

Enhancement of the School Climate by Reducing Teacher Burnout: Using an Invitation Approach

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Abstract

Teacher burnout involves the feelings of failure and exhaustion resulting from excessive demands on a person's energy with insufficient reward for the effort. Teacher burnout has serious consequences for the individual, the school and students. For the individual, this can involve physical, psychological and/or behavioural symptoms, loss of motivation, decreased self-esteem and ultimately loss to the teaching profession. This article outlines the objectives and the rationale of a pilot intervention program which was implemented in a school in the Sydney urban area (N.S.W., Australia) to respond to teacher burnout. The purpose of this intervention program was to address the causes of burnout and implement strategies to assist in the reduction and ultimate prevention of burnout using invitational theory as a foundation to create a better school climate.

Enhancement of the School Climate by Reducing Teacher Burnout : An Invitational Approach

According to Purkey and Novak (1988), the implementation of invitational education "... creates schools where people want to be and want to learn" (p.11). Subsequent research findings have shown that teachers in Australia are reporting increased work-related stress which is leading to professional burnout. Teachers are describing schools as places where people do NOT want to be. This leads to feelings of disillusionment, emotional exhaustion, negative attitudes towards children and loss of job satisfaction.

The Australian National Safety Council (1983) has estimated that stress is costing industry and commerce \$1.4 billion Australian dollars (approximately equivalent to \$1,045,240,000 US dollars) a year in lost working time. It is also directly responsible for loss of personnel at all levels. Surveys have shown that one out of every four teachers eventually leaves the profession (Kremer-Hayon & Kurtz, 1985). A study by McGowan (1984), estimated that approximately 25% of teachers in the Australian state of Queensland were experiencing acute stress and burnout. In Australia, with a total population of 17,896,700 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994), there are 98,527 teachers at the primary level (Kindergarten and Grades 1 - 6 which is equivalent to elementary school in the USA) and 103,388 teachers

at the secondary level (Grades 7 - 12, equivalent to high school in the USA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

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1993). If McGowan's estimate is extrapolated to the total workforce (that is, 25% of 201,915), it could be predicted that 50,479 teachers in Australia were or are experiencing burnout.

Burnout Defined

Burnout was first defined by Freudenberger (1974) and involves feelings of failure and exhaustion resulting from excessive demands on a person's energy with insufficient reward for the effort. Other researchers have defined burnout as psychological distancing from work (Maslach, 1976; Seidman & Zager, 1987; Cherniss, 1980). Block (1978) and Freudenberger (1983) have identified many of the symptoms associated with burnout, which can be categorised into three groups: physical (e.g., exhaustion, lingering cold, frequent headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, weight loss, sleeplessness and shortness of breath), psychological (e.g., changeable mood, irritability, depression, loss of caring for people, cynical attitude, increased frustration, feelings of helplessness, greater professional risk-taking [i.e., smoking, escapist drinking, drug use]), and behavioural (e.g., deterioration in work performance and absenteeism). It is unlikely that any single isolated symptom can be viewed as an indication of burnout. Various combinations

of the above and perhaps others represent the manifestations of burnout. If these issues are not addressed, eventually, the individual loses desire and motivation, and is unable to fight or flee what is perceived to be an impossible situation. On a more global scale,

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burnout can lead to serious consequences in the individual, the school and students. For these reasons, a preventive approach is imperative since damage is likely to have occurred by the time the symptoms are recognised.

Teaching and Burnout

Teaching can be considered a high-stress occupation. The education system has all the elements associated with stress: a bureaucratic structure, continuous evaluation of its processes and outcomes, and increasingly intensive interpersonal interactions with students, parents, colleagues, principals and the community.

In addition, increased student misconduct, student apathy, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate salaries, demanding or unsupportive parents, budgetary constraints, expanding administrative loads, lack of infrastructural support, and an increasingly negative public opinion have contributed to an embattled and embittered teacher force in Australia and, no doubt, many other centres in the world.

