REDUCING STRESS & BURNOUT

(U) Research Question: "What happens when I implement strategies to reduce symptoms of stress to prevent burnout?"

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"And gladly would he learn and gladly teach."
--the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer

Introduction

Like Chaucer's Oxford cleric in *The Canterbury Tales*, people who enter the field of teaching usually do so for altruistic reasons: a passion for a subject, a love of learning, and most importantly, a desire to work with and inspire young people. Obviously, people with these high ideals are generous in spirit and willing to work hard to make the world a better place. Why, then, do so many new teachers—by some calculations up to nearly 50%--leave the profession before finishing their fifth year of teaching? I became more personally interested in this question during a stressful fourth year of teaching; I started to seriously doubt whether I was indeed up to the challenge of becoming the teacher I want to be. I found myself asking, *How will I make it through 20 or more years of teaching? How could I—a person with such high ideals and energy, commitment, and a strong work ethic—question whether I am really cut out for teaching after all?*

This research paper reflects an ongoing exploration into the causes of teacher stress and what can be done to manage it before it leads to "teacher burnout." As I discovered, stress and burnout have important implications for not only for individual teachers, but their students, schools, districts, and the teaching profession in general. Teacher stress and burnout can affect teachers' interactions with their students and impact rates of teacher attrition that have serious repercussions for schools and taxpayers.

Genesis of Research Question

The assignment for this graduate class teacher research project was designed to help teachers learn how to research some aspect of their own teaching that was important and

meaningful. We were asked to think about the following questions: Why is teacher research valuable? What can we learn about our students or our methodology through teacher research? But perhaps most importantly, *what can we learn about ourselves as teachers, learners, and researchers by doing our own research?* Although there are many important aspects of my teaching that I considered, the one that was most important for me to explore at this time was how to reduce the stress I was experiencing on a daily basis to the point that made me question my stamina to remain in the teaching field. My question became, "What happens when I implement strategies to reduce symptoms of stress to prevent burnout?"

Context

My research into teacher stress took place during my fourth year of teaching high school English and being an adviser for the school newspaper. I had taught two years in a previous district and was in my second year in the new district. Even though I had changed districts, I expected that by this time I would "have a handle" on balancing my personal and professional life. I do understand that, as with any new job experience, it takes time to learn the ropes and figure out ways to work efficiently and effectively. But instead, I found my job increasingly time consuming and draining to the point that I felt exhausted, resentful and disillusioned. My professional life was encroaching on my personal life to the point where even my family started feeling resentful, too. I often found myself asking these questions: *Why am I feeling so stressed all the time? Why do I often feel like what I do is not really good enough? Why am I always playing "catch up" instead of moving ahead and exploring new ideas? I certainly never predicted this would happen to me! What am I doing wrong? More importantly, what can I do to "fix" it?*

In a journal entry dated Feb. 15:

Today was particularly stressful. Everything went wrong. All of the work we did on the newspaper the other day has to be redone since it didn't save properly on the computer and now it's getting more and more behind schedule. Articles had to be updated to be current, so I used my prep time and lunch period to do that today [with the student editor] and still

didn't finish proofreading. Grades are due this week and I still have two class sets of essays to grade. I have to finish the IEP reports on the classified kids by Monday, and [a student's] mom is driving me crazy with her constant phone calls. I forgot to call her back today because I was distracted with the newspaper stuff. I need to stay up late to finish grading but I am so tired. Charlie [my husband] is getting so annoyed at these late nights and early mornings to finish work. Yesterday I even said to my colleagues in the faculty room that I'm really not sure I can do this teaching thing much longer. I honestly do wonder if I can last. I try hard to hold it together while I'm in school, but sometimes I just want to cry.

After a preliminary reading of literature on teacher stress, I realized I had many emotional and physical symptoms that lead to teacher "burnout": consistently feeling anxious, inadequate, frustrated, sluggish, and losing sleep. Ironically—and sadly—the only consolation came from the wealth of literature about the topic which led me to realize I was certainly not alone in feeling this way. It became clear to me that it was critical to my future as a teacher to identify the causes of my own stress and gain some control in managing it before I became a victim of teacher burnout. I also believed I could learn something about my own stress by asking other teachers how they deal with theirs. Therefore, after thinking about my questions related to stress and refining my research goals, my ultimate research question became, "What happens when I implement strategies to reduce symptoms of stress to prevent burnout?"

