ABSTRACT
        This study of 469 elementary and secondary classroom
teachers examined the relationships among role conflict, role
ambiguity, and teacher burnout. Three phases of burnout were
examined: feelings of emotional exhaustion, negative attitudes toward
students, and feelings of lack of accomplishment. Multiple regression
analysis was used to examine the relationships. Two of the more
important findings were: (1) Role conflict and role ambiguity
explained a significant amount of variance in feelings of emotional
exhaustion and negative attitudes toward students; and (2) Role
conflict and role ambiguity differ in their relationship to the three
burnout phases. Suggestions for minimizing role conflict and role
ambiguity and recommendations for future research are presented.
(Authors/JD)

THE EFFECT OF ROLE CONFLICT AND ROLE AMBIGUITY

ON PERCEIVED LEVELS OF TEACHER BURNOUT[1]

Richard L. Schwab

University of New Hampshire

Edward F. Iwanicki

University of Connecticut

AUTHOR IDENTIFICATION

Richard L. Schwab is Assistant Professor

of Education at the

University of New Hampshire

Edward F. Iwanicki is Associate Professor

of Educational Administration at the

University of Connecticut

Abstract

"THE EFFECT OF ROLE CONFLICT AND ROLE AMBIGUITY ON

PERCEIVED LEVELS OF TEACHER BURNOUT."

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conflict and role ambiguity upon teacher burnout. Three phases of

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gression analysis was used to examine the relationships. Two of the

more important findings were: 1) Role conflict and role ambiguity

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4

THE EFFECT OF ROLE CONFLICT AND ROLE AMBIGUITY
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PERCEIVED LEVELS OF TEACHER BURNOUT

"I feel like I am wasting the best years of my life."

Background

These are not the words of a distraught housewife or a bored assembly line worker. They were shared by a high school teacher with five years of experience. The feelings expressed are not atypical. Public school teachers are subject to stressful situations as a result of many problems confronting education today. Among the more pressing problems are declining enrollments, staff reduction, poor public opinion toward education, a rise in violence and vandalism, and tight budget constraints. Currently, teachers unable to cope with the stress resulting from the impact of such problems on their performance have been labeled as "burned out."

Although much has been written about burnout in education (Glemch, 1978; Hendrickson, 1979; Landsman, 1978; Reed, 1979; Youngs, 1978; Cook, 1979; Magoon and Linkous, 1979), research on teacher burnout is limited. Most of the systematic research on burnout has focused on the helping professions in general, teachers being only a small part of such investigations. Maslach and colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley have conducted considerable research on .nout in the helping professions (Maslach, 1976, 1978a, 1978b; Maslach . ` nes, 1977; Pines & Maslach, 1978; Maslach & Jackson, 1979; Jackson & Maslach, 1980). Among the helping profession examined by Maslach, _et al._, were social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, poverty lawyers, prison guards, teachers, police officers and child care workers. According to Maslach, the stress which professionals encounter because of constant involvement with people who have problems can lead to a loss of the care and commitment that was once characteristic of their original attitudes. This loss of caring and

5

commitment can lead to feelings of burnout.

According to Maslach and Jackson (1979), there are three phases to burnout. In the initial phase of burnout, affected workers develop in-creased feelings of emotional exhaustion and fatigue. As emotional re-sources are depleted, they feel they are no longer able to give of them-selves as they were able to earlier. In the second phase of burnout, people develop negative, cynical attitudes toward their clients. This feeling has been described by Maslach & Jackson as dehumanization or depersonalization. The third phase of burnout is the tendency to eval-uate oneself negatively, particularly with regard to one's clients. People experiencing this phase of burnout are not happy with their jobs or themselves. Maslach and Jackson describe this phase as a lack of a feeling of personal accomplishment.

Although Maslach and Jackson provide clear support for these three phases of burnout for people in the helping profession, it is crucial to note that these phases are viewed as independent. One phase is not an inevitable consequence of another phase. As one experiences burnout, one does not necessarily progress from emotional exhaustion through de-personalization to lack of a feeling of personal accomplishment. Also according to Maslach and Jackson, it is not appropriate to classify a person as "burned out" or "not burned out". Instead, it is important to assess the degree to which a person is experiencing the feelings associated with the three phases of burnout. Workers experiencing stronger feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment would be viewed as more burned out than persons experiencing weaker feelings in these areas.

