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Teacher Burnout and Self-Care Techniques

Ryan Stumne

rgstumne@go.stcloudstate.edu

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Teacher Burnout and Self-Care Techniques

by

Ryan Stumne

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J. Michael Pickle, Chairperson

Brian Valentini

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background Information: Historical Overview of Burnout and Self-Care

Freudenberger (1974) created the term “burnout” to describe the exhausting physical and mental strain placed on those who work in helping professions. These occupations include teaching, nursing, mental health care, and similar fields. He attributed the stress and strain of these professions to the demands of delivering physical, social, and emotional care to individuals.

In the United States, burnout rates have been consistently high. Factors contributing to these atypically high levels include larger class sizes, administrative pressures, community expectations, financial struggles, maladaptive student behaviors, and difficulties with classroom management. Burnout among teachers can produce decrements in performance, physical symptoms from somatization, and decisions to change careers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Through the use of self-care techniques, teachers who are struggling to cope with the stressors of education can relieve some of the pressures of the profession. Although there is no “beat all, end all” self-care techniques for alleviating all the stresses of the education field, there are many proven methods of self-care that have shown to provide relief for teachers facing burnout.

Definitions of Key Vocabulary

Self-care: the maintenance of one’s self-health, both physical and mental, when working in a career with high demand in aiding others. Self-care includes the conscious maintenance of one’s emotional and physical well-being, while working in a stressful environment. Self-care can

range from taking time to meditate, to exercising, to even visiting professional help, like therapists (Lawler et al., 2021).

Burnout: a term first used by American psychologist, Herbert Freudenberger to describe the exhausting physical and mental strain placed on those who work in “helping” professions (like teaching, nursing, mental health care, etc.). Professionals who suffer from “burnout” often feel overworked to the point of physical and mental fatigue, place their clients (students, patients, etc.) before their own, and are overwhelmed with constant feelings of underachieving in their fields. Burnout can affect personal relationships, neglect of physical health, and reduced performance and care for their field of work.

Wellness: Wellness is an active exercise of bettering oneself by making conscious, healthy choices that result in physical and/or mental growth. Although often referring to one’s physical health, wellness can equally be related to an individual's mental health as well. Individual perceptions can influence moral and motivation, and likewise, negative perceptions can hinder one’s ability to build a growth mindset, which can in turn lead to unhealthy physical and mental choices (International Self-Care Foundation [ISF], 2020).

Somatization: Somatic symptoms are physical conditions or pains solely related to excessive mental strain or stress. These mental stressors, ranging in mild to severe, can range from anxiety from a new job, relationship troubles, academic strain, depression, and other mental and emotional tensions. Physical results of these stressors can be gastrointestinal issues, physical pains, cardiopulmonary, and can either be short or long-term depending on the causes of somatic symptoms (Servan-Schreiber, 2000).

Autonomy: the ability to work under one's own accord, which includes making decisions and choices that relate to the direct benefit of the individual. In association with self-care, autonomy relates to being able to recognize that in order for an individual to be at their peak effectiveness for their peers and students, they must first be conscious of their self-health. In terms of education, maintaining one's autonomy is key in order to provide individualized instruction, avoiding "cookie-cutter" instruction, and continuing to further their own academic abilities.

Statement of the Problem

An array of problems manifest from burnout among teachers. Teachers routinely report elevated levels of dissatisfaction with their jobs. Myriad districts in Minnesota and throughout the United States have teacher shortages. These shortages arise as a function of teachers leaving the field rather than an initial low level of candidates for teaching positions. To remain viable, districts must find a means for improving the job satisfaction and for slowing the exodus from the profession. Because burnout contributes to both these problems, districts are trying to develop programs that ameliorate physical and mental exhaustion experienced by teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Self-care techniques are a variety of strategies and tools used to help relieve educators of some of these stressors and to help reduce teacher burnout rates. This review examined burnout among teachers and investigate the implementation of self-care programs for reducing stress among teachers. Three questions guided the analysis. First, what are the principal causes of burnout among teachers? Second, what self-care techniques are most efficacious in reducing the

emotional, physical, and behavioral sequelae of burn out? Finally, which district level self-care interventions have been successfully implemented?

Rationale

Several theoretical implications and applied outcomes may arise from this review. The theoretical issues arise from mind-body somatization within the context of reactive decision making. The applied issues address job satisfaction among teachers, teacher retention, and improving teacher performance.