Educational Setting

District

The regional district in which I teach maintains two high schools and draws students from four towns. Both schools are upper-middle class and predominantly white. Although my previous district was slightly less affluent, the reason I applied to this district was for its reputation for progressive education and an increase in pay. I considered this a step up, although I already knew from acquaintances who work in my district that there is a very high level of expectation and accountability from supervisors and administrators. I was informed that parents in this district are known to be very involved with their children's education and pay heavy school taxes to support

the schools. Students—and teachers—are expected to do well and show results. Although I knew it would be more challenging than my previous district, I viewed taking a position in this district as a chance to grow as a teacher and to refine my teaching skills in a district known for its dedication and commitment to progressive education.

Department

My department has 13 English teachers in one school and 11 in the other. (For the purpose of clarity, I will focus on the school in which I teach the most classes.) In my school, 2 out of 13 teachers in my department have been there for over 20 years, most have been there five years or more, and three (including me) came last year. The three of us are known as the "NTs," the "Non-Tenureds"—which I found to be an interesting distinction, since I think it highlights tenure's importance in how teachers are viewed. One teacher retired last year after teaching for 27 years. We have one English supervisor for both schools.

My Classes

This year, I taught one class in the morning at one school and traveled to the other school to teach four classes. I taught three classes of Junior English and two classes of Journalism. I had 119 students total; my smallest class consisted of 17 students and the largest had 27. I am also the adviser for the school newspaper; the staff of the paper meets usually 1-2 times per week.

Literature Review

The Teaching Profession is Particularly Vulnerable to Stress

Fortunately (or rather *unfortunately*, depending on one's perspective), there is a wealth of professional literature that addresses various aspects of teacher stress and burnout. "Teaching, in particular, has been identified as a stressful situation; it is also the most debated subject in burnout

literature (Jackson, Schwab, " (Weisberg & Sagie, 1999, p. 334) Current research available includes empirical and statistical data on teacher attrition, intrinsic and extrinsic stress factors that lead to burnout, and strategies for change on individual and institutional levels.

All professions—and our lives in general—have stressful elements that are unavoidable. However, people in the "helping" professions (such as teaching, nursing, social work, police, clergy) suffer similar causes and symptoms of stress and have a higher potential for burnout than other professions. Greenglass and Burke in *Occupational Stress in the Service Professions*, give definitions of stress, burnout, and separate chapters on the particular stress factors for each profession, including a chapter on teaching.

> Given the stress and burnout that can accompany teaching, there has been considerable research on the effects of work stress on teachers. Perhaps more than any other public service professionals, teachers are affected by job burnout, resulting in negative attitudes toward students and loss of energy, idealism and purpose (Schamer and Jackson, 1996). With increasing burnout, there is a continual eroding of the person's ability to cope effectively with the continual bombardment of perceived stressors. (Greenglass & Burke, 2003, p. 215)

Internal vs. External Causes of Teacher Stress

It is logical that challenging, often demanding jobs can cause stress. However, it is also important to consider that people react to their environments in distinct ways. Each person has a different tolerance for stress; some people thrive under pressure and are able to multi-task quite well, while others feel overwhelmed and unable to keep up. But all of us have a point of stress overload, which over time can eventually lead to job burnout. Stress becomes a problem when it creates symptoms that interfere with one's personal physical or mental health, job satisfaction, or job performance.

One person's meat is another person's poison. If your work situation exposes you to continuous over-stimulation, additional stimulation at work or outside it is unlikely to improve your overall situation. In contrast, if your work is habitually under-stimulating, such added stimulation may be highly beneficial. (Dollard, Winefield, and Winefield, 2003, vii)

Since all of us are unique individuals, a person's background, expectations and personality traits, such as being idealistic or a perfectionist, coupled with external factors, can cause significant stress:

Predispositional factors may also contribute to teacher burnout. Bloch (1977), for example, reports that teachers who are obsessional, passionate, idealistic, and dedicated (as measured by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) are more prone to "battered teachers syndrome." (Farber, 1984, p. 326)

Gold and Roth point out that burnout and stress-overload are manifested by physical and emotional symptoms such as increased anxiety, depression, feelings of incompetence, loss of sleep, and decreased job satisfaction, resulting at its highest in contemplation of leaving the field for good (1993). So, a person's personal reaction to his or her environment is part of what causes stress, not just the environmental factors alone. There seem to be many causes of teacher stress and burnout, both external (environmental) and internal (psychological).