2

6

In investigating factors contributing to burnout, Maslach (1978) comments, "from my own research vantage point, I have concluded that burnout is best understood (and modified) in terms of social and situational sources of job related stresses" (p. 115). Kahn suggests (1978) that burnout may be related to the situational factors of role conflict and role ambiguity. Kahn, et al., (1964) isolated the constructs of role conflict and role ambiguity as important aspects of organizational stress. Role conflict is the simultaneous occurrence of two or more sets of inconsistent expected role behaviors for an individual. Role conflict occurs when the person cannot reconcile the inconsistency between these sets of expected role behaviors. Role ambiguity is the lack of clear consistent information regarding rights, duties and responsibilities of a person's occupation and how they can be performed best.

Studies building upon the work of Kahn and associates have found role conflict and ambiguity in various professions to significantly affect job satisfaction and personal stress (Schuler, Aldag, and Brief, 1977). Further studies have contended that role conflict and ambiguity are particularly important in institutions that are human service oriented (Kahn, 1978; Cherniss & Egnatios, 1978). Though these studies have indicated role conflict and ambiguity may be related to burnout, this relationship was not examined directly.

This study was designed to build upon the work of Maslach (1978) and Kahn (1978) by examining burnout among teachers as it relates to the organizational stress factors of role conflict and role ambiguity. More

3

specifically, this investigation focused on the following research question:

> What is the relationship among the levels of role conflict, role ambiguity, and the perceived teacher burnout factors of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, when controlling for the teacher background variables of age, sex, marital status, grade level taught, years of teaching experience, level of education and size of community in which one teaches?

METHODOLOGY

Instrumentation

The Teachers' Stress Survey was developed to collect the data for this study. The four sections comprising this survey are described below:

I. Background Information - This section elicited information concerning the respondent's background, including sex, age, level of education, grade level taught, teaching assignments, class size, size of community, and years in teaching.

II. The Survey of Professional Occupations - This section contained the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

III. Job Characteristics - This section contained the Role Questionnaire.

IV. Personal Information - This section asked for more personal information which included questions concerning marital status, salary range, smoking, amount of exercise, caffeine consumption, and future occupational aspirations. Also, a section was included that asked respondents to list stressful situations they faced at school. A major purpose of this section was to gather data for future research.

4

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1979) through their work in the helping professions. This instrument provides a measure of perceived burnout in terms of the three subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The items comprising the subscales of the MBI are presented in Table 1. Each of the 22 items is rated twice, once for frequency and once for intensity. The frequency rating ranges from 1 (a few times a year) to 6 (every day). The intensity rating ranges from 1 (very mild,barely noticeable) to 7 (major, very strong). A place is provided for the respondent to check "never", if the feeling or attitude described is never experienced. For each of these subscales, separate scores are provided for the frequency and the intensity with which feelings are experienced. According to Maslach and Jackson, persons with higher scores on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales, and a lower score on the personal accomplishment subscale would be perceiving themselves as more burned out. Thus, a person is not classified as "burned out" or "not burned out", but rather placed on a continuum from "more burned out" to "less burned out". Maslach and Jackson (1979) have reported considerable evidence supporting the reliability and validity of the MBI when used with people in the helping professions (including teachers).

When the MBI was used with teachers in this study, a slight modification was made in the items stems. The word "student" was used in place of the term "recipient". Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) present further evidence substantiating the reliability and validity of the MBI when adapted in this manner for use with teachers.

5

TABLE 1

Subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory

(High degrees of burnout are reflected in high mean scores on A and B, and low scores on C)

A. Emotional Exhaustion

1. I feel emotionally drained from my work.
2. I feel used up at the end of the workday.
3. I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
6. Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
8. I feel burned out from my work.
13. I feel frustrated by my work.
14. I feel I'm working too hard on my job.
16. Working directly with people puts too much stress on me.
20. I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.

B. Depersonalization

5. I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal "objects".
10. I've become more callous toward people since I took this job.
11. I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.
15. I don't really care what happens to some recipients.
22. I feel recipients blame me for some of their problems.

