UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING TEACHER BURNOUT

A SOURCEBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Teacher burnout is a very broad concept with several different aspects. It includes stress, professional dissatisfaction, absenteeism, low professional involvement, and the wish to leave the profession. In more severe cases, it may even lead to emotional exhaustion and depression (Esteve, 1992). Also for Rudow (this volume), “burnout is an overlapping concept... it is overlapping as it unites symptoms of (chronic) stress, fatigue, job dissatisfaction, anxiety.” He notes that the terms “burnout” and “stress” (more specifically “distress”) are used as synonyms. Teachers who have professional problems and who cannot cope in an efficient way with those problems experience distress (Pithers and Fogarty, 1995). Burnout results from continuously experiencing distress (not cu-stress). It is always negative. Maslach (1993; this volume) developed a multidimensional model defining “burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced accomplishment.”

Woods (this volume) discusses the introduction of the Education Reform Act of 1988 in the school systems of England and Wales and the subsequent steep increase in the number of teachers applying for early retirement because of health reasons. He uses it as a case study that may tell us a lot about “theoretical and conceptual constructions that have common currency” regarding teachers’ stress (and burnout). Also, when looking at stress from a psychological or a psychosocial point of view – as we want to do, rather than to consider it as a social or sociological phenomenon as Woods does – it is indeed possible to derive from the specific England/Wales case more general underlying psychological processes leading (or not) to stress, burnout, and demotivation among teachers. Illustrating this is the main goal of the chapter.

First, we would like to make a few remarks. Not only teachers but also many other social professionals who work in close relationship with other individuals or groups of individuals show burnout. Also in other jobs, in
private companies and public institutions, many people suffer from distress, demotivation, and burnout. Maslach's first studies of burnout did not even include teachers.

It is also important to keep in mind — as Woods does — that not all teachers experience stress. There are at least as many, and probably more, teachers who are still highly motivated, and not over stressed than there are over stressed, demotivated, or burned-out teachers (Pithers and Fogarty, 1995). Who are the teachers who suffer from stress and burnout and how do they differ from their colleagues without those problems? Research in "high-vitality teachers" (Sederberg and Clark, 1990) could help to identify the qualities of highly motivated, nonstressed teachers.

The danger with the media hype around students' lack of motivation and teachers' stress and burnout is that it might cause the many teachers who are still highly motivated and who still love their jobs to feel outdated and awkward. Teachers' stress and students' demotivation (Lens and Decruyenaere, 1991) seem to be contagious.

So, there are many teachers who are not strained and there are many non-teachers who suffer from stress that is related to their job. The problem of occupational stress is not new and it is certainly not specific to teachers (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal, 1964).

Lens and Schops (1991) report that in a group of 718 junior high school and high school teachers in Flanders, only 5% said that their job was a more or less permanent source of stress; 42% said that they were regularly stressed in their job. However, 41% answered that this was very seldom the case and 12% were never stressed by their job. A large majority — 67% — were rather or very satisfied with their jobs and only 17% were rather or very dissatisfied.

When the researchers asked the teachers in their sample if they would choose to become a teacher again if they could restart their career, not more than 20% said "certainly," 31% said "probably," 20% said "it depends," 20% answered "probably not," and 9% said "certainly not." This is a very gloomy picture. But what are the numbers among other professionals such as nurses, bank tellers, insurance agents, and salespersons?

