

An Evaluation of Stress and Burnout in Education and Its Impact on Job Performance and Work Life Quality

Richard Karnia¹

¹ Purdue University Global, West Lafayette, Indiana, United States

Correspondence: Richard Karnia, Purdue University Global, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA. E-mail: Karnia.Richard@gmail.com

Received: September 29, 2023

Accepted: October 27, 2023

Online Published: October 30, 2023

doi:10.5539/ijps.v15n4p13

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v15n4p13>

Abstract

Stress and burnout in education is the result of a teacher experiencing unpleasant, negative emotions—such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, or depression—that have an impact on their job performance (Carroll et al., 2021). Job performance is identified as the actions or behaviors that are relevant to an organization's goal and is measured by each individual's proficiency (Conte & Landy, 2019). Campbell identified multiple factors that contribute to job performance that are declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and motivation (Conte & Landy, 2019). Variables can impact and have a direct impact on one's performance if one of the factors are changed (Conte & Landy, 2019).

One of the biggest factors of job performance is burnout and stress and its impact on a teacher's motivation. Burnout is described as prolonged or chronic job stress that happens over time and is consistent and repeated (Hills, 2019). Burnout is marked by exhaustion; feeling emotionally drained; cynicism/less identification with the job; alienation; and feelings of reduced professional ability. This reduced capacity means that some people do not see any value to what they are doing or contributing (Hills, 2019). What happens to an individual who becomes burned out is that there is the extinction of motivation or incentive to a cause (i.e., the organization) (Hills, 2019). When looking at reasons for burnout/demotivating conditions, several areas of concern are highlighted that include a lack of control, lack of resources, unclear or impossible job expectations, dysfunctional workplace, a mismatch in workplace values, poor job fit, and work-life imbalance (Hills, 2019).

Keywords: stress and burnout, education, job performance, work life quality

1. Introduction

Many teachers are facing high levels of stress and burnout, which is leading to a decline in employee motivation as a result of loss of autonomy and control of their classroom. These factors result in high turnover rates and teachers leaving the education field. The objective of the research is to identify a link for changing classroom conditions that is a result of the standardization movement and the loss of teacher autonomy in the classroom. The goal would be to collect data using Likert Scales to identify the amount of autonomy that teachers have in their classroom in different schools, identify the positive or negative affect related to the loss, and identify the link between burnout and autonomy. Evaluation would also need to compare schools with teachers who have high levels of autonomy and the teacher retention rates between the two models. After gathering the data, an improvement plan should be created if there is a correlation to help determine the relationship between theories of motivation such as self-efficacy, self-determination, and achieving self-actualization and how these strategies can be used to increase teacher retention rate and reduce autonomy.

2. Literature Review

Teacher stress and burnout can be defined as the experience of a teacher experiencing unpleasant, negative emotions—such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration, or depression—from that their work that has been identified as a stress contagion that can cross over and will influence/increase stress levels in other individuals (i.e., their students) (Carroll et al., 2021). When reviewing current data, the burnout rate of K–12 teachers is 14% higher than other industries, with almost 44% of teachers feeling chronically stressed compared to other industries at just 30% (Peck, 2023). One key element identified was teachers' poor work-life balance; up to 85% of teachers define their work as unsustainable, often using nights and weekends to make up work (Peck, 2023).

Voices from the Classroom organization annual teacher survey shows that 87% of teachers agree they have too many non-teaching responsibilities to be effective educators (Tadros & Faulker, 2023). A staggering 55% of educators are thinking about leaving the teaching profession earlier than they had initially planned, according to a National Education Association (NEA) survey of its members released in February of 2022 (Walker, 2022).

The National Education Association attributes burnout to teachers' pervasive sense of having lost control of their classroom due to mandated changes to educational philosophy, which is not accepted by a majority of veteran teachers who are turned off by changes (Campbell, 1983). Such feelings can bring about teachers' dissatisfaction and lack of motivation toward their career and lead to a decline in teachers' professional development (Javadi, 2014). A transition has taken place in a national trend to more clearly document and measure what is taught, which is a supervisory way to hold teachers accountable and a shift towards standardizing lesson plans (Brundin, 2016). Teachers are highly skilled and highly qualified professionals, but a transition to a heavily standardized secondary-level curriculum has stymied teachers' motivation and creativity (McCabe, 2017). Teachers are under constant scrutiny through models such as common core and guaranteed and viable curriculums requiring standardization connected to evaluations, which is often perceived as a significant lack of both trust and respect for teachers as autonomous professionals (McCabe, 2017). Teachers are confined by a model of conformity that robs them of their professional agency and creative capacity (McCabe, 2017).

