Potential Pre-Service Teacher Candidates' Perceptions of Teacher Burnout

Christina Janise Wickard, Emily Reeves Fyfe, Daphney L. Curry
Midwestern State University
USA

Abstract

In both the US and the UK it has been reported that as high as one in three new teachers quit the profession within five years of beginning. The tendency of teachers to quit their jobs before retirement age, is strongly correlated with burnout and is a growing concern for schools. A meta-analysis of burnout and teacher attrition revealed that the areas of burnout, exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment had significant positive correlations with teachers' intentions to quit their jobs [4]. The purpose of this study is to shed light on situations, personal characteristics, and perceptions of burnout in students seeking to be educators in order to better prepare pre-service teacher candidates for teaching careers.

1. Introduction

As At one time the term "burnout" in reference to teachers brought to mind an exhausted, harried, but close-to-retirement age individual. Nowadays, however, the term burnout seems everywhere and not just those who are reaching the end of their careers. Burnout is being used in reference to children who are experiencing long term fatigue in athletics, extracurricular activities, and academics. Burnout is applied to college students who are tired and overextended in their jobs, lives, and their classes. It seems the term burnout is ubiquitous. Interestingly, teacher burnout is now not relegated to the retirement age teachers either, but even new teachers within the first few years of being on the job.

Teacher attrition is a growing concern for schools in the US and UK and is strongly correlated with burnout. In both the US and the UK it has been reported that as high as one in three new teachers quit the profession within five years of beginning. The tendency of teachers to quit their jobs before retirement age is strongly correlated with burnout and is a growing concern for schools. In the US after the pandemic, according to a 2022 Gallup Poll, K-12 teachers now have the highest burnout rate of all professions, roughly 40% of respondents reported feeling burned out "always" or "very often" [6]. The pressures that come from a job in the teaching field are innumerable. Teachers are expected to teach students content and be responsible for their test scores; this alone is stressful, then add on the high stakes nature of school testing culture that remains pervasive despite calls for change. Teachers are also expected to take care of students' health, social emotional learning and well-being, safety, and mental health. Teachers must deal with difficult students and parents, many times without the necessary support and resources, and are expected to take on extra duties with no time and little compensation. According to an article published on the National Education Association's website, teachers also bear the brunt of a divisive political climate that seems to be aimed at driving a wedge between schools and parents and creating a hostile relationship with those who teachers need support from. Lawmakers and other political interest groups continue to pass and attempt to pass legislation that removes the autonomy of the highly skilled and education teachers in the schools. The message is that despite years of schooling, training, and acquired expertise, teachers are not responsible enough to select appropriate and relevant curricula, class materials, and instructional strategies for their students [10]. Add insult to injury with low pay, difficult working conditions, little flexibility and scant resources, and it is no wonder that new teachers are burning out and leaving the profession at such alarming rates.

The World Health Organization [11] defined "burnout" as a syndrome resulting from continuous workplace stress that has not been effectively managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) reduced professional efficacy. Burnout can cause very real and harmful effects that negatively impact one's quality of life. Mental exhaustion, depression, and anxiety are the most often cited mental effects of burnout [1].

In addition to the adverse mental effects burnout can cause, people can also experience negative physical health impacts such as gastrointestinal issues, chest pains, headaches, muscle and back pains and a diminished immune system response [8]. Compiled from 13 different self-report surveys [8], over 30 symptoms associated with burnout have been identified such as depression, chronic fatigue,

distress, inability to relax, poor sleep, helplessness, and exhaustion. Additionally, Darbishire, et al, [2] found several predictors of burnout such as heavy workload, poor work-life balance, inequities, and negative work culture.

The gold standard for measuring burnout is the Maslach Scale which possesses both high reliability and validity as a measure of burnout, with three major subscales affecting burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment [7]. A newer assessment tool, the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT), focuses on identifying markers in four core dimensions: exhaustion, mental distance, emotional impairment, and cognitive impairment and three sub-dimensions: depressed mood, psychological distress, and psychosomatic complaints [8].

