

Preventing Burnout Among Early Career Teachers

Paige K. Peterson, BA
Science Teacher, Grade 6
Osseo, MN

Steven M. Baule, PhD
Associate Professor
Department Chair
Leadership Education Department
Winona State University
Winona, MN

Abstract

Education jobs can prove to be stressful careers with various aspects being more stressful than others. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the ways that professional development could help reduce burnout in early career teachers. The study used an anonymous online survey to collect data from teachers in the state of Minnesota. Research questions aimed to understand if professional development could help limit burnout. The research study included 289 participants. The study showed that student behavior caused the most stress for early career teachers, but teachers were not hopeful for effective professional development. These findings recognized that professional development to improve student behavior management was the most sought after professional development topic for early career teachers.

Key Words: beginning teachers, educator burnout, mental health, stress, student behavior

As the Great Resignation impacts the American workforce, the need for educational leaders to tend to the effective development of their teaching faculty is essential. Teacher burnout has reached epidemic proportions. In 2014, Gallup reported that 46% of teachers had “high daily stress.” That rate was only matched by nurses and physicians according to Gallup (2014).

In January 2022, the National Education Association released the results of a poll showing that 55% of current teachers are considering leaving the profession earlier than planned due in part to the impact of the Pandemic. A full 90% of teachers responded that burnout was a serious problem and 91% felt Pandemic related stress was also a serious concern (Rainey, 2022).

Previous studies had identified that in 2017, between forty and fifty percent of teachers with five or less years of experience left the teaching field due to burnout (Ryan et al., 2017). This is a serious concern as the Center for America Progress reported that enrollment in teacher preparation programs is down more than a third since 2010. They project that is a deficit of more than 340,000 new teachers a year (Partelow, 2019) for the next decade. If that trend continues, there will not be replacements for those new teachers leaving the profession.

Educational professionals deal with an abundance of emotional demands within the workday. Many first-year teachers are not prepared to handle the stress created by the career (McCarthy et al., 2020). Earlier studies showed that many student-teachers start to experience strain and exhaustion as soon as they enter pre-service teacher education (Zimmermann, et al. 2018).

One study of North Carolina rural special education teachers showed that burn out often began to evidence itself in the first year of teaching. (Fimian & Blanton, 1986). The study was done several years ago before many of the current stressors of the new century were added to the educational milieu. Ninety-four percent of teachers in 2021 identified that schools need additional mental health support for their staffs and that nearly the same amount feel schools need to hire additional staff (Rainey, 2022).

Summary of the Literature

Burnout is a psychological response developed from extended exposure to stressors within a career (Salovita & Pakarinene, 2021). It has been identified as being made up of three primary facets, depersonalization, personal inefficiency, and emotional exhaustion (Bottiani, et al, 2019). Teaching is a profession likely to lead to burnout (Taylor et al., 2021), due to the high levels of daily stress and emotional demands (Fiorilli et al., 2017). Only nursing and medicine seem to have similarly high levels of burnout.

One of the key stressors for teachers that leads to burnout has been identified as student behavior issues (Garwood, 2018). Soini, et al, (2019) identified a lack of support and dysfunctional interactions with colleagues and the principal as key stressors for early career special education teachers. Bottiani, et al (2019) identifies burnout and job stress as more prevalent in urban, low-income schools and significantly higher among female educators.

According to Fusco (2017), charter schools are also known for higher-than-average burnout rates and high levels of teacher turnover. Soini, et al (2019) found that teacher’s frustration with perceived inadequacy in teacher-student relationships was a factor in

teacher burnout. Ortan, Simut, & Simut (2021) found that teacher stress and burnout have a negative impact on student achievement. This finding along with the difficulty replacing teachers are two key reasons why leaders need to address teacher stress and burnout.

Student behaviors

Hepburn, et al. (2021) identified that most early career teachers are not prepared for the emotional experiences of dealing with student behaviors and relationships.

This unpreparedness can cause concerns that they are not ready to teach and contribute to job stress. Meanwhile, McCullough, et al. (2022) identified that nearly 30% of students enter school with behavioral challenges. Miller & Flint-Stipp (2019) found that preservice teachers are not immune from burnout even before they complete their undergraduate education. Therefore, some of the professional development considerations could reasonably be included in pre-service education as well.

Professional development

Teaching is emotionally taxing work, meaning teachers need care, support, and access to professional learning to feel valued and competent (Coldwell, 2017). Professional learning occurs outside of professional development sessions (Kyndt et al., 2016), and can be both formal and informal (Coldwell, 2017). Teachers learn through collaboration, interaction, sharing ideas, extracurricular activities, experimenting, consulting, information sources, reflection and encountering difficulties (Kyndt et al., 2016).