Theoretical Issues

The constructs of wellness and of mind-body somatization have been widely investigated. However, these issues have not been fully examined within the scope of professional education. The results from this review may inform discussions of stress arising from repeated, reactive decision-making, and such findings may be applied to models of pedagogy and of leadership. One theoretical rationale behind the compilation and comparison of successful self-care techniques is the help of having a centralized location to reference proven and successful self-care techniques.

Practical Consequences and Outcomes

Programs that teach self-care techniques may attenuate burnout among teachers. Although burnout has been recognized and investigated for about 50 years, a noticeable shortage of universally taught or accessed self-care techniques for teachers to use is still extant. By compiling successful self-care techniques, teachers will have a centralized location to find self-care suggestions that fit their particular needs and degree of need. As the mental and physical health of educators improve through the implementation of self-care programs, a number of

ancillary benefits may arise. First, level of burnout is inversely related to performance. As teachers learn self-care techniques, they may become more effective in the classroom. Second, levels of burnout are directly related to job dissatisfaction and to the likelihood of career change. The implementation of self-care programs may be a means for reducing teacher shortages.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction: Purpose Statement and Organizational Scheme

The roles of the teacher have changed over time. Teachers have nurtured students who are without stable home conditions. They have been role models to those who have no one to emulate. Teachers have helped students develop moral compasses. Most recently, they have been technological innovators in the classroom. With all the roles that teachers assume, the managing of professional duties and personal weighs heavily on educators.

With these challenges, teachers often find their abilities and resources overwhelmed (Brown, 2020). Such exhaustion has been commonly known as professional burnout (Brown, 2020). Self-care, viz., stress relieving and healthy habit building practices (Brown, 2020), is one approach for ameliorating burnout. Self-care aims to alleviate some of the detrimental effects of the onset of burnout through a variety of different mental and physical exercises.

This review examined the construct of burnout as it manifests among teachers. Two themes guided the analysis. First, the direct and indirect effects of current educational models on teachers' abilities to complete their duties as educators to satisfaction are examined. Within this examination, current practices that hinder autonomy and that trigger somatic responses as a function of internal stress are principal foci. Second, self-care techniques that provide relief and encourage wellness are reviewed. Lacking a single panacea for the effects of burnout, many different approaches to self-care with both physical and mental emphases are addressed.

Review of Literature

Freudenberger (1974) used burnout to describe the exhausting physical and mental strain placed on those who work in "helping" professions, such as teaching, nursing, and mental health care. Professionals who suffer from burnout syndrome often feel overworked to the point of

physical and mental fatigue, place the needs of their clients before their own needs, and are overwhelmed with constant feelings of underachieving in their fields. Burnout can affect personal relationships, cause physical health to be neglected, and reduce professional performance (Freudenberger, 1974).

Origins of the Burnout Construct

Freudenberger (1974) experienced burnout as a function of the demand and the hours arising from his duties as a psychoanalyst. He often worked 10 to 12 hours as his “day job” before beginning his work at a free clinic where he often worked until late in the night and sometimes early morning. According to his report, Freudenberger experienced severe exhaustion between his two positions, and he noticed that his own burnout between led to a loss of charisma as the leader of the free clinic and to a loss of quality in his work (Fontes, 2020). Because of these experiences, Freudenberger continued to research, to study, and to publish works that addressed burnout in the helping” professions. His works became the theoretical and the applied basis for future research in the area.

Clinical Descriptions of Burnout Syndrome and Its Theoretical Origins

Fontes (2020) reviewed and extended Freudenberger’s work. The particular foci for his review were the original description of burnout and how the personal experiences of Freudenberger contributed to the understanding of the construct. During the 1970s, Freudenberger was a researcher and the head of a free clinic. These facilities provided cost free care to patients, and volunteers completed many of the clinical duties. These clinics were both free in cost, but they also represented the “free” spirited beliefs of many at the time. Fontes (2020) argued that Freudenberger’s experiences at the clinic led to the use burnout as a

descriptor. At the time, term of “burnout” was used in popular media and slang to describe an individual who was heavily involved in the drug scene at the time.

