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WHERE HAVE ALL THE TEACHERS GONE?
A LOOK AT TEACHER ATTRITION IN THE U.S.

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Abstract

This author of this paper defines the terms “teacher attrition”, “depression”, “burnout”, and discusses the problems, both in the United States and in Minnesota regarding teachers leaving the profession faster than they are entering it. People often feel stressed and overworked because of the nature of their jobs, but unfortunately many teachers report feelings of depression and burnout because of their careers. The author discusses various reasons that teachers leave their careers, and the findings in the paper suggest that student-teachers need to receive more support during training, while new teachers need mentoring in the first year in order to recognize, prevent, and alleviate the symptoms of burnout and depression; not only for their own health, but for the sake of their students, their schools, their communities, and for the benefit of the state of Minnesota and the rest of the United States.

Keywords: teacher attrition, depression, burnout, resiliency

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Introduction

There is a growing teacher shortage in the United States, with approximately 8% of teachers leaving the profession annually (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014), and only 4.6% of college freshman pursuing degrees in education (Eagan, et al., 2017). The shortage appears even more dire in Minnesota, where there's been a 46% increase in the number of teachers reported leaving districts since 2008-09 (Teacher Supply and Demand, 2017). Teachers are citing higher levels of stress and lower levels of job satisfaction, which contributes to this growth in attrition (Nolan, 2016). High job stress and low job satisfaction are also linked to high levels of depression among teachers compared to people in other professions (Kidger, et al., 2015).

Studies have been done about the similarities between teacher burnout, or the emotional exhaustion occurring when a teacher can no longer provide students with support (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2011), and depression, and attributes much of the causes of teacher stress, burnout, and depression to stem from low levels of self-efficacy and high levels of emotional labor, or having to interact with students and parents while carefully managing and expressing their own emotions during the interactions (Kidger et al., 2015).

While there are many reasons for teacher attrition, there are also several ways to increase teacher resiliency and persistence. Teachers' sense of personal well-being and self-efficacy can grow through increased positive experiences (Clara, 2017), which can be fostered through teacher mentorship programs and individual counseling (Hoerr, 2006). This paper explains what teacher attrition is, how it is related to depression and burnout, and what specific things lead to it. The paper will also examine teacher resiliency and the importance of mentorship as a preventative measure against teacher attrition.

Review of Literature

Teacher Attrition

The teaching profession ranks among the highest for job related stress which directly affects the mental health of the teachers in that workforce (Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015). Teachers are leaving the profession faster than they are entering the field which has resulted in a teacher-crisis in Minnesota (Nolan, 2016). The Minnesota Department of Education found not only a 7% decrease in new teacher licenses being awarded to those completing Minnesota teacher preparation during the span of 2008-2013 (Schools, Districts, and Teachers at a Glance, 2017), but of the teachers leaving their professions, only 22% are leaving because of retirement, 25% cite personal reasons, and 15% remain unknown reasons (Schools, Districts, and Teachers at a Glance, 2017). Those percentages from prior to 2013 remain consistent, and it's reported that of the more than 7000 Minnesota teachers from the 2016-2017 school year who did not return to teach in 2017-2018, 41.4% cited "personal" or "unknown" reasons (Wilder, 2019). More than a third of Minnesota teachers are leaving the profession annually and aren't giving any answers as to why.

Concerns about the increase in teacher attrition rates and the decrease of education majors are exacerbated by the fact that the demand for teachers has not stopped growing and will increase an estimated 20% from 2015 levels by the year 2025 (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Other than contributing to the obvious challenge of overcrowding in classrooms, which require individual teachers to serve higher numbers of students per hour, the teacher shortage has several other negative impacts as well. Student achievement suffers when inexperienced teachers are quickly hired to replace exiting teachers (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016), staff morale suffers when administrators and faculty must spend time,

energy, and money on hiring and training new teachers who, statistically, have a 25% chance of leaving their jobs before the end of five years (Hoerr, 2005), and finally, the new teachers suffer because they have been hired for jobs which come with huge amounts of responsibility and oftentimes limited amounts of professional and personal support.

Depression and Burnout

Researchers have established that burnout and depression are closely related, finding that burned-out individuals seem, act, and feel depressed (Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2015). Depression is a family of mood disorders ranging from mild to severe, which can include one or more of the following symptoms: Feeling sad or having a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, changes in appetite — weight loss or gain unrelated to dieting, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, and loss of energy or increased fatigue (Parekh, 2017). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) states that at least five of these symptoms must present themselves every day for at least two weeks for a clinical diagnosis of depression (2013).

Schonfeld and Bianchi state that "Burnout has been viewed as a syndrome combining emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynical attitudes toward coworkers, students, and clients), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment with emotional exhaustion burnout's central component" (2015, p. 22). The differences between depression and burnout are that burnout is specific to work context, where depression affects every area of a person's life (Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2015). Because teachers' professional lives tend to spill into their everyday personal life, one can easily see where the lines separating depression and burnout could be blurred. Teachers and others in social and healthcare fields, are called upon to interact with others while keeping their own reactions and emotions in check. This is called "emotional

labor" and can be challenging for teachers who must respond appropriately to disruptive or challenging behavior on a regular basis in the classroom setting (Kidger et al., 2015). Kidger asserts that in addition to the already emotionally exhausting job challenges of teaching, it is also often difficult for teachers to form "the supportive relationships required of them, because of a lack of training in mental health management, which further exacerbates their own stress levels" (2015, p. 77).