Professional development focuses on students, with little to no focus on career development and teacher retention (Coldwell, 2017). In Minnesota, teachers who hold a Tier 3 license must complete 75 hours of

professional learning hours every three years and Tier 4 license holders must complete 125 hours every five years (PELSB, 2020).

The five sections of professional development required by the state of Minnesota are Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS), reading preparation, key warning signs for early onset mental illness in children and adolescents, English learners, and cultural competency. Districts may add additional requirements (PELSB, 2020).

Professional development can build teacher motivation to help decrease teacher attrition and burnout. New teachers can especially benefit from professional development to help build confidence and decrease stress.

New teachers require more assistance, yet typically have less varied options regarding professional development compared to experienced teachers (Coldwell, 2017). Hepburn, Carroll, and McCuaig-Holcroft (2021) found that yoga classes could decrease stress in early career teachers as well. McCullough (2022) found that a Tier 2 behavior intervention (BEST in CLASS-E) did not significantly reduce teacher stress.

The New Teacher Project studied professional development and found on average teachers had 19 days of professional development but less than 30% of teachers improved their practice (Mader, 2015) making professional development less than effective. Since the pandemic began, nearly a quarter of teachers have felt that have decreased access to professional development since the pandemic began. Less than half of teachers felt the occasional professional development that was the norm in many districts was satisfactory for their professional growth (Kuykendall, 2022).

Methodology

The study intended to answer the research question, “What teacher professional development topics help prevent burnout in teachers who have five or less years of experience?” To understand this question, the study asked three questions in the survey. The first was “How much training have you received during professional development on how to cope with stress or feelings of burnout?” Participants could select one of five answers: None at all, Less than 2 hours, 2-5 hours, 5-8 hours, or More than 8 hours.

The second was “Do you think you would experience less stress if your school district provided more specific training in regard to teacher's mental health, stress, and feelings of burnout during professional development?”

The third asked participants, “Do you think you would experience less stress if your school district provided more specific training in regard to teacher's mental health, stress, and feelings of burnout during professional development?” with answers on a 4-point Likert Scale from Definitely No to Definitely Yes.

The survey results were reviewed using descriptive statistics and an ANOVA and Tukey HSD for the question regarding the potential professional development topics.

Sample

The survey participants responded to an email solicitation from the researcher. The survey was sent to 5000 random Minnesota teacher license holders. Of that sample, 348 responded and 225 early career teachers complete the entire survey. The sample considered of 62 (22%) males, 219 (77%) females, and one (0.35%) non-binary individual.

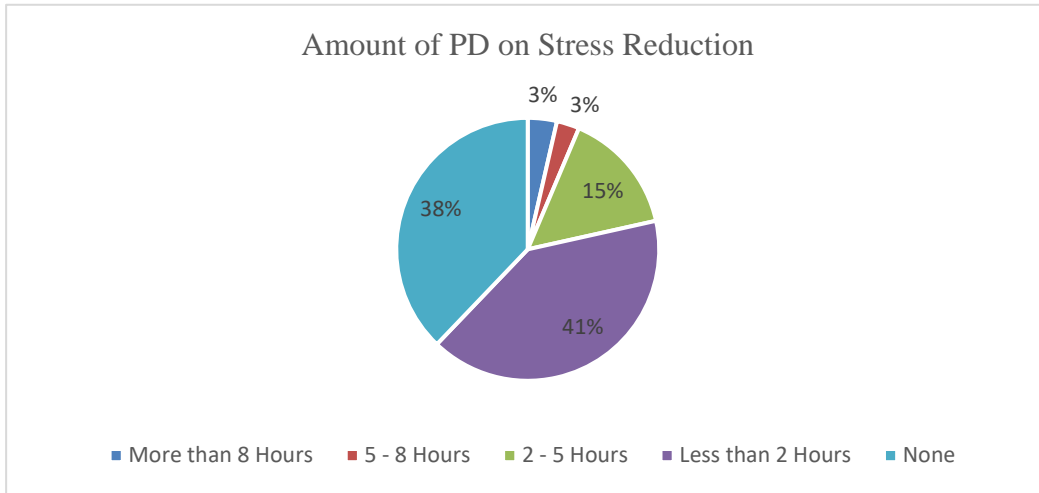
The participants varied in age with 220 individuals between 20-30 years old (76%), 45 individuals between 30-40 years old (16%), 19 individuals between 40-50 years old (7%) and three individuals between 50-60 years old (1%). By level taught, the sample included 105 (42%) elementary teachers, 115 (46%) secondary teachers, 14 (6%) early childhood teachers, and 18 (7%) teaching other assignments including K-12 assignments.