Complaining teachers very often compare themselves with employees with about the same level of educational training but holding a job in private companies. In general, teachers think that those people are much better off professionally. They think their neighbor — unlike teachers — has a lower workload, is less stressed, is paid or rewarded as a function of his or her merits, can be promoted, and so on: "The grass is always greener on the other side" (Jeurissen, 1992).
In a pilot study, Lens and Creten (1995) compared a group of 110 junior high school and high school teachers (from only two different schools) and fifty white-collar employees (from also fifty different companies) with a corresponding level of education. They found that 92% of the teachers and 88% of the employees were at least “rather satisfied” with their jobs. The mean score (on a 7-point scale: 1 = very satisfied; 7 = very dissatisfied) for teachers (\(M = 2.20\)) is not different (\(F[1, 147] < 1.0\)) from the mean score for employees (\(M = 2.28\)). However, they also found that 95% of the teachers and only 76% of the employees reported feeling that what they contribute to their job (their input) is smaller or less important than what they get out of it (their output). More teachers than employees subjectively felt that they get more out of their job than they have to contribute (the input/output ratio being smaller than 1.00). The mean input/output ratio is significantly (\(F[1, 142] = 6.82, p < .01\)) lower for teachers (\(M = 0.70\)) than for employees (\(M = 0.84\)). So, the grass is not really greener on the other side, or is it greener on both sides? The big majority of the teachers (89%) and of the employees (84%) considered their input/output ratio to be fair (see Adams' equity theory; Adams, 1965; Adams and Freedman, 1976). This difference is not significant.

Twenty-four percent of the teachers had the feeling that they are now more motivated for their job than they used to be, 30% said that they are now less motivated, and the other 46% do not experience any difference. For the employees, the picture is somewhat less positive: The corresponding percentages are 20%, 42%, and 38%. The chi-square (2) = 2.22, however, is not significant. Also, Pithers and Fogarty (1995) unexpectedly found almost no differences in occupational stress between vocational teachers and a professional/business reference group.

Diekstra, de Heus, and Schautele (this volume) asked the research question, “Do teachers burn more easily?” (than other social professionals), and found a strongly affirmative answer. Several studies show that burnout is a more important problem in the teaching profession than in many other professions with similar academic and personal requirements (Kyriacou, 1987; Punch and Tufteman, 1990).

Probably for the sake of simplicity, Woods distinguishes among only four types of accommodating teachers and nonaccommodating teachers. We prefer to consider stress as a continuous independent variable. People are more or less stressed. From a psychological point of view, stress or strain results from subjectively weighting on the one hand the demands that are made by the job and the circumstances in which the job has to be done, and on the other hand the available resources one is willing to put in
the job (Boehr and Newman, 1978; French, 1973). This means that whether a job is stressful or the degree to which it is stressful is a highly individual determination. In Woods’s case study, teachers became stressed mostly because the demands on them were increased, due to “the intensification” of their work. In our own studies, about 20% of teachers refer to their decreasing individual resources (due to age, health, and lack of on the job training in, for example, the psychology of today’s adolescents) as an important cause of stress. Of course, there are many other factors that may lead to teacher burnout (Friedman, 1991; this volume). Farber (this volume) discusses a “hypothetical experiment” illustrating changes in the teaching profession that can contribute to the increase of teacher burnout.

The relationship between the level of experienced stress and psychological well-being is curvilinear or an inverted U-shape. Recall the old and often neglected Yerkes-Dodson Law indicating, in this case, that stress levels below or above an optimal point have negative consequences. The level of stress at which people function most optimally is very individual and depends on the kind of task to be done (e.g., complexity, difficulty, novelty). Some people would feel much better and perform more efficiently if they were more stimulated and stressed. The concept of stress refers almost always—and also in these chapters—to levels of stress beyond the optimal. It is then also referred to as “distress” (versus eu-stress or optimal stress). But we have limited this discussion to stress as distress and eventual burnout.

A Multilevel Approach: Stress as a Function of Person and Situation Interactions

As suggested by Lewin’s paradigmatic behavioral formula $B = f(P, E)$, all behaviors and psychological processes result from the interaction between individual and situational variables. Woods (this volume) also refers to these two categories of causal variables to explain stress. What are the personal and the situational variables and circumstances that cause stress in nonaccommodating teachers and that can account for the four different types of accommodating teachers? In a somewhat different question, how do teachers explain that they are stressed (demotivated, burned out)? What type of causal attribution do they make? From a psychological point of view, this second question is at least as important as the first one. It is indeed the teachers’ perception or interpretation of situational, social, or sociological factors (the potential stressors) that will affect their functioning. And it is well documented in research on social cognition and self-perception that
causal attributions can be very biased (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). For example, when Lens and Schops (1991) asked teachers what motivates them for their job, 68% of the teachers made an internal attribution and referred to themselves; 34% made an external attribution by referring to the pupils and their parents. When asked what de-motivates them, only 33% of the teachers referred to variables within themselves and 43% referred to the pupils and their parents.