From the reports of Freudenberger, Fontes (2020) described the physical and mental sequelae that characterize the syndrome of burnout. These symptoms include physical and psychological exhaustion, susceptibility to lingering colds and illnesses, suffering from frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disturbances, sleeplessness, and shortness of breath. Further psychological symptoms include as “difficulty in holding in feelings, instantaneous irritation and frustration, quickness to anger, and potential attitudes of suspicion and paranoia” (Fontes, 2020, p. 6).

Fontes suggested that individuals who are more committed to their work are the ones who are more likely to experience burnout. He argued that professionals in the helping fields often place the needs of their clients ahead of their personal needs.

Exclusionary Criteria for Burnout

Burnout is not a form of depression. Although it may lead to feelings of depression, burnout itself is not considered depression (Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care [IGWiG], 2006). Individuals suffering from burnout usually exhibit symptoms from three different areas: physical and mental exhaustion, alienation from work-related activities leading to cynicism and detachment from work-related tasks, and reductions in performance in the work setting. Simple tasks may become difficult, and concentration may be lessened. The syndrome of burnout differs fundamentally from depression. Although the enjoyment of other non-work activities may be affected, individuals experiencing burnout do not typically have negative thoughts and feelings related to other areas of their lives. Depression further differentiates from

burnout in that it is tied to feelings of low self-esteem, hopelessness, and potential suicidal tendencies (IGWiG, 2006).

Somatization and Physical Symptoms of Burnout

Burnout can produce unexplained physical complaints and issues; somatization is the clinical descriptor for physical symptoms arising from mental health and psychological issues (Glise et al., 2014). Somatization can “range from mild stress-related symptoms to severe debilitation,” and it can lead to incredibly high medical costs due to unknown reasons for patient suffering, that results in extensive testing with often inconclusive results (Servan-Schreiber et al., 2000). Emotional and physical exhaustion may exacerbate (Van Der Doef, & Maes, 2002). Shortness of breath, dizziness, gastrointestinal issues, frequent headaches, and feelings of extensive fatigue may result or be amplified.

Burnout Among Teachers in American Schools

Teacher burnout in America yields a number of challenges for the profession. Retention rate of teachers declines. Educators are dissatisfied in and out of the classroom, and the lowering of quality education provided to students. Absenteeism and dissatisfaction may increase.

Teacher turnover and departure from the profession has increased. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) reported teacher departure rates are on the rise. About 16% of teachers leave their current teaching position each year. Of this population, 67% of these teachers leaving due to voluntary pre-retirement (30%) or voluntarily “movers” transfer from their current position to an external position (37%). The remaining 33% of those leaving the profession depart as a function of personnel or age-related action (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Teachers who voluntarily leave the profession before retirement report concerns related to testing and accountability measures, unhappiness with school administration, dissatisfaction with the teaching career as a whole, and leaving for financial exigencies. Because expertise in some disciplines may yield greater financial remuneration outside of schools, licensure in mathematics, in science, in special education, and in foreign language is a risk factor for early departure from the field (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Geographic region is also a predictor of early departure. Teacher turnover rates are the highest in the south and are lowest in the northeastern region of the United States. Geographic region is a proxy for pay scales, class sizes, and investments in local education. Teachers working in areas identified as lower socioeconomic status are also at increased risk for early departure from the field (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

According to Dworkin (1987), teachers are three times as likely to depart from their jobs as their peers working in different professions, and burnout is a common factor for leaving teaching positions. Factors contributing to increased risk of burnout include inexperience as a teacher, having an external locus of control, and having experienced racial discrimination or racial isolation.

Van Der Doef and Maes (2002) examined the relation between quality of work and teacher burnout. Teachers were compared with their peers in other disciplines. Teachers reported issues to higher levels of pressure resulting from time and work demands, role ambiguity, student aggression, and the physical demands of work at rate at levels that exceeded those of their peers who are not teachers. Somatic complaints and a general lack of physical wellbeing were associated with the physical demands of teaching.

Chang (2013) examined how teachers regulate their emotions during episodes of maladaptive behavior of their students. Classroom management is one of the most significant factors contributing to burnout among novice teachers. The relations among teacher emotions, classroom management, and pedagogy requires further investigation (Emmer & Sough, 2001). Such interactions can affect emotional wellbeing and feelings about teaching positions (Emmer & Sough, 2001). Chang (2013) argued that maladaptive behavior, the negative affect associated with such events, and the inability of teachers to regulate their emotions following these episodes contributes to burnout. Teachers who employ proactive measures of coping were far less likely to feel the effects of burnout after negative behaviors, because they were able to perceive possible risks within the classroom prior to incidences (Chang, 2013). Consequently, novice teachers need additional training in classroom management and require support from administrators when maladaptive behaviors recur.

