The Psychology of Teacher Stress

Part I: Overview of Teacher Stress

Teacher stress began in 1635, in Dedham Massachusetts, with the imminent threat of attack by displaced Native Americans. Acute stress has given way to chronic stress, which human beings weren’t designed to endure. Since the evolution from that one room school house, to the industrialized institutions of contemporary education, both the source of stress has evolved, as has its impact on education, which also wasn’t meant to endure.

Teacher stress is strikingly absent from prominent education debates, including international rankings, standardization, or segregation in public schools. While most can agree a new paradigm for progressing our stalled educational system is critical, preparing students for complex challenges like modulating the use of technology, how to move forward while attracting and retaining quality educators is not clear.

What we know today, are the growing deficits in social-emotional student maturity, the tolerance to sustain attention without highly extrinsic stimulation, the skills to negotiate with their peers, or a sense of peace (as indicated by growing levels of childhood anxiety). To help these struggling students successfully prepare for both their personal and professional lives, our educators need to be better equipped.

With high levels of daily stress, and a diminished joy for teaching, the omnipresent threat of burnout jeopardizes our entire system, making student preparation more ominous. Our country’s most important natural resource feels like factory workers without appreciation, autonomy, or the respect they once enjoyed. Many educators struggle with some of the same issues as our students, including addictions to technology and low resiliency.

Expecting educators to engage students, keep up with technological innovation, and ensure that test scores are high, does not feel fair or realistic to many teachers or administrators. Michael J. Hynes, Ed.D., Superintendent of at Patchogue-Medford Schools cited the ‘de-professionalization of teaching’, predicated upon our self-induced ‘data purgatory’. Hynes believes this is one primary cause of elevated teacher stress since the inception of NCLB.

Identifying the causes of educator stress is the job of superintendents like Dr. Hynes, but also the responsibility of everybody within educational leadership. Understanding the role of educator well-being within the context of the larger educational ecosystem might be more attainable if we simplify the matter into three important questions: What are the greatest stressors for teachers? How does teacher stress impact student learning (learning environment)? Are we successfully addressing this issue?

In the U.S., consideration of teacher stress and wellness (the antidote for stress), is growing, but still trailing other countries such as Australia and the UK. The U.S. has considerable research on stress (and in the workplace) and a fair amount on school culture, but not nearly enough on the interaction of the two. Part of the challenge is we have many competing definitions of school culture, that it’s difficult for those on the front line to assimilate.

For the purpose of this series, we will define organizational health as the integration of three dimensions: adaptation, climate, and infrastructure. Climate, in particular, is made up of the collective
well-being of educators, which in turn lays the foundation for relationships, safety, and emotional investment in academics. Both individual and institutional stress, in large part determines the climate of the school.

**Part II: The Source of Teacher Stress**

Through two small studies in New Jersey, the primary source of work related stress for educators was found to be students. Stress from students (23.6%) nearly doubles the close second and third factors of policy changes (21.7%) and lack of input into decisions (19.8%). Also on the list are administration (10.4%) and lack of autonomy & creativity (7.5%).

What’s revealing is if we expand the source of stress to include both personal and professional, we find a different number one cause of stress: work/life balance. Thus, our efforts to address school culture/climate may only be part of the equation for solving this problem. While the sample size is small (n<200), the results still raise questions about what we are doing to address influences of distress, both inside and outside of school.

Surveyed teachers surprisingly agreed at 97.3% with the notion that stress in one’s home life, impacts work in the classroom. This means it’s not realistic to expect educators to leave their home life at the school door. Thus, it may not be effective for schools to only address workplace culture and expect these well intended interventions to be sufficient for supporting their most important resource through the complexity of stress.

Our move toward greater accountability in schools has meant a heavier reliance on standardized curriculum and testing to measure outcomes. Teachers become stressed by the loss of autonomy/creativity and the pressure to prepare students for testing. Fedrick Cohens, Executive Director of Curriculum for Georgetown County School District in South Carolina sees this as a top concern for educators, which is why he de-emphasizes test scores, believing what’s taught in the classroom will be naturally reflected in those benchmarks.