3. Methods/Research

After conducting an interview with a high school principal, there appears to be a detachment from the factors that are contributing to teacher stress and burnout. One part of the conversation is the viewpoint from administrators that teachers are burned out from teaching after several years and just lose their "passion" for the art of teaching and interacting with students. The factors for burnout from a principal versus a teacher perspective highlights a major disconnect/discrepancy between administration and teachers on the fundamental purpose of why teachers become secondary or high school teachers. The drive for secondary teachers was not only their students, but it was also for the content they taught; many teachers speak of their enthusiastic love for their subject matter (Smoot, 2013). For passionate teachers, teaching does not so much complement their expertise as it completes it. For them, knowing a subject fully is being able to teach it, both of which are mutually enriching (Smoot, 2013). The current stress-reducing strategies in secondary schools focus on the emphasis on post-work social activities and social gatherings such as lunches or training that occur during teacher preparation time. Administration struggled to understand why these social activities are poorly attended even though they try to create a sense of community or connection. This observation/discussion point fails to take into account that another factor for teacher stress was the work-life balance, which shows a disconnect between identified stressors and stress-reducing activities such as after work socials or school related functions. Another area of stress for teachers was dealing with cultural and political issues within the classroom by balancing the diversity of ideas and backgrounds that students come from; therefore, the impact is that teachers have to constantly be on guard about cultural sensitivity.

4. Discussion

Reforming education requires respect for the professional autonomy of teachers and granting them the freedom to make independent decisions within their own classroom about what is best for their students; after all, education is not a product but a process (McCabe, 2017). Teachers have continued to lose control of their classroom due to the transition towards standardization, which has been identified as a leading cause of stress and burnout (McCabe 2017). Education reform should find ways to retain teachers and increase work-life satisfaction. The application of the self-determination theory states that when people perceive the feeling of being controlled, their motivation and satisfaction decline (Latham, 2011). The self-determination theory focuses on individuals' inherent growth tendencies and the satisfying three needs—the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy—which are essential for optimal function and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to a sense of volition and internal perceived locus of causality in one's undertakings and the desire to feel that one's actions emanate from the self and reflect who one really is and not the result of external pressures (i.e., mandated curriculum) (Martela & Riekk, 2018). Competence, in turn, is about a sense of mastery and efficacy in one's activities, which is connected to teachers wanting to be viewed as subject matter experts (Martela & Riekk, 2018).

Relatedness is more about the interpersonal dimension, reflecting the extent to which a person feels that one is connected to others, has caring relationships, and belongs to a community (Martela & Riekk, 2018). Current education models including common core and guaranteed and viable curriculum for standardization and evaluation fail to take into account these human motivational factors. Therefore, the models should be reformed

versus the current environment, which is highly focused on strict deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals. Research has shown that a focus on pressure leads to diminished intrinsic motivation, which is linked to a perceived locus of causality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The application of self-determination will lead to high quality and sustainable motivation for teachers. Self-determination will foster a workplace condition in which teachers will feel supported in their autonomy, have higher levels of satisfaction, and will lead to collateral benefits, such as the experience of less stress in the presence of the high job demands of the classroom and school environment (Deci et al., 2017).

Schools should apply Daniel Pink's motivational principles of autonomy, mastery, and purpose (Pink, 2009). Schools are currently operating under the guise of standardization in the name of equity, leading to the opposite of autonomy, which is control. Control creates an environment of compliance versus one of autonomy, which leads to engagement and then to mastery, or the desire to get better at something that matters (Pink, 2009). Autonomy promotes enhanced persistence at school, higher productivity, less burnout, and greater levels of psychological well-being (Pink, 2009). A lack of individual discretion in the classroom is the main reason for declining productivity and job satisfaction. The mandated extra paperwork, meetings, and other non-teaching/classroom tasks, along with scripted curriculum disrupts the four essential features of autonomy in work: what people do, when they do it, how they do it, and with whom they do it (Pink, 2009). Pink's view mastery is power tool that allows one to live a satisfying life of personal fulfillment, enabling teachers to view how working towards mastery within their subject matter would reduce one's stress and burnout (Pink, 2009). When discussing Pink's goal of purpose, we see that autonomous people who are working towards mastery perform at a high level, and they do this in service of a greater objective that can achieve even more (Pink, 2009). When education's current purpose currently is to only get students to meet a standard, demonstrate a skill, or pass a standardized measurement, the purpose is often at the loss of the development of relationships. These relationships encourage students to debate, analyze, and create, which are the product of truly great expertise and mastery (McCabe, 2017). These are the markers of a great teacher, but this is unrecognized by standardized tests, which have been used to scrutinize teachers, increased stress, and illustrated a lack of both trust and respect for teachers as autonomous professionals (McCabe, 2017). When teachers are stripped of their autonomy, creativity, and professional judgment, their ability to meet the individual needs of their students is stifled (College Readiness, 2023).

