

## Teacher Stress in Urban Classrooms: A Growing Epidemic

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*About half of educators in the field have reported experiencing excessive amounts of stress several days a week, but this issue is even greater for teachers in urban schools. Urban teacher stress is due to a number of unique variables such as lack of resources, student behavior and disrespect, unattainable goals while teaching students below grade level, and lack of support both financially and emotionally. As a result, teacher stress not only affects the teachers themselves but also their students in urban settings. This research paper reveals the cause and effects of 121 urban teachers' stress, including student academic performance and behavior, and explores solutions to help reduce the amount of stress urban teachers endure. In a review of this correlational study, levels of teacher stress and burnout were identified using Likert-type scales and their students' academic achievement in reading and math were measured with the Woodcock-Johnson III Test of Achievement to determine the impact of stress. This critical issue in urban education must be brought into the spotlight soon or students will greatly suffer as our country continues to lose qualified, motivated novice teachers to stress.*

*Keywords:* urban schools, Title I, stress, teacher, burnout

Teachers at high-poverty, urban schools encounter additional stressors that are not commonplace at suburban or rural schools. Some of these stressors include lack of funding, resources, heavy workload, poor student attitudes (Thompson, 2017), and student discipline (Ryan et al., 2017). Unfortunately, stress can result in teachers being less sympathetic toward students, being less motivated to prepare for class, having low tolerance for classroom disruption, and feeling less committed and dedicated to their work (Farber & Miller, 1981). Prolonged stress, while working with students who live in poverty, can result in teacher burnout.

Thompson (2017) declared that not only does teacher stress affect teachers, but it may also negatively affect their students. Teacher stress is defined as conditions of negative effects that result from aspects of the job that are perceived as a threat to a teacher's psychological or physical well-being (Abel & Sewell, 2001) and can especially be a concern for students in urban schools. Occupational stress among teachers can create physical or psychological absence from work which leads to less effective behavior management practices and instruction (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018). The purpose of this research paper is to explore the causes of teacher stress in urban classrooms and the direct effect it has on student performance and behavior and the community at large through a correlational study. Solutions for recognizing and reducing teacher stress, to essentially lessen teacher turnover, are also discussed in this paper.

### Literature Review

#### Causes of Teacher Stress in Urban Schools

High levels of prolonged stress in urban classrooms can be related to poor working conditions, inordinate time demands, inadequate collegial relationships, large class sizes, time

pressures, lack of resources, isolation, fear of violence, role ambiguity, limited promotional opportunities, inadequate salary, lack of support and involvement in decision making, student behavioral problems (Abel & Sewell, 2001; Eslinger, 2014; Prilleltensky, Neff, & Bessell, 2016), and negative school climate (Ryan et al., 2017). Tellenback, Brenner, and Lofgren (1983) revealed that relationships with students have been suggested as the most important source of stress for teachers. Furthermore, Tokar and Feitler (1986) found that stress from inadequate discipline policies, inadequate salary, noisy pupils, and too much work were the major stress sources for urban teachers. Of the countless factors that produce teacher stress, research has shown that one factor greatly produces more teacher turnover than the others.

Several studies have indicated that disruptive student behavior is consistently, if not the best, predictor of urban teacher stress (Abel & Sewell, 2001). In agreement, Tokar and Feitler (1982) and Ouellette et al. (2018) stated that urban teacher stress was produced more often by one or two students who chronically misbehave rather than the general lack of discipline or overall behavior problems in the school. In a study conducted by Haberman and Rickards (1990), twenty-four teachers who had previously left the teaching profession altogether indicated that discipline was the primary reason for quitting. In a separate correlational study conducted by Abel and Sewell (2001), urban school teachers identified pupil misbehavior and poor working conditions as the best predictors of burnout.

Teachers in urban classrooms confront the everyday stress of meeting the challenging demands originally outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act (Eslinger, 2014). Urban educators spend large amounts of time on instruction and see below-average national scores (Thompson, 2017). DiBara (2007) revealed that when educators work in schools that are often labeled as *failing*, they try to bring their students' work up several grade levels while concurrently inspiring them and supporting their personal growth and development. Eslinger (2014) suggested that stress and the ultimate exit of teachers from the field of education is caused by the difficulties teachers face of confronting the "cultural mismatch that marginalized students face in school and society and of negotiating the bureaucratic challenges of limited resources and support" (p. 229).

