CHALLENGES IN THE CLASSROOM AND TEACHER STRESS

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The issue of teachers’ stress is one that has received reasonable attention regionally, nationally and internationally. The release of Dr. Lynda Younghusband’s grounded theory study in early winter 2005 highlights the issue for high school teachers in Newfoundland and confirms the ongoing prevalence and consistency of teachers’ concerns related to classroom conditions and their link to stress (Full study at: www.nlta.nl.ca/html_files/html_pages/publications/ly_tchrstudy/tchrstudy_list.html). The proceeding article summarizes Dr. Younghusband’s research as well as earlier findings of other, selected teacher organizations.

Study Methods

The researcher conducted a qualitative grounded theory study of 16 high school teachers, from 24 to 55 years of age, in rural and urban Newfoundland. Personal interviews were completed throughout 2002 with only teachers who had experienced stress at work responding to the request for participants.

Dr. Younghusband used a constant comparative method of analysis to generate three theoretical constructs:

1. The struggle to balance multiple demands (feeling burdened by work pressures and demands, barriers to teacher effectiveness).
2. The importance of supportive work environments (feeling unsupported by administration, value of a collegial community, importance of having adequate resources).
3. The realities of stress (participants’ understanding of stress, self-concept, the taboo of stress, feeling consumed by the job: interference with personal life).

Defining Stress

Extensive literature exists to define stress and all of its constituents and their interaction with one another including pressure, demands, and stressors. Dr. Younghusband’s report provides a thorough examination of all of these items including the traditional theories and constructs of stress. Everyone knows and understands what stress is and the experience of stress but an explicit definition is elusive.

In the context of health, stress is a mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and capable of affecting physical health (www.dictionary.com). The National Union of Teachers (UK) indicates the ways in which stress manifests itself:

The effects of stress can be manifested in many different ways, including physical effects such as raised heart rate, headache, dizziness, palpitations, skin rashes, aching neck and shoulders and lowering of resistance to infection. Over a long period stress may contribute to chronic health problems such as heart disease and stomach ulcers. Various psychological and behavioural changes affecting work performance and interpersonal relationships may also be noticed by stressed individuals’ colleagues, including inability to concentrate, overworking, irritability or aggression, becoming withdrawn or unsociable, or reluctance to accept constructive criticism and advice.1

Defining Teacher Stress

Through her review of the literature, Dr. Younghusband indicates that workload and increasing time pressures have a negative impact on teachers and as a result, stress levels are rising. Common stressors related to workload and therefore, to teacher stress include time pressures, problems associated with class size, inclusive classrooms, the implications of a heavy workload on family life and the repercussions of on-going change.

Time Pressures

Not surprisingly, lack of time and long working hours are often cited in the research as significant sources of stress for teachers. In Canadian teacher organization studies, these findings hold out. In BCTFs “Worklife of Teachers Survey Series, 1: Workload and Stress” (April 2001), the author noted that 80% of full-time teachers reported that they spent at least one week of vacation preparing for the coming school year, with new teachers spending three to four weeks doing the same. Dibbons 2004 Newfoundland study revealed that 52% of participants found lack of time a problem and that an average of 52.32 hours/week were spent on school related activities. Similarly, CTF’s 2005 National Teachers Poll found on average, teachers had a total work week of 55.6 hours.

Problems Associated with Class Size

Dr. Younghusband notes that among researchers “the consensus appears to be overwhelmingly in favour of smaller classes, ideally under 20 students, in order to reduce the workload demands on teachers and better meet the needs of students”. More time spent

on preparation, grading and discipline rather than relating to individual students or using innovative instructional approaches, are problems frequently identified with large classes.

Inclusive Classrooms

Integrating students with a host of diverse needs and challenges (intellectual, physical, emotional, social) has increased teachers’ stress markedly. Completing individual learning plans, meeting with parents, feeling ineffective and unprepared and having inadequate resources are all noted stressors originating from inclusive classrooms. Studies completed in Nova Scotia (Goddard, 2000), British Columbia (Naylor, 2001) and Newfoundland (Dibbon, 2004) confirm this assessment.

Family Implications

Although not extensively studied, increasing work pressures and greater time spent working understandably impacts teachers’ time with their families. The resulting conflict contributes to stress for teachers. In a 2000 Nova Scotia study, 75% of teacher participants worried about not spending enough time with family and friends. Similarly, a 2000 Newfoundland study with similar findings in 2004 determined that 65.5% of teachers in the study desired more time to spend with friends and 40.9% reported that their relationships were not good ‘lately’.

Workplace Change

The changing face of students in the classroom, Board restructuring – including amalgamation and downsizing, and curriculum changes are common sources of stress for teachers. Among many others, a 2005 Ontario study found that teachers were personally and professionally overwhelmed and that changes occurred too often and too quickly with little input from the teachers.