C. Personal Accomplishment

4. I can easily understand how my recipients feel about things.
7. I deal very effectively with the problems of my recipients.
9. I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.
12. I feel very energetic.
17. I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my recipients.
18. I feel exhilarated after working closely with my recipients.
19. I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
21. In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.

Table from Maslach & Jackson (1979, pp. 22-23)

The Role Questionnaire was developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) to examine the constructs of role conflict and role ambiguity. The items comprising each subscale of the Role Questionnaire are presented in Table 2. Each item is rated by the respondent on a scale of 1 to 7. A score of 1 indicates that the respondent perceives the statement as definitely not true of one's job, while a score of 7 indicates the statement is extremely true of one's job. The role ambiguity items must be reverse scored since these items are worded positively. Higher subscale scores on the Role Questionnaire are indicative of higher levels of role conflict and role ambiguity. Support for the reliability and validity of the Role Questionnaire as a measure of role conflict and role ambiguity is provided through studies by House and Rizzo (1972), Keller (1975), Schuler, Aldag and Brief (1977), and Szilagyi, Sims, and Keller (1971).

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of Massachusetts teachers selected randomly from the active membership list of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. The Massachusetts Teachers Association has approximately 70,500 active members and is an affiliate of the National Education Association. Of the 794 teachers originally sampled, 507 (approximately 64%) completed and returned the Teachers' Stress Survey. To maximize the rate of return, two follow-up requests were made after the original mailing of the survey.

Statistical Procedures

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship among the organizational stress variables of role conflict, role ambiguity and burnout, when controlling for the teacher background variables of

TABLE 2

Subscales of the Role Questionnaire

A. Role Conflict

1. I have to do things that should be done differently.
2. I have to work on unnecessary things.
3. I receive an assignment without the proper manpower to complete it.
4. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.
5. I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.
6. I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.
7. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.
8. I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others.

B. Role Ambiguity

9. I frequently have much more to do than I can handle during the time available at work.
10. I feel certain about how much authority I have.
11. Clear, planned goals exist for my job.
12. I know that I have divided my time properly.
13. I know what my responsibilities are.
14. Explanation is clear of what has to be done.

8

sex, age, marital status, grade level taught, years of teaching experience,
level of education, and community size. Teachers were categorized on these
background variables as noted below.

          Sex - Male
                Female

          Age - 20 to 29 years
                30 to 39 years
                40 to 49 years
                50 and over

          Marital status - Single
                          Married with no children
                          Married with children

          Grade level taught - Elementary
                              Middle/junior high
                              High School

          Years of teaching experience - 0 to 4 years
                                           5 to 12 years
                                          13 to 24 years
                                          25 to 38 years

          Level of education - Bachelors
                              Master's plus

          Size of community taught in - Urban
                                        Suburban
                                        Rural

Three of these background variables need clarification. For the back-
ground variable of marital status, people who responded to the categories
of divorced, single parent and other, were not included in the analysis be-
cause there were not enough teachers in these categories for meaningful
analysis. The background variable of grade level taught was classified
as elementary, middle/junior high and high school. Middle/junior high school
teachers were combined since schools vary across the state of Massachusetts
in the grades included in middle and junior high schools. Therefore,
middle/junior high school teachers could teach at grades 5-8, 6-8, 7-8,
and 7-9. The final clarification concerns size of community. Respondents

were asked to check the classification which best described the community in which they worked; urban,suburban or rural.

The three subscales of burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment served as the dependent variables in the regression analysis. Each subscale was analyzed twice, once for frequency and once for intensity. To control for the variance in burnout accounted for by the background variables, these variables were.entered into the regression equation first. Then the predictor variables of role conflict and role ambiguity were allowed to enter the equation in a stepwise fashion. This allowed for the predictor variable which accounted for the most variance in the criterion to enter first, and subsequent predictors to enter if they accounted for additional significant variance. An F-ratio was used to determine if each entering predictor accounted for a significant increase in explained variance in the criterion. The results of these regression analyses are summarized in Tables 3-4.