External factors are often out of one's personal control, which in itself can create stress. Work load and time constrictions of a typical teaching day require teachers to perform a myriad of tasks, often simultaneously and under pressures of time and deadlines. School frameworks and policies affect teachers in many of ways they often cannot control, from increased class size and added teacher responsibilities to expected testing outcomes and the pressure of deadlines for grades and paperwork. Little opportunity for teacher input and control over one's environment are also cited as factors of teacher stress and burnout.

Teachers are traditionally not given much decision-making power. The educational research and administration communities once tried to provide teachers with "fool-proof,"

prepackaged curricula, as if teachers' thinking and decision making are not related to improving teaching quality. (Shen, 1997, p. 81)

How teachers deal with external causes of stress often affects them internally. Internal factors of stress range from unclear or over-zealous goals and high expectations for one's own performance. Perfectionists may self-impose standards that cannot realistically be met. Others may suffer from poor organization or time management skills that create anxiety. Fortunately, there are many sources that provide plans and strategies for improving these skills to alleviate stress from these factors, even if it cannot be eliminated. (Wiley, 2000, p. 80)

Common tools for formally assessing teacher stress are the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and Occupational Stress Inventory (OSI). The MBI assessment takes into account one's self perception as well as workplace stress; OSI assesses three aspects of stress including occupational stressors, psychological strain, and coping sources. (Hanson and Sullivan, 2003)

Wider Effects of Stress and Burnout

Stress and burnout can affect the individual, of course, but there are also larger implications. Teacher attrition is becoming a serious problem that is starting to be recognized on an institutional and national level. Many researchers make the connection between teacher stress, the effect on teacher attrition, and the resulting effects on the quality of education. It is not simply a problem to be faced on an individual level but should be treated on an institutional level, as well.

> At the beginning of a new millennium, the issue of teacher stress is significant for the educational manager, because excessive stress may negatively affect the quality of the teacher's work. The stress of teachers has been widely discussed and written about and the devastating consequences of stress has been thoroughly documented in teacher journals. (Van Der Linde, 2000, p. 375)

When burnout becomes systemic and many people leave the field, it creates a drain on resources that affects everyone involved in the educational hierarchy, from students, parents, administrators, and taxpayers.

> The outcomes of teacher burnout in the United States were investigated in several studies. Cherniss (1980) showed that burnout leads to a significant decrease in the quality of teaching, long absenteeism, and early leaving of the profession. Jackson et al. (1986)

One important study by The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 2002) found that a "teacher shortage" was actually stemming from poor teacher retention rates:

> Our inability to support high-quality teaching in many of our schools is driven not by too few teachers coming in, but by too many going out, that is, by a staggering teacher turn-over and attrition rate...We need to ask "How do we get the good teachers we have recruited, trained, and hired to stay in their jobs?" (NCTAF, 2003, pg. 1)

The study estimated that almost a third of America's teachers leave the field sometime during their first three years of teaching, and almost half leave after just five years. (NCTF, 2003, pg. 3) Retaining teachers, rather than hiring new teachers to replace them, is much more cost-effective and productive for all concerned. The study found that when schools focus on strategies for teacher retention, everyone wins: teachers, administrators, taxpayers, and especially, students.

My teacher research project was a small but important study to document first-hand what causes teacher stress for me, how I respond to it, how I can manage it, and how I can prevent or stem the all-too common fate of teacher burnout and disillusionment. This will have important implications for me and my students in the future.

Methodology/ Data Collection

For this research, I developed a plan and timeline to gather data about teacher stress, incorporating my own journals, comments about teacher stress from an informal "support group,"

and questions and responses from a more formal email focus group. I also made plans to read professional literature about the nature of teacher stress, its causes, effects, and implications. I began collecting data in late March and finished in late June, so the approximate range of time for the data collection was about three months, although I also referred back to journal entries made previous to the beginning of my research.

Data collection in many research projects means recording what is observed externally in an objective way, but since my topic was more abstract and psychological/ reflective in nature, I began by keeping (mostly) regular, daily journal entries about my teaching day and after school time, noting what happened during the day that was stressful, my reaction to it, and what I might do to prevent this from happening in the future. Ironically, the commitment to journal writing added another task to be accomplished in an already busy schedule, and I admit at times, I did find it somewhat bothersome and time consuming to commit time to writing in my journal. But, as time progressed through the project, even if I was not always able to make a daily entry, I still wrote thoughts or ideas that came to mind during the week. Although this added task took time, I found it an invaluable tool for recording exactly what was causing my stress and my reaction to it.

