Teacher Stress: Cognitive implications for teacher "burnout".

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And I have known the eyes already, known them all-
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin

T.S Eliot The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock

The present paper attempts to review the factors that have been commonly associated with teacher stress and burnout, and reports the results of a small pilot study using quantitative and qualitative analyses. In analysing the data, it is shown how the "narratives" extracted from teacher interviews reveal "hidden" factors that may well be worth further investigation in the study of teacher stress. The cognitive and motivational implications for these findings are discussed in terms of teacher education and individualised coping intervention strategies.

Burnout and stress in teachers

Concern for teacher "burnout" has attracted some attention in Australia in recent years. One of the main instigators for concern is the short lived lifespan of the teacher, who researchers estimate last only five to seven years in their profession (Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991). Moreover recent research identifies teachers as among the top sufferers of stress and "burn-out"in comparison to other white collar workers (Bransgrove, 1991).

"Burnout" occurs when an individual is unable to function effectively in the job as a result of prolonged and excessive job-related stress (Byrne, 1991; Friedman, 1991; Schonfeld, 1991). Many researchers object to the interchangeable use of burnout and stress and some researchers suggest that burnout is more accepted in the lay population than the professional population (McKay, 1990). Therefore, for the purposes of the present paper, burnout is viewed as the incapacitating psychological consequence of sustained stress whereas stress is

viewed as a negative emotion arising from the doubts about the efficacy of coping.

Research has attributed teacher stress and teacher "burnout" to a number of variables and these have been most often examined by the three subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MB) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) which are

a) emotional exhaustion: feelings of fatigue which develop as emotional energies are drained

b) depersonalisation: development of negative uncaring attitudes

c) reduced personal accomplishment

These subscales have been useful in disentangling some of the equivocal associations found in the research. Nevertheless, all three factors have been found to relate to stress and burnout and are useful in the detection of early burnout syndrome (Gold, Roth, Wright, Michael & Chen, 1992).

Despite the fact that Sarros and Sarros (1990) found low to moderate levels of teacher stress in their Victorian sample of teachers compared to their North American counterparts, Sarros and Sarros did note that the Victorian teachers reported more depersonalisation burnout than North American teachers. Nevertheless the low rates of burnout may well be associated with the recession, as Dinham (1992) reports that teaching becomes more attractive in times of economic recession as it is perceived as a "safe" occupation and has the potential to ameliorate more pertinent survival concerns.

The factors reported to affect stress and burnout levels can be categorised into three areas: Personal, environmental, and organisational. Personal encapsulates gender, age, years of experience, marital/family status (Byrne, 1991), and education level (Fennick, 1992; Friedman,1991), while environmental includes the type of student taught, the grade taught (Byrne, 1991; Pierce & Malloy, 1990), school type (Pierce & Malloy, 1990) and region (particularly "unfavoured regions") (Dinham, 1992). Organisational factors include climate, culture, social support and professional support (Friedman, 1991). By far the most commonly reported organisational factors affecting stress implicate role ambiguity, role overload (Fennick, 1992; Friedman, 1991) and lack of recognition for good work performance (Dinham, 1992).

Personal Factors affecting teacher stress and burnout

Even though the teaching profession is predominantly female, it appears that generally, males report higher levels of burnout than females (Friedman, 1991). However, some studies have suggested that males are higher on depersonalisation (from the MB) than females, and that females are higher than males on emotional exhaustion (from the MB).

The effects of age on stress and burnout have also yielded equivocal findings. Some report that the youngest and most idealistic teachers are at the greatest risk of burnout (Fennick, 1992; Sarros & Sarros, 1990), while others report that older teachers are more susceptible to burnout and report the peak burnout period occurs at 41-45 years (after approximately 20 -24 years of experience)(Friedman, 1991). Perhaps this difference can be qualified in terms of the Maslach subtypes. Byrne (1991) reports that young teachers show significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion than older teachers. It may be that older teachers are more prone to depersonalisation or reduced personal accomplishment than younger teachers and that these aspects of stress are more likely to emerge with age.

The more educated a teacher is, the more likely he/she is to succumb to burnout (Friedman, 1991). Many teachers perceive that they have "waste(d) their HSC marks on teaching" (Dinham, 1992). Other researchers hypothesise that those with higher educations

require more stimulation than that which is provided by the standard teaching environment (Fennick, 1992; Dinham, 1992).

Environmental factors affecting teacher stress and burnout

Research consistently reports that burnout occurs more often in secondary teachers than primary and infants teachers (Byrne, 1991; Pierce & Malloy, 1990) and that secondary teachers evidence more depersonalisation than other teachers (Byrne, 1991.) Public school teachers suffer more stress than private school teachers (Pierce & Malloy, 1990; Heller, Clay & Perkins, 1992), while Low SES government schools produce higher teacher stress rates than high SES government schools (Pierce & Malloy, 1990; Smith & Bourke, 1992).

