



[Excerpt]

High School Teachers' Perceptions
of
Their Working Environment
in
Newfoundland:
A Grounded Theory Study


by

© Lynda J. Younghusband

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ABSTRACT

Teacher stress has been of considerable concern for several decades. Researchers have reported that the primary health problem of teachers is stress and that the causes are multiple and complex. Workplace stress has also been found to diminish teachers' enthusiasm and distance them emotionally from their students, thereby lessening the teacher-student interaction. School reorganization and consolidation in Newfoundland and Labrador has caused the incremental downloading of additional duties for teachers and, in their perception, unreasonable demands. The high stress levels of teachers in this province are worrisome and the causes and results of their stress must be identified and reduced.

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the experiences of high school teachers' work environment, particularly their experiences of stress. Interviews were conducted with 16 high school teachers, from 24 to 55 years of age, in rural and urban Newfoundland in 2002. The constant comparative method of analysis was used to generate three theoretical constructs: the struggle to balance multiple demands (feeling burdened by work pressures and demands, barriers to teacher effectiveness), the importance of supportive work environments (feeling unsupported by administration, value of a collegial community, importance of having adequate resources), and the realities of stress (participants' understanding of stress, self-concept, the taboo of stress, feeling consumed by the job: interference with personal life).

A picture presented of a profession that demanded constant attention often to the detriment of participants' health and well-being. In particular, the emotional repercussions of stress seemed difficult for these participants. Findings suggest that they were concerned not just for themselves but for their colleagues and their students as well. The stigma associated with stress had prevented these teachers from speaking out until they were interviewed.

This study emphasized the importance of administrative and collegial support, the importance of effective communication, the necessity of adequate resources and professional development, and the need to recognize the excessive workload and the associated stress that teachers are feeling. The results of this study provide new insights into the serious problem of teacher stress in this province and the repercussions on their personal and professional lives. The implications of this study for teachers, the education system, and further research on teachers' stress are discussed..

Chapter 6

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the limitations of the study, implications, recommendations for further research, and conclusions, based on the data.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study represents a purposeful sample of high school teachers in Newfoundland. Every attempt was made to include both male and female teachers in rural and urban schools and to select teachers across the island. Labrador was not included.

The small sample size ($N=16$) might be considered a limitation. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that saturation is reached when collecting additional data seems counterproductive. In the present study there did not appear to be any new themes evolving from the data after the first 10 to 12 interviews. Strauss and Corbin emphasize that it is not the number of individuals who exhibit a concept but rather how often the concept emerges and how the properties look in different conditions.

Teachers were asked to relate their experiences of stress in their working environment. As such, only teachers who had experienced stress at work responded to the invitation to participate in the study. There is no way to determine if the teachers interviewed were more or less stressed than those who chose not to respond. Further research, using similar methods, focussing more generally on the work environment is needed.

The data were based exclusively on high school teachers' experiences and do not include teachers from primary/elementary or junior high schools. Private schools, which may have different administrative structures or support systems, are not represented.

6.2 Implications and Recommendations

The literature does not cover this aspect of teacher stress well. This study illuminates just how seriously teachers can be emotionally affected by stress. This demonstrates the importance of further qualitative studies to better understand their feelings and their needs.

It was clear from the interviews that stress for these teachers was a serious issue and that they wished to bring it to the forefront. Their goal in volunteering for this study was to do just that. They saw it as an opportunity to speak out, and they hoped that by doing so something could be done to "make teaching less stressful." When comments such as "There's a lot of teachers in our school who are stressed to the max" were made it was difficult for the interviewer to understand why, seemingly, administration did not notice. Perhaps they did but felt unable to deal with the problem. Or, perhaps they did not recognize stress for what it was. The literature does not discuss this aspect of teacher stress but administrators' understanding of teacher stress is an area of research worth exploring. As well, further qualitative research to explore the taboo of stress would be helpful to better understand why teachers themselves are reluctant to speak out about stress.

The interviews illustrate teachers' perceptions of a systemic failure to recognize the excessive workload and the associated stress that teachers are experiencing. There are so many expectations but it seems that little consideration has been given to the effects of cumulative expectations and demands on these teachers. How reasonable is it to expect teachers to implement new curriculum and at the same time develop the curriculum, all without adequate training? Considering the barrage of educational policy changes and the increasing demands placed on teachers it is worrying that none of the previous responsibilities, such as supervision or extracurricular duties, have been reduced or eliminated.

The implications of work overload are clear in this study. Personal time is becoming increasingly scarce outside of school for these teachers as they are faced with increasing demands to meet deadlines that cannot be accomplished within the scheduled instructional time. Perhaps supervision duty could be eliminated by establishing paid positions in each school when supervision is required, thereby freeing teachers for more important work or a much needed lunch break. There is a need for more qualitative studies to give teachers at all school levels the opportunity to discuss these issues.

What creates collegial support in a school, and how can it be encouraged and nurtured? What is the role of administrators? What is the role of teachers themselves? And what is the responsibility of school boards to provide a physically pleasant workplace, especially a staff room in which teachers can gather and lend support to each other? Some communication between all parties could be a positive step towards creating a more nurturing atmosphere in which to work.

Perhaps improving communication between all levels of education would be a start to address some of the concerns voiced by these participants. The importance of effective communication, particularly between administrator and teacher, was discussed at length throughout the interviews. Pressure and stress from a lack of communication or recognition of the work they were doing was reported by many participants. The right mix of challenge and support is in itself a challenge. Changing work structures to enhance access to the sources of job-empowerment (i.e. shared governance) is within the scope of the education system. Administrators should be encouraged to empower teachers and support professional practice. Rather than implementing policies designed by others, teachers ought to be making their own policies, ones that would suit not the just the school board, but the school.