Results

The survey showed the majority of participants (79%) had less than two hours of professional development on how to cope with stress and feelings of burnout. There were 38% of participants who received no professional development training on feelings of stress or burnout. There were 3% of respondents who had received more than eight hours of professional development on the topic of stress and burnout (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Amount of PD on Stress Reduction



Participants answered, “Do you think you would experience less stress if your school district provided more specific training in regard to teacher’s mental health, stress, and

feelings of burnout during professional development?” Only 40% of early career teachers felt such professional development would be helpful (See Table 1).

Table 1

Would Professional Development Help Burnout?

Responses	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Definitely Yes	21	8%
Probably Yes	81	32%
Probably No	119	47%
Definitely No	30	12%

Over half of the participants (59%) did not think specific professional development regarding mental health, stress and burnout would decrease stress levels. There were 8% of participants who thought it would definitely help. There were 40% of the participants who thought this specific training could be helpful, based on their responses of either Definitely Yes or Probably Yes. There were 12% of participants who strongly disagreed and said specific training would definitely not help.

The last question on the survey asked participants what professional training topics

they thought would be most beneficial to help lower feelings of stress or burnout. It asked participants, “How helpful would the following professional development topics be in helping you feel less stressed or burned out?”

Participants were able to respond with; Extremely Helpful, Somewhat Helpful, Somewhat Unhelpful, or Not Helpful at All. Table 2 shows how participants ranked the following professional development categories: managing student behaviors, lesson planning tips, time management, mindfulness techniques, and stress management techniques.

Table 2

Professional Development Topics

Professional Development Topics	Number of Participants			
	Extremely Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Somewhat Unhelpful	Not Helpful At All
Managing Student Behaviors	109 (44%)	102 (41%)	20 (8%)	18 (7%)
Lesson Planning Tips	66 (26%)	108 (43%)	44 (18%)	32 (13%)
Time Management	45 (18%)	94 (38%)	60 (24%)	50 (20%)
Mindfulness Techniques	30 (12%)	122 (49%)	53 (21%)	45 (18%)
Stress Management Techniques	22 (9%)	123 (49%)	51 (20%)	55 (22%)

There were 85% of participants who thought professional development regarding managing student behaviors would be helpful. There were also 58% of participants who listed stress management techniques as being helpful. Professional development discussing lesson planning tips was voted as helpful by 69% of the participants who completed the survey.

A one-way between topics ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the following facets of potential professional development, lesson planning tips, managing student behavior, mindfulness techniques, stress management, and time management. There was a significant difference on the perceived effectiveness of the various options. [$F(4, 1230) = 27.489, p = .000001$].

Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that managing student behaviors was perceived as significantly more likely to be useful ($M = 3.219, SD = 0.867$) than any of the other topics. Lesson planning tips ($M = 2.842, SD = 0.952$) was perceived as significantly less useful than managing student behavior, but was viewed as more useful than stress management, time management, or mindfulness training.

Discussion

Professional development often focuses on content, yet incorporates little to no focus on career development, teacher retention, or stress management (Coldwell, 2017). The survey question that asked, “How much training have you received during professional development on how to cope with stress or feelings of burnout?”

Of the participants, 79% said they received less than two hours of professional development about how to manage stress. A total of 38% of the participants from the

research study reported receiving no professional development at all on how to manage stress or feelings of burnout. Teachers learn how to complete the job most effectively through collaboration, consulting, information sources, reflection and encountering difficulties (Kyndt et al., 2016), something these participants did not experience regarding stress management.

Current professional development efforts are not enough to help prevent burnout for teachers with five or less years of experience. Leaders need to develop strategies to address burnout among their entire teaching staff from first year teachers through their more senior veterans. The potential of burnout to push educators out of the profession must be ameliorated to maintain necessary staffing levels.

Another area of concern is the number of early career teachers who feel that professional development will be helpful. When more than half of those surveyed responded (59%) felt professional development would not be helpful, one must ask why? Do they feel that all of their professional development is ineffective or is it potentially a time issue or are they just not in favor of stress reduction training and would prefer more traditional topics?

Eighty-five percent of the respondents felt that additional professional development on dealing with student behaviors. Lesson planning was a second choice for early career teachers. There is a definite need for improved mental health support for all teachers as evidenced by the recent NEA survey (Rainey, 2022).

Recommendations for Future Study

The first recommendation for future research would be to explore how teachers can be better

prepared for dealing with behavior management in the classroom. Why is behavior management difficult for new teachers, and how can school leaders better equip new teachers to deal with student behavior?

A broader review of how to make professional development effective is another area for study. Are nearly career teachers receiving the necessary support to develop their own professional learning networks is another question that should be addressed?

Conclusions

Professional development is not enough to help prevent burnout for teachers with five or less years of experience. Professional development alone will not help teacher retention or lower the amount of stress teachers experience.

