

Toward Alleviation of Teacher - Burnout: Implications for Effective Teacher Productivity in the New Millennium

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Abstract

In the educational system, teachers are the major line officers. The extent to which the educational goals of a nation are achieved depends on the availability of well-qualified, devoted and highly motivated teachers. This paper identifies and discusses the effects of teacher-burnout on effective job performance. It surveys the various sources of distress affecting teachers and highlights the strategies that could help teachers cope with the problem. The paper finally proffered suggestions that could help educational administrators in alleviating burnout in the teachers' work environment for improving the overall teacher productivity.

Introduction

The study of teacher stress and burnout have long been areas of research and scholarly activity in education although theoretical knowledge in these areas remains limited. The word 'burnout' is the end effect of a long-term prolonged feeling of physical and emotional distress. Stress and burnout are responses to environmental demands. There is a potential for stress when the capabilities and resources of the individual cannot adequately meet the demands imposed by the work environment. When this becomes chronic and persistent, the individual is burn out.

The role of teachers in Nigeria educational system is becoming more greatly challenged than ever before. The success of the teacher depends essentially on his capacity to adjust to situations associated with the workplace. The work environment sets certain behavioural and performance requirements for the teacher, The teacher in turn has certain expectations of the work environment in terms of job satisfaction, provision of adequate facilities and reasonable remuneration.

World Bank Survey (1994) identified that the three factors which should enhance the quality of education in any education set up were totally absent in Nigeria. These include in their degree of importance;

- a qualified and motivated teacher force;
- availability of textbooks and instructional materials and teaching aids to support learning and concept development;
- the physical environment in which learning takes place.

The survey strongly revealed that in the Nigerian educational systems at all levels, these factors were grossly inadequate. The survey also revealed that the morale of the teacher is low owing to poor working conditions. The overall poor learning environment also contribute to the decay with dilapidated buildings, ill-equipped classrooms and the dearth of reading materials. Teachers have no instructional materials, the Bank wonders how much learning does take place in such devastating circumstances.

This fear becomes alarming in view of the increasing complex roles the teacher is expected to play to effectively strengthen education in the present millennium. As changing conditions have made teaching more stressful, some teachers have left the profession. For those remaining, there is the difficulty of coping with distress and burnout. Both low moral and low self-image including low self-esteem are conditions that negate effectiveness and productivity. The combination of these factors possibly lead to the exhaustion of teachers' emotionally and physically. Over the years, teachers have fought extremely hard to make themselves heard. In more recent times, they seem to be fighting a war on several fronts, with the government; with the general public, and most destructive, with the students under their care. Nobody is interested in the teachers' frustration and the students inability or unwillingness to learn or the defensive stand of parents when their children are punished. Educators in developed countries have begun to stress that the cumulative effects of these negative emotions over time lead to burnout syndrome in teachers.

Teacher Stress and Burnout in Perspective

Stress is a reality of teaching which can be beneficial or harmful depending on how a teacher responds to it (Selye 1974). For example, an able, challenging class can be stressful to teach. If efforts to meet students need lead to increased teacher growth and satisfaction, the effects of stress are beneficial. If such efforts result in emotional and physical illness, the effects of stress are harmful. Selye (1974) uses the terms eustress and distress to distinguish between beneficial and harmful types of stress. It is the cumulative wear and tear of distress that leads to teacher-burnout.

Research efforts in the area of teacher stress are closely linked to understanding the problem of teacher burnout. Regardless of how researchers conceptualize job burnout, they invariably identify job-related stress as the major factor in the etiology of the burnout syndrome. According to most researchers, job burnout refers to

the emotional, attitudinal, and physical exhaustion that results from job-related stress.

Maslach and Jackson (1981) as well as Pines, Aronson, and Kanfry (1981) have indicated that burn out is composed of three phases:

- emotional exhaustion
- depersonalization and
- reduced personal accomplishment.

Emotional exhaustion is characterised by the depletion of a teacher's emotional resources and the feeling that one has nothing left to give to others at the psychological level. The depersonalization phase consists of developing negative, cynical and sometimes callous attitudes towards students, parents and colleagues; finally, reduced personal accomplishment is the feeling of no longer being effective in working with students and in fulfilling other school responsibilities. The level of burnout experienced by a teacher is a function of the frequency and intensity of one's feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment.

Beck and Gaguilo (1983) assert that continued stressful situation seriously deplete the teacher's emotional and physical resources leaving him unable to cope with further distress. Spaniol and Caputo (1978) have identified the following three levels of burnout:

- i. First-degree burn (mild): Short-lived bouts of irritability, fatigue, worry, frustration;
- ii. Second-degree burn (moderate): same as mild but lasts for two weeks or more;
- iii. Third-degree burn (severe): physical ailments occur such as ulcers, chronic back pain, and migraine headache. It is usual for conscientious teachers to experience occasional mild to moderate feelings of burnout. It is when these feelings persist and manifest themselves through chronic physical and emotional illness that burnout becomes a more serious problem.

Since teachers affected by distress reasoned differently, each teacher must be sensitive to these symptoms and to their levels of persistence. Also a teacher must identify strategies for alleviating or coping with distress effectively. Otherwise, the symptoms of burnout will become more chronic and lead to more debilitating consequences.

Sources of distress affecting teachers

1. Societal sources of distress

Societal sources of distress result from the pressure placed upon schools by societal and political forces in the community. The political strength and public image of education have decreased as reflected in the low priority being placed on education at the national, state and sometimes local levels.

The poor public image of education is a major source of teacher distress for at least two reasons. First, it has led to diminished esteem levels for those in teaching profession, second, it has prompted demands for increased productivity at a time when the financial support for education is being curtailed. It is usual for a burnout teacher leaving education to comment: 'I gave all I had, and they told me I needed to do a better job. As I tried to do a better job, they gave me more students, cut out my aide, and reduced my instructional materials and supplies allotment' (Campbell, 1974).