Reasons for Teacher Attrition

It is difficult to determine why any person chooses to leave their profession, and unless there is a formal exit interview conducted, there is no way to know for sure. Many reasons have been documented, such as staff reduction, retirement, choosing to raise a family, moving to another district or state, or not being offered reemployment for reasons other than staff reduction (Teacher Supply and Demand, 2017); these reasons seem to be split between environmental, extrinsic reasons and internal, intrinsic reasons. The environmental reasons happen to the teachers, for example by way of staff reduction, forcing the teacher to leave the position. The internal reasons happen because the teacher makes a conscious choice to leave the teaching profession. Despite the variety of reasons teachers leave the profession, new teachers are at the highest risk of attrition and, "on average 16.4% were no longer teaching in Minnesota after their first year, 22% left teaching within two years...26% left within three years, 30.2% left within four years, and 32.3% left within their five years of entering the profession" (Teacher Supply and Demand, 2017, p. 37).

Environmental Reasons. One environmental variable which contributes to teacher stress and eventual burnout is student behavior. Teachers feeling burned out are more prone to irritability and are less equipped to deal effectively with misbehaving students, which

perpetuates the problem and leads to more student behavior problems, which in turn leads to emotional strain for and absenteeism of the teacher (Pas, et al., 2011). Both absenteeism and presenteeism, which is showing up to work but underperforming due to illness or other problems, will result in a negative effect on student learning and performance (Kidger et al., 2015). Recent studies have found that teachers reporting high levels of depressive symptoms give less positive academic feedback to their students, which could result in lower levels of student achievement overall (MacLean & Connor, 2018). Social-emotional development of younger students has also been found to be adversely affected by teachers with depressive symptoms (Roberts, et al., 2016).

Another environmental variable which can cause teacher attrition is the school itself. Opfer (2011) analyzed “hard to staff” schools and found that attrition is not directly linked to schools with lower poverty rates or higher minority rates, but rather attrition is, “an indicator of how well the school is functioning” (p. 611). School systems which are healthy and productive tend to keep more effective teachers while less effective teachers move one more quickly (Borman & Dowling, 2008). One external variable which may lead to future teacher attrition and which is closely aligned to the functioning of a school system is a new teacher’s perceived lack of support from the school administration and teaching cohorts. New teachers who are not provided with mentoring and other support systems are twice as likely to leave their position than those who do receive support (Podolsky, et al., 2016). Assigned mentorship, practiced in some but not all schools, has been found to have a positive impact on first-year teachers perceived support, and Andrews, D’Amato, & Quinn, (2005), found that mentoring programs help significantly reduce new teachers’ feelings of isolation and lack of support.

Internal Reasons. As stated previously, the teaching profession requires extensive emotional energy, and this is asked especially of student-teachers. During the field experience, the individual is required to be both the student and the teacher, so one is simultaneously learning the craft of and mastering the art of teaching. It is during this time that the student-teacher's sense of self-efficacy, or their belief in their ability to do what they need to do to achieve the results they want (Fives, et al., 2006), begins to develop. The achievements or failures during student-teaching directly affect a young professional's sense of self-efficacy. It can be a stressful time for which the student hasn't fully developed necessary coping skills, and they're already feeling the burnout indicators of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of students, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Fives, et al., 2006). If student-teachers perceive themselves as incapable of succeeding, it's unlikely they will be successful during the first few years of teaching. Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez (2006) state, "A teacher does not wake up one morning suddenly burned out, rather this is a process that takes place over time, through a multiplicity of causes" (p. 918).

Friesen & Besley (2013) after applying Erikson's (1950) identity development framework to their study, found that an individual with a well-formed sense of personal identity is more equipped to begin to form a strong professional identity. Friesen & Besley (2013) emphasize the importance of understanding that the identity of a professional teacher must go through a developmental and social psychological process. The student-teacher's development begins with learning what teaching is and progresses until they master their craft and can teach others what learning is. If a young student-teacher fails to develop their personal identity, they may also struggle to recognize their own teacher identity. An internal lack of personal-identity

development in a young student-teacher is one internal variable which may lead to future teacher attrition.

