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What is the Transformational Learning Experience of Secondary Teachers Who Have Dealt with Burnout?

Dr. Julius R. Sims

Abstract

Burnout is a syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion (EE) and depersonalization (DPZ) (Yong & Yue, 2007). Educators who fall victims to burnout are likely to be less sympathetic toward learners, have a lower tolerance for disruptions within the learning process, be less apt to prepare adequately for content delivery and student interaction, and feel less committed and dedicated to their work (Fisher, 2011). A phenomenological study explored the burnout experiences among eight secondary teachers and their strategies for coping. Using in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to understand the personal meanings, expressed opinions, feelings, and other detailed descriptions of the participants' burnout experiences. Administration issues, administrative workload, negative teacher/student relationships, and lack of student effort were resulting themes associated with EE and DPZ effecting teaching performance. In contrast, mental efficiencies, interpersonal relationships, and outside resources were themes associated with the coping activities/strategies of participants. Consequently, learning and employing affective strategies that cope with burnout can help educators become more effective in their professional field (Maslach, 2003; Zonlnierczyk-Zreda, 2005). This study seeks to add to the adult education research in further understanding the transformational learning process of adults; and the social or environmental context that influences the learning that adults encounter.

Introduction and Background

The field of teaching requires educators to be equipped mentally, professionally, and socially to face the responsibilities and demands of the vocation. However, the job demands, daily stress, and responsibilities of today's teachers exceed the expectations and demands of educational pioneers and teachers of yesterday. The potential increase in student population through 2015 could affect the number of new teachers needed within the field of teaching in the future (The Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). A teacher learning to secure their well-being is monument. Burnout continues to be a pressing issue among teachers (Maslach, 2003; Mee, 2011). Teachers who fall victim to burnout are likely to be less sympathetic toward students, have a lower tolerance for classroom disruption, be less apt to prepare adequately for class, and feel less committed and dedicated to their work (Fisher, 2011). The best-skilled teachers can feel overwhelmed, highly pressured by the job, professionally frustrated, and emotionally stressed. The term burnout refers to the conditions of physical and emotional exhaustion (EE) and negative attitudes stemming from callousness, detachment, or depersonalization (DPZ). Consequently, such adverse conditions tend to emerge from intense interactions while working within human service occupations like the teaching field (Maslach, 2003; Skvoholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2010).

The overwhelming job responsibilities of teachers, increasing academic demands regarding all students, and the accountability factors facing teachers have caused new pressures upon those in the teaching vocation (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2002). Additional pressures from federal and state mandates along with societal expectations have resulted in levels of

emotional/physical breakdowns and indifferences within teachers (Ravitch & Chubb, 2009). However, quality teaching, professional care, and self-motivation of teachers have become an increasing challenging job for all in the professional teaching field. A combination of various on-going stress factors or intense engagements in any work environment can possibly trigger the effects of burnout (Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Rimm-Kaufman, 2011). It is essential that educators at all levels constantly maintain a quality degree of self-motivation, determination, resiliency, empathy, unwavering care, and passion about the interactive learning process of all learners.

For teachers to adapt or cope and productively progress while dealing with mental or emotional exhaustion may require meaningful transformations. Such transformations may help teachers preserve good qualities of teaching. The stressful job of teaching may require teachers to learn or self-educate themselves in how to preserve the quality of their well-being and, subsequently, services to their students/learners. According to Adams (2003), work-related stress, high-stimulating job environments, or occupational burnout can be a disorienting dilemma or personal crisis due to the adverse effects it can have upon the mental well-being of individuals. Transformational learning suggests that adults can psychologically change their specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions due to a personal crisis or difficult events they daily encountered. The following sections will briefly discuss the research problem, teacher burnout and coping, transformational learning, and selected methodology. It will conclude with implications, recommendations, and references.

The Research

For this study, the researcher took a qualitative approach to explore and understand the burnout phenomenon of high school teachers that experienced EE and DPZ and their coping strategies. This selected approach addressed the question: What is the transformational learning experience of secondary teachers who have dealt with burnout? This study gained an understanding of the coping strategies employed by secondary teachers who experienced burnout and their transformational learning experiences because of burnout. The following questions were used to guide the study: (a) What were the factors that lead to teacher burnout?; and, (b) How did teachers cope with handling their professional duties while dealing with burnout?

Considerable research has been devoted to studying teacher stress and burnout at all levels of teaching. Burnout is a known phenomenon within human-service occupations such as teaching, social work, health care, law enforcement, and mental health services. According to Black (2003), when burnout conditions negatively affect the mental and emotional state of teachers, the teacher/student relationship becomes toxic having negative results. There is a gap in the education literature regarding the importance of preserving quality classroom instruction along with the effectiveness of employing coping strategies or protective measures for handling teacher burnout. The transformational learning needs of adults often grow out of their larger life issues stemming from life-change events or pressing conditions of the workforce (Taylor et al., 2000). Teachers can experience personal and professional development while they continue to execute their demanding duties within the job. Just as the poor response to distress is a learned behavior in the teaching field, so is learning or relearning skills for coping with stress. Teachers, like many adult learners, can develop and learn to protect themselves from the pressures of overload and the perceptions of failure.

