

Using Emotional Intelligence Practices to Mitigate Teacher Stress and Burnout

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Abstract

Teacher shortages continue to be a problem in schools across the United States. The crisis is especially alarming in hard to staff subjects like Mathematics and Special Education. Research indicates that the dominant factor that leads to teacher burnout and attrition is stress. The stress may emanate from workload demands, classroom management issues or secondary traumatic stress. Many teachers are experiencing worry, mental stress, impatience, weariness, anxiety, and issues with sleep, which can quickly lead to burnout. Their inability to manage ongoing stress increases the likelihood of burnout, negatively impacting job performance and student achievement. Teachers' use of emotional intelligence skills in the classroom can be a preventative against stress and help them navigate complex circumstances that arise, positively impacting students. This paper aims to discuss the effects of teacher burnout on the profession and the use of emotional intelligence in professional development to build skills among teachers to address stress. The paper proposes a model for addressing the Emotional Intelligence of teachers as a tool to mitigate teacher burnout.

Keywords

Teacher Shortage, Teacher Burnout, Stress, Trauma, Teacher Attrition, Classroom Management, Secondary Traumatic Stress and Emotional Intelligence

1. Introduction: What Is Teacher Burnout?

The prevalence of widespread teacher attrition and burnout are real issues that impact the American education system (Dworkin, 1987). Furthermore, the issue

appears more complex than another hectic day in the classroom with off-task students, demanding parents, or technology failures (Chapple, 2022). Chronic stress brought on by unreasonable work demands is the root cause. According to the National Education Association, teacher burnout is “a condition in which an educator has exhausted the personal and professional resources necessary to do the job.” Research on the relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout shows that “emotional intelligence, motivation, and mood swings have also been shown to predict burnout” (Kant & Shanker, 2021: p. 973). Emotional intelligence’s role in teachers’ well-being is critical and provides tools to help manage stress and avoid burnout in the profession (Currie, 2021). Furthermore, EI skills can contribute to achieving and attaining academic goals, making sound decisions, and long-term success in life (Cherry, 2022). EI skills are crucial to gaining insight and judgment regarding emotions as well as the ability to manage those emotions. Practicing self-awareness is one of the essential components of EI skills. Teachers are “more in tune with their emotions and aware of the things that cause them stress” (Currie, 2021: p. 1). Identifying triggers enables them to employ the appropriate strategies to decrease stress and avoid being consumed by anxiety (Currie, 2021).

2. Elements of Teacher Burnout

According to Chapple (2022), some critical signs of teacher burnout include worry and mental tension, irritability, and fatigue. Other symptoms include disruptive sleep patterns from hypersomnia to insomnia brought on by anxiety. She notes that some teachers can feel depressed or overwhelmed and no longer enjoy working. Gaining or losing weight and unexpected hair loss are physical symptoms (Chapple, 2022). Parker et al. (2012) describes signs such as sickness, impatience, missing work, a lack of dependability, and inadequate job performance. Those teachers with more developed emotional competencies appear better prepared to manage the emotional demands of the job and understand reactions to the origins of stress (Ramaci et al., 2016).

3. Effects on the Profession

Research shows that given the numerous demands placed on educators within the profession, they battle to maintain a state of well-being, which can quickly result in burnout, and harms retention rates and student achievement. The shortage of teachers becomes more of an issue as retention rates decline, and its effect on students becomes more apparent (Kipps-Vaughan, 2013). Furthermore, teacher burnout can directly impact quality teaching and students’ motivation, leading to higher rates of behavior disruption, decreased sense of connection, self-doubt about their ability to achieve, and poor grades. Additionally, the increased cortisol levels in students, a biological marker of stress, are associated with higher teacher burnout (Laurie & Larson, 2020). According to studies by Houchard (2005), motivation, effort, and job satisfaction are all positive-

ly correlated with teacher morale. Low morale has also been linked to poor job performance and a lack of student attachment (Lumsden, 1998).