The causes for these differences are often associated with the types of students, in that older students are often more eager to assert themselves against authority and some students from low SES backgrounds are forced to be independent at an earlier age than other students due to larger family sizes, and lower average incomes. In addition, more low SES students are likely to bring home based problems to school. Consequently behaviours of

students can vary with school type (Bransgrove, 1991).

Organisational factors affecting teacher stress and burnout

Within the organisation, certain behaviours and demands have been found as stressors in particular the role conflict, role overload and role ambiguity phenomena in teachers (Bransgrove, 1991; Dinham, 1992; Friedman, 1991; Jenkins & Calhoun, 1991).

Role conflict is defined as conflicting job demands and is related to physiological stress. Role overload is defined as a situation in which the individual is assigned more work than he/she can effectively deal with (Friedman, 1991). Role ambiguity occurs when an employee does not have adequate information to perform the task, or understand the expectations of that particular task. These factors have a significant negative impact on self esteem, professional self image and consequently resilience in the face of adversity.

Other organisational factors which have an immediate impact on teaching itself include lack of staff and equipment, excessive paperwork, insufficient salary, lack of advancement and opportunity, involuntary transfers, lack of administrative support, and conflicts in the perception of the job (French & Caplan, 1970; Kahn et al., 1964; Margolis et al., 1974 cited in Friedman, 1991).

Social Pressures on Schools and Teachers

The first year of teaching has been described as particularly isolative and frustrating. There are a number of reasons for this, but it seems that many new teachers come from stable backgrounds and are unprepared for violence, broken homes, racism, apathy, hopelessness and students questioning authority (Dinham, 1992).

Moreover it is reported that efforts to improve education always seem to focus on disciplining or changing teachers, which increases their overall accountability (Fennick, 1992). These assertions are supported by Dinham (1992) who noted one of the

complaints of beginning teachers was that they were not adequately informed of probation conditions and the requirements for a "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" result.

Teachers also perceive that there is pressure on schools to solve society's problems which results in an overcrowded curriculum. In addition demands on schools and teachers have increased with society having higher expectations for teachers while at the

same time the status of teachers has declined.

The plight of the average teacher, therefore is a difficult one and it would seem requires some very healthy coping strategies to resist falling foul of the surmounting pressures that are confronting teachers in the present educational and economic climate.

It was the aim of the present study to assess the levels of stress evidenced in teachers through quantitative and qualitative analyses. In addition three schools operating in two different systems and located in a low SES area and a high SES area were hypothesised to differ in the types of teacher stress that was experienced. The interviews of the teachers from the low SES school were conducted so as to furnish the quantitative data with explicit descriptions of teachers' experience within that school.

Method

Subjects

Teachers were taken from three schools. The main school was the focus of a broader study. Part of our negotiations with the school resulted in a specific request from the teachers to examine their overall stress levels.

This school is situated in the Hunter region and would be considered to be in one of the "undesirable" (cf Dinham, 1992) locations. It services a low SES area. The principal and teachers are keen to upgrade its reputation and have solicitously been focussing on positive media coverage. The staff have also introduced the concept of vertical unitisation in an attempt to lift student and staff morale. Staff have also been exposed to Control Theory and Reality Therapy to assist them in coping with the many changes occurring within the school.

In all 31 teachers (16 females; 15 Males) from this school participated in this pilot study on teacher stress. Twenty five of these teachers participated in teacher interviews (13 Males; 12 females).

The other two schools were part of the ACT public system where years 11-12 attend separate secondary colleges. From one school 18 teachers participated (8 Females; 10 males) while six teachers from the other school participated (4 females; 2 males).

Therefore a total of 55 teachers from two different public school systems responded to the battery of questionnaires which assessed various aspects of teacher stress.

Apparatus

a) The Teacher Stress Questionnaire (Smith & Bourke, 1992) is a
26 item (4 point Likert Scale) self report questionnaire which

conceptualises teacher stress as multi-dimensional. It assesses
stress from four main areas: Conflict, Students and Physical
Conditions, Rewards and Recognition, and Teacher workload

b) The Teacher Satisfaction Questionnaire (Smith &Bourke, 1992)
requires 18(4 point Likert Scale) self reported responses and
addresses three main areas: Satisfaction with workload and
conditions, satisfaction with relationships with students and
satisfaction with administration and senior staff.