The Role of Resiliency

There is a surplus of research about why teachers leave the profession, focusing on the negative aspects of school environments or the limitations of the teachers themselves. Beltman, Mansfield, and Price (2011) studied the factors that keep teachers in the profession despite the daily challenges which present themselves. They found that resiliency, “the outcome of a dynamic relationship between individual risk and protective factors” (Beltman, et al., 2011, p. 185), is an important character trait to possess. Clara (2017) further explains that teacher resiliency happens, “when a teacher adapts positively to an adverse situation” (p. 82). Teachers often experience difficult days with challenging students, which can dampen the teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy. But when teachers feel supported by administration and have other positive experiences on a regular basis to balance out the negative ones, teachers are more likely to have feelings of positive self-efficacy (Beltman, et al., 2011). Feeling supported, experiencing positive interactions with co-workers and students, and having positive self-efficacy are all things which can build teacher resiliency and reduce teacher attrition.

It Takes a Village

In some cases, though, new teachers do receive professional and administrative support, but often still struggle and end up leaving teaching in four years or less (Hoerr, 2005). They didn’t go into the profession blindly—they knew it would be hard work with low pay—yet they are still unable to make it work. The teaching profession doesn’t just take place between 8AM and 5PM. Oftentimes new teachers find themselves working longer hours yet feeling less successful than they hoped (Hoerr, 2005). In these cases, the teachers need more than just

professional support, they need personal support. Hoerr (2005) recommends that schools provide new teachers with a two-year mentorship program to help establish relationships and make the new teacher feel more supported. Hoerr (2005) also suggests that schools provide teachers regular after-school meetings, safe from administrators and facilitated by willing school counselors, to discuss how personal issues may be affecting job performance. While a school counselor's job is to work with students, they may be able to recognize markers of depression and burnout and could refer an overwhelmed teacher to appropriate mental-health counseling when necessary. Hoerr (2005) states that, "good administrators take responsibility for knowing when a teacher needs help" (p. 83). Ultimately, the burden of care for teachers lies on all the members of the school system. The acts of administrators providing support, veteran teachers forming mentorships, counselors giving guidance, and young teachers growing in positive self-efficacy help to increase teacher resiliency and decrease teacher attrition.

Discussion

In the literature review section, the problem of the teacher shortage in Minnesota and the United States was introduced, and teacher attrition was explored. Data suggests that there are less people joining the teacher workforce (Schools, Districts, and Teachers at a Glance, 2017) and more teachers leaving the profession than in previous years (Wilder, 2019). The growing demand for teachers in the United States will increase 20% by 2025 (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Many teachers feel overwhelmed by the high demands of their jobs, and may experience depression and burnout, which perpetuates the growing attrition rates. Reasons for depression and burnout leading to attrition stem from multiple sources. Student behavior, lack of support, and feelings of inadequacy are just a few reasons teachers decide to leave their jobs for other careers (Kidger et al., 2015). Teachers who have poorly

developed teacher identities tend to struggle more than teachers who fully understand their roles and the expectations placed on them (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010).

Teachers who feel highly supported by school administrators often feel higher levels of self-efficacy than teachers who feel unsupported (Beltman, et al., 2011). Young teachers who are provided with mentorship from veteran teachers feel less isolated and more involved (Andrews, D'Amato, & Quinn, 2005). Teachers need both professional and personal support if they hope to persist past the first five years of educating (Hoerr, 2005).

Relevance to Professionals

Clinical mental health and school counselors are highly trained to recognize internal problems when they see them in themselves and others. Teachers are trained to recognize academic and physical challenges in their students and are less trained to recognize their own internal struggles. Because of the challenging and often difficult nature of teaching, educators can easily get drained from the emotional labor of the job and succumb to feelings of depression and burnout (Kidger et al., 2015), yet not be aware or able to recognize it.

Future and current school counselors should be aware of the unique struggles that teachers face and could serve as first responders when they see struggling teachers. School counselors could provide referrals for teachers who need to seek clinical counseling for emotional support, or they could lead professional learning community sessions on mindfulness techniques, which studies have shown can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression for teachers when they participate (Roeser, et al., 2013). By partnering with teachers and advocating for social and emotional health for all, school counselors can help create a more positive school climate, which is critical for teacher well-being and student learning (Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017).

Clinical mental health counselors and school psychologists will benefit from understanding the demanding roles of a teacher in order to be better prepared when a teacher comes to them with symptoms of depression and burnout. It's important to know the physical and emotional toll that teaching takes on an educator, especially one new to the profession. Being able to recognize low self-efficacy and a breakdown of resiliency will assist a clinical mental health counselor in providing the best care possible to any client who is a teacher; by supporting teachers in their challenging roles mental health professionals can help increase teacher efficacy (Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017) and thus decrease attrition rates.

Veteran teachers have an important responsibility to mentor younger teachers, and school administrators have the responsibility to know when teachers are struggling and be proactive in providing mentoring relationships for new teachers (Andrews, D'Amato, & Quinn, 2005). School principals who support teachers can increase teacher job-satisfaction rates when they provide useful resources, communicate effectively, and are friendly and approachable (Leithwood, 2006). By uniting professionally, creating meaningful relationships between teachers, and recognizing the importance of strong personal, professional, and emotional support, school administrators can support teacher well-being (Gray, et al., 2017; Beltman, et al. 2011), take steps towards growing self-efficacy and resiliency in teachers, and begin to reduce teacher attrition rates in the U.S.

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