Burnout tends to be contagious. When dissatisfied and depressed teachers are present in a school, others can very easily become lethargic, cynical and discontented and, before long, the entire organisation becomes a dispirited and uninviting place. According to van der Sijde (1988), the school climate influences both the student and the teacher. He reported a positive relationship between teachers' work conditions and the amount of support they gave to students. In addition, he noted, that

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teachers' behaviour depended on their perceptions of how their school functioned. Thus, teachers play an important role in establishing the overall tone of a school. According to Purkey (1970), teachers need to feel successful and good about themselves and their abilities before they can empower their students to feel the same. If, however, teachers are experiencing feelings of failure and/or lacking in personal satisfaction, their relationship with students and the overall school will ultimately suffer.

Australian and international studies have repeatedly shown that the quality of the teachers is the number-one predictor of a school's effectiveness. Therefore, by implication, teachers should be targeted in any intervention program (Jeans, 1992; McGaw, Piper, Banks, & Evans, 1992). To date, most research directed to burnout is descriptive and provides little foundation for further

study or prevention. Strategies that have been employed to help teachers cope with stress, have been of a therapeutic nature; for example, the provision of stress-management seminars and the kindly, if inexperienced, advice of some principals and colleagues. This approach could be classed as a band-aid measure, addressing symptoms rather than causes. An alternative and more effective approach is needed to enable causes to be addressed, corrected and ultimately prevented. To break the cycle requires intervention strategies and in-service training that will provide teachers with intrapersonal and interpersonal skills enabling them to cope effectively and achieve personal satisfaction.

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Based on previous research, this article outlines the objectives and the rationale of an intervention program which was piloted in a school in the Sydney urban area (N.S.W., Australia) with a teacher-burnout problem. The purpose of this intervention program was to address the causes of burnout and implement strategies to assist in its reduction and ultimate prevention using invitational theory as a foundation.

Pilot Program to Decrease Teacher Burnout

Goals and Enabling Strategies

Invitational education encompasses a constructivist model (Novak, 1990). That is, it implies that education is a cooperative activity in which process is as important as product. It is,

therefore, important to promote a collaborative environment not just in the classroom but among the staff. In addition, intentionally inviting leadership is essential to maintain consistency and a balance in purpose and direction. Kanter (1984) contends that successful leaders need to be skilled at team building, seeking input from others, showing sensitivity to others interests and needs, and possessing a willingness to share rewards and recognition. Another key feature of invitational education is its emphasis on interactions among students, teachers and the school, which is the social context of education. Therefore, based on previous research, the staff involved in the pilot program were advised to strive towards four main goals. Strategies to achieve these goals were also recommended. The goals and enabling strategies reflect the interactive, cooperative emphasis focal to invitational education and are listed below:

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Goal 1: Restoring Balance and Perspective Within the Staff

Burnout tends to be contagious and, if it is not prevented early, the entire school may become dispirited and uninviting. In addition, research studies consistently report that burnout occurs more often in high school teachers than primary and infants' teachers (Byrne, 1991; Pierce & Malloy, 1990). The reason for this difference may be attributed to the age of

students; that is, older students are often more eager and able to assert themselves against authority. Therefore, a major goal in preventing burnout is the improvement of staff morale and school climate by the restoration of balance and perspective within the staff.

Enabling Strategies :

Strong leadership was essential to achieve this goal, and strategies directed to enhancing leadership skills were implemented. For example, leaders were advised to support the staff by making them feel worthwhile and important and to give praise and recognition that was deserved. The leaders were encouraged to develop among the staff professional relationships based on mutual trust and respect. It was recommended that leaders should encourage an optimistic outlook and demonstrate intentionality by maintaining consistency in their purpose and direction. Striving towards intentionality was emphasised as this leads to direction and control in one's personal and professional life. Intentionality also helps teachers to develop plans, act on opportunities and evaluate their

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actions which is important in the face of major difficulties.