Initially, Woods (this volume) situates the teachers’ experiences on “a field” that is constituted by the interaction between sociological factors at the micro level (“the teacher’s biography and person”), the meso level (“institutional and middle-range factors”), and the macro level (“global trends and government policy”). In our own educational research on students’ and teachers’ motivation, we prefer the Lewinian formula and we distinguish between four types of factors: the teachers themselves or the P in the formula (their gender, age, and seniority, level of professional training, career expectations, marital status, physical and psychological health, etc.), and three levels of situational variables, the E in the formula: the class level (the teaching requirements and didactic instruments, the type and the level of the curriculum, the pupils and their parents), the school level (the principal or directorate, the board of management, the representatives of parents and of the local community, the colleagues, the local community, the school culture, etc.), and the national level (the government, the national church and their inspection or supervision, the labor market, socioeconomic variables, society in general, etc.). But these four categories largely correspond to the distinction made by Woods when he discusses nonaccommodation in the second part of his chapter.

Teachers and Their Careers

Woods (this volume) argues that teachers with strong feelings of vocation are more at risk of stress. Highly committed teachers derive their personal self-esteem to a large extent from their professional career and how they define it. They do not want to adjust to new demands that are contrary to their habitual style of teaching. All kinds of professional changes and renewals that are imposed on them are easily interpreted, not as a change for the better or as a challenge, but as a personal criticism. These hurt their self-esteem.

We cannot test this hypothesis in our data, but we did find that teachers, when asked to give the important reasons for their being positively motivated, refer most frequently to themselves. They say that for highly moti-
vated teachers, teaching is not a job but a vocation. If that is true, it may be part of the teachers’ motivational problems. At least in Belgium, for many teachers in elementary school and in junior high school, teaching was not their first choice. Before entering a teachers’ training college (outside the university system), most of them enrolled first at a university to prepare for a nonteaching job (e.g., law school, medical school, engineering, psychology, or educational sciences) but failed their freshman exams. They left the university to enter lower-level teacher training colleges. This pattern, of course, does not totally preclude strong feelings of vocation. But we would argue that, in general, such teachers identify less with the job than men and women whose first and only choice was to become a teacher (as it used to be “in the old days”). In Portugal, only 31% of the preservice teachers for elementary and junior high school say that teaching is their first professional project and that they want to be a teacher (Jesus, 1993). Contrary to Woods, Jesus (1995a) found that beginning teachers who really wanted to become teachers and who went to a teacher training college to realize their professional goal are more motivated for their job and show more resistance against potential causes of burnout (Jesus, 1995a).

From a motivational point of view, it would indeed be regrettable if Woods’s argument would hold. Good teachers should also stay lifelong students or continuing learners, as they expect their pupils to be (Maeuru, 1984). Teaching is not so much an achievement as a continuous learning experience in which one must grow and become more proficient. Lens and Schops (1994) found that highly motivated teachers, unlike demotivated teachers, are strongly interested in inservice training and other types of professional development. They also found that only 13% of 718 teachers do indeed refer to their colleagues and 15% to their principal as a source of motivation. It seems that teachers do not learn very much from each other professionally. We strongly agree with Woods where he refers to D. Hargreaves (1994). Teachers do indeed need a “new professionalism,” less individualism and more collaboration, less supervision and more mentoring, less resistance to change and more creativity, flexibility, and team spirit (Jesus, 1995b). It is easier to adapt in a constructive and efficient way to externally imposed changes in a group than as an individual. Teachers-in-training and teachers on the job should be given plenty of opportunities to acquire a more scholarly attitude, not so much for the content of the curricula that they are or will be teaching, as for the teaching itself and for the psychology of children and adolescents. It is amazing to see that in many schools, young and inexperienced teachers get the most difficult classes to
teach. In private companies, however, the newly recruited professionals are given the time to grow into their new jobs; they are assisted and coached by experienced colleagues. Also at the university level “mentoring partnerships with senior faculty give young professors the help they need to thrive when launching a career in academia” (Murray, 1995).