Leaders should not incorporate mandatory professional development about managing stress and assume it will be enough to help reduce burnout in teachers with five or less years of experience.

Leaders should offer optional professional development on stress and burnout for those teachers who wish to attend. This could be in place of another professional development session or be a completely optional session.

Leaders could help teachers create professional or personal learning networks where teachers can share ideas and techniques with one another. Leaders should not use professional development to avoid talking with teachers directly to ensure their individual needs are being met.

Author Biographies

Paige Peterson is a student at Winona State University pursuing her master's in educational leadership. She obtained her BA from the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, WI in 2018 and is currently a 6th grade science teacher in Osseo, Minnesota. E-mail: Paige.Peterson.2@go.winona.edu

Steve Baule is an associate professor at Winona State University in the educational leadership department. He previously served as a superintendent in Illinois and Indiana. He earned doctorates in educational leadership and instructional technology. E-mail: steven.baule@winona.edu

References

- Bottiani, J. H., Duran, C. A. K., Pas, E. T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2019). Teacher stress and burnout in middle schools: associations with job demands, resources, and effective classroom practices. *Journal of School Psychology, 77*, 36-51.
- Fimian, M. J. & Blanton, L. P. (1986). Variables related to stress and burnout in special education teachers. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 9*, 9-21.
- Fiorilli, C., Albanese, O., Gabola, P., & Pepe, A. (2017). Teachers' emotional competence and social support: Assessing the mediating role of teacher burnout. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 61*(2), 127-138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2015.1119722>.
- Fusco, M. (2017, May). Burnout factories: The challenge of retaining great teachers in charter schools. Kappan,
- Garwood, J. D., Werts, M. G., Varghese, C., & Gosey, L. (2018). Mixed-methods analysis of rural special educators' role stressors, behavior management, and burnout. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 37* (1), 30-43.
- Hepburn, S-J., Carroll, A., & McCuaig-Holcroft, L. (2021, June 11). A complementary intervention to promote wellbeing and stress management for early career teachers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*, 6320.
- Kuykendall, K. (2022, February 15). Teachers want more online, on-demand, and targeted professional learning opportunities; New survey shows. *THE Journal*. https://thejournal.com/articles/2022/02/15/teachers-want-more-flexible-and-more-targeted-professional-learning-opportunities.aspx?s=the_nu_220222&oly_enc_id=0417H2586389I3U.
- Mader, J. (2015, August 4). New report reveals that teacher professional development is costly and ineffective. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/new-report-reveals-that-teacher-professional-development-is-costly-and-ineffective/>.
- McCarthy, C. J., Fitchett, P. G., Lambert, R. G., & Boyle, L. (2020). Stress vulnerability in the first year of teaching. *Teaching Education, 31*(4), 424-443. doi:10.1080/10476210.2019.1635108.
- McCullough, S. N., Granger, K. L., Sutherland, K. S., Conroy, M. A., & Pandey, T. (2022). A preliminary study of BEST in CLASS-Elementary on teacher self-efficacy, burnout, and attributions. *Behavioral Disorders, 47* (2), 84-94.
- Miller, K. & Flint-Stipp (2019). Preservice teacher burnout: Secondary trauma and self-care issues in teacher education. *Issues in Teacher Education, 28* (2), 28-45.
- Ortan, F., Simut, C., & Simut, R. (2021, December 3). Self-efficacy, job satisfaction and teacher well-being in the K12 educational system. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*, 12763.

- Partelow, L. (2019, December 3). What to make of declining enrollment in teacher education programs. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/make-declining-enrollment-teacher-preparation-programs/>.
- Rainey, C. (2022, February 1). Public schools are facing an existential resignation of teachers. Fact Company. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90717876/great-resignation-education-teachers-quitting>.
- Ryan, S. V., Von der Embse, N. P., Pendergast, L. L., Saeki, E., Segool, N., & Schwing, S. (2017). Leaving the teaching profession: The role of teacher stress and educational accountability policies on turnover intent. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 66, 1-11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.03.016>.
- Salovita, T., & Pakarinen, E. (2021). Teacher burnout explained: Teacher-, student-, and organization-level variables. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 97, 1-14. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2020.103221.
- Soini, T., Pietarinen, J., Pyhalto, K., Haverinen, K., Jindal-Snape, D., & Kontu, E. (2019, June). Special education teachers' experience burnout and perceived fit with the professional community: A 5-year follow up study. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45 (3), 622-639.
- Taylor, S. G., Roberts, A. M., & Zarrett, N. (2021). A brief mindfulness-based intervention (bMBI) to reduce teacher stress and burnout. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 100, 1-14. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2021.103284.
- Zimmermann, F., Rosler, L, Moller, J, & Koller, O. (2018). How learning conditions and program structure predict burnout and satisfaction in teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 41 (3), 318-342.