The second component for my data was a collection of responses from four fellow teachers in my department, which for clarity's sake, I will call "Support Group" (SG) as I noted in my journal. Our department has a faculty room where teachers work and talk during their prep time. I explained to my fellow teachers during one of my prep periods about my project and they agreed to discuss various topics that cause stress and how they deal with it; topics ranged from time management (the amount of grading we have, balancing personal/ professional time, lesson planning, paperwork), student behavior and lack of motivation, administrators, and other factors that cause stress in our lives. It was more conversational and free-flowing than a focus group, and I specifically stated (in a democratic way) that I hoped it would remain more positive and helpful in

tone (which it did for the most part) rather than becoming a session for complaining. I recorded comments from the support group in my journal and marked them with an "SG" so I could easily find them in my notes.

The third component of my data was correspondence from an email focus group I organized. I created a list of twelve teachers I know that teach outside of my district. I emailed them to ask if they would be willing to participate in an on-line focus group. Two declined due to time constraints, one did not respond, and nine responded very positively and said they looked forward to the questions. They were invited to respond to the whole group to benefit from each others' responses, which most did. The focus group was more formal than the support group in that I created a list of seven questions and sent one at a time to the group. I saved their responses in a folder on my email so I could refer back to them at a later date and code them accordingly. The list of questions that was sent is as follows:

1. **List in order of degree (high to low) three factors that cause you the most stress in your daily teaching. If you have time, please write any comments/ thoughts about each one in a few sentences.**
2. **Do you have any particular strategies for dealing with teacher stress? (Exercise, yoga, meditation, talking with others, throwing papers into circular file?)**
3. **If you could give a new teacher one piece of valuable advice, what would it be?**
4. **Other than the required mentoring for first year teachers, does your school have a new teacher support group? Is there some other kind of teacher network or professional development (for all teachers, not just new) to share ideas and provide teacher-to-teacher support?**
5. **How do you manage your time for schoolwork? (Do you prefer to do grading and planning after school or take work home? Why? On average, how much of your weekend evening time revolves around schoolwork? How do you find balance in your personal and professional lives?**
6. **Have you ever considered leaving the field of teaching because of stress? What changed your mind? What would you suggest to school administrators or policy makers to alleviate high rates of teacher attrition?**
7. **What do you find the most rewarding aspect of teaching? Cite an example if you can.**

Coding

After reviewing my own journals, the notes from the support group, and the responses from the focus group, I began to notice patterns of what was causing teachers' stress, so I made a list of categories. I decided to use color codes for each of the categories below to identify causes of stress according to this pattern, for all three sources of data (myself, support group, and focus group). I have put them into order of frequency in the list below:

- **lack of time, feeling rushed**
- **number/ scope of duties**
- **intrusion of work into personal time**
- **grading**
- **school politics on various levels (teacher to teacher, departmental, whole school, and/or district)**
- **self-imposed, self-critical pressure ("I'm not doing this well enough")**
- **administration**
- **secretarial/ paper work**
- **classroom management (behavior problems, kids' "issues")**
- **parents**
- **logistical issues (such as lack of child care, problems with technology, copy machine)**
- **feeling isolated**

This very simple, yet effective, method of coding worked well for finding patterns and organizing data. Especially for the top four listings, categories often overlapped, but then I used two or more colors to underline passages or notes.

Data Analysis and Findings

Four Causes of Stress Related to Time Management

After coding the data, I found that the most stressful factor for me, as well as for most of my fellow teachers, was "lack of time/ feeling rushed to complete tasks," which also intertwined significantly with "number and scope of duties," "intrusion into personal time," and "grading." Teachers have so much to do in so little time. Good time management is critical to having some control over what we must accomplish and still have a personal life. Unfortunately, I consider

myself lacking in this area, but it was a wake up call to realize how much other teachers struggle

with it and how much more I can control it if I put my mind to it.

Much of my journal reflects a constant feeling of anxiety to complete everything on time.