### **Effects of Teacher Stress in Urban Schools**

Teachers who feel emotionally exhausted or experience high levels of burnout demonstrate lower quality of teaching and impaired relationships (Herman et al., 2018; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Eaton, Anthony, Mandel, and Garrison (1990) stated that teaching is a high-stress profession and many teachers experience serious emotional problems that are related to the stress of their job. Furthermore, the stress that teachers experience can interfere with personal well-being and can weaken their performance (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). Possibly the most harmful effect of teacher stress is that when teachers are stressed and not coping, the relationships they have with their students are likely to suffer and lead to negative academic and behavioral outcomes for students (Wentzel, 2010). Reinke, Herman, and Stormont (2013) found that emotional exhaustion was associated with low levels of positive behavior support as evidenced by high rates of harsh reprimands.

Persistent stress can ultimately result in professional burnout (Herman et al., 2018). In many cases, the teacher stress in low socio-economic schools can be so significant that teachers leave the profession altogether after just one year (Thompson, 2017). At the same time, half of the teachers that enter the field leave within their first five years often as a result of the stress of their profession (Ingersoll, 2002). As turnover is most likely to occur in poorly performing urban schools, it leads to long-term destabilization of low-income neighborhood schools which lose continuity in relationships between students, teachers, parents, and the community (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). The country also suffers a heavy financial burden when teachers

leave the profession after just a few years. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that public school teacher turnover costs the U.S. more than \$7.3 billion per year and the cost per teacher is estimated from over \$4,000 in rural areas to over \$17,000 in urban districts (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2016). The causes and effects of teacher stress have been researched and identified, but how are urban educators coping with them?

### **Coping with Urban Teacher Stress**

According to Abel and Sewell (2001), "stress depends on an individual's cognitive appraisal of events and circumstances and on the ability to cope" (pg. 287). Coping refers to a person's behavioral and cognitive efforts to manage the internal and external demands of their environment (Herman et al., 2018). Coping strategies are constantly changing to manage the specific demands and as long as an individual's coping ability is not exceeded, no long-term stress is experienced (Abel & Sewell, 2001). Unfortunately, for teachers, coping with stress in their work environment can be less effective because most of the stressful situations tend to lie outside of the individual's control (Abel & Sewell, 2001). Novice teachers have to be able to multitask and cope with an endless number of dilemmas that occur in the classroom on a daily basis (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017). Furthermore, stress may be so prevalent in teachers because of the general level of alertness that is required on a daily basis (Abel & Sewell, 2001). In summation, understanding the patterns of teacher stress and coping may help provide systems of support or solutions needed to reduce teacher stress and burnout (Herman et al., 2018).

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The purpose of the research presented in *Empirically Derived Profiles of Teacher Stress, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, and Coping and Associated Student Outcomes* by Herman et al. in 2018 was to examine the cause and effect of stress in elementary teachers in an urban Midwestern school district. The participants were 121 general education teachers and 1,817 students in kindergarten through fourth grade from nine elementary schools (Herman et al., 2018). All of the schools were implementing positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) with fidelity at their schools. The basic premise of PBIS is that adults are responsible for providing effective environments for their students and support is needed for adults to sustain this implementation (Herman et al., 2018). Of the teacher participants, 95% were female and 5% were male and the demographics of the teachers were 76% Caucasian, 22% African American, 1% Asian, and 1% Other (Herman et al., 2018). The student sample included 52% males, 76% African American students, and 61% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch (Herman et al., 2018).

### **Procedures**

The teachers completed a packet of measures for each consented student in their class and self-report measures on their levels of burnout, stress, efficacy, and coping (Herman et al., 2018). Academic achievement in reading and math were assessed using *Woodcock-Johnson III Test of Achievement* (WJ III ACH) administered by trained undergraduate and graduate students. The *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI) was completed by all of the teachers to measure their levels of burnout. The level of teacher stress and their ability to cope were identified by their responses on an 11-point Likert-type scale from 0 to 10. The *Ohio State Teacher Efficacy Scale* was completed by all of the teachers to measure their teacher self-efficacy. Findings for the levels of stress were presented in four subgroups: Stressed/Low Coping, Stressed/Moderate Coping, Stressed/High Coping, and Well Adjusted (Herman et al., 2018). To report student behavior, the

teachers completed the 54-item *Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation Checklist* (TOCA-C) that included seven subscales: Concentration Problems, Disruptive Behavior, Prosocial Behavior, Emotional Regulation, Internalizing Problems, Family Problems, and Family Involvement. Finally, student achievement was measured by conducting the six subtests of the WJ III ACH in reading and math.