Teacher Burnout

The vast literature on teacher burnout suggests that there are a number of problematic factors affecting psychological outcomes and teaching performance. These factors include social support, locus of control, negative affectivity, professional efficacy, and coping behaviors. These factors may affect outcomes independently of, or in interaction with, work stressors (Schonfeld, 2001). Nevertheless, due to the emotional and mental nature of their work teachers have become prone to work-related issues such as anxiety, depression, stress, exhaustion, callousness, and anger. The problems and impact of burnout has affected the performance abilities, or the lack thereof in many teachers along with other employees and administrators in the field of human-service occupations (O'Reilly, 2005). Some of the job-related frustrations of teachers are due to the negative or unhealthy teacher/student relationships they deal with daily (Benner, 2000; Brewster & Railsback, 2001). The neglect to employ strategies for coping or other preventive measures or if such strategies and measures have become ineffectual, burnout may become a severe issue.

Coping

The psychological development and quality performances of individuals are contingent upon their abilities to form protective measures or strategies for coping with difficult conditions. Some researchers suggest that with some strategic training, mental development, and advanced learning, most educators can still perform adequately while dealing with demanding, stressful, or explosive job situations (Van Dierendonck et al., 2005). Some of the most effective means of preventing the effects of occupational stress and burnout among teachers has been the employment of coping strategies/activities. Coping seems to be the mental and/or physical ability of individuals to adapt, adjust, manage, or develop an emotional balance while facing challenging periods of life, challenging conditions, and/or high-stress environments.

However, coping is a learned behavior. Coping is associated to the idea of developing behaviors, mental activities, or methods that help sustain one's resiliency and protect quality performance. Biglan (2008) suggests that the personal expressions or any formulated activities for coping is a learned behavior. Unsuccessful strategies for coping or the absence of any such measures to adapt at all can affect the well-being of teachers and quality of teaching (i.e., success) in the classroom. Recognizing particular events or situations/conditions within the job setting that could act as a trigger that causes stress is paramount.

Transformational Learning

Teachers in general want to resolve the problems of declining self-efficacy created by stress and burnout. Thus, teachers are becoming open to develop or redevelop and learn their own solutions for self-efficacy coupled with developing new perspectives about themselves and their work environment (Betoret, 2006). The learning requirements throughout the many aspects of adulthood are not limited to the periods of vocational training needed, or the desire to progress through an educational system for an academic goal. The prevailing challenges adults face within certain work environments or conditions in life will require the kinds of personal learning that will transform the mental perspectives of adults (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Transformational learning is an endeavor undertaken by adults to possibly build self-worth, redevelop personality, or develop one's belief system. Transformational learning involves acquiring a new perspective about an individual's worldview or personal viewpoint (Clark, 1993).

In short, transformational learning occurs because of a myriad of personal experiences, daunting work environments, or challenges that threaten the well-being of adults. This form of learning can lead to attitude change, personal growth, and ultimately succeed in adapting new skills and strategies that will allow teachers to remain as productive educators for the students they serve (Dana, 2007). A disorienting dilemma can be a large event or a series of smaller events that causes the need for change, usually experienced as an intense personal crisis or dilemma (Cranton, 2006).

Methodology and Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the coping strategies employed by secondary teachers who experienced burnout and understand their transformational learning experiences. The following questions guided the study: (a) What were the factors that lead to teacher burnout?; (b) How did teachers cope with handling their professional duties while dealing with burnout? One-on-one interviews collected data regarding EE and DPZ of teachers and their strategies for coping. Using a qualitative approach to understand the opinions, ideas, concepts, feelings, and perceptions of participants were important. A phenomenological methodology for a research design strategy was appropriate to study things as they appeared to the participants (Smith, 2011). My active role as a qualitative researcher in this study, according to Patton (2002), was to position myself "on the inside of the phenomenon being observed" (p. 51). As an investigator, I would hear and understand how the burnout phenomenon affected my participants and their well-being. Eight high school teachers provided comprehensive and complete descriptions of their burnout experiences and coping strategies through one-on-one interviews. Participants in this study became co-researchers or co-investigators with the researcher (Patton). I used a purposeful sampling procedure (Creswell, 2013) to identify participants in order to conduct my phenomenological study (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002).

Administration issues, administrative workload, negative teacher/student relationships, and lack of student effort were resulting themes associated with EE and DPZ effecting teaching performance. In contrast, mental efficiencies, interpersonal relationships, and outside resources were themes associated with the coping activities/strategies of participants.

Implementations for Action and Recommendations

The benefits of relieving teacher burnout by learning and employing strategies for coping, before negative consequences or poor job performance start, would be of immense value to all student-teacher programs, novice teachers in the field, tenured teachers, school administrators and district officials, educational policy-makers, educational specialists, and all educational institutions that serve students (Yavuz, 2009). Using this research may help create some needed understanding of the relationship between high school teacher burnout and constant change or revising of school policies regarding discipline and organizational factors related to burnout (i.e., lack of affective interventions and faculty support systems). For teachers preparing for the field, teacher education programs should foster collaborative efforts involving educational policy-makers, school administration, and presently employed teachers from all grade levels in pursuing initiatives/training programs that would assist teacher education programs in developing emotional regulations skills (i.e., skills for coping) for those adults advancing towards field that they then might use when addressing the various stressors of their work environments.

Further research is required regarding the effects of burnout and its relationship with: teachers' daily workload, ethnicity of teachers, teachers enforcing school rules, and overly populated classrooms of a teacher's daily class schedule.

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