Stress, Burnout and Self-Esteem Among Educators

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Abstract

Over the past thirty years, researchers have gradually become more interested in examining stress, burnout, and self-esteem in the teaching profession. The relationship of these factors does not have a single cause; rather, the covarying stressors that educators experience in the performance of their daily roles contribute to the process of burning out and attrition. When the working conditions of teachers remain conducive to the interactive, dynamics of a non-stressful environment, highly motivated teachers teach students to become highly motivated, thus, repeating a positive, productive cycle.

Issues related to teachers’ stress, burnout and self-esteem are increasingly gaining the attention of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners alike. During the last decades, teachers have had to adjust to new challenges when dealing with heterogeneous populations posing radically different educational, social, and psychological demands (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003). This is primarily due to marked changes in the population make-up of Western countries. In the United States, for example, students who are culturally, linguistically and ethnically different from the majority culture comprise over 30% of the K-12 population (Taylor & Sobel, 2001). Within this demographic context, teachers cannot avoid dealing with issues of education and diversity at their various levels (Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003).

According to Wedekind (2001), many teachers do not have the knowledge, experience, or in some cases the disposition to address matters of race and culture in their classrooms. Although teachers generally prefer to teach in school settings similar to those in which they grew up (Byrnes, Kiger, & Manning, 1997), the reality of educational settings today is one of increasing “cultural mismatch and “cultural [dis]synchronization” (Marshall, 1996). Such a cultural clash is likely to lead to occupational stress, burnout, and low self-esteem.

Burnout

Tatar and Horenczyk (2003) suggested that the stress and difficulties involved in working with a culturally diverse student body could contribute to professional burnout among teachers. Maslach & Jackson (1981) identified the following dimensions of the burnout syndrome as: emotional exhaustion (a feeling of being emotionally overextended by contact with other people), depersonalization (an unfeeling and callous response toward these people, as recipients of a service, and low personal accomplishment (a decline in feelings of competence and achievement in one’s work.
Other variables that have been suggested as having an impact on stress and burnout are personal characteristics, school characteristics and organizational conditions, including lack of administrative support, salary, student discipline and motivation, class size, inadequate planning time (Ingersoll, 2001), lack of opportunity for advancement (Hodge, Jupp, & Taylor, 1994), the students’ grade-level (Tatar, 2001), and length of teaching experience (Byrne, 1991). Ample evidence has shown; however, that teachers lack the information, skills, and support from administrators necessary to cope successfully with these new challenges (Borg, Riding & Falzon, 1991; Browers & Tomic, 2000).

Farber (2002) suggest the type of burnout today is characterized by complaints of multiple obligations, increasing external pressures, inadequate financial rewards, and insufficient opportunities for personal advancement. It has been shown that burnout teachers provide significantly less information, less praise, and less acceptance of their students’ ideas, and the interact with them less frequently (Beer & Beer, 1992). Consequently, occupational stress and its relationship to burnout seem to have a negative impact on teachers, on the students they teach, and directly influencing their attrition.

**Attrition**

Because occupational stress, burnout, and teacher attrition have become concerns in the human service and helping professions (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997), much has been written about retaining quality teachers. Only recently have researchers discovered retention is more of a problem than recruitment. The National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reported that across the nation 9.3% of public school teachers leave before they complete their first year in the classroom and over 1/5 of public school teachers leave their positions within their first three years of teaching. Additionally, nearly 30% of teachers leave the profession within five years of entry and even higher attrition rates exist in more disadvantaged schools (Delgado, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2001).

It is difficult to determine the actual percentage of teachers who leave the profession as a direct result of stress; however, in a literature review by Borg and Riding (1991) they noted that one-fifth to one-third of teachers reported teaching as either very to extremely stressful. Teachers who experienced disproportionately high levels of stress leading to higher attrition rates were general educators (Farber, 1991), special educators (Brownell & Smith, 1992) and those who provide related services for students with special needs (Fimian, Lieberman, & Fastenau, 1991).

Bertock, Nielsen, Curley and Bor (1989) cited three reasons which determine teacher stress, all interrelated and addictive: (1) stress events taking place in the environment, (2) the nature and intensity of the stress of resulting emotional responses; and (3) personality characteristics of the person. Teacher emotional stress components were listed as “anger, self-doubt, lack of confidence, exhaustion, hypertension, absenteeism, and early retirement” while teacher personality stress components were “negative self-perception, negative life experiences, low morale, struggle to maintain personal values and standards in the classroom (p. 118). The authors claimed a need for a complex, multi-faceted stress management and coping skills program for teachers with additional individualized treatment (p. 127).