For instance, a journal entry from March 6 reads:

> Today—after getting up at 4:00 AM to finish grading a set of papers to enter for the grades
> due TODAY—I started reminiscing about previous jobs I've had where I left work at the
> end of the day and my life was my own! No lesson planning, no grading...my evenings and
> weekends were my own. I feel resentful sometimes. If only I could everything done during
> the day and not have to bring work home, I think I would feel so much better. The actual
> teaching is such a small part (BUT—the best part) of my day. There is so much else to do!
> I need a secretary! Nobody knows until they are a teacher themselves what it's really like.

So, I made a list of all the duties teachers have—in *addition* to actually teaching in the classroom.

A List of My Teaching Responsibilities
(in stream of consciousness form)

> Researching/ thinking about/writing lesson plans, creating meaningful assignments and
> rubrics, grading, returning and reviewing papers, taking attendance, making copies,
> keeping records, filing papers, filling out forms, making and returning phone calls,
> documenting parent contact, responding to and organizing email, maintaining the website,
> attending department and faculty meetings, attending parent conferences, writing IEP
> statements, writing college letters of recommendation for my juniors, contacting guidance
> counselors about kids I'm worried about, signing up for the projector for the technology
> requirement, being observed and meeting with administrators, keeping up with the portfolio
> [all non-tenured teachers in this district must create and present a teaching portfolio to the
> school administrators, superintendent, and the BOE], attending grad class and PD seminars,
> provide after school help, and be an adviser for the school newspaper, supervising staff,
> proofreading copy....My old job of being a florist seems like a dream now! Maybe they'll
> take me back???? I am so tired......

When I shared this thought with my colleagues, they empathized. One fellow teacher said

she wondered how much she actually made per hour if she totaled up all the hours she puts in

before and after school to get everything done. Another, a more veteran teacher of 22 years, said

she felt that teacher's time has been increasingly encroached upon over the years. She noted that

although this district's new push for integration of technology in all areas of teaching does save

time for some things (such as spreadsheets for computing grades), it also adds another level of

"stuff" we must deal with, such as managing email, learning new programs to use, being required to set up and maintain websites, etc. Older teachers in particular struggled with how to adapt their teaching styles and habits to the demand for technology in their lessons. This also added to the demands on their time.

In relation to time management, grading was the biggest issue; all five of us in the support group agreed that as English teachers, we are perhaps the most swamped with grading because of the nature of most assignments, which involve responding to students' writing rather than multiple choice tests. Many things vie for our time, but as English teachers, grading consumes an inordinate amount due to the nature of most assignments (writing). It is simply an unavoidable component of our jobs. We all agreed that it was not reading the students' work that was stressful, but the small amount of time in which we had to do it.

All but two teachers in the email focus group also rated lack of time as the most significant factor, with grading and number/ scope of duties as part of that theme. I felt as though one teacher had read my mind when he wrote:

> I never feel relaxed during the year. I'm always thinking about 'the next thing' that I need to get done. When one thing gets checked off, another takes its place. What's more, the immense curriculums force me to rush a lot of material, which also makes time feel scarce. At the end of the year, balancing time and grades is especially tough. I want to give a lot of time to grading, especially on assignments that students worked hard on. If I don't, it shows, which may impact the effort I get back from students. With that in mind, I put a lot of pressure on myself to grade in a timely and focused manner. Not easy.

Several teachers cited administrative intrusions as particularly time consuming, such as being asked to run meetings or participate on committees, completing seemingly endless administrative paperwork, or being an adviser for a sport or club. (I also found being an adviser for the school paper to be not only very time consuming but stressful due to the public nature of the paper: when mistakes are made, everyone sees them.)

Therefore, time management became an important and frequent point of discussion in the data. So what do teachers do about "too much to do in too little time"?

Teachers in both groups offered suggestions about how they deal with grading and planning, but all responses were highly idiosyncratic. Two teachers in the support group like to save all the grading for the weekends because they are too tired with the days events during the week to deal with it and want to spend weeknights with spouses or kids. Others like to do a little each night. One teacher said she prefers to make sure she can finish one set of papers in one sitting to assure uniformity in how she grades, while another finds that idea too overwhelming and does a little at a time throughout the day and evening, whenever there is time. She even takes a grading bag with her to doctors' appointments to avoid wasting time. One teacher only plans at school and grades at home, while another does the complete opposite.

Some teachers like to stay after school until 5:00 to finish what they can and call it a day. Others like to leave soon after school ends (often due to family commitments) and do work at home in the evening. Conclusion: when it comes to time management, one size does not fit all. Regardless, most teachers responded that they spend at least 15-20 hours per week outside of school time doing grading and prep work such as lesson planning.

