

REFEREED ARTICLE

Exploring Psychological Health and Safety Interventions and Their Value to Students, Classroom Teachers, and School Divisions

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Abstract

Teachers are in a profession with high levels of stress, which play a role in absenteeism and burnout. Many studies have focused on teacher burnout; however, limited literature has examined how to support teacher well-being. Based on my research of school wellness initiatives, I discovered that the role and significance of teachers is the linchpin for establishing and sustaining school health. This article focuses on the stakeholders involved in the work of building a healthy school community, the role of school divisions, and how the whole school community benefits from teachers who are provided psychological health and safety supports in the workplace.

Monday Morning Struggles

It's a Monday morning before students have arrived at school, and as normal I turn on my computer and check my email. There is an update from the principal: an educational assistant (EA) will be away in one classroom and a teacher is sick in another classroom. No substitutes can be found for either, so the scramble begins of adjusting EA and teacher schedules to meet the needs of students and recess duty coverage for the day.

Unfortunately, this scenario is typical and there are many times our school struggles to find substitute teachers for teachers needing time off for medical, sick leave, or professional development purposes. The extra stress of coverage for other teachers, not having adequate preparation time, and losing EAs from one classroom to supervise students in other classrooms likely contributes to burnout for teachers. On top of these changes being made for coverage and day-to-day teaching duties, teachers are burdened with a heavy load of administrative tasks. Faced with increasing expectations from all levels – students, parents, and government – teachers are putting in longer hours at work that is more emotionally demanding.

Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

Over the past year, psychological health and safety in the workplace has been a topic of discussion within the school division where I work. As the Workplace Safety and Health Co-Chair and WSH Representative on the Swan Valley Teachers' Association, I am part of discussions relating to what steps our division needs to take to create better policies and strategic plans towards a culture of well-being. Von der Embse et al. (2019) stated that many interventions for stress have largely been targeted for students rather than teachers. Our division is in the beginning stages of change as new programs are being implemented for students, new roles such as counsellors are available for students to talk to, and therapeutic learning centers are being created to support students in need of self-regulation strategies.

Whereas efforts to build and maintain healthy school communities in support of mental well-being usually focuses on students' needs, in this study I ask the question: What is the role and significance of teacher well-being in establishing and sustaining these healthy school communities? Asserting the foundational importance of teacher well-being, this article explores

key elements of the Comprehensive School Health framework (Stolp et al., 2023) to consider what strategies and interventions would best support teachers' psychological wellness, so that they do not burn out but can continue to provide positive caregiving in supporting student well-being.

Teacher Stress and Burnout

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (Government of Canada, 2023) defines job burnout as –

A state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term exposure to demanding work situations. Burnout is the cumulative result of stress...professions with high job demands and few supports can increase the prevalence of burnout and reduce engagement. (What Are Other Issues in The Workplace That May Affect Mental Health? para. 6).

Within the research, teacher burnout has been a topic recently focused on more as the teaching profession experiences higher levels of stress. These stressors play a role in absenteeism, burnout, school climate, and teachers' behaviour management strategies (von der Embse et al., 2019). Research has found that "stress, burnout and lack of support can lead to poor mental health" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019, p. 26). Teachers are experiencing higher levels of emotional exhaustion, a condition in which one's emotional resources have been depleted, and can be characterized by fatigue, debilitation, loss of energy, and being worn out (Chang, 2009).

Teachers play a key role in setting the emotional tone within the classroom by providing timely and sensitive responses to children's emotional behaviour and consistently modelling respectful social interactions for students (Hatton-Bowers et al., 2022). In their research, Hatton-Bowers et al. (2022) discovered that when teachers are emotionally exhausted, there is a correlation between reduced sensitivity and increased harshness toward children, and lower levels of classroom organization and instructional support. They also found that teachers with more effective strategies for managing their personal emotions and dealing with negative emotions were better prepared to provide emotional support to their students. It is therefore important to discuss supports for reducing burnout, which will generate well-being. Well-being incorporates aspects of physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual health, food literacy, self-awareness, relationship skills, and injury prevention (Alberta Teachers Association, 2019).