School leaders who recognize work-related sources of stress will likely identify several factors such as the lack of administrative support, declining parental involvement, and the various challenges around modern day students. Challenges such as the lack of impulse control, a need for higher levels of stimulation to sustain student attention, lacking parental involvement, a lack of student self-discipline/motivation, and fears around limit setting, to name a few. Mr. Cohens believes the role of the school leader is to provide support in navigating these and other challenges, so

Even if these challenges from students aren’t the main source of teacher stress, consider how patient teachers will be when their overall stress level is high. It may even seem more energy efficient for teachers to overlook students with minimal effort or behavioral challenges, due to their high levels of work and home distress.

Even if a teacher has the capacity to intervene, new hurdles such as the growing influence of social media and technology play significant roles in the creation of stress. While technology can simplify certain tasks, there are just as many complexities being navigated.
One teacher in a suburban NJ district recently caught two students cheating using technology, but then feared her instinct to address the issue may result in a legal violation of the student’s privacy rights. The growing concern around student rights and the use of technology is one of the many new challenges facing educators. The need for legal and ethical training is one of the deficit areas schools might consider for easing work-related stress.

Nuances of technology and privacy may be the newest on a long list of needs educators have both inside and outside the classroom. With what seem to be increasingly busy lives from an abundance of personal demands, educators are hampered by the omnipresent seduction of immediacy, born out of technology; with every convenience comes a price we may not be cognizant of.

Teachers are part of the 50% of adults reportedly addicted to their cell phones, and thereby impacted by their personal use of technology and the withdrawal that comes from being isolated in a classroom. This compounding variable has made it more difficult for teachers to self-soothe, one of the primary coping mechanisms for stress relief.

The higher complexity of stressors and obstacles to peace, means more innovative tools to restore wellness are needed. While we know that wellness is a crucial component to a strong school climate, then it’s reasonable to estimate that stress will erode the very conditions needed to create a safe and supportive environment for educators and learners. Once this cycle builds momentum, the overall health of the organization begins to erode.

**Part III: The Impact of Teacher Stress on Student Learning**

When students come to school stressed, their learning is understandably impacted. When a teacher comes to school stressed, their teaching is impacted. Dawn Lazarus, with 25 years in education, currently the PD specialist at Jumoke Academy, a Charter School in Hartford said that “We can’t improve scholars if we aren’t improving the staff... they are the delivery method. If they are not happy and healthy, neither will our children be.”

Teaching requires a high level of vigilance sustained over a long period of time. While educators get some down time, it’s often spent grading, supporting students, or prepping work, each of work still take
a good deal of energy in the form of concentration and enthusiasm. When moderate to high levels of stress are applied to these complex tasks, we greatly jeopardize the quality of work.

Let’s consider even the simplest of personal tasks such as washing dishes and add a moderate level of constant stress. Rather quickly you will notice your rate of productivity diminishing as your energy stores are drained. Due to muscle weakness, reduced focus, and deteriorating mood, moderate levels of chronic stress can make ordinary tasks a burden. When we consider more complex tasks that educators face each day, the results are more critical.

As motivators of student learning, teachers need an abundance of energy to keep children interested in learning over a long period of time. A tremendous barrier to success is the impact of stress, which erodes the intrinsic motivation of educators and ultimately their investment in teaching. A staggering statistic from the Gallup Survey, found that over 90% of educators are either actively disengaged or not engaged in their work. This statistic is an alarm that among other problems, teacher stress is too high.

While we can speculate about the causes of disengagement and the potential relationship to teacher stress, two things are clear: we cannot expect educators to be fully invested in learning outcomes for students if they don’t feel engaged and secondly, that stress is likely a causative and/or resultative factor for this statistic.

An anonymous middle school teacher in Mount Laurel, NJ shared her progressive decline in work investment over the years to “protect” herself from high levels of stress. What she realized however, was being disengaged created a new type of stress, one that undermined her ordinarily high integrity/work ethic.