### **Results**

Findings from this study indicated that nearly all teachers (93%) fell into classes that were characterized by high levels of stress and only 7% of the teachers were well-adjusted (Herman et al., 2018). The Stressed/Low Coping class presented the highest rates of student behavior problems and lowest academic achievement (Herman et al., 2018). Further, the Stressed/Low Coping class had a significantly lower mean score on prosocial behavior while the Well Adjusted class had a higher mean score for prosocial behavior. The Stressed/Low Coping class had significantly higher disruptive behavior mean scores than the Well Adjusted class, Stressed/High Coping, and the Stressed/Moderate Coping class. Additionally, the Stressed/Not Coping class had the highest means for student concentration problems and teacher burnout. Among math achievement, the students of the teachers in the Stressed/Not Coping class had lower mean scores than their counterparts. However, there was no significant differences between classes on reading achievement scores as reported by Herman et al. (2018).

### **Discussion**

The profiles of the teachers were significantly related to the student behavior outcomes in ways the authors expected, supporting the validity of the profiles in this sample of elementary school teachers (Herman et al., 2018). The high stress levels of nearly all of the teacher participants in this study confirmed evidence suggesting that teaching is a stressful profession. Herman et al. also stated that it is no surprise that teachers report higher than average levels of mental health and physical problems and below average levels of job satisfaction when compared with individuals in other occupations. Ultimately, the Stressed/Low Coping teacher profiles were associated with the worst student outcomes which included higher disruptive behaviors and lower student adaptive behaviors and math achievement (Herman et al., 2018). The identified study implications that can be used to address stress in teachers in urban classrooms across the country. First, their study revealed that screening teachers based on their levels of stress, coping, and burnout may identify those in need of support. Voluntary or self-screening could be tied to building initiatives such as health promotion and mental health awareness. Second, teachers who report high levels of stress and low coping skills should be offered supportive services that focus on equipping adults with strategies for promoting adaptive thinking and adaptive behavior. Third, Herman et al. suggested ecological manipulations that include fostering nurturing environments at school, not only for the students but also for the teachers that work there. Finally, teachers should also be better prepared to enter the field of education. Teacher preparation programs should pay more attention to classroom management and psychological techniques to cope with stress (Prilleltensky et al., 2017). Further, teacher candidates should be challenged to “gain skills in critical reflection and critical consciousness in an effort to deconstruct the existing social order” (Allen, Hancock, Starker-Glass, & Lewis, 2017, p. 14) to teach their ever-growing diverse population of students

Overall, their findings suggested that investing in resources that support teacher adaptation may improve not only their well-being but also the well-being and functioning of their students (Herman et al., 2018). The authors summarized their study by reminding the audience of the fact that teacher stress and burnout are significant problems that affect our urban schools and that there is a need to find impactful and innovative ways to support teachers and, in return,

improve outcomes for students. The findings of this article support the literature that exists in education that teachers are dealing with stress on a daily basis and this affects not only themselves, but also their disadvantaged students. Potential solutions to urban teacher stress include identifying those suffering from high stress and intervening, building strong mentor/mentee relationships, providing teachers with four mental health days per school year, and placing emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher education programs and professional development.

While a great deal of research exists in regards to urban teacher stress, very few solutions and their effectiveness have been reported. Herman et al. (2018) revealed that current research on teacher burnout indicates that teachers may benefit from additional support in classroom management, but future research will need to determine if these interventions move teachers into more adaptive stress profiles. Current solutions include additional training for teachers, improving teacher preparation programs, ongoing professional development (DiBara, 2007), and improving the conditions of work (Haberman & Rickards, 1990). Again, no data has been revealed to present the success of these solutions. Future implications of this research paper could include incorporating the solutions presented and conducting a longitudinal study on the effectiveness.