The preceding highlights stress associated with workload. A teachers’ work environment is also identified as a significant contributor to the experience of stress. Common difficulties include administrative support, inadequate collegial support, lack of physical and professional resources and disruptive students.

Lack of Administrative Support

Involved and supportive administrative staff are pivotal determinants of a teacher’s perception of stress in the workplace. Reasonable expectations, appreciating teachers’ efforts and consulting and involving teachers are viewed as necessary characteristics of a supportive administrator. For example, a 1992 Canadian study commissioned by CTF found that appreciation of teachers’ efforts by principals was highly related to teachers’ satisfaction with their work and 55% of participants in the high stress group said they received ‘little recognition’ for their performance from their administrators.

Inadequate Collegial Support

Providing time and opportunity for teachers to interact with one another and share experiences can make a positive difference to a teacher’s perception of stress. Greater collegial support is of benefit to the teacher. In the 1992 Canadian study referenced above, researchers found that teachers who indicated good relationships with their colleagues tended to be highly satisfied with teaching.

Lack of Resources

Inadequate classroom resources contribute to a teacher’s perception that their work is stressful – lack of materials and supplies makes their work that much more difficult. Using their own resources and contributing personally to maintain their classrooms places additional strain on teachers. CTF’s 2005 National Teachers Poll determined that 92% of full-time teachers contributed some of their own money for students at their school and on average each teacher spent $344 for the 2004-2005 school year.

Disruptive Students

Classroom discipline and managing disruptive students demand time and energy from teachers and are linked to a sense of stress. CTF’s 2005 National Poll revealed that 78%, 75% and 60% of teachers interviewed witnessed a student physically assaulting or intimidating another student, a student verbally abusing another student and a student verbally abusing a teacher, respectively. In addition, one-third of educators surveyed reported an increase in the number of incidents with angry or abusive parents compared to four years ago. Also, a joint study undertaken by the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation and the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario revealed that almost 40 percent of Ontario teachers and education workers are subjected to bullying by students resulting in emotional and stress-related symptoms for teachers.

Younghusband’s Research Findings

Results in Dr. Younghusband’s Newfoundland study expand upon previous findings and illuminate teachers’ workplace concerns and their perceptions of teaching in that province.

Struggling to Balance Multiple Demands

The study provided teachers an opportunity to describe their teaching experiences from their point of view – teachers expressed a feeling of “being disabled by demands and responsibilities while at the same time struggling to overcome the barriers that were perceived to inhibit effective teaching”. Study participants

described being overwhelmed with the scale and pace of educational change in the province in the past few years and feeling bombarded by demands and deadlines within the work day with little time to reflect on their work. “The incremental and cumulative expectations of others caused them to feel pressured and stressed”.

As in other research, working hours was a prevalent concern. Hours spent outside actual school time enhanced “the pressure they were feeling and they often felt resentful when work encroached on personal time”. Longer hours as a result of increased demands for accountability provoked feelings of frustration, fatigue and anxiety. Closely related – teaching new curriculum for which they felt unprepared, and the resultant accountability and responsibility, left teachers feeling insecure.

Greater demands and conflicting expectations from their employer and from the public, was a source of frustration for teachers. The profound social and emotional needs that students bring to the classroom along with the demand for teachers to take on multiple roles not directly related to teaching and learning were a concern. Added supervision responsibility that provides little or no time for other needs and involvement in extracurricular activities were referenced.

Also reported as a concern and resultant source of stress were items characterized as barriers to effective teaching:

- Pathways (a comprehensive, provincially developed special needs program)
- Inclusive classrooms
- Behaviour management
- Struggle to facilitate learning in less than ideal conditions

Finally, verbal abuse and violence and the emotional toll these had on them, were areas of concern for teachers in this study. Teachers reported experiencing verbal abuse by both parents and students and described feeling a need for constant vigilance to protect against violence.

Importance of Supportive Work Environments

The previously reported sentiment of a pressure to do more with less was repeated by this study’s participants. Working cooperatively and collaboratively along with the presence of adequate physical and human resources were identified as important for teachers. A lack of communication or recognition of teachers’ work exacerbated by a sense of being ignored, not feeling engaged and being devalued when making their opinions known created feelings of resentment, negativity and isolation for these teachers. Administrators who valued and trusted their teachers was noted as important conditions to “bond together a school”. Teachers noted the need for a healthier working environment including a “happier, more relaxed school environment where they would experience both administrative and collegial support, where there would be time to converse with colleagues, and time to have lunch on most days”. Providing time and opportunity for camaraderie among colleagues was also identified as an important buffer against stress. Finally, adequate professional development and consultation regarding new courses and policies was cited as essential. Teachers “often felt as though they worked in a negative atmosphere where their expertise and experiences did not count”.