Another psychological principle that can reduce stress and is connected to autonomy, mastery, and purpose is the development of an environment that promotes self-efficacy. Research suggests that personal resources such as self-efficacy are powerful protective factors against inflated levels of stress and psychological distress (Katsantonis, 2020). When teachers have high self-efficacy over what they are teaching, they will commit to high goals for themselves and their students (Latham, 2012). If a teacher falls short of a goal, they will enhance their performance by setting a new challenging goal for themselves; this adoption of a goal will create new motivating discrepancies to be mastered (Latham, 2012). Thus, if teachers have self-efficacy that is derived from competence and mastery, they will continue to strive to set new goals for themselves and their students and be lifelong learners of their subject matter area.

Burnout and stress play a key contributor in reducing job satisfaction; when job satisfaction is low, it prevents an individual from achieving a path towards self-actualization. When teachers do not feel any path towards self-actualization they lack the capacity to realize their own potential; do not have a balanced view of themselves; and do not develop self-confidence, self-esteem about their teaching methods, or their ability to teach and connect with students (Bedaway et al., 2017). A key component that is linked with developing self-actualization is creativity. When creativity is stifled in the classroom due to standardization, a teacher will find it difficult to—or is prevented from—obtaining self-actualization, which will result in lower satisfaction with life (Bedaway et al., 2017). A work or school environment needs to emphasize and promote employee engagement that allows them to have creative support, employee engagement, and feedback, which in turn will lead to fulfilling an employee's purpose. This engagement often results in motivating an employee or teacher beyond what a material or financial reward could (Bedaway et al., 2017). When applying Herzberg's two-factor model in the school environment, often the emphasis from administration and school boards focuses on satisfying teachers' hygiene needs (physical and security needs) and does not emphasize motivator needs (self-esteem and self-actualization) (Conte & Landy, 2019). By creating a classroom and school environment that is not focused on a strict standards-based curriculum, but instead promotes teachers' autonomy and creativity, it will lead to meeting motivator needs. Meeting motivator needs will result in a greater expenditure of effort from teachers while at the same time increasing their satisfaction, which may increase teacher retention rates (Conte & Landy, 2019).

Other areas that contribute to teacher burnout are the classroom environment and student interactions. Many teachers, even those not teaching social studies, walk on eggshells in the wake of restrictions on classroom conversations about race and gender. Some teachers avoid potentially “divisive topics” altogether, while others are more cautious with their language (Will, 2023). When talking about diverse topics, teachers will need to plan ahead and be prepared for all perspectives by being aware that students’ opinions have deeper origins that are wrapped up in their personal identities influenced by family, culture, and religious identity (Indiana University, 2023). Another step is to assign work in advance that allows students to articulate their view with evidence. The assignments could be connected to disciplinary content, which allows them to do logical thinking versus having emotional-based discussions (Indiana University, 2023). Another key idea when discussing diverse issues is for teachers to weigh the impact of sharing their own opinion; if they do share an opinion, a teacher should elaborate on the thinking process of sharing that in relation to the content of the course (Indiana University, 2023). A final step to address and deal with diverse and multicultural issues is to allow students to synthesize what they have heard that will give students a chance to process any ideas that may cause cognitive dissonance (Indiana University, 2023).

An evaluation of other factors and working conditions that can be changed to reduce teachers’ stress would be a study to focus on the amount of time that teachers spent on paperwork and other non-teaching responsibilities. They could identify if there is correlation to burnout and time spent on paperwork versus teaching responsibilities. Many teachers seek to collaborate with staff members as a part of the school day/planning time. However, teachers are often burdened with using this limited time for the team to focus on completing paperwork for administrative tasks instead of using the time how a teacher and team would best see fit (Tadros & Faulkner, 2023). Schools should allow time for teaming, but they should structure the time for autonomous work groups that allows teams to have control over a variety of functions that include planning, allocating work priorities, and performing a variety of work, which also supports the teachers that sought after a desire for autonomy (Conte & Landy, 2019). Autonomous work groups tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction (Conte & Landy, 2019). Another disconnect in education administration theory is the idea that norms need to be displayed, read, and created, which is a forced feeling and non-autonomous environment. Teachers and departments need to allow norms to organically form and reflect the informal and unspoken rules that teams adopt to regulate behaviors among colleagues (Conte & Landy, 2019).