Interestingly, I expected to see that newer teachers would spend more time outside of school doing schoolwork, but I was surprised to learn some veteran teachers said they still spend most of Sunday preparing for the week ahead and many hours in the evening grading papers. All agreed there is too little prep time during the day and too many distractions that interfere with quality work time at school. Some teachers admitted to taking sick days just to catch up on work, which I have done myself.

Based on my coding of the data, I concluded that time management, and grading in particular, is a number one issue for English teachers in particular; we all must deal with it in

whatever way works best for us as individuals, according to home life, schedules, and personal preference. The key is for each person to find what works for him or her. From my entry dated March 20:

> Decision: Change needed. I am not getting enough sleep and things are starting to feel overwhelming again. I am so tired when I get home, but if I put off grading or prep for tomorrow or for the weekend when I'm less tired, I just get distracted with all the other things that need to get done. And I can't sleep knowing I have things to finish. And if I get up early to finish, I don't exercise in the morning, and it becomes a vicious cycle: too little sleep, no exercise, not enough work getting done, and I feel my stress level rising. I realize I am a person that needs to sleep and exercise in order to function well and I'm not getting enough of either. This connection of physical and mental (mind/ body) is really strong. This is not good. Need to get control of this now.

I tried various strategies recommended by others and found a better balance once I committed myself to making a change. I made a list of what I had to accomplish each day, set a very detailed schedule for myself, and checked off at the end of the day what I had accomplished. To actually write down and check off my accomplishments gave me a sense of completion and satisfaction. I found that little by little, I was getting more sleep, which helped with other things such as my level of concentration and energy. I learned that despite being tired when I got home, it was better to just do a little bit of grading each night rather than wait until the weekend. Procrastination due to being tired only made my anxiety greater as work continued to pile up and get back-logged. I found it less stressful in the long run to just nibble away at what I could during the course of the week, even if it was just one or two papers at a sitting. But most importantly, I learned that I needed to be more self-disciplined in getting work done promptly, because the anxiety of not getting work finished was creating more stress than the work itself. I found that completing grading tasks brought a sense of relief that is reflected often in my journal entries, such as this one from May 11:

> So, I just finished grading the last of three class sets of essays. I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Now at least I can relax and enjoy Mother's Day weekend.

Other Stress Factors

Low Self-Image and Self-Confidence

Besides realizing that my time management needed a make-over, I learned that my lack of

self-confidence often tinted my self-perception and consequently, my level of stress. Only one

other teacher in the support and focus groups mentioned self-imposed critical pressure as a source

of stress. An entry in my journal dated June 5 states:

> I wish that I could take the best qualities of every teacher around me and pour them into
> myself. I feel like I will never be the teacher I really want to be! Shawn is so organized and
> self disciplined. Nancy is so creative and engages her kids with such cool things like art,
> music, food. Val and Trish are masters of teaching writing and getting kids to think on a
> higher level. Oona is an expert at classroom management and interacting (schmoozing?)
> with parents. Joyce knows so many ways to link the literature to other parts of life to make
> things meaningful for the kids....I still feel like a novice, even four years into my teaching
> career. I always feel like everyone else has it all figured out except me. Why can't I be
> more organized/ motivating/ creative/ interesting/ efficient/ witty/ engaging/ intelligent/
> self-confident? I still struggle with how long everything takes me to do (especially lesson
> plans) and how well I do things. I feel this sense of "everyone is watching" and never feel
> good enough with what I'm doing. Am I being paranoid?????

Interestingly, when I mentioned this passage to some of my colleagues, they all smiled

because they had all felt the same thing, sometimes inadequate and "jealous" of other teachers'

admirable qualities. I found some comfort in knowing I was not the only one to feel this way. In

fact, they mentioned qualities that they admired in me (being creative, willing to ask questions and

learn/ try new things). I came to realize that teachers, by nature, strive to improve and make

lessons more meaningful, so they are constantly critiquing and analyzing their methods and

interactions with students. "It is easy to become victim to only seeing the negative," one teacher

said. "It is sometimes more helpful to focus on what went well rather than what went wrong."

Administrative Issues

Two teachers chose different first-place causes of stress, both which relate to administration. One teacher wrote, "Administrators are too scared of parents and lawsuits to discipline kids appropriately. This is not only a source of stress but accounts for grade inflation, enabling non-academic behavior, etc..THE SOURCE of everything I see wrong in schools nowadays." Another found school politics to be the biggest source of stress, citing it as "outlandish and disgusting."