### **Implications**

More attention needs to be placed on the growing epidemic of teacher stress to reduce the consequences stress has on teachers, their students, and the community. First of all, attention needs to be placed on helping teachers cope with stress to help prevent them from experiencing work-related burnout and turnover (Thompson, 2017). Prior to providing support for teachers suffering from teacher stress, a survey must be conducted to identify the teachers that need additional support. Tokar and Feitler (1982) agree that schools need to identify the stress levels of staff, especially new teachers, and provide them with more supervision and coping skills. A team of trained professionals would provide coping skills and interventions such as relaxation training as a free, voluntary service for state educators with intense needs (Herman et al., 2018).

As several studies have revealed that teacher turnover typically occurs within the first five years of a teacher's career at an urban school (Eslinger, 2014; Haberman & Rickards, 1990; Ingersoll, 2002; Prilleltensky et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2017; Thompson, 2017), a strong mentor/mentee relationship must be developed with consistent, meaningful meetings. The administrators of the school would choose strong mentors who will then receive relevant training and a monetary incentive for their additional time and support. This relationship would continue for at least three years or until the novice teacher feels comfortable and competent in the classroom as evidence of observations, discussions, and self-reflection. Haberman and Rickards (1990) pointed out that it takes approximately three years for teachers to become competent in urban classrooms, therefore urban schools may be losing teachers at the point they become effective professionals.

To help reduce teacher stress, one mental health day would be provided per quarter for each educator. This time would be given in addition to sick and personal days each academic year, but would not require a doctor's note or written excuse. These mental health days would provide additional time for teachers to take care of themselves, regroup, or do something they enjoy. Eslinger (2014) acknowledged that teachers are often buried in paperwork which includes classwork to grade and lesson plans to write. This mental health day could also be used to catch up on the abundant amounts of work that hang over a teacher's head, daily.

Ultimately, scholars agree that urban students do not perform well academically or behaviorally because of the cultural mismatch between their school and home (Eslinger, 2014). This can result in discipline problems and failing school grades. To help dissolve the Eurocentric

norms (Eslinger, 2014) in urban classrooms, a culturally relevant teaching (CRT) course must become required in all education course loads. It is hopeful that discipline and the difficulties of working with underachieving students of various cultural backgrounds will be improved if teacher education programs are required to include instruction on culturally relevant pedagogy (Allen et al., 2017; Haberman & Rickards, 1990). In agreement, Allen et al. (2017) have proposed a critical framework that integrates culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) into teacher education programs that incorporates social justice, critical reflection, and critical questions for teacher candidates that are 82% White female. Allen et al. (2017) declared that program development is imperative in teacher education and should be grounded in a social justice mission.

One semester long course of CRT would include teaching preservice teachers how to engage their students of different cultures and backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2011). These preservice teachers would need to learn how to deconstruct the curriculum to expose its weaknesses, construct or build the curriculum, and reconstruct or rebuild the curriculum to help students make sense of it (Ladson-Billings, 2011). This course would be required by all students pursuing a degree in education across the country. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2011) revealed that after observing preservice teachers, they began to see multicultural education and teaching for social justice as an ethical position they need to take in order to ensure that students are getting the education they are entitled to. Further, all preservice teachers should experience an urban classroom setting, at least once, prior to receiving their educational degree.

As most current educators have not received culturally relevant training, a required professional development training would occur throughout one full school year to educate teachers on the aspects, importance, and tools for implementing culturally relevant training. This professional development would need to be ongoing for at least one school year in order for teachers to buy into the importance of this teaching model. Teacher performance on this standard would be evaluated yearly by administrators. Overall, teachers need to understand that they will not be given additional work and that CRP is simply a different way of thinking and teaching their diverse learners.

### **Conclusion**

In summation, it is crucial that professionals in the field of education not only address the issue and innumerable causes of teacher stress but also find strategies to help teachers cope with work-related stress. While small steps can be taken to reduce teacher stress it is believed that the best way to approach the largest factor of teacher stress in urban classrooms, which is student discipline, is by requiring all preservice teachers pursuing their degree in education to take at least one CRT course in college and experience an urban classroom setting. All other current teachers will earn credentials by attending and participating in a year of professional development. If this growing epidemic is not addressed, the average turnover rates among new teachers will continue to rapidly increase, particularly in low-income schools.

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