Regarding the age variable, we also found that younger teachers (ages 23 to 35) are generally less stressed and more satisfied than are the teachers in the age groups of thirty-six to forty-five and forty-six to sixty-five. Most of the teachers who experience stress more or less continuously belong to the oldest age group. Those least satisfied with the job are in the middle group. We also found that female teachers are significantly less stressed and more satisfied than male teachers. In the Lens and Creten (1995) data, this difference was in the same direction but not significant. For the employees the difference was in the other direction: Males were more satisfied with their job than females. However, this difference was not significant (nor was the interaction between gender and profession). The mean input/output ratio is not different for male ($M = 0.69$) and female teachers ($M = 0.71$).

Teaching in higher, more difficult levels of secondary education (e.g., the humanities) seems to be less stressful and more rewarding than teaching in lower levels of technical or vocational schools. Especially teaching general courses such as math and languages at the lowest levels of vocational education is a very nerve-racking enterprise for many teachers. This has, of course, to do with the type of students at that “bottom end.”

We also found, as Woods does, that teachers complain about their horizontal career. Most teachers cannot be promoted in their jobs. Only a very few can realistically aspire to become a principal, an inspector, or other administrator.

Many younger teachers have no job security and/or are forced to teach in different schools to have a full load. It is not easy to invest oneself in different institutions, each with its own climate and culture. This is even more difficult for older teachers who may have tenure but who are supernumerary in their school. Such teachers have – at least in Belgium – a priority when there is a vacancy and they are also a constant threat to younger colleagues without tenure in other schools.

Being a teacher implies, of course, much more than teaching. Many teachers in our elementary and secondary school samples complain that they have too many additional odd jobs (e.g., watching over the children in the playground, fund-raising, making house calls to recruit new pupils to the school, being involved with the sociocultural life of the local community).
Situational Variables

We distinguished three levels of situational factors: the class level, the school level, and the national level.

The Class Level

Lons and Schoeps (1991) found that for secondary school teachers, the pupils and their parents are the most important source of stress: 26.5% of all listed reasons for being stressed, expressed by 30% of the teachers. Many teachers have problems with children’s negative attitude, their lack of motivation, their disruptive behavior in class. Students’ lack of discipline is another important cause of teacher burnout (Jesus, 1995a). It seems to be stressful for teachers to cope with underachieving students; but teaching children who lack the necessary intellectual abilities and skills to be successful in the curriculum their parents selected for them is also stressful. Additionally, the psychological and emotional problems of children from broken families or with other problems at home are a burden for teachers.

Many teachers (about 20% in our data) admit they have disciplinary problems and feel handicapped by them because they know that in many cases, they will not be supported by their director and/or the parents. Indeed, teachers complain about two types of parents. Some parents are interested very little or not at all in the school career of their children. This attitude is more typical in lower-level technical and vocational education than in other types. Other parents are too much involved and obtrusive. They know everything better than the teachers. It is no longer true that the parents usually take the teacher’s side when there is a problem at school. They would rather blame him or her and believe the child’s point of view: “my child, beautiful child.”

The School Level

Teaching is a very lonely activity, even in large schools. We found that only a very small percentage of the teachers refer to their colleagues (13%), their director or principal (13%), or the inspector/supervisor (1%) as a source of motivation, help, and support. We refer to Friedman’s contribution to this volume for a discussion of how to prevent or mitigate teacher burnout by creating healthier work environments in schools.