4. Disproportionate Impact Teacher Shortage

The leaking pipeline in teacher retention directly influences students in public schools by also impacting the field of education. The nation's public schools are already suffering greatly from the teacher shortage, which is currently in full force. Also, it is essential to note that not all pipeline sections are leaking at the same rate as others. Low-income students and students of color continue to be disproportionately served by "hard-to-staff schools" (Philip et al., 2019: p. 254). Research shows that teachers frequently leave these schools in large numbers due to poor learning environments and low achievement. Thus, teacher attrition creates instability in some school districts and significantly raises the district's costs for finding and appointing new teachers (Piotrowski, 2021).

5. Increased Referrals and Stress

Burnout is possible when teachers experience increased levels of emotional tension and strain and cannot effectively manage stress over time (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). Maslach and Jackson (1981) note that employees in caring professions, such as teachers, experience burnout elements such as emotional fatigue, depersonalization, and decreased personal accomplishment. The main symptom of burnout is emotional tiredness, which is the sensation of being highly stressed and overextended (Klusmann et al., 2008). Moreover, the experiences of emotional exhaustion increase the propensity for using reactive and punitive classroom management techniques (Reinke et al., 2013). Teachers need emotional intelligence skills to foster positive relationships with students (Asrar-ul-Haqa et al., 2017), provide stability and healthy classroom space, and select conflict management strategies for successful problem-solving (Almost et al., 2016).

6. Emotional Intelligence and Burnout

Numerous survey results have demonstrated the significance of emotional intelligence in people's daily lives and how it helps their capacity to successfully handle stress and work demands (Wrobel, 2013). Developing emotional skills has been shown to help teachers cope with the stressful demands of their jobs, increasing motivation within the profession (Jennings & Greenberg, 2008; Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012). Teachers who possess developed emotional competencies are more prepared to deal with stress and emotional demands and better understand why and how they react to the origins of stress. Most studies found a connection between teachers' burnout and emotional intelligence (Przybylska, 2016). Research has demonstrated a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and stress. Further analysis indicates that emotional intelligence makes it easier to handle stressful emotions. Due to exhaustion, schoolteachers' emo-

tional maturity is declining (Jude & Adekunle, 2011).

7. Proposed Model

The proposed model and activities derived from Goleman's (1995) expanded work that leveraged Salovey and Mayer's (1990) original theory on Emotional Intelligence theory. Goleman (1995) argued that although IQ was an important attribute, intellect alone cannot establish or indicate one's emotions or understand the emotional expression that manifests in others. According to Goleman, individuals need unique intelligence beyond IQ to process and use emotional information effectively, whether to support wise personal decisions, settle disputes, or inspire others. Thus, broadening Mayer's and Salovey's four-branch system to incorporate five essential elements of emotional intelligence, or EQ, the acronym he occasionally utilizes: Emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). Self-awareness, is the ability to recognize and understand your moods and emotions and how they affect others. Self-regulation, involves being able to control your impulses and attitudes and to think before acting. Internal (or intrinsic) motivation, Empathy, allows us to sense the emotion in others, and Social skills, managing relationships, inspiring others, and influencing desired outcomes (Cherry, 2022). The proposed model would include a series of professional development activities designed to address each component of EI.

7.1. Enacting Self-Awareness

Teachers that have self-awareness are knowledgeable of the impact their emotional state can have on them, their job performance, and their interactions with others. Goleman (1995) defines self-awareness as deeply understanding one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. When a self-aware teacher notices a student is emotionally hijacked, their ability to attune to, validate, and regulate the student helps to foster a positive relational dynamic. Attunement includes actively listening to understand the student's experience and reading their body language to ascertain the degree of their dysregulation. A self-aware teacher can guide the student to identify their emotions and validate their feelings. Once the student has been heard, and experiences their feelings being validated, regulation follows. When a teacher successfully deals with dysregulated students, there is less stress.

Activity

Teachers will receive professional development regarding self-awareness. They will watch a short video showcasing a teacher's unsuccessful response to a dysregulated student. They will be asked to describe the experience from the student's perspective, decode the student's body language, and identify the emotions and rationale utilized by the student. After discussing what was viewed with their group, they will create a script demonstrating how a self-aware teacher would have responded to the student in the video.

