

# Turnover in Teachers: Stress, Burnout, and Fixing the Problem

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## Abstract

*Teacher burnout is a major problem in the education field. Student misbehaviour, loss of independence, increased workload, and lack of support are only a few causes of increased stress in teachers. With turnover rates at an all-time high, it is important to find ways to increase overall teacher well-being. Methods such as reflection on one's practices, goal-setting, doing more physical activity, and developing resilience can help decrease stress in teachers, improve self-efficacy, and therefore prevent turnover.*

Teaching is known to be one of the most vital and challenging occupations in society (Vesely, Saklofske, & Leschied, 2013), but many times the demands can become too overwhelming, causing numerous educators to leave the profession. Every day, teachers prepare and plan lessons that need to engage a classroom full of diverse students, and that is only a small fraction of the demands of the job. Turnover rates in educators are increasing each year because of growing stress and burnout, with a staggering 30-50% of Canadian teachers leaving the profession within the first five years (Reichel, 2013, para. 3). Teacher attrition can be caused by such factors as student misbehaviour, loss of autonomy, lack of support, time pressures, and increased workload. It is important to improve the overall well-being of teachers and increase their self-efficacy. Some strategies include reflecting on current practices, finding tactics to reduce the stressors, goal-setting, physical activity, hobbies, being given autonomy, and developing resilience. If teachers can successfully increase their well-being and see their value, the chances of reducing turnover can be achieved.

## Stress and Burnout in Teachers

Although stress is a normal part of life, teachers have a high risk of becoming stressed out because of changes and demands in the profession. Stress is someone's "physical, mental, and emotional" response to demands in life (Larrivee, 2012; Mrozek, n.d.). Because high stress is so dominant in teachers that it can be the root of many physical and emotional problems. A staggering number of illnesses can be caused by too much stress in one's life. These illnesses may include exhaustion, headaches, indigestion, sleep problems, high blood pressure, chronic pain, depression, and many more (Larrivee, 2012; Pickering, 2008). The most dominant symptom of stress found in teachers is the feeling of being drained. When the pressures become too much on educators, they reduce productivity, increase absenteeism, and can cause burnout (Larrivee, 2012; Vesely et al., 2013). Teachers are more vulnerable to stress and, although stress can be healthy, it is important to find strategies to reduce the negative effects.

Burnout is often the result of prolonged stress. It is when someone has reached complete "physical and mental exhaustion" in his or her professional life (Pickering, 2008). Teachers who have reached burnout show high levels of depersonalization from the job, low morale, and emotional exhaustion (Martin, Dolmage, & Sharpe, 2012). Once the negative feelings become too overwhelming, it is hard for teachers to feel their value in the profession (Vesely et al., 2013), and they leave. L. Larson,<sup>1</sup> a recently retired teacher, revealed that she neared burnout numerous times throughout her teaching career (personal communication, October 23, 2013). She explained that changes such as new curriculum, formalities from the division, and different

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect individual identities in all personal communications in this article.

course loads each year prevented her from focusing her time on students, and the stress was sometimes too much for her to handle. Burnout is preventable. Self-efficacy, increased self-esteem, getting the passion back (Fernet, Guay, Senècal, & Austin, 2011), as well as learning how to maintain stress in a healthy way, can all prevent burnout in a teacher.

### **Factors in Teacher Attrition**

Students' disruptive behaviour has been found by many teachers, in various studies, to be one of the leading causes of stress (Fernet et al., 2012; Larrivee, 2012; Parker, Martin, Colmar, & Liem, 2012). When students are not motivated to learn, it can be a frustrating process for teachers. Behavioural issues in the classroom can wear down a teacher's feeling of effectiveness (Fernet et al., 2012), and it can be even more disheartening when there is no support from parents. N. Frocklin, a first year teacher, said that her biggest struggle so far has been classroom management (personal communication, October 29, 2013). She explained that the most frustrating part about classroom management is that a strategy that works for one class will not work for another. If teachers do not have effective strategies for classroom management, this can increase disruptive behaviour, create emotional exhaustion, and in turn decrease the teachers' self-efficacy (Larrivee, 2012; Vesely et al., 2013).

Loss of autonomy and inadequate support are also crucial determinants in teacher dissatisfaction. Not being given independence to do the job can cause disengagement, and is a large reason why many teachers leave the profession (Devos, Dupriez, & Paquay, 2011; Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012). Teachers are professionals, and when there is constant interference and constraints from administration and division personnel, it can cause a feeling of powerlessness and, furthermore, resentment (Elias). Administrative decisions that involve significant changes in a teacher's work environment, and that are unsupportive, can disconnect the teacher. Turnover in administration also creates inconsistency in the school, reduces teacher morale, and affects student behaviour (Pas et al., 2012). For example, one Pre-K-12 school in rural Saskatchewan has had three administrators in the past six years. Various staff members of the school have identified that it is impossible to keep up with the constant changes and expectations of different administrators (K. Bender, L. Larson, & M. Javette, personal communication, October 23, 2013). They indicated that just when something begins to work for the school, a new administrator will come in and change everything, which is very overwhelming and frustrating. If teachers do not receive the support they need from administrators, and are not trusted to make decisions on their own, there is an increased chance of turnover.