With moderate to high levels of daily stress, extended over a period of weeks or months, we will likely see problems such as absenteeism, lateness in grading, less investment in addressing student behavioral issues, diminished effort around grading, a lack of creativity, and poor engagement with students. Schools with high levels of behavioral problems and poor grades, always want to consider whether stress is resulting from or contributing to these issues.

**Part IV: Are we successfully addressing this issue?**

The warning signs are flashing brightly, our awareness of the issue is growing, and the desire to improve is heard throughout the country. In large and small districts, public and private, in all regions of the country, the consensus is that we need to do something and do it fast before we lose more qualified educators.

Efforts to address teacher stress are varied, with some addressing school culture, while others attending to the personal needs for educators outside of the classroom.

Systemic influences around the standardization of education in an effort to build accountability has fueled our need to slow down and be more appreciative of quality relationships, greater fun in our work, and restoring the passion that brought educators to schools in the first place.

We are seeing a growing movement toward mindfulness in education, concentrated on the West Coast but spreading out to other urban and rural areas nationwide. The term “mindfulness” represents a wide
array of beliefs and strategies that vary by author/presenter, but the etiology is born from Zen Buddhism. Somewhat of a misnomer, mindfulness generally involves more balance between our overwrought brains and our neglected bodies.

Mindfulness is growing in popularity in large part as a response to the increase in accountability efforts in the form of federal policy. When standardization increases, educators often lose real and perceived autonomy, leading to reduced feelings of power and control. When people feel a loss of power their tension level rises until eventually feeling defeated. This is part of the burnout cycle that typifies high levels of chronic stress.

Mindfulness helps people feel more peaceful through various paradigm and practice. Some districts have introduced wellness related goals for faculty into their yearly plans, introducing activities such as yoga and nutrition. While educators often appreciate these opportunities, only small percentage take advantage, likely due to time constraints. “I love the idea that my school offers these outlets but I’ve never actually attended,” says an elementary teacher in State College, PA.

While efforts are being made to balance output with input (stress vs. wellness), the damage toll may be growing too quickly for simple fixes. Without a more concerted, unified effort to support the well-being of our educators, the more likely we will see growth in turnover and reduction of student outcomes.

Supporting education is a matter of priority, according to Dr. Royce Avery, Superintendent of Manor ISD in Texas. Dr. Avery warns that without increased funding and higher pay for teachers, we will continue to struggle. Districts struggling to afford basics will have a difficult time considering higher order needs.

To support the longevity of our educators and improve the health of our school learning environments, we can make one simple but powerful paradigm change. By introducing personal growth into professional development, we will help our caretakers with their own improved self-care. A simple way to begin is by evaluating the wants and needs of your faculty.

Simple polling can be done to determine how much and what types of stress exist among the faculty along with desired solutions. A warning, however, if you elect to assess results- be prepared to act on them. We want to avoid the message that we know you are stressed but we aren’t prepared to do anything about it.

Whatever creative method of supporting your most valuable human resource, remember to continuously measure for efficacy. It’s not enough to implement a strategy and believe it will sustain it’s value over time. Rewards are an iterative process, in need of constant adjustment.

And most importantly, remember that teacher wellness and student outcomes are “inextricably linked... If we are taking care of ourselves and model health for students, such as pursuing our passions, self-care, connecting with others, negotiating to meet our basic needs, and moving toward greater self-actualization... our students will be more successful” (Heather McKinney, Head of School at Fusion Morristown).
Creative approaches to stress reduction from the district leaders quoted throughout this article:

- Dawn Lazarus (Jumoke Academy): More PD and team time embedded within schedule. Opportunities to work in groups, by department or grade level.
- Dr. Royce Avery (Manor ISD): Innovative Schedule where faculty get a week off in October for rejuvenation.
- Michael Hynes (Patchogue-Medford District): Yoga for teachers before and after school.
- Fedrick Cohens (Georgetown County School District): Teacher led PD
- Heather McKinney (Fusion Academy): Open microphone night for students and faculty to perform together, Creating playlists to reflect mood, yoga, and meditation.