The main source of stress I feel from the administration is when I am observed. There is an implicit (and explicit) expectation of excellence and I worry that I will not meet these high standards in their eyes. The observation by my superintendent made me so nervous that I deviated from my original lesson plan and the lesson did not go as well as the one I had planned probably would have! One journal entry was about my supervisor stopping in unannounced and later writing an email to me about a something she observed. I know this is meant to be helpful criticism, but I still feel intimidated when being observed and find it to be the most unsettling experience, which I know I need to work on mastering because observations continue throughout our teaching years. This was not a great concern to most veteran teachers, but among the non-tenured teachers this did come up as a source of some stress because it makes us more self-critical and self-conscious.

I asked the focus group teachers (outside my own district) about what their administration provides in the way of teacher support. A few teachers applauded their district's efforts to strengthen this often weak link. One teacher is involved in a quality management group that tries to identify areas of concern and how they can implement positive changes. Another district has new teacher orientation throughout the first year where new teachers must visit classrooms from all departments and learn about many aspects of the school they might not do so otherwise (library, computer training, health services, administrative offices). Another district has a monthly new-teacher meetings where teachers meet with the principal and other teachers to discuss any issues of concern. In this same district, there is also an extensive web of professional development

requirements in which teachers from the school must attend and share best practice strategies or other skills. But these are very structured and considered classes rather than emotional or collegial support for teachers. She would like to see more casual meetings where teachers are free to discuss topics as they arise throughout the year.

So while efforts are being made in some schools, others still do not offer much professional development time for collegial support. One teacher writes:

> Lack of communication between teachers is probably my biggest complaint against "the system." Department meetings are long and boring, an irrelevant series of reminders about keeping good attendance, etc. I never get to ask the important questions of my colleagues like how do you handle late papers? What can we do about kids that are failing? I once started a support group but the president of [the union] shut it down, saying it set a bad precedent.' We are all stumbling in the dark and we could be such amazing resources for each other. The only time I get face to face with colleagues is when I am going into the restroom and they are coming out!

Burnout: How to Prevent It

When asked if they had ever considered leaving the field of teaching due to stress, all of the teachers in the support and focus groups said that they love their jobs, despite the high level of stress, but understand that it takes a toll, particularly on new teachers. One teacher writes,

> I don't think that new teachers will be able to sustain themselves as long as previous generations of teachers. This is because of scrutiny of parents (and the kid-glove treatment they get from the administration), the ever-growing curriculum loads, and the focus on standardized testing...So while I haven't considered leaving, I don't see how I can go for 30 years.

Two other teachers expressed interest in pursuing other areas of teaching, such as becoming a librarian and/ or media specialist in order to stay interactive with students yet avoid the heavy load of grading.

When asked what can be done to alleviate burnout and high rates of attrition, there were various responses. One teacher writes,

> I think society (parents, administrators, BOE, government and taxpayers) expect too much of a system they no longer know very much about. Unfortunately, those that make the

decisions about our jobs and expectations are so far removed from the schools that they make idealistic decisions and not practical ones. The amount of pressure put on schools to make every child successful is unrealistic. And the increased amount of inclusion of special needs students is adding more and more to the plate. I understand the need for accountability on the part of the schools, but at this point there is no balance.

Several responses included suggestions to avoid burnout that included providing bettor

mentoring, time for more collegial interaction and administrative support:

> More mentoring, more collegial sharing is the answer to so many teacher problems, burnout included. Every department meeting should be people sharing ideas that work in the classroom. Instead, we always seem to wind up discussing administrative and/or policy issues as they relate to our department, which is important but more time needs to be spent sharing good ideas.

> Teachers should be forced to get together in a non-threatening environment and share their struggles. It would have been amazing for me to know [during my first years of teaching] that other people felt like they were worst teacher ever!

> I remember each day that I am doing the best I can. I give my all in the classroom and try to do the same outside the classroom. I still make sure to make my family a priority and have a life. I enjoy what I do. I admit my mistakes and shortcomings and try to move on and ask friend for support when I need it—until the system gets better, I think the best thing to do is take care of each other!