When the needs of the job become too much to handle, there is an escalation of stress in teachers. An educator can feel as though there are too many demands and not enough time to meet them. Course overload, paperwork, government and division initiatives, and extra-curricular activities can all increase the attrition of a teacher. Teacher health, performance, and job satisfaction are all negatively affected by a challenging workload (Martin et al., 2012). Furthermore, a varied course load, especially when not in a teacher's area of specialization, can lead to increased stress (Bilash, 2009-2011), which many teachers experience. M. Javette, a fourth year teacher in a rural school, revealed that his course load has changed every year of his teaching career thus far (personal communication, October 23, 2013). He explained that it is hard to feel successful as a teacher when one does not even have the chance to become familiar with a course before it is gone and something new is on the plate. Educators use personal time to complete tasks, and they work well over the 40-hour work week that society sees as full-time with no overtime pay, and many still feel behind. Teachers who feel more prepared to endure the many demands of the profession are less likely to burn out (Pas et al., 2012), but sadly a majority of teachers never feel that they can get ahead.

## Methods in Increasing Self-Efficacy

Teacher efficacy is imperative. Educators need to believe that they are doing a good job and effectively providing learning opportunities to students (Pas et al., 2012), in order to succeed in their career. When teachers feel this job satisfaction, they are more engaged, which in return amplifies student achievement (Devos et al., 2011). In order to reduce attrition and increase efficacy, teachers need to be aware of methods and strategies that can successfully reduce the stress in their lives.

Reflection on tools that have worked in the past is a step in increasing self-efficacy of a teacher. By looking at their own strengths and weaknesses, and using the challenging moments as learning experiences, teachers can overcome some of the anxieties that they are feeling (Gorow & Muller, 2008). It is also important for teachers to reflect on how they deal with behaviour in the classroom, manage the demands of the profession, and meet their own personal goals. Reflection can lead to individuals' developing successful strategies to cope with the stressors that they face (Pas et al., 2012; Vesely et al., 2013), which in return can alleviate some of the pressures of the career.

When teachers feel hopeless and are too overwhelmed, it is important for them to admit that they are approaching burnout, and try to do something to fix the problem (Friedman & Reynolds, 2011). Attending professional development sessions, receiving a reduced schedule, working with a mentor, prioritizing, finding balance, and goal-setting are all effective strategies in helping educators to cope with stress (King, 2002). Interventions to decrease the demands placed on a teacher are crucial in preventing burnout (Fernet et al., 2012). Developing long and short-term goals, and eliminating goals that are too unrealistic to achieve, are effective in relieving the feeling of being too overwhelmed (Gorow and Muller, 2008; King, 2002). If teachers work at finding strategies to reduce the stress that they are feeling, they are more likely to stay in the profession long term.

Regular physical activity and other stress-reducing activities, such as hobbies, are methods that can reduce teacher attrition. Physical activity is one of the most recommended ways for individuals to relieve and reduce stress (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2010-2013). It can lower the probability of developing physical and mental stress problems, improve sleep, and increase self-esteem. K. Bender an educator for 26 years, said that his daily walks during lunch allow him to clear his head, and he finds it to be an excellent stress reliever (personal communication, October 23, 2013). Teachers who are physically and mentally healthy are less likely to burn out (Hultell, Melin, & Gustavsson, 2013). Therefore, when physical activity or hobbies are used as an outlet to free the mind of the daily demands that a teacher faces, turnover can be reduced.

Teachers are more likely to connect with the workplace if administrators provide "autonomy-supportive conditions," which give teachers independence and certain decision-making freedom (Fernet et al., 2012). Administrators also need to provide a culture of trust and support, and supply teachers with opportunities to express their frustrations and concerns (Devos et al., 2011). When teachers have positive perceptions of school administration, they are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to exhibit better well-being (Fernet et al., 2012; Pas et al., 2012). If teachers are regarded as professionals and given a voice (Elias, 2012), they are more connected to the job, and are less likely to leave.

Teachers also need to develop resilience towards factors that may be enhancing their stress. Being optimistic and flexible is important (Friedman & Reynolds, 2011), and furthermore, a work-life balance needs to be created. Educators can develop resilience by using protective factors in their lives, such as support networks at work, personal and social relationships, and interests to counteract the stress (Doney, 2013). M. Javette disclosed that after four years of teaching, he is still working at establishing a balance in his life (personal communication, October 23, 2013). He explained that each year he feels that certain stressors do not affect him as much as they did, because he relies on his family, friends, coworkers, and hobbies to distract

him from the overwhelming demands of the career. This is an example of developing resilience. Resilience creates flexibility and enables individuals to cope after dealing with adversity (Doney, 2013). Furthermore, teachers who can successfully develop buoyancy and resilience are more engaged in their job, and have greater well-being (Parker & Martin, 2009).

### Conclusion

It is crucial for educators to develop strategies that help them to deal successfully with the numerous demands of the teaching profession in order to reduce stress, burnout and, with any luck, turnover. Many educators feel as though teaching is comparable to a “sink or swim” experience wherein they cannot handle the countless demands (Hultell et al., 2013), which explains why attrition dominates this occupation. The turnover rate of teachers is higher than any other profession (Riggs, 2013), and strategies need to be in place to prevent educators from leaving the field. Although issues such as disruptive behaviour, loss of autonomy, inadequate support, and increased demands are major factors in teacher burnout, many published works support methods to help teachers reduce stress created by these issues, and hopefully improve self-efficacy. Some strategies include reflection of own strengths and weaknesses, goal-setting and finding methods to improve the situation, becoming physically active and finding a hobby, being provided with autonomy and support by administration, and developing resilience by using protective factors in one’s life. Teaching is a demanding profession, and there will always be stress associated with a job where so many external factors come into play. The most crucial element in retaining educators and reducing turnover is to provide awareness and strategies to help them overcome the adversity that they face.

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### **About the Author**

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