Sederberg, and Clark (1990) studied vitality as an essential intangible, positive quality of individuals that is synonymous with purposeful production and sustained commitment.
They identified motivations as a dynamic force that sustains vitality and identified seven integrated “needs” that are essential for motivation. Without these needs, teachers are left with feelings of insignificance and deprivation. Mills (1991) reported researchers from the University of Oregon discovered a “higher self or metacognitive self-as-agent,” with intrinsic motivation being the by-product of a healthy, self-actualized individual” (p. 67). According to the researchers, individuals vacillate between the “higher” self and the "lower" self daily. When teachers operate at the lower self level they become “burned out and try to use external forces to attempt motivation in their students…consequently, teachers not only experience low self-esteem but also students were found to be high risk with low self-esteem” (p. 76).

**Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem, the positive feelings self-worth, is an inherent need for every human being and is a key component in restoring and maintaining mental and physical health (Meisenhelder, 1985). For more than a quarter of a century self-esteem has been viewed as the magic key to success and happiness. Consequently, the self-esteem movement continues to represent the cutting edge in cultivating healthy people and healthy communities. Moreover, it represents our most promising and effective means of developing sustainable solutions to our most persistent educational problems of stress, burnout, and depression.

Over the last 30 years, authorities in the field of psychology, education, and healthcare have attempted to clarify what is meant by high self-esteem. According to Rosenberg (1965), a person with high self-esteem is able to express feelings that one is good enough; the individual feels that he is a person of worth; he respects himself for what he is. Coopersmith (1967) describes self-esteem as the extent to which a person believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. Consequently, people with high self-esteem are seen as more acceptable socially and hence more active, more successful and less prone to deviance (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1979). Rosen (1991) stated that everyone attempts to maintain a level of self-esteem within a given range.

Research carried out on teachers found that those who have high self-esteem—in addition to the qualities of empathy, acceptance, and genuineness—are able to relate personally to students’ conversations and are generally relaxed in their teachings. Thus, students are able to follow and identify with this high self-esteem model (Murray, 1972).

According to the National Association for Self-Esteem [NASE] (2004), 50% of our nation’s adolescents are at risk in school due to low self-esteem.

Parents, educators, and counseling professionals are continually being encouraged to establish conditions that foster healthy self-esteem among adolescents for several compelling reasons. To begin, low self-esteem has been closely associated with many problem behaviors. To counteract feelings of devaluation, some individuals try to balance these feelings by any means, such as recourse to physical violence or aggression, by alcohol, drugs or risk-taking methods. Because adolescents are easily influenced or manipulated by others, teachers with high self-esteem can help them overcome feelings of inadequacy (NASE, 2004). As noted by Jenny (1990), self-esteem is important for teachers to have because it is inextricably linked to the teacher’s ability to communicate to students, which then allows students to empower themselves to be successful.
Conclusion

The relationship of stress, burnout and low self-esteem do not have a single cause; rather, the covarying stressors that educators experience in the performance of their daily roles contribute to the process of burning out and attrition (Wisniewski & Gargiulo, 1997). Respect for and understanding of administrators and teachers roles and a willingness to listen to and learn from one another can make the working environment more positive and productive for both administrators and teachers. Thus, when the working conditions of teachers remain conducive to the interactive, dynamics of a non-stressful environment, highly motivated teachers teach students to become highly motivated, thus, repeating a positive, productive cycle (Certo & Fox, 2002). Often by “changing a person’s situation, that person can be encouraged to change, to grow, to progress-the working assumption being that people can and do change” (Burgess, 1976, p. 7).

Boosting self-esteem among educators can be achieved by the following three steps as listed by The National Association for Self-Esteem (2002):

1. Use affirmations to boost your self-esteem. Write out positive statements about yourself and repeat each statement several times during the day.
2. Associate with positive, supportive people. When you are surrounded by negative people who constantly put you and your ideas down, your self-esteem is lowered.
3. Make a list of your past successes. This can even include your minor victories and read the list often because you will experience the feelings of satisfaction and joy.


1. A is for “acknowledge”. The first way teachers can manage their stress is to acknowledge what exacerbates their stress levels.
2. B is for “Behavior Modification”. Behavior modification can help teachers reach a state of homeostasis, such as exercise, meditation and diaphragmatic breathing.
3. C is for “Communication”. Communication provides an avenue for teachers to prevent stress or, when that is impossible, minimize the impact of stress. (pp 3-4).

The authors concluded that the key for teachers is to remember that much stress is within their control to manage using skills such as they have outlined.
References