On the back of the above two questionnaires were spaces for
optional additional comments

d) The Public and Private Self consciousness scale (Fenigstein
Scheier and Buss, 1975) measures the public and private aspects
of self presentation. Private self-consciousness focuses on
subjective feelings and thoughts, while public self consciousness
focuses on overt behaviours such as physical appearance and
expressions of affect.

e) The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE) (Watson & Friend,
1969) is a 30 item Likert response scale which measures social
anxiety in potentially evaluative situations and focuses on a
concern about others' reactions to oneself.

f) The Self Discrepancy Questionnaire (an adaptation of the
Selves Questionnaire Higgins, 1987) assess self-esteem according
to three different perspectives (i.e. how you believe you are,
how you believe you ought to be, and how you think you should
ideally be). Scores are termed as self discrepancies, so that
matches with the ideal and ought selves indicate high self
esteem. Higher or lower scores for the actual self in comparison
to ideal and ought selves indicates a belief that you exceed your
own expectations, or a negative self esteem (discrepancy).
Consequently each person receives an ideal self discrepancy score
and an ought self discrepancy score.

Results

Quantitative Analyses

Sex Differences

T-Tests revealed that there were no significant sex differences on any of the questionnaires.

School Type

For the purposes of the analyses the two Hih SES schools were grouped together as they both represent the same SES status and operate under the same system.

T-tests for location type revealed significant differences on only three of the measures.

The Low SES school teachers (X = 15.03) were more publicly self conscious than the high SES school teachers (X = 11.44) (t=2.28; df=47 for p,.02) and evidenced higher levels of Fear of Negative Evaluation (X = 63.0) than the High SES school teachers (47.3) (t =2.8; df=47 for p < .04).

In addition, the Low SES school teachers evidenced a significantly lower ought discrepancy than the High SES teachers. In fact it appears that Low SES teachers believed that they exceeded their ought selves in comparison to the High SES teachers (t= -.37; df=47 for p< .000).

Qualitative Analyses

For the purposes of this study, 5 questions from the Teacher Interview were selected for analysis.

Motivation to Teach

Forty eight percent of the sample said that teaching was not their first choice, while 52% said that it was their first choice. Sex differences were evident in that 70% of males did not choose teaching as their favoured career path, while only 30% of women said that teaching was not their first career choice. Favoured choices for a career focus were engineering, science subjects and law.

It is interesting to examine some of the "yes" responses

Male

"I suppose I was influenced by my father who went through the depression and unemployed and he always said get a government job, that was one influence, you know. "

This response is suggestive of a lack of individual choice or

control over a projected career path. It also emphasises the "safe" aspects of the profession.

Female

"..I just went on into Year 12 and then we put down a few things - I had nursing down as another choice but I sort of found out a bit more about it and thought no way"

This comment suggests a choice based on limited stereotyped female career options. Does "yes" indicate unconditional affirmation, or does it mean "maybe"?

Only 8% of the sample answered the question "If you had unlimited choices, what occupation would you choose to be in at the present time?" with "Teacher". Many of the choices nominated, reflected earlier career first choices while others focussed on fantasy components (eg 9 to 5 work; Manager at Hamilton Island)

Perception of a Teacher's Role

The way teachers perceived their roles were collated under eight categories. These categories included discipline, facilitator, administrator, learning, interpersonal (self respect, self esteem, manners and social skills), motivation, achievement, and welfare (teacher as caregiver, crisis manager etc.) Figure 1.1 shows graphical representation of the group's perceptions of teacher roles.

Figure 1.1 demonstrates that there are a number of different functions perceived to be part of a teacher's role. However, to have students learn and achieve attracted the greatest number of responses.

Some teachers see their role as one of multiple duties, while others see their duties as singular or twofold. Figure 1.2 shows the frequency of teachers who saw the teacher as having 1 to 5 roles. As the figure shows the majority of teachers saw their roles as twofold, though certainly a substantial number of responses saw the teacher as having more than two roles.

Recognition

The final analyses focussed on whether the teachers are happy teaching at the Low SES school. Only 16% of respondents answered "No", the remaining 84% offered a number of reasons as to why they liked being at that particular school. As figure 1.3 shows

68% of reasons focussed on the interpersonal (ie student and staff relations) and 80% focussed on what could be conceptualised as recognition.

An example of a "recognition" response follows:

Female
"....you know a lot of people sort of say that, you know, 'Going to be a teacher?' and you say (at)(name of school) and they go 'Oh No!' but I find kids really appreciate you taking an interest in them........it's probably pretty rewarding to see if you've made some sort of impact on them"

Male
" I like teaching at this school because a lot of people reckon it's a tough school, and it is!..but I find that with kids from this area you get what you give, you know, and I get on pretty well with the kids here, I don't seem to have any problems with them."

Both of the above responses show that there is some rewards to be gained from "surviving" the reputation of the school. In fact many responses used the words "challenge" and "survival" in their descriptions of their placement satisfaction.

It was interesting to note that a few responses embellishing the reasons for liking the school were reminiscent of a "doublebind" response. The following quote is representative of this.

Female
"Yes because the kids need help and the familiarity and if the kids see you out of the school, they're nice and it's wonderful-maybe because I've been here too long and I need a change and you get stale and I just don't think you put in as much effort if you get stale"

This teacher acknowledges interpersonal satisfaction with the students but admits to being "stale". She also reflects on her loss of interest in her professional accomplishments.