Findings and Recommendations

Findings

As indicated in Tables 3-4 the organizational stress variables of role conflict and role ambiguity each explained a significant amount of variance in the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. This finding supports previous contentions that role conflict and ambiguity are separate factors of organizational stress (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck and Rosenthal 1964; Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970). Additionally, it supports contentions of Kahn (1978),

10

Table 3

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for the Relationship
Between Role Variables and the Frequency of Perceived Teacher
Burnout When Controlling for Select Teacher Background Variables

Emotional Exhaustion
(N=406)

Step	Variable Entered	R	SE_{EST}	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\hat{R}$	F
1	Background Variables	.146	1.275	.021			
2	Role Conflict	.468**	1.141	.219	.198		99.91**
3	Role Ambiguity	.481**	1.133	.231	.012	.462	6.29*

Depersonalization
(N=415)

Step	Variable Entered	R	SE_{EST}	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\hat{R}$	F
1	Background Variables	.336**	1.159	.113			
•2	Role Conflict	.440**	1.106	.193	.080		40.47**
3	Role Ambiguity	.450**	1.101	.202	.009	.429	4.52*

Personal Accomplishment
(N=399)

Step	Variable Entered	R	SE_{EST}	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\hat{R}$	F
1	Background Variables	.227*	.805	.051			
2	Role Ambiguity	.331**	.781	.109	.058	.301	25.22**
3	Role Conflict[1]						

Note: An indepth discussion of the relationship between background variables
and burnout factors is provided by Schwab and Iwanicki (1981). $\hat{R}$ represents
the shrunken R at the last significant step. The F reported is for the sig-
nificance of the variable at the point of entry. An F is not reported
at Step 1 since a set of variables is entered rather than a single predictor.

[1]Variable did not account for sufficient additional variance to be included
in the analysis.

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

Table 4

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for the Relationship
Between Role Variables and the Intensity of Perceived Teacher
Burnout When Controlling for Select Teacher Background Variables

Emotional Exhaustion
(N=400)

Step	Variable Entered	R	SE_{EST}	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\widehat{R}$	F
1	Background Variables	.198	1.471	.039			
2	Role Conflict	.523**	1.280	.274	.235		125.75**
3	Role Ambiguity	.531**	1.275	.282	.008	.515	4.38*

Depersonalization
(N=417)

Step	Variable Entered	R	SE_{EST}	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\widehat{R}$	F
1	Background Variables	.343**	1.379	.118			
2	Role Conflict	.454**	1.310	.206	.088		45.17**
3	Role Ambiguity	.466**	1.302	.217	.011	.447	5.81*

Personal Accomplishment
(N=394)

Step	Variable Entered	R	SE_{EST}	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\widehat{R}$	F
1	Background Variables	.144	0.884	.021			
2	Role Ambiguity	.217*	0.873	.047	.026	.165	10.55**
3	Role Conflict	.225*	0.873	.051	.004		1.52

Note: An indepth discussion of the relationship between background variables
and burnout factors is provided by Schwab and Iwanicki (1981). R represents
the shrunken R at the last significant step. The F reported is for the sig-
nificance of the variable at the point of entry. An F is not reported.
at Step 1 since a set of variables is entered rather than a single predictor.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Cherniss, Eqnatios, and Walker (1976) and Mattingly (1977) who indicated that role conflict and ambiguity were related to perceived levels of burnout.

The organizational stress variables of role conflict and role ambiguity differ in their relationship to the three burnout subscales. Role conflict accounted for the most variance in both the intensity and frequency dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In contrast, role ambiguity was the only organizational stress variable to explain a significant amount of variance in the personal accomplishment subscale. These findings support previous work by Keller (1975) and Van Sell, Brief and Schuler (1980) which indicated that the organizational stress variables of role conflict and role ambiguity vary in importance depending upon the job outcome measured and the type of occupation studied.

In attempting to explain these results, one can speculate that the unique nature of the two role variables can lead to differing feelings associated with burnout. Role conflict occurs when two or more people have sets of inconsistent expected behaviors for the person in their role as teacher. The inability of the teacher to reconcile these contradictory expectations results in role conflict. In order for this conflict to occur, some form of interpersonal exchange must take place. It may be that the stress of trying to reconcile these feelings leads teachers to have feelings of exhaustion, fatigue and negative attitudes toward their students. Though role conflict has a significant effect upon feelings of emotional exhaustion and attitudes toward students, it does not appear to affect a teacher's perception of accomplishment on the job.