7.2. Possessing Self-Regulation

Teachers that are competent with self-regulation can control their responses to others and their emotions. When difficult situations arise, they can keep themselves calm enough to access their prefrontal cortex to pause and think before reacting to a problem. When a self-regulated teacher notices a student is emotionally hijacked, their ability to remain tranquil enables them to assist the student. A lack of self-regulation can lead a teacher to become too upset and initiate the stress response system in their brain. Van der Kolk (2015) states, “Your frontal lobes can restore your balance by helping you realize that you are responding to a false alarm and abort the stress response.” A self-regulated teacher is balanced and can avoid activating their stress response system.

Activity

Teachers will receive professional development regarding self-regulation and mindfulness/stress techniques. They will begin by dividing their paper into three vertical columns and listing things that spawn an impulsive, emotional reaction. After learning and practicing mindfulness techniques, they can place the list to the side to interact with: the RAIN exercise, Body Scanning, 4-4-4 Breathing, and the Mindfulness Walk (Ackerman, 2017). Teachers will retrieve their list and write a mindfulness technique they can use to decrease their emotional impulsivity next to each item on their list. Lastly, they will write a specific benefit their students will experience from them reacting in a self-regulated manner.

7.3. Having Intrinsic Motivation and Empathy

Intrinsically motivated teachers do not depend on external factors to validate them; they are goal-oriented and driven to improve. When they notice their lack in an area, they take accountability for the impact of their absence and challenge themselves to grow. Empathic teachers notice when students struggle and respond based on what they see. They do not discount the power dynamic intertwined within the relationship yet leverage it to meet the student’s needs. Teachers with empathy relinquish expectations of how a student should be, for unmet expectations lead to disappointment and stress. Empathic intrinsically motivated teachers alleviate stress by challenging themselves to consider the plight of students as they partner with them to meet their needs.

Activity (Empathy)

Teachers will receive professional development regarding empathy. They will work with a partner to complete an activity requiring them to provide non-triggering details about events from their past.

Each pair will receive two envelopes filled with five different emotion words. One partner will select a comment while the other describes the last memory they have experienced that emotion. The listening partner will use the empathy skills taught to respond empathically. The partners will alternate switching roles until they have discussed all the feelings in their envelopes.

7.4. Using Social Skills

Teachers with developed social skills are aware of their emotional state's impact on others. The contagious nature of emotions is considered when they engage with and instruct students. Being attuned to their feelings and needs enables them to understand the same of others. Socially skilled teachers are also adept at building rapport with students. They accomplish this by actively listening during verbal communication to understand the student, understanding their nonverbal behavior, and using their rapport to influence them while communicating effectively. A socially skilled teacher avoids stress by using the knowledge of their students to assist them in remaining calm and balanced.

Activity (Social Skills)

Teachers will receive professional development regarding social skills. They will work in table groups to read five scenarios illustrating teachers effectively utilizing social skills. The group will identify the social skills the teacher uses and how the students respond. Lastly, they will list the benefits experienced by the teachers and the students in the scenarios because of the use of social skills.

8. Data Analysis

Teachers will be pre and post tested in the areas of:

- Self-awareness
<http://newhorizonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Self-Awareness-Assessment.pdf>
- Self-regulation
[https://casaa.unm.edu/inst/SelfRegulation%20Questionnaire%20\(SRQ\).pdf](https://casaa.unm.edu/inst/SelfRegulation%20Questionnaire%20(SRQ).pdf)
- Internal (or intrinsic) motivation
- Empathy
<http://www.highdefpeople.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Toronto-Empathy-Questionnaire.pdf>
- Social skills

Training facilitators will analyze pre- and post-survey responses completed by respondents to determine changes in knowledge and skills, the effectiveness of the professional development *interventions-PD activities*, and how adjustments could be made for future PD training.

9. Recommendations

Additional research is needed on the emotional intelligence of teachers and factors such as, the incidence of discipline referrals, the type of discipline referrals, teacher attrition and teacher burnout. Research has identified stress as a cause of teacher burnout. However, more research is needed to accurately describe the source of the stress factors and how educational institutions can mitigate these factors.

10. Conclusion

Ongoing teacher support is needed to address the issue of teacher stress which

can potentially lead to teacher burnout. This model proposes professional development that would support teachers in gaining emotional intelligence to improve personal well-being, managing classrooms, and avoid burnout. This approach would support teachers with the identification, regulation, and solution strategies to address the needs within a highly dynamic educational setting.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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