Positive Thinking to Balance Stress

So, if teaching is as stressful as it is, why continue? What is the payoff? All of the teachers,

myself included, found a sense of accomplishment and success by interacting with students. To all

of us, this was the best part of being a teacher and actually made the stress worthwhile. Seeing

students respond positively to a discussion, or seeing "light bulbs go off" was a common thread of

what we find rewarding in our teaching. In my journal, dated June2:

> Wow, it's been a long week but a rewarding one. Students presented their research about the books they read exploring some aspect of the American Dream. Some of them who had been resistant to doing this big project admitted that they actually like it and learned from each others' presentations. They admitted they saw the value in it, even if they had not at the outset. It was a redeeming moment....their hard work paid off. I guess mine did too.

On June 28, our last day of school this year, I reflected on the past year:

> Yes, it was stressful this year, but the kids make it worthwhile. So many of my kids from last year, the graduating seniors, asked me to sign their yearbooks this past week. I was flattered that they wanted me to and they said they will remember my class as one of their favorites. And so many of my students this year hugged me and said they wish I could teach senior English next year so they could have me again. Now THAT is a compliment...

To end the project on a positive note, I asked teachers in both the support group and the focus group, *What advice would teachers give to new teachers now entering the field? Or, what do you wish you knew then that you know now?* Some of my favorite responses were:

- Be yourself; students respect "the real deal." Also, follow through on what you say (good or bad); you might be the only person in their lives that does.
- Have a life of your own. Teaching will consume you if you let it.
- If you let yourself burn out, you will leave your kids in the dark.
- Take care of your body as well as your mind. Take a yoga class. Get enough sleep. Rest assured that somehow everything will get done.
- Find your own style of teaching and stick with what works. Once I let go of trying to be someone I was not, I relaxed and became a much better teacher.
- Once, in my first year of teaching, I made up my mind to quit because I was sure I was the worst teacher ever. Only then, when I took the pressure off myself, did I enjoy teaching and ultimately decided to stay!
- You do not have to reinvent the wheel: use the materials and resources (even other teachers) available to you; you do not have to shine your first year; a nice glow will do.
- Remember that everything gets easier after the Christmas break.
- Grade a little each day; it will make the pile a lot less intimidating.
- Don't let negative people dissuade you from the important and wonderful job we do. Smile, give it your best shot, and don't beat yourself up when you make a mistake.

Conclusions on Findings

A high level of stress in the teaching profession is inevitable. Some stressors are external things we have little or no control over (such as class size, grading, time constraints); internal forces are at play too, such as our emotional and psychological reactions to stressful conditions. The thing we *can* control is how we *react* to stress. We can either eliminate stressors or work to effect change in external conditions (join a committee to change school policies, implement better time management strategies) or we can change our own reactions to it (reaching out to other teachers for support, keeping physically fit and rested, relaxing by taking a yoga class).

Even though the required first-year mentoring is helpful to brand new teachers, it is not enough. We need more time to share ideas and provide collegial support as we teach through the years. As demonstrated by my small research, even veteran teachers would benefit from support groups, focus groups, or professional development that focus on helping teachers share ideas and cope with stress. The individual teacher should not have to figure everything out on his or her own in a "sink or swim" situation. Much can be done on a local and institutional level to help teachers deal with stress issues to prevent burnout.

Implications and Emerging Questions

How will my research and findings affect me as a teacher and learner? I've learned that my stress level is quite normal, which is comforting on one hand and concerning on the other. If stress is systemic and something all that teachers must deal with on an everyday basis, finding ways to deal with it and lesson its impact is important if we want to stay fresh and remain in the field. It would be a shame to lose potentially good teachers due to increased stress and burnout.

I also learned that teachers are the best resources for each other; I learned that I should seek help more often from other teachers instead of muddling through on my own. I was given books to read and found one particularly helpful, *The English Teacher's Companion* by Jim Burke (1999), in which there are so many helpful strategies that will help me with grading issues and time management as they relate to being an English teacher.

I also learned that journaling helped me identify sources of my stress and also helped me figure out ways to deal with them. And since having so much to do in so little time was causing me the most stress, working on better time management is key in helping me with stress management, too. I will continue to work on this as a part of a personal improvement plan through my next year.

I will also focus on the positive aspects of my teaching, and try to see things less negatively. I feel more confident now knowing I can manage time, and my stress, if I put my mind to it.

As I saw through my own research and reading literature about teacher stress and burnout, my experience with stress is similar to many other teachers. So what can be done on a larger institutional scale to reduce teacher stress, prevent teacher burnout and stem the rate of attrition