In-service training was also recommended to be held on a regular basis. Issues covered at in-service sessions included research on classroom-management and stress-management

skills. Classroom management was considered to be an essential topic at the high school level for reasons described earlier. In-service training would also assist in the improvement of staff morale and school climate by the restoration of balance and perspective within the staff.

Job enrichment was another requirement to achieve the first goal. This was considered to be very important to teachers and involved recommending that their professional role be enriched by taking trips outside the school, visiting different educational settings, and generally encouraging the opportunity for change and self-development. This would also help enhance teacher morale and school climate and hence the restoration of balance and perspective within the staff.

A sense of humour was also considered essential in achieving this first goal.

Goal 2: Reducing an Individual's Feelings of Isolation

Unfortunately, a recurrent theme in many schools is one of teacher isolation (Hargreaves, 1990) which occurs more often in high schools than primary or infants' schools (Byrne, 1991; Pierce & Malloy, 1990). Isolation contributes to burnout as it precludes possible sources of praise and support. A collaborative school climate should be encouraged to overcome this problem.

Enabling Strategies:

Regular group meetings were recommended, so that teachers could discuss mutual concerns, express emotion, and receive encouragement. These meetings were meant to encourage collaborative communication and reduce feelings of isolation.

Time out was advised during the course of a day to allow opportunities for staff to meet and discuss matters in a relaxed way. Once again this stressed the importance of collaboration and also minimising isolation.

Physical exercise was encouraged, even if this consisted only of a walk at lunch time. It was regarded that a healthy body was more likely to reduce the negative influences of stress.

Goal 3: Increasing Self-Esteem

The enhancement of self-esteem is central to invitational education philosophy. According to Trent, Cooney, Russell, and Warton (1996), children's self-definition is based on their perceived appraisals from significant others (reflected appraisals) as well as how they see themselves (actual opinions). Teachers are considered to be significant others and to have a profound effect on children's developing self by promoting or diminishing their sense of well-being. Studies have shown that a strong positive correlation exists between how teachers view themselves and how they view their students (Purkey & Smith, 1983), that is,

teachers with low self-esteem can hold a correspondingly low

opinion of their students. It follows from this finding that teachers need to view themselves in essentially positive ways for their own well-being as well as to enhance the self-development of their students.

Enabling Strategies:

It was recommended that teachers be encouraged develop a sense of realism about their work and accept the fact that they would not always succeed. Gratification could come from the fact that effort was made whatever the outcome. This way of thinking was to encourage teachers to think more positively about their efforts and consequently more realistically about themselves.

In addition, staff was encouraged to think well of themselves and to develop a sense of personal value and confidence. Strong leadership assists in the achievement of this goal. Teachers should be praised and recognised for their efforts and provided assistance and support in more difficult situations.

Fennick (1992) suggested that instead of working harder, work smarter. In other words, teachers who are likely to overwork and over-stress themselves need to think of strategies to ease their workload. It was suggested that teachers could achieve this by using conferencing, peer-response groups, collaborative grouping, and journal and portfolio writing. Such a

proactive approach could enhance teachers' self-confidence by demonstrating that teachers retain control of their own profession.

Goal 4: Identifying a Strategic Plan of Action

When there is an indication that the staff are starting to work in a collaborative fashion and there is agreement on the directions of the school, it is useful for staff to articulate or identify a strategic plan of action. This process should be a collaborative exercise which involves all members of staff. Plans to continue preventative-burnout strategies should also be incorporated into the action plan.

Enabling Strategies:

It was recommended that staff be engaged in a retreat, even for a few days, from areas of stress and, if possible, into a new geographical setting. This would allow individuals collectively to take stock of his/her situation and plan in a positive and thoughtful manner for the future. This action plan included a list of priorities, preferably short, which were realistic and achievable.