2. Organizational sources of distress

A second major source of distress among educators results from the failure of schools to organize properly to meet the demands of the public as well as the needs of teachers and students. Some writers have indicated that distress results when teachers are required to implement school programme within organizational constraints which they have had no influence; when teachers feel that insufficient resources have been made available to meet performance expectations; and when curriculum or instructional directives conflict with what teachers believe is the best for their students.

3. Role-related sources of distress

The third sources of distress is role-related. Sources of role-related distress are classroom disciplinary problems, lack of appropriate instructional programmes for students who have special needs, finding sufficient time for professional growth, and developing positive relationship with administrators, fellow teachers and parents. Role-related distress could occur when teachers are required to teach subjects which they have no skill or training for. These teachers are faced with the dilemma of either resigning or accepting a position where they experience increased role-related distress.

Coping with burnout

Pines et. al. (1981) have identified four strategies for dealing with burnout:

- i. Being aware of the problem;
- ii. Taking responsibility for doing something about it;
- iii. Achieving some degree of cognitive clarity and
- iv. Developing procedures for coping

It is important that teachers realize that burnout is an occupational hazard. It is largely a function of the work

environment rather than of the teacher's inability to deal effectively with the requirements of the job. Once teachers are aware of the problems they must do something to avoid distress and burnout. A programme can be developed to deal with the sources of distress leading to burnout. In planning this programme, it is important that teachers identify the sources of societal, organizational and job-related distress affecting them as well as achieving some degree of cognitive clarity. Achieving cognitive clarity consists of determining the extent to which each source of distress can be alleviated or reduced.

Miles (1965) has identified 10 characteristics of a healthy school organisation which could help in alleviating teacher burnout as follows:

- i. **Goal focus:** The school's goals must be clear and well accepted by the staff. These goals must be achievable with existing resources and congruent with the demands of the community;
- ii. **Communication adequacy:** Information should flow with no distortion throughout all levels of the school. Teachers receive the information they need without exerting undue effort.
- iii. **Optimal Power equalization:** Teachers at all levels must have influence on how the school is run. Collaboration rather than coercion typifies the relationship among teachers.
- iv. **Resource utilization:** Teachers should be used effectively. They should work hard and derive personal sense of growth and fulfillment from their contribution of the school.
- v. **Cohesiveness:** Teachers are pleased to be part of the school. They should remain with the school and contribute further to its development;
- vi. **Morale:** Teachers should have a sense of wellbeing and satisfaction;
- vii. **Innovativeness:** New approaches are developed to meet the school goals. Procedures are not routine or standardized.
- viii. **Autonomy:** The organization actively determines its own direction. It responds neither passively nor destructively to perceived demands;
- ix. **Adaptation:** The school can restructure its operation to meet changing community demands. It possesses sufficient stability to manage the difficulties encountered during the adaptation process;
- x. **Problem-solving adequacy:** The school should have well-developed procedures for sensing problems, devising solutions, implementing them, and evaluating their effectiveness. Such problems can be solved with minimum energy.

Through a review of these 10 characteristics, the school can improve the health and productivity of teachers by reducing or alleviating the sources of distress affecting its teachers.

Implications for Effective Teacher Productivity

A quick look at researches on teacher Stress and burnout show that a considerable number of primary and secondary school teachers are not happy and satisfied with their work environment. This situation, in one way or the other affects their stability on the job and where they cannot change job easily, they resort to moonlighting, absenteeism, truancy and apathy which reduce their productivity and efficiency, (Eneasator, 1990).

Any meaningful attempt to improve teacher productivity in Nigeria must look at the teachers' motivation and job satisfaction. In trying to look at strategies that could improve teacher productivity in the school system, it is necessary to take into cognizance the work environment of Nigerian teacher. According to Ndu (1984: 82) 'Many Nigerian workers earn a fat pay packet which unfortunately has a low purchasing power'. The Nigerian teacher therefore apparently lives from 'hand to mouth'.

The work environment of the teacher should be made conducive in order to achieve high productivity. Nigerian teacher would need a decent work environment, adequate pay, motivation, appreciation of work done, personal comfort, security, leadership, power and authority, respect and affection. These needs are very essential and when they are satisfied, teacher stress and burnout would be experienced less in teaching profession.

Teacher-burnout in the school system would be alleviated if the conditions of service of teachers are improved. The government apparent neglect of the school system and conditions of service of teachers could result to low productivity and poor performance. The salary of teachers should be paid regularly and on time too. A situation where Nigerian secondary and primary school teachers are owed 4 to 5 months salary is very appalling and demoralizing. Such situations generate absenteeism, truancy, dissatisfaction and above all induces stress and burnout in teachers which leads to low productivity.

Nigerian teachers should be sent on occasional in-service training programmes like seminars, workshops, study leave and encourage sandwich programmes, since according to Ndu (1991: 51) this will make for improved performance as the teacher develops a more positive attitude to his job. Promotions help a lot in reducing burnout among teachers. If teachers are promoted based on performance as and when due, they would be satisfied and achieve high productivity. When teachers are motivated and satisfied in their workplace, there is bound to be effective teacher productivity.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide teachers with a better understanding of the burnout phenomenon as well as some strategies for dealing with the problem. Burnout is recognised as a very serious threat to the teachers' effective productivity and the ability to meet the challenges of the new millennium. The various ways through which burnout is manifested have been examined. The general dilapidation and decay in the Nigerian education system is seen as a very high correlate of burnout and thus the need for teachers and administrators to take leadership in planning strategies to combat sources of distress and the need for the government and education authorities to motivate teachers and improve their working condition for effective teacher - productivity.

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