Compare these general findings with the following anonymous comments from the Teacher Stress Questionnaire.

Female

"There is no help for teachers under stress until you crack. Then the assistance is offered. DSP schools are difficult to work in. There is no way out unless you crack, then maybe you can get a transfer"

Male
"This school is very soul destroying because of the poor
aspirations of students and lack of goals. They reflect a very
disadvantaged background which is largely indifferent or hostile
to school and the value of education."

Both these statements exhibit the individual's frustration with
their particular school and its psychological climate. The former
is indicative of emotional exhaustion while the latter is
representative of depersonalisation.

The qualitative data and the quantitative data when viewed
together present an interesting picture of teacher behaviour.
There is an air of trying to please the researcher, yet some
unconscious leakage of possible frustrations occur

Discussion

The present results show that neither sex nor SES or school
system result in differences in teacher stress levels. However,
the teachers at the low SES school reported more fear of
negative evaluation, higher levels of public self consciousness
and perceived that they were performing beyond what they felt
they ought to be (high on ought self) in comparison to the high
SES schools. Previously, Higgins (1987) has identified that ought
discrepancies are specifically associated with social anxiety
measures (of which both the FNE and the Public Self-consciousness
Scale have been highly correlated). In addition Monfries (1990)
suggested that the FNE in fact tapped a form of cognitive anxiety
(ie the articulation of a fear that at some point could lead to
behavioural anxiety) that may precede the development of
pathological anxiety.

It is possible that as the low SES school received many research
visits and was subject to observations of teaching, in depth
interviews as well as adjusting to the implementation of vertical
unitisation that teachers were sensitised to evaluations from
others and became "cognitively" anxious.

Alternatively, the teachers from the Low SES school may be more
cognitively stressed generally than their counterparts and this
may imply that this population is more vulnerable to burnout or
stress, but that overt manifestations of stress symptoms are not
yet evident.

The interview responses of the low SES teachers revealed that a
large percentage of teachers did not choose to teach as a first
option. Rather aspirations of these teachers lay predominantly in

scientific fields. Moreover, many teachers said that they would not choose to be teaching now if they had unlimited occupational choices. These findings can be interpreted in two possible ways. Firstly, it may be that the lack of initial motivation to teach may affect cognitive coping mechanisms and therefore predispose individuals to forms of cognitive anxiety or social sensitivity as shown on measures such as the FNE and the Public Self-consciousness Scales. Secondly, some of the fanciful and atypical

professions that teachers would presently choose (ie film director, manager of Hamilton Island) may also indicate that at some level (maybe an unconscious one) that teachers are less than satisfied with their current conditions. The latter interpretation would certainly be favoured by psychoanalysts.

One implication of such findings is that both at the teacher training level and at the school level, it is important to motivate individuals to see the value in being a teacher. Fennick (1992) suggested that teachers' motivations could be affected through the collaboration of universities and schools to provide aspiring teachers with the opportunity to establish networks through research and scholarship. She posits that such a pro-active approach would enhance teachers' self esteem by demonstrating that they have control and influence in their profession. She suggests "Instead of working harder-working smarter" by using conferencing, peer response groups, collaborative grouping, journal writing, holistic grading and portfolios.

The perceptions of a teacher's role were by no means uniform. Despite the fact that a large proportion of the teachers emphasised the fairly traditional objectives of learning and achievement, their understanding of what constitutes learning and achievement were not necessarily shared. Moreover it was clear that not everyone holds the same view on the number of roles a teacher fulfils. Consequently, the research citing role ambiguity and role conflict as important organisational factors (Dinham, 1992; Friedman, 1991; Pierce & Malloy, 1990) is also something that needs to be addressed given the association with teacher stress levels

Although there were no significant associations with teacher stress, a number of factors emerged from the interviews which teachers cited as having an effect on their satisfaction with their working environment. Recognition and interpersonal rewards were cited as contributing to professional well being. Teachers generally perceived it as a challenge to function in a school which had an infamous reputation. Some teachers saw the school as "progressive" in its approach to tackling its idiosyncratic

problems. Therefore research suggesting that improvements to teaching morale (Dinham, 1992) can be made by providing more recognition is certainly warranted in light its favourable effect on these teachers. In particular Dinham (1992) points out that teachers are constantly pressured to provide more positive reinforcement to pupils but receive little reinforcement themselves.

Finally the concepts of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment as proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1980) may provide useful guidelines for further qualitative analysis, as it was quite clear that some teachers use such concepts in qualifying their responses.

The findings of the present pilot study are certainly tempered by the small sample size and lack of comparative data. Nevertheless some interesting data emerged which highlight the importance of motivation and role/role conflict.

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