Plans to continue preventative-burnout strategies were also incorporated into the action plan. It was necessary for this process to be a collaborative activity, involving the entire school staff.

Strong leadership was essential to achieve this goal as the leader was the catalyst to promote a positive and optimistic way of viewing the future.

Program Evaluation Feedback.

Following the implementation of the pilot program the Principal of the school was interviewed and her opinion on the effect of the intervention program was sought. The Principal had been at the same school, in this leadership position, for 10 years. She was satisfied

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there had been an overall improvement in the attitude of the staff and reported that the program had been very successful. The Principal noted that the teachers appeared to be, happier, less stressed and able to communicate with each other more effectively. She also described a reduction of tension amongst the staff which contributed to a more peaceful school climate. The Principal also mentioned that a more trusting environment had developed, where staff were more relaxed, able to discuss mutual concerns more effectively and were more encouraging of each other.

Two specific strategies which were implemented in this program consisted of support groups and more regular and informal staff meetings. Social outlets called support groups were set up. These support groups were designed to delineate specific

areas that were likely to cause stress and frustration, and hence burnout, and discuss ways of sharing out the work more equitably or introduce methods to deal more effectively with their work (e.g., discuss short-cuts other staff members had discovered or suggest possible alternatives).

It was also recommended that staff meetings be held in a more informal fashion. For example, the supply of refreshments at the school's expense, to start meetings by thanking the staff for their contributions, highlighting achievements, and to express formal appreciation and praise for staff efforts. It was also recommended that meetings be held fortnightly instead of monthly. The objective of every second meeting would be to highlight and deal with a problem issue, for example, conflict-

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resolution strategies, stress management, problem-solving techniques, classroom-management techniques, and the notion that partnerships must be set up among staff in dealing with more difficult children. The introduction of support groups and more informal, regular staff meetings were considered by the Principal and staff to be very practical, useful and successful, and they recommended that these practices should continue.

At the conclusion of the pilot program, the staff organised three "pupil-free days" and went away on a retreat to a nearby resort. They worked on a mission statement and a strategic plan

of action. They incorporated the suggested preventative-burnout strategies into their action plan. The Principal reported that the staff gained much by this retreat, and that "the staff was able to work collaboratively towards a common goal, seemed to grow closer together by supporting and encouraging each other, and felt at more ease to express emotion and mutual concerns." The Principal and staff recommended that the program should continue in its present form during the subsequent school year.

Suggestions for Future Implementation.

The feedback obtained was considered a satisfactory outcome to develop a more in-depth and definitive study. In the latter, it was considered that the following approach to evaluation be taken :

- (a) Future programs would include the assessment of the academic performance of students prior to the implementation of the program and at the conclusion of the program to monitor whether there had been any improvement as a consequence of teacher mediation.

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- (b) The first and final stage of future programs would include a more in-depth evaluation of the intervention program. Examples of the variables would be : teacher-burnout assessment, teacher satisfaction with the school, teacher satisfaction with the leadership, job- enrichment

opportunities, teachers' level of self-esteem/self-satisfaction/job satisfaction and students' satisfaction with the school.

- (c) The program would also consider the implications of the research findings for development of proposals aimed at changes in policies and practices and for their implementation.

Toward the Future.

Burnout is often thought of as an expression of negative adaptation to stress, therefore, the focus tends to be on the detrimental effects of burnout. But burnout can also provide signals to monitor and alter maladaptive systems, both personal and social. This awareness enables us to recognise our stress points and consequently shift our goals, limit our activities, and rethink our lifestyles. From this point of view, burnout provides information that, used effectively in an intervention program, can make positive health-promoting changes in our lives. Once we begin to move in positive directions and address burnout, then we can empower the students to accept our invitations to achieve success. We as educators need to develop balance within ourselves before we can effectively impart this balance with our students. Much of this can be achieved if teachers feel more professionally satisfied as collaborative members of a united school.

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