Realities of Stress

Participants described stress as feelings of pressure and lack of time to fulfill their own expectations and those of others as well as a number of additional indications – anxious, frustrated, fatigued, uptight, depleted of energy, exhausted, edgy, drained, inadequate, overwhelmed, down, depressed, panicky, tense, and helpless. They highlighted what they perceived as the main causes of stress in the workplace:

- Balancing multiple demands
- Work overload
- Lack of time
- Inadequate resources
- Inadequate administrative support
- Inclusive classes
- Pathways
- Student misbehaviour
- On-going changes
- Inadequate professional development

Teachers manifested a number of physical symptoms including headaches, being unable to sleep, feeling chest pain and having back aches and high blood pressure. Feeling unable to cope, ineffective and unsure while perceiving little compassion for a teacher experiencing stress, contributed to teachers’ negative self-perceptions and fuelled their internal debate about their effectiveness and capabilities. Consequently, teachers’ home life was impacted. “The lack of personal time resulted in poor emotional health, guilt because they felt neglectful of their families, and resentment because they felt forced to choose work over self and family”.

Other Teacher Organization Research

Dr. Younghusband’s literature review summarizes much of the prevalent Canadian research on teacher workload and teacher stress and was reported in an earlier section of this article – Defining Teacher Stress. Notably, research conducted either directly or indirectly, with or by teacher organizations in British Columbia, Alberta, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Ontario
provide some insight to the Canadian experience of teacher stress and provides further substantiation of Dr. Younghusband’s results (see references section of Dr. Younghusband’s thesis at: www.nlta.nl.ca/html_files/html_pages/publications/ly_tchrstudy/tchrstudy_list.html).

In addition, the American Federation of Teachers (www.aft.org) has a number of resources available for their members on the topic of stress and its management. On the international front, the United Kingdom has directed a fair amount of attention to the problem of teacher stress and the contributing factors to its incidence, including workload.

National Union of Teachers

The National Union of Teachers has utilized the results of a number of successive surveys on teacher workload to highlight its impact on teachers’ working lives. In a 2000 follow-up of results obtained in 1994 and 1996, the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB) completed a diary-based survey and a qualitative interview-based survey to explore issues in greater depth. Results are similar to those of Canadian studies:

- Total average working hours had increased for classroom teachers in both primary and secondary schools with average hours of 52.8 and 51.3 respectively.
- Larger class sizes equated to longer working hours with primary teachers that had classes of 30-34 students working an average of 54.2 hours compared to an average of 52.6 hours for teachers with class sizes of less than 30 students.
- Both primary and secondary classroom teachers spend over 30% of their time on lesson preparation and marking.
- Teachers spent approximately 15 hours per week completing work on weekends, during the evenings and before school.
- Teachers reported feeling that the working day was longer and more intensive than previous and described feeling exhausted, stressed and having low morale.
- Non-teaching responsibilities were burdensome and labour intensive.
- Diversity and inclusive classroom-related needs affected workload.
- External demands from their employer, including Government, increased workload and demands.

The 2005 STRB diary survey yields similar results to those of 2003 in terms of average total hours worked by full time teachers. “The findings were alarming – classroom teachers in the primary sector were working on average 50.9 hours per week. The figure for secondary classroom teachers was 49.3 hours”.

Because they may provide direction for further initiatives particularly at the school level, the UK studies are of particular interest with regard to the methods used by teachers and schools for managing workloads:

- Prioritizing tasks
- Longer-term lesson planning
- Skim-reading assignments
- Decreasing involvement in extra-curricular activities
- Pooling resources with other teachers
- Delegation of tasks

Methods used by schools:

- Wider allocation of responsibility
- Restructuring staffing
- Revising job descriptions and changing responsibility
- Using ‘float’ teachers
- Allocating additional preparation time
- Reduce administration – Use standard forms, greater administrative assistance, advance scheduling and reduce meetings

In addition, a 2001 study commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills set out to “identify the main factors that determine teachers’ workload and to develop a programme of practical action to eliminate excessive workload”. As confirmed in earlier UK studies and the previously cited Canadian references, “Many teachers felt that they were not in control of their work, [and] that it caused them stress”. Respondents identified issues underlying excessive workload:

- Teachers undertaking tasks that could be carried out by other staff.
- Inadequate support from available technology.
- Insufficient time to manage the staff and other resources at their disposal, and to manage their own planning; and feeling they have insufficient ownership of, and access to, high quality professional development.
- Administrators and leadership not seeing teacher workload as part of their responsibility and wide variations in approaches to managing teacher workload between different schools.
- Lack of sufficient thought about the impact on workload by the employer and Government.
- Perception of being mistrusted and consequently, accountability requirements necessitating documenting “every decision, every lesson and most interactions with pupils”.