Wellness

Teaching is one of the careers with the highest levels of stress, and it also associated with lower levels of job satisfaction (Brasfield et al., 2019). Consequently, teacher must practice self-care and develop wellness strategies (Brasfield et al., 2019). Wellness is a “balance in the dimensions [of physical, mental, and social health], allowing an individual to cope with life circumstances and to achieve an optimal state of being... wellness emphasizes lifestyle behaviours that go beyond basic health into optimal states across multiple dimensions” (Bart et al., 2018). When one of these dimensions is impacted by the stressors of a profession, an individual’s wellness to be disrupted.

Brasfield et al. (2019) studied teachers who maintained well within one area of their physical and mental well-being. The effects of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment through the maintenance of physical wellness, viz., exercise and nutrition and through creative factors, viz., self-maintenance of internal thinking, emotions, control, work and positive humor. The wellness maintenance factors of coping self, social self, and essential self, did not reduce the potential for burnout (Brasfield et al., 2019). Teacher training programs, schools, and school systems must contribute to the understanding of stressors in education and work to attenuate the consequences.

Bubb and Earley (2004) examined the number of hours teachers traditionally work and work activities teachers complete during a typical week. Tasks were categorized as actual teaching, lesson preparation and marking (grading), non-teaching contact with pupils and parents, school and staff management, administrative tasks, and individual or professional development. According to their report, teachers spend less than half of their time (36% the primary level and 39% at the secondary level) actually teaching in their classrooms, and the majority of time is taken up by other tasks (Bubb & Earley, 2004).

The workloads of teachers have also been assessed (e.g., Bubb & Earley, 2004). Survey responses show that teachers perceive their hours worked as onerous; 85% of teachers stated their excessive workload was having a detrimental impact on their lives at home, 60% worked more than 50 hours each week. Slightly more than one-third of teachers surveyed reported that their workloads left them feeling exhausted and stressed on a daily basis. For some teachers, workload demands negatively affect their social lives. Almost two thirds of respondents to the

survey felt that they were expected to complete tasks that they did not deem as a teacher's responsibility (Bubb & Earley, 2004).

Self-Care

To respond appropriately to the stressors and difficulties in teaching, self-care techniques have been recommended. Self-care is the maintenance of one's self-health, both physical and mental. Self-care includes the conscious maintenance of one's emotional and physical well-being, while working in a stressful environment (Lawler, et al., 2021; Paul, 1997). The World Health Organization defines self-care as "... a lifelong habit and culture. It is the action individuals take for themselves and their families to stay healthy and take care of minor and long-term conditions, based on their knowledge and the information available, and working in collaboration with health and social care professionals where necessary" (ISF, 2020).

Additionally, self-care can vary in efficiency from one person to another; one strategy that works well for one person may lack effectiveness in another compared to another technique (Lawler, et al., 2021).

The International Self-Care Foundation (2020) divides self-care elements into seven different categories or "pillars." Health literacy, which includes understanding basic health information and how to make proper health related decisions. Mental well-being consists of knowing various aspects of one's health (such as body mass index level, blood pressure, cholesterol level, and engaging in regular health screenings). Physical activity includes participating in moderate physical activities in order to maintain physical fitness. Healthy eating includes having a nutritious and balanced diet and consuming an appropriate number of calories daily. Risk avoidance or mitigation consists of avoiding tobacco and alcohol, practicing safe sex,

and accessing vaccines for communicable diseases when necessary. Good hygiene includes regularly washing hands, brushing teeth, and bathing. The rational and responsible use of products, services, diagnostics, and medicines when needed is the final dimension (ISF, 2020).

Lesh (2020) examined the health and welfare of special education teachers. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) was a specific focus. ACEs can range from mild to severe traumas. Teachers can also experience ACEs vicariously through interactions with students who have experiences trauma. Lesh (2020) advised teachers to be active participants in self-care in order to relieve some of the stresses of teaching and identifies self-care strategies for teachers. The first suggestion was recording two or three things that one is grateful for each day such writings can have a positive effect on moral and mental well-being. Teachers should practice reflective time. Regular exercise and proper diets are encouraged. Time for family and for family events must be maintained. Collegial support is valued. Pet therapy is recommended. A self-directed stress management plan should be developed. Teaching methods should be refreshed periodically. A focus on positive events should be fostered.