The barriers identified by teachers in this present study need to be recognized. The implications of inadequate resources affect both teachers and students. This issue must be addressed at all levels of education, and teachers' concerns should be taken seriously to ensure that adequate resources are available. It is unfair to expect a teacher to teach technology courses with only half the computers in working condition and little technical assistance to repair broken equipment. It is not acceptable to expect teachers to purchase their own supplies or to expect students or teachers to study in classrooms designed for half the number of students. How inadequate resources can be justified by the Department of Education was difficult for teachers to understand and caused considerable frustration and anger. Failure to recognize the need for resources was perceived as a lack of respect for both teachers and students. So too were the crowded conditions in which several of the participants had to work. The outcome is an education system which is stressful for teachers, leaving them feeling ineffective in the classroom.

One of the barriers that teachers identified was dealing with students who had varying levels of academic abilities in an inclusive classroom. Additionally, many of those students had multiple difficulties and problems not related to academics. How can the social, vocational, and personal needs of these students be met when the greater portion of the school day is spent on academics? The special-needs students are physically present, which satisfies policy but at what cost? The education system has turned a blind eye to the very problems and conditions that have caused those students to have special needs, and the teachers are caught in the middle. How can this problem be addressed best? Does the onus lie with the university to prepare teachers for these roles? Should school boards provide professional development in this area? On the other hand, should teachers be expected to perform the role of social worker/care giver? Perhaps, in addition to the guidance counsellor, there is a role for a social worker in the schools.

Discipline was a serious issue for each teacher in this study, but they felt it was not adequately addressed by administrators. They also felt that they had little control over disciplinary matters. Of great concern was the threat of violence. Other studies have demonstrated the problems of discipline and violence using statistics, but there is a need for further qualitative research in this area. No teacher should be expected to live with the threat of physical violence or verbal assault to him/her self or to students in the class room. The fear of possible violence and how it might be managed is a concern that should be studied in greater depth. There are safe school programmes to help ensure the safety of students, but some thought should be directed to ensuring the safety of teachers as well.

Based on the results of this study, there appears to be a need to monitor the health of our schools and to be proactive in stress reduction. The questions arise: What can we do to change the conditions faced by teachers? How can we reduce the turbulence within the school system and improve the quality of work life? How can we educate teachers, administrators, and the public about teacher stress? How can we reduce or eliminate the taboo of stress so that it can be discussed freely?

At the heart of the matter is the realization that stress is a serious problem for teachers. Simply ignoring the issue will not make it go away. According to these participants, stress is linked with a heavy work load, increasing expectations, and inadequate supports. Further qualitative research in these areas, giving teachers an opportunity to discuss their concerns, is indicated for a better understanding and the possibility of answers to the questions posed. Helping to create an environment where stress could be talked about as something other than failure would be a positive step.

Neither the Department of Education nor the school boards have addressed stress in a serious manner in NL. NLTA provides workshops on stress, but they must first be invited to a school, and only one teacher in this study had had that experience. Additionally, such workshops are generic and cannot possibly address each school's individual concerns in a manner that will result in adequate systemic change. If stress management is to be effective it must be individualized to a particular workplace and it must be more than a "one time" endeavour. Instead, at the present time, the onus is placed on the teacher to learn better methods of coping, and no responsibility has been taken by the education system to reduce teacher stress.

Educational reform has ignored the need for structural changes. For the most part, those changes that have been implemented have been add-ons to existing teacher practices without attention to the root causes of concerns in the education system.

There is a need for the education system to acknowledge the problem of teacher stress and to begin to work with teachers and administrators to seek solutions toward stress reduction. The "front end issues" should be addressed in a proactive manner. Less emphasis on EAP programmes as a solution and more emphasis on what the education system can do to eliminate or reduce teacher stress would be a better answer to this problem.

6.3 Conclusions

The objectives of this study were to increase understanding of the environment in which high school teachers work, to learn more about the factors which contribute to high levels of stress, and to gain a better understanding of the separate and interactive effects of teacher stress. The researcher considers that these objectives were met and that the findings will contribute to further work directed towards solutions.

Overloaded and bombarded with massive changes and unrealistic time demands, these teachers were feeling overwhelmed, helpless and powerless, exhausted and disillusioned. There was never enough time in their work day to accomplish everything that was expected of them. Their personal lives were eroded by the increasing demands of their job, which impacted their well being, forcing many of them to re-consider their desire to continue teaching.

Time to converse with colleagues, to collaborate, to look for support or be supportive, was negligible, and that often created feelings of isolation. The perception of inadequate administrative support and poor communication caused feelings of being undervalued and created an environment of negativity which in turn reduced feelings of responsibility to the school itself and the system in general. Feeling that they had almost no authority outside the classroom and very little inside, these teachers were left feeling at the bottom of the totem pole.

Effective teachers constitute a valuable human resource, one that needs to be supported and treasured. Instead, these teacher participants felt undervalued, and they worried about their effectiveness in the face of all the obstacles they perceived. The needs of students with academic deficits, social and/or behavioural disabilities, often accompanied by previous failures and frustrations, caused great concern for the teachers. Such students, functioning at a slower and lower academic level will forever be behind and outside the group, yet the teacher is expected to teach this class of 25 to 40 students as a group. Such a task is extremely difficult at best but impossible without adequate supports.

The teachers in this study wanted to be well prepared, to work in a supportive environment where stress is understood and acknowledged, and where they would be encouraged to flourish and grow. They wanted their employer to provide a safe working environment to ensure their psychological and physical well-being. Surely, no teacher should leave their workplace in a worse state of health than when they arrived.