According to the Alberta Teachers' Association (2019), there is "a renewed focus across Canada to move beyond student wellness to that of understanding and supporting teacher and school leader wellness" (p iii). Teachers will inevitably experience high levels of stress at work; however, research suggests by moving toward a more Comprehensive School Health approach a healthy school community can be developed (Stolp et al., 2023). Identifying and describing essential strategies to develop and sustain a healthy school community (Stolp et al., 2023), and attending to teachers' needs, could address "their feelings of detachment, absenteeism, and the desire to leave their occupation" (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Addressing teacher burnout through targeted supports and a Comprehensive School Health approach is crucial for supporting a healthier school environment, which can positively enhance teachers' well-being.

Teacher Well-Being

Based on my review of the literature regarding the causes of teacher stress and burnout, I discovered that teacher well-being is the linchpin for holistic school health. On this basis, I focus on identifying and describing specific elements of a holistic approach to school well-being that contribute to the successful development and sustainability of a healthy school community, particularly in my Canadian context. I assert the following as key elements:

1. There are many stakeholders involved in the work of building a healthy school community (teachers, students, administration).
2. School divisions play a role in providing job resources to support teachers' well-being (e.g. peer support, school health champion, and updating policies and procedures).
3. The whole school community benefits from teachers who are provided psychological health and safety supports in the workplace (e.g., teachers, students, and school divisions).

Teamwork of Stakeholders

Many stakeholders are involved in the school system, from students to teachers, administrators, superintendents, board of trustees, parents, community members, and government. Each of these groups work together in helping to build a healthy school community. The more people are involved in this work, the easier it is to develop and sustain a healthy school community (Stolp et al., 2023). Teachers are the entrusted people who often get programs operating within the classroom to support the students' well-being, so it is important that teachers are also provided opportunities for support with their well-being by principals and administrators.

Because teachers deal with the daily stress of student behaviours, excessive workload, and emotional exhaustion, they play a vital role in contributing to a healthy school community with action-oriented steps in the classroom and school. When teachers buy into a healthy school community, awareness that healthy students learn better encourages teachers to provide lessons and role modelling opportunities for student well-being (Storey et al., 2016). Teachers must also encourage their school principal to make healthy school development a priority for teachers by including wellness on the agenda at staff meetings, providing opportunities for staff well-being, and involving teachers in healthy school development planning (Storey et al., 2016).

To reinforce healthy practices and behaviours and sustain a healthy school community, teachers must provide students opportunities for leadership. This enables students to take responsibility and ownership of their actions, leading to a positive school environment. Storey et al. (2016) stated that students taking a leadership role towards a healthy school community development is critical. When teachers provide opportunities for students to take these leadership roles and responsibilities, they help to reinforce healthy practices and behaviours.

Administrators such as principals and superintendents also need to take part in developing a healthy school community because they support teachers and they influence the priority of divisional change. When an administrator makes psychological health and safety a priority, it is easier to do the work needed to make positive changes in the workplace. Within the research of Montemurro et al. (2023), one principal indicated that "when you have a superintendent who makes it a priority – It's a whole lot easier to start doing the work" (p. 5). Upper administrators are instrumental in influencing the prioritization of well-being and catalyzing district level change.

Job Resources as Supports

To deal with the job demands of teaching, school divisions would benefit from providing job resources to teachers to support their well-being. These resources can include providing professional development (peer support) opportunities, funding for a school health champion, and updating school policies and procedures (Stolp et al., 2023). System leaders who consistently provide clear and ongoing communication of well-being, and work on initiatives of psychological health and safety, reinforce it as a value worthy of attention (Montemurro et al., 2023).

Professional development (peer support) is one strategy used to support a healthy school environment. Providing time for teachers to meet allows school members to be aware of school

goals, build capacity to support well-being, and sustain knowledge and action plans to respond to emerging needs of students. Creating a workplace where teachers are provided the opportunity for involvement and influence of their workplace helps to support psychological health and safety (Government of Canada, 2023).

Another job resource school divisions can take advantage of is providing funding to hire a School Health Champion. This is a person who can initiate the process of developing a healthy school community by being a central coordinator who is knowledgeable about interventions to support teachers' psychological health and safety, and works with district leaders and staff to implement these interventions (Montemurro et al., 2023). Due to the busy structure of a school environment, many times it can be difficult for administrators and teachers to start change on their own. Having a school health champion is valuable because they are able to take on some of the work required to make change (Storey et al., 2016).

