceptions, and beliefs and find different pathways to solve problems and see events from wider perspectives. Vaughan (2002) stated that spirituality is an indispensable part of every human being which cannot be ignored. Only through paying attention to it and cultivating it one can act successfully in the different aspects of life, including one's job.

This study analyzed spiritual intelligence and burnout among EFL teachers in an informal context. Another study can be done to explore this relationship in formal context of universities or public schools. Because the participants of the study were 100 teachers and the study was conducted only in private language institutes of Mashhad, a city located in Iran, generalization to other EFL contexts based on the results of the present study should be made cautiously. In addition, in this study, EFL teachers' major was not taken into account. Further studies can be done controlling this variable.

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