A meta-analysis of burnout and teacher attrition revealed that the Maslach areas of burnout, exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment had significant positive correlations with teachers' intentions to quit their jobs [5]. While inventories that indicate burnout risk factors exist and those that measure burnout, mentioned above, as well as research that highlights many of the possible causes, little information is available on how those wishing to enter the teaching profession view burnout.

Teacher burnout surveys exist such as the Leichtman Burnout Scale which helps current educators determine their level of burnout through four levels: passionate but overwhelmed, overwhelmed, becoming cynical and cynical [3]. This survey and others utilize indicators that apply to in-service teachers which are outside of the scope of the experiences of students wishing to enter the field. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of teacher burnout of students entering an educator preparation program. The information gleaned from this study will shed light on the perceptions of teacher burnout in students seeking to enter the profession in order to better prepare pre-service teacher candidates for teaching careers.

2. Method

Our pilot study examined pre-service teachers' perceptions of teacher burnout using archival interview transcripts. The question this study seeks to answer is What are the perceptions of teacher burnout of college students seeking to enter the teaching profession? Program data from 36 entrance interviews from students applying to a small US teaching program at a four-year post- secondary institution was utilized in the study. As part of the entrance requirements, students are interviewed by education faculty and are asked a series of questions that relate to their knowledge and dispositions in relation to the teaching profession.

One of the entrance interview questions pertains to their understanding of and feelings about teacher burnout and its causes and possible solutions. Candidates were asked first, if they knew what burnout was, and if not, they were supplied a definition/explanation. Next, they were asked to explain what they think causes teacher burnout and some possible solutions. Finally, they were asked if they thought burnout could happen to them or could happen to anyone in the teaching profession. The interviewer, education faculty at the university, recorded the candidate responses, which were used in this study to shed light on students' feelings about and understanding of the complex nature of professional burnout, specifically in education.

3. Results and Analysis

The researchers used open coding to create initial categories which allows for meaning to be drawn from the repetition of phenomena [9]. Aligning with the WHO characteristics mentioned previously for measuring burnout, is the Maslach Scale with three major subscales affecting burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment [7]. While this scale was not used in this study to survey students, due to the study's particular focus of identifying characteristics in pre-service teachers before they experience burnout, using the three dimensions mentioned above was appropriate in analyzing the transcripts to discover possible indicators. Open coding of responses revealed the initial main categories of workload, monotony, emotional states, lack of support, low pay, discipline issues, fulfillment, and management. These were then analyzed using the three subscales mentioned above to reveal if what students were saying aligned with how burnout is measured and the components that affect it.

Of the student respondents, 55% mentioned being overworked, 56% cited classroom discipline and management issues, 47% mentioned emotional states such as being overwhelmed, drained, and stressed. Twenty-two percent cited monotony and 11% of those specifically mentioned having no freedom to teach what and how they want. Thirty one percent listed no support with 73% of those mentioning administration specifically as being the problem. While more than half of the respondents mentioned "lack of support" and "administration" as major contributing factors to burnout, fewer than 8% address administrative support in solutions. Eleven percent of respondents mentioned low pay, yet only half of those list higher pay as a solution.

Solutions that students mentioned to the causes they presented were getting support from colleagues and administration, higher pay, self- care, taking on fewer responsibilities, and taking time off. More than half stated that "making things fun" or "changing things up" were solutions to burnout, and 8% mentioned professional development specifically.