The National Level

The second most important category of causes for teacher stress is from the national level. The Education Reform Act of 1988 and the resulting
intensification in teachers' jobs are a very good example (Woods, this volume). We see at least two important problems with nationwide educational reforms. First, they are too frequent; second, they are dictated or imposed on the schools and the teachers without much educational justification. The combination of both is, of course, the best way to demotivate people in whatever job or career.

First, each reform in educational programs or didactic approach is seen by teachers as an accusation of failure of the old system. You can imagine the motivational and emotional reactions of teachers who believed in and worked hard for the old program. They feel like many of the dogs in Seligman's experiments on learned helplessness. They experience not just helplessness but also hopelessness. They worked hard to make the program successful; nevertheless, someone "way up there" has decided to change things. Many of the things they worked hard for now seem to be superfluous. If they had not put in so much effort, the outcome would have been the same: failure. Experiencing no connection between action (input, effort, caring, etc.) and outcome is the best soil for cultivating helplessness, hopelessness, demotivation, stress, and depression. No wonder teachers who experience this a few times get burned out. They give up. They are no longer able to summon the energy, the enthusiasm, and the hard work to make the next new program succeed. Experience tells them that it does not matter at all, that things will be changed after a while, anyway. For example, the Flemish ministry of education decided recently that school directors or principals should no longer be educationally trained people or former teachers but management people. The present directors will have to limit their responsibilities to education as such. Finances, personnel management, human resource management, buildings, and so on will be handed over to business school graduates. What do you think the reaction will be among the present school directors who identify themselves to a large extent with their job and their school?

Second, most of the changes are imposed on the schools and the teachers from the top down. The teachers have no voice. "Teachers have little or no choice but to carry out the dictates of others" (Woods, this volume). Nobody asks for their opinion - even though we have known for a long time how important this is. Many teachers feel like pawns in the present school system, moved around by external forces (the government, the principal, the inspector, the parents). They live there with an external locus of causality, with no feelings of self-determination, and this totally undermines their intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Usually little or no justification is given for the new program (why is it better from
an educational point of view) and why teachers should be highly motivated to do more things if they do not see their educational benefits (Woods, this volume). We guess that the negative effects of the intensification program in England and Wales are due mostly to these two aspects. The right kind of job intensification program could also be a job enrichment program. And we do know from research in organizational psychology that the motivational, behavioral effects of job enrichment are the opposite of stress, demotivation, and burnout.

Conclusion

Teaching should be a we thing, not a me thing. Although teachers are finally alone with their children in the classroom, teachers should see themselves as team players who can learn a lot from professional exchange with colleagues. They should be given more opportunities for continuous learning and professional development, as is the case in many other jobs held by educated people. Teaching young children is certainly much more difficult in this extremely permissive, anti-authoritarian, open society than it was in the “old” days, when most of the children would immediately obey their parents and teachers, and when discipline was not a problem.

Some teachers overestimate their stressors and strains and should be more realistic when comparing themselves with other professionals. They probably underestimate the impact they still have on the learning process and the personal development of the children in their class. It is true that the status of their job has decreased in the society, but that did not start recently and it is true for many other jobs too – such as medicine and law.

“Teachers are made for teaching, and teaching shall they do.” That means, however, that as a group, they should also be much more involved in developing and evaluating educational programs and reforms. They should feel like “origins,” not like pawns, not only in their class but in the school system at large.
“Burnout” was first investigated in the 1970s as a crisis of overextended and disillusioned human service workers. But the nature of the syndrome has changed with the evolution in the nature of these human service professions. The current experience of burnout is lived out in a more difficult social context, with human service workers struggling harder for social credibility and job security. For instance, through the greater demands on their time and energy, many teachers are being pressed to do more work with fewer resources, while receiving fewer rewards and less recognition of their efforts. Psychologically, they run the risk of experiencing more emotional exhaustion and a sense of alienation from their work lives.

A prime objective of this volume is to provide new perspectives and a deeper understanding of the nature, conditions, and consequences of burnout, notably in the teaching profession. To do this, the contributions review the most recent research in the field, describe a “research agenda,” and provide an “action agenda” designed to prevent the incidence of burnout in the workplace.