Mindfulness strategies are becoming a component of self-care strategies. Mindfulness should be prioritized and promoted. Jennings et al. (2019) studied the use of mindfulness techniques as a means for promoting the social and emotional competence of teachers. The results suggest that teachers can be trained to better manage their stress and well-being through the use of mindfulness strategies. Milne (2009) examined the stress levels reported by a group of Minnesota elementary education teachers in order to determine their use of mindfulness strategies and their effectiveness in mitigating their work-related stress. According to the

findings, meditation and mindfulness strategies create better engagement, healthy student and teacher relationships, and less classroom management concerns.

Chapter 3: Summary and Implications

Summary

Teacher burnout affects the instruction of students and the personal lives of teachers. Teacher mental well-being issues need to be addressed. Self-care strategies ameliorate the difficulties associated with each of these issues.

Burnout is physical and mental exhaustion that results from job and activity related stress (Freudenberger, 1974). Burnout manifests in exhaustion, in alienation from work-related activities, and in reduced performance in the work environment (IGWiG, 2006). Those who experience burnout can also be subjected to somatic symptoms of varying degrees of intensity. Somatic symptoms may include shortness of breath, dizziness, gastrointestinal issues, frequent headaches, and feelings of extensive fatigue (Van Der Doef & Maes, 2002).

Burnout can lead teachers to depart from their current positions and from the profession in general. Mediating variables that increase teacher attrition and exacerbate burnout include testing and accountability measures, unhappiness with school administration, dissatisfaction with the teaching career, maladaptive behavior exhibited by students, and financial exigencies (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers in the fields of mathematics, science, special education, and foreign language are more likely to leave their positions than to elementary school teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The effects of these factors are intense and persist across time.

To address the epiphenomenal effects of stress, self-care techniques have been recommended. The World Health Organization defines self-care as “Self-Care is a lifelong habit and culture. It is the action individuals take for themselves and their families to stay healthy and

take care of minor and long-term conditions, based on their knowledge and the information available, and working in collaboration with health and social care professionals where necessary” (ISF, 2020). An array of approaches to self-care are promulgated. These strategies include keeping a gratitude journal, practicing reflective time, consistently exercising, maintaining a proper diet, actively planning family time, creating school confidants, participating in pet therapy, developing a self-directed stress management plan, improving pedagogy in the classroom, and celebrating accomplishments (Lesh, 2020).

Another commonly encouraged self-care technique is to practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is “a type of meditation in which you focus on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment. Practicing mindfulness involves breathing methods, guided imagery, and other practices to relax the body and mind and help reduce stress” (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2020). Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) can provide effective long and short-term relief to teachers facing mentally taxing situations (Jennings et al., 2019).

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Implementations

Self-care is a practice designed to improve the quality of life among individuals experiencing stress and the effects of stress. Self-care techniques must be intentional and based on data. Self-care regimen must be maintained over time. If delivered through schools or as a component of professional development, administrators must actively support training in the area (Brasfield et al., 2019; Bubb & Earley, 2004; Milne, 2019). Time must be dedicated to self-care activities. School districts must foster cultures of self-care (Willis & Varner, 2010).

In terms of personal usage of self-care, I have accessed multiple forms. I have benefitted from pet therapy, from regular exercise, and from personal reflection. I understand the need for confidants within my school and appreciate the needs for confidentiality and for professional discussions. I am learning greater empathy and attempting to view situations from multiple perspectives and points of view.

Future Research

Although widely investigated, burnout and self-care research can be improved. First, more empirical studies of efficacy are needed. Much data is self-reported and lacks rigorous study related to implementation. Data for self-care techniques are largely anecdotal records and personal commentaries. Fewer studies have been conducted in the United States, and because

cultural beliefs and expectations affect educational practice, the results from studies completed in other countries may not generalize to classrooms in the United States. Finally, my experiences as a teacher have biased my research strategies and interpretations of the findings. Because of these biases, I have been more skeptical of the reported results. Many of the authors writing in the area of self-care have presented overly optimistic reports of their findings and the concomitant implementation of their program. Future studies need to be driven by both healthy skepticism but appropriate levels of open mindedness.

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