4 www.teachers.org.uk/resources/pdf/1564.pdf

Based on these and ongoing survey findings, subsequent government policy in the yearly School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document has introduced statutory provisions that attempt to reduce teachers’ working time and improve working conditions – although not to the complete satisfaction of the National Union of Teachers.

Actions and Response to Teacher Stress

The information that Canadian teachers are experiencing greater workloads and levels of work intensity with rising stress levels as a result, is of little surprise to Member organizations. Many organizations have been attempting to address the sources of teacher stress for a number of years through collective bargaining, with varying degrees of success. The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario’s 200 hours campaign during collective bargaining in 2005 secured significant improvements to the amount of preparation time available to teachers, culminating at 200 minutes in the last year of the agreement. In British Columbia, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation and its members defied provincial legislation that imposed a collective agreement and continued to assert their ongoing commitment to having classroom size and classroom composition issues returned to collective bargaining and dealt with at local negotiating tables. As well, throughout most of 2005, the Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers (and other teacher organizations) conducted a campaign to achieve collective bargaining gains in two main areas: 1) improving resources for students with special needs, 2) reducing class sizes in both regular schools and in adult education centres. Despite having both solid public and member support, agreement was not reached at the bargaining table and the teachers’ working terms and conditions of employment were legislated in December 2005. Finally, on a positive note, an April 2006 announcement by the New Brunswick Department of Education confirms that effective September 2006, class sizes noted in the collective agreement will be reduced by one student for all given scenarios.

Internationally, a number of groups are also attempting to tackle the factors contributing to teacher stress or at minimum events are bringing the issue to the forefront. For example, teachers in Hong Kong protested in January 2006 calling for fewer working hours. The Hong Kong Professional Teachers Union reported that teachers are working up to 70 hours per week under intense pressure from (among others) government-mandated educational reforms. The action followed the suicide of two Hong Kong teachers.

In the UK, a 2002 pilot project – “Well”, reduced absence rates among teachers from 10.5 days to 8.9 days per employee at five schools in York. Stress consultants used questionnaires to develop personal stress profiles based on an assessment of mental and physical health. Those teachers at the higher end of the stress scale received extra support such as counselling and all staff had access to an onsite health manager. In addition, “The project identified the main causes of stress and drew up an annual calendar of workload ‘hotspots’ so that peak times could be planned for. The marking policy was also changed to better stagger workload, and an extra teacher was employed”.

Also in the UK, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) won a settlement award for one of its stressed teachers in 1999. The secondary school teacher was awarded £47,000 in an out of court settlement for experiencing stress in the classroom. The teacher informed her employer of the pressures she was facing due to excessive workload and other factors but nothing was done to support her. The teacher’s health deteriorated, she was unable to work and was diagnosed with severe depression and an adjustment disorder caused by stress. Ultimately, the teacher was forced to retire which prompted NUT’s successful action on her behalf.

Furthermore, a NUT document “Tackling workload: Beating back bureaucracy 2004–2005” notes 21 administrative and clerical tasks teachers are protected from routinely undertaking. The protection comes from the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document 2003, Section 4, paragraphs 3-22. The NUT’s ongoing campaigns to reduce teachers’ workload, and therefore, reduce teachers’ stress, have resulted in further changes in teachers’ working conditions:

- from September 2004, a limit of 38 hours on the amount of supervision that can be required of an individual teacher in each academic year.
- from September 2005, an entitlement to at least 10% of timetabled teaching time for planning, preparation and assessment.

In its February 2006 document, “Working Time & Duties – NUT Guide”, NUT updates the information and instruction provided by “Tackling Workload” in giving direction to teachers for limiting their workload within the bounds of their contract of employment. Reports of reduced average weekly working hours between 2000 and 2005 among primary and secondary teachers – 52.8 primary and 51.3 secondary hours in 2000, compared to 50.9 primary and 49.3 secondary hours per week in 2005 suggest that the initiatives have met with some success.

Finally, although not directly researching teacher stress, the American Teachers’ Federation’s (AFT) 1998 Policy Brief “Recent Research Shows Major Benefits of Small Class Size” chronicled the American research conducted on class size and the inherent benefits of smaller classes on teacher workload. Consequently, as many Canadian teacher organizations do, the AFT has a number of class size resolutions on its books that provide the framework for action.

8 www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/83/ACFD.doc
for public and political lobbying, education and collective bargaining initiatives. On the specific issue of stress, the AFT provides information about what it is and how to cope as well as a link to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health for an information video on workplace stress.

Conclusion

Collectively, teacher organizations worldwide recognize the debilitating impact that stress has on its members. Numerous studies have consistently documented the sources and contributing factors to a teacher’s experience of stress, not least of which is Dr. Younghusband’s recent doctoral dissertation. It is clear that all stakeholders are well-informed of the issue and the reasons for its occurrence but what remains elusive are consistent, well-funded practices to effectively address teacher stress.

About the Author

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