5. Conclusions

One can see that policies within schools have led to multiple factors that are causing an increase in stress and burnout in teachers. Decision-makers within schools should take an active role in understanding how high turnover rates and burnout are connected to policies and decisions that lead to disrupting teachers’ motivation and satisfaction. A goal should be to evaluate and change the teaching environment to one that promotes autonomy and supports the motivational factors of self-determination, autonomy, mastery, competency, self-efficacy, and self-actualization of its teachers. Further research should seek to determine if changes are made, and autonomy should be returned to teachers so that it will lead to a lower percentage of teachers seeking to leave the profession. Further research could include a longitudinal study to identify the correlation in teacher autonomy and rates of teacher turnover within schools or districts. Other factors should be looked into including the impact on teachers’ attitudes related to the role of hygiene factors (i.e., salary) on contributing or reducing burnout and stress (Latham, 2012). Teachers and schools can also work with organizations and professional development that emphasize how to change attitudes by using aspects of Peterson and Seligman’s attribution theory which focuses on people learning to make retroactive judgements of the cause of their performance and emotions which will impact ones optimism and that will help teachers focus on the locus, stability, and controllability of their profession and the affect connected to each (Latham, 2011). Applications of Peterson and Seligman’s theory can also continue to work and identify strategies to increase optimism and to develop plans to increase teachers’ psychological capital, which is a state that can be positively affected by multiple factors (Latham, 2011).

References

- Bedway, R., Ramzy, O., Maher, A., & Eldahan, O. (2017, July 11). The Role of Training, Democratization, and Self-Actualization in Addressing Employee Burnout. *Canadian Center for Science and Education*.
- Brundin, J. (2016, September 4). *After 25 Years, this teacher Says It’s All the Paperwork That Made Him Quit*. NPR
- Campbell, L. (1983). Teacher Burnout: Description and Prescription. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.1983.10113845>

- Carroll, A., York, A., Fynes-Clinton, S., O'Connor, E., Flynn, L., Bower, J., Forrest, K., & Ziaei, M. (2002, July). *The Downstream Effects of Teacher Well-Being Programs: Improvement in Teachers' Stress, Cognition, and Well-Being Benefit Their Students*.
- College Readiness. (2023). 5 Reasons for Teacher Burnout and What Administrators Can Do to Help. *UWorld*. <https://collegereadiness.uworld.com/blog/five-reasons-for-teacher-burnout-and-what-administrators-can-do-to-help/>
- Conte, J., & Landy, F. (2019). *Work in the 21st Century, An Introduction to Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. Wiley.
- Deci, E., Olafsen, A., & Ryan, R. (2017, January 11). Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032516-113108>
- Indiana University. (2023). Managing Difficult Classroom Discussion. *Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning*. <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/managing-difficult-classroom-discussions/index.html>
- Javadi, F. (2014). *On the Relationship between Teacher Autonomy and Feeling of Burnout Among Iranian EFL Teachers*. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.480>
- Katsantonis, I. (27, April 2020). Factors Associated with Psychological Well-Being and Stress: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Psychological Well-Being and Gender Differences in a Population of Teachers. *Pedagogical Research*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.29333/pr/8235>
- Latham, G. (2011). *Work Motivation: History, Theory, Research, and Practice*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335520>
- Martela, F., & Riekkari, T. (2018, July 10). Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, and Beneficence: A Multicultural Comparison of the Four Pathways to Meaningful Work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01157>
- McCabe, E. (2017, October 4). Our Rigid Education System is Killing Creativity in the Classroom. *Irish Times*.
- Peck, Delvin. (2023, May 31). *Teacher Burnout Statistics: Why Teachers Quit in 2023*. DelvinPeck.com. <https://www.devlinpeck.com/content/teacher-burnout-statistics>
- Pink, D. (2009). *Drive, The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Riverhead Books.
- Ryan, R., & Deci, E. (2000, January). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. *American Psychological Association*, 55(1), 68-78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Smoot, B. (2013, February 27). Passion and Awareness: What Great Teachers Have in Common. *Higher Ed Jobs*. <https://www.higheredjobs.com/blog/postDisplay.cfm?post=412>
- Trados, J., & Faulkner, G. (2023, August 28). Teachers have too Many Extra Responsibilities to Be effective. Some Ways to Help. *The 74*.
- Walker, T. (2022, February 21). Survey: Alarming Number of Educators May Soon Leave the Profession. *National Education Association Today*.
- Will, M. (2023, January 25). Scared, Anxious, Worried: States' New Restrictions Have Teachers on Edge. *Education Week*.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).