4. Discussion

In the analysis, each of the student responses for what causes burn out to happen to align with the three Maslach subscales emotional exhaustion, depersonal-ization, and personal accomplishment, indicating that these students can identify main factors contributing to burnout. However, student responses providing solutions for the causes do not, for the most part, align with those categories, indicating there is a mismatch between what students view are the causes of burnout and the solutions to address it effectively. Although more than half of the respondents mentioned lack of support and administration as major contributing factors, fewer than 8% address administrative support in solutions. Half of those made comments such as "lack of support of administration" as a cause and "get support from administration" as a solution, which may align but doesn't reveal an understanding of how to address it. Many of the solutions listed to the causes the students gave follow in a similar fashion: overwork- take a vacation; exhausted- self-care, etc. Fifty-five percent of respondents mentioned being overworked, which did not on the surface fit into any of the three categories without additional information. Some of the responses such as the lack of low pay, unless they have a parent, spouse, or some other family member who is an educator are not necessarily contributing factors they are aware of at this point. Almost a quarter cited monotony or something related, 11% of those specifically mentioned having no freedom to teach what and how they want which aligns with the NEA report mentioned above as contributing to a toxic work environment.

Solutions that students mentioned to the causes of burnout such as getting support from colleagues and administration, self- care, taking on fewer responsibilities, and taking time off demonstrate that these pre-service teachers lack the understanding of real coping strategies and the lack of support systems in place for something like taking a day off periodically for mental health or relaxation.

More than half stated that simply "making things fun" or "changing things up" in the classroom were real solutions to burnout, and only three mentioned professional development specifically. Although these pre-service teachers do not have complete grasp of the very real stresses they will face or effective strategies to combat workplace burnout, what is important from this initial investigation is that students who are wanting to enter the teaching profession, at least tangentially, understand what contributes to burnout which is a positive finding. It demonstrates that they are at least aware of some of the job-related issues that can cause stress and lead to burnout. Interestingly however, when asked if they thought burnout could happen to them, overwhelmingly most did not, citing that they would take care of themselves and "change things up" to prevent stagnation. It is clear that providing pre-service teachers with the information, tools, and resources to combat it may prevent them from experiencing burnout or at least forestall the onset.

5. Recommendations

Several recommendations to be implemented as part of pre-service teacher education programs were highlighted in this study. Some recommendations are straightforward and can be implemented in a program immediately while others are more programmatic in nature and will require strategic implementation. As well, all recommendations can be modified to work with a program to best benefit each pre-service teacher education program. Regardless of exactly how individual teacher preparation programs decide to combat teacher burnout, it is critical to the profession to begin arming pre-service teachers with strategies to avoid teacher burnout because it may be too late once teachers are already experiencing teacher burnout. Working to avoid or minimize the problem may prove more effective than waiting until it is already problematic.

5.1. Understanding Teacher Burnout

Directly defining and addressing teacher burnout systematically and consistently through our pre-service teacher programs is a basic step of understanding and addressing teacher burnout. This is not a topic to be noted once or twice but because of the significant impact on the profession, must be equally emphasized in the preparation of the profession. Programs should work to define teacher burnout and, as a unified front, take responsibility for consistently addressing both what teacher burnout is, the causes, and solutions throughout preparation programs. This may look different in different programs, however; the premise should remain the same. Repeat review and integration of teacher burnout topics will help pre-service teachers be armed against teacher burnout before they enter the profession.

5.2. Student Inventories

Pre-service teachers have different backgrounds and knowledge of the concept of burnout. Some have come from families of teachers and are very familiar with the term, others have never heard of teacher burnout, and some in the middle may have a vague idea. Regardless, pre-service teacher programs must meet students where they are. One way to tackle this is to have students take an inventory to highlight individual areas of potential need. With this information, programs can focus on providing tools to address those potential problem areas and be

responsive in supporting their pre-service teachers with targeted instruction and support.

5.3. Field Time Check-Ins

As pre-service teachers begin and continue time in the field, programs should take the opportunity to support the implementation of some of the strategies that are incorporated in the program previously. To do this, it is beneficial to conduct periodic check-ins during field time that allow students to reflect on possible stressors and use that as a framework for discussing coping strategies. This practical application will help pre-service teachers to begin integrating these important strategies that they will need both as they enter the profession and remain in the profession long term. If pre-service teachers are able to identify possible areas of stress that align with burnout indicators, mentors and university supervisors can tailor professional development opportunities to train students in ways to recognize and deal with the stresses that lead to burnout.