In contrast to role conflict, role ambiguity has the most effect

13

upon the teacher's perceptions concerning accomplishment in their work. It appears that where teachers receive adequate information concerning their rights, duties and responsibilities, they are more likely to have stronger feelings of accomplishment in their job.

Role ambiguity also explained a significant amount of variance in the emotional exhaustion (1%) and depersonalization (1%) subscales. Though significant, the amount of variance explained for each subscale indicates that the information available to teachers concerning their performance as teachers has only a small effect on their perceptions of emotional exhaustion, fatigue and attitude toward their clients.

The amount of variance explained in each of the three burnout sub-scales by the combined effect of role conflict and role ambiguity is presented in Table 5. In combination, role conflict and role ambiguity explained 21% of the variance on the frequency dimension and 24% of the variance on the intensity dimension for emotional exhaustion. Also, role conflict and ambiguity accounted for 9% of the variance on the frequency and 10% on the intensity dimensions of depersonalization. While role ambiguity accounted for 6% of the variance on the frequency and 3% on the intensity dimensions of personal accomplishment, role conflict did not account for a significant amount of variance in either dimension..

This large difference in variance explained by the organizational stress variables of role conflict and ambiguity across subscales of the

14

TABLE 5

Percent of Variance Explained by Background Variables,

Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity in the Subscales of Burnout

Subscales	Background Variables	Role Conflict	Role Ambiguity
Emotional Exhaustion			
Frequency	2%	20%	1%
Intensity	4%	23%	1%
Depersonalization			
Frequency	11%	8%	1%
Intensity	12%	9%	1%
Personal Accomplishment			
Frequency	5%	--	6%
Intensity	2%	---	3%

15

Maslach Burnout Inventory strongly supports examining each subscale in-
dividually. An in-depth examination may indicate that feelings of emo-
tional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment are
affected differently by situational and personal variables. Such a find-
ing would have implications for intervention programs and strategies for
dealing with teacher stress. Instead of trying to deal with the three
phases of teacher burnout at once, it may be more beneficial to work on
problems associated with individual phases.

Recommendations

Since role conflict and ambiguity are related to feelings of burnout
as perceived by teachers, strategies to reduce role conflict and ambiguity
in schools should be considered when planning programs to ease feelings
of burnout. This appears to be particularly important for role conflict in
alleviating feelings of emotional exhaustion and fatigue.

Some potential strategies for reducing role conflict and ambiguity
are presented below:

- Establish clear lines of authority within
  the school organization

- Develop clear teacher job descriptions.

- Involve teachers in the development of
  realistic systemwide as well as individual
  school goals and objectives

- Involve staff in the teacher selection
  and evaluation processes.

- Train teachers and administrators in
  conflict resolution skills.

- Organize effective teacher support
  groups.

16

Future research should examine the effectiveness of such intervention strategies to determine if they reduce perceptions of role conflict and ambiguity.

As in many exploratory studies, several questions arise which future research could address. Among the questions this study raises are:

(1) Why does role conflict explain the most variance in the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales?

(2) What types of role conflict (i.e., sent role, person role, role overload) affect feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization?

(3) Why does role ambiguity explain a significant amount of variance in personal accomplishment, while role conflict does not?

Since the amount of variance explained differs among subscales, future studies in burnout could examine the three phases of burnout individually. Other variables which the literature has shown to relate to dysfunctions in organizations may be examined in relation to the three subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Such studies could look at the leadership styles of administrators, the climate of the school organization, and the personality characteristics of teachers. Both qualitative as well as quantative approaches could be employed to gain a more holistic understanding of burnout.

Summary

This study represents one block in establishing a systematic foundation of research in the area of teacher burnout. Hopefully, this foundation will be strengthened by future examinations of the burnout syndrome. Unfortunately many organizations have launched programs to combat burnout without understanding what burnout is, why it exists; or even who it is effecting.

Though the term "burnout" has a trendy connotation, the feelings that
teachers are expressing are not. In order to reduce the problems leading
to these feelings, we must first isolate the sources. Once isolated,
intervention programs can be designed and implemented to reduce these
feelings. Before we attempt to solve the problem, we must first under-
stand the problem better.

18

Footnote

19

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