Another job resource that helps to sustain healthy school communities is the updating of school-wide policies related to health and safety (Stolp et al., 2023). Creating strategic plans for long-term goals is essential to reinforce well-being as a district priority (Montemurro et al., 2023; Stolp et al., 2023), and to promote alignment across schools to inform implementation (Montemurro et al., 2023). SAFEwork Manitoba (n.d.) is a public agency dedicated to the prevention of workplace injury and illness. Through prevention education, safety programming, and strategic direction, SAFEwork Manitoba strives to create a culture of safety for those within Manitoba. There are 11 elements of a safety and health program by which SAFEwork Manitoba encourages that psychological health and safety be adapted and incorporated into the workplace's safety and health program. Element 1: Safety and Health Policy, Element 2: Hazard Assessment, and Element 5: Inspections are areas in which school divisions can update and work toward improvements to ensure the sustainability of a healthy school community.

The School Community

School divisions that incorporate job resources involved in teachers' psychological health and safety will experience benefits for the whole school community. There are many stakeholders within the school. When psychological health and safety is addressed, not only teachers but also students and school divisions benefit.

When teachers' psychological health and safety is addressed, teachers feel supported both personally and professionally (Montemurro et al., 2023). Lower levels of emotional exhaustion and increased feelings of personal accomplishment help in dealing with teacher burnout (Montemurro et al., 2023). Within Chang's (2009) research, he found that emotional regulation strategies like suppressing, faking, or hiding emotions led to burnout. When teachers are encouraged to express their feelings and learn strategies for emotional regulation, and learn not to neglect their emotions, they are better able to role-model effective regulation strategies for students (Chang, 2009).

Fostering teachers' psychological health and safety also helps to support students' health and academic success (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019). Hatton-Bowers et al. (2022) found that teachers who participated in a wellness program demonstrated stronger attention to children's emotional cues and an increased ability to describe and observe the emotions of the children they cared for and educated. When students are well, they learn better. Students are also able to make better relationships with their teachers, reducing the burden of student behaviour for teachers and enabling students to increase their knowledge and graduate from school (Montemurro et al., 2023).

By addressing teachers' psychological health and safety, school divisions positively impact their school community that may be struggling to retain staff and experiencing teacher absenteeism, sickness, depression, and low job satisfaction (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Like my personal experience at the beginning of this article where teacher absenteeism and sickness led to further burnout and stress of other colleagues, von der Embse et al. (2019) found that this

chronic understaffing in schools led to loss of high-quality instruction for students. Attrition not only lowers morale, job satisfaction, and job performance among teachers (Ibrahim et al., 2021), but it also leads to loss of financial and occupational resources for administrators needing to deal with teacher turnover (von der Embse et al., 2019). Merrill et al. (2016) also found that teacher participation in a wellness program resulted in lower average medical claim payments.

Discussion

Job stress, defined by Chang (2009) is a combination of high job demands and low job control, which impacts employees' well-being and productivity. Using the Job Demand-Resource (JD-R) model helps to better understand why it is important to research the elements that contribute to the successful development and sustainability of a healthy school community. Job demands refer to role ambiguity, task stress, and psychological stressors involved in accomplishing a heavy workload (Chan et al., 2021). Job control refers to "a working individuals' potential control over his tasks and conduct during the working day. Lack of job control leads to psychological distress" (Ibrahim et al., 2021, p. 4). Providing job resources such as social support, encouragement, and effective communication from school leaders helps to enhance teachers' well-being in the workplace (Ibrahim et al., 2021). This type of supportive supervision (Chan et al., 2021) increases self-esteem, sense of competence, good coping strategies, and the ability to accept change (Ibrahim et al., 2021). "Employees who receive high support from colleagues and supervisors are less affected by adverse emotional effects" (Ibrahim et al., 2021, p. 5), and job satisfaction increases.

The Comprehensive Health School framework is "an internationally recognized framework for supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing school health in a planned, integrated, and holistic way" (Stolp et al., 2023 p. 300). Because this framework focuses on developing a healthy school community as a whole, teachers' psychological health and safety benefits.

Conclusion

Incorporating psychological health and safety in the workplace helps to support new and experienced teachers who are part of the school system and may be experiencing stress. Resources are vital in a workplace that requires personal emotional regulation dealing with the heavy workload and student behaviours. These resources help teachers to provide role-modelling on how to deal with student emotions, which in turn supports students' behaviour regulation and learning. When students and teachers are well and cared for, such as by using The Comprehensive Health School framework, a healthy school community is developed and can be sustained – which benefits all stakeholders within the school.

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