5.4. Classroom Management

Classroom management is often overlooked in the context of teacher burnout. Emphasizing the importance of classroom management not only for student outcomes but also the health and safety of teachers is important as programs work to address teacher retention issues. Teaching procedures and routines that support both the health and safety of teachers and student outcomes is an important part of arming, so to speak, pre-service teachers with skills necessary to be successful in the classroom. These strategies can be taught explicitly in a classroom management class, for example, and encouraged to be utilized throughout field work and clinical teaching. This may be emphasized in reflections specifically about both aspects of classroom management so that both aspects remain a focus and one does not supersede the other as student outcomes tend to take center stage.

5.5. Mentorship

Providing mentorship from expert teachers who have stayed in the profession provides a wonderful opportunity for real-world learning. This can look many different ways depending on how programs are structured. Professional Development Schools, for example, can embed this in their agreement with school districts. Other options may include virtual groups, after school groups, aligning this as a criterion for field placements, and more. Overall, this type of arrangement may prove reciprocal as it is often beneficial for in-service teachers to work with pre-service teachers both as reminders of their own strategies as they reflect on how they avoid teacher

burnout and as a way to brainstorm new strategies. However, this is structured, framing the conversation about teacher burnout will be important so that it is directly addressed.

5.6. Embedded Professional Development

Embedded professional development that targets teaching stressors and coping strategies is another recommendation for programs as they move to address teacher burnout. One option for implementation may be identifying a professional organization that supports pre-service teachers as they matriculate through a program and into the profession. This serves several purposes including intentionally setting pre-service teachers up to start their career with support from colleagues and an avenue to reach out for help once they are in their own classroom. The connections built may help combat teacher burnout.

6. Conclusion

Although this is a small pilot study of one group of students who are seeking to enter a teacher education program, participant responses shed light on the issue of teacher burnout which is a leading cause of attrition in the profession. Although limited in scope, this study can begin a dialog and spark an initial course of action that is much needed in the profession.

7. References

[1] Alves, P., Oliveira A., Paro , H. (2019). Quality of life and burnout among faculty members: How much does the field of knowledge matter? DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0214217.

[2] Darbishire, P., Isaacs, A. N., and Miller, M. L. (2020). Faculty Burnout in Pharmacy Education. American journal of pharmaceutical education, 84(7), ajpe7925. DOI: 10.5688/ajpe7925.

[3] Leichtman, K. (May 26, 2022) How burned out are you? A scale for teachers. https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-burned-out-are-you-scale-teachers (Access Date: 12 July 2023).

[4] Madigan, D., Kim, L. (2021a). Towards an understanding of teacher attrition: A meta-analysis of burnout, job satisfaction, and teachers' intentions to quit. Teaching and Teacher Education, (105):103425. DOI: 10.1016/j.tate.2021.103425.

[5] Madigan, D., Kim, L. (2021b). Does teacher burnout affect students? A systematic review of its association with academic achievement and student-reported outcomes. International Journal of Educational Research (105): 101714. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101714.

[6] Marken, S., Agrawal, S. (2022). K-12 Workers Have Hig

-hest Burnout Rate in U.S. Gallup Poll. https://news.gall up.com/poll/393500/workers-highest-burnout-rate.aspx (Access Date: July 12 2023).

[7] Maslach, C. and Jackson, S.E. (1981), The measurement of experienced burnout. J. Organiz. Behav., 2:99-113. DOI: 10.1002/job.4030020205.

[8] Schaufeli, W. B., Desart, S., and De Witte, H. (2020). Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT)-Development, Validity, and Reliability. International journal of environmental research and public health, 17(24), 9495. DOI: 10.3390/ij erph17249495.

[9] Stake, R. (1995). Art of case study research. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

[10] Walker, T. (March 21, 2023). Us against them: A toxic vision of parent engagement. https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/us-vs-them-toxic-vision-parent-eng agement (Access Date: 12 July 2023).

[11] World Health Organization. (2019). Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases. https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn -out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classificat ion-of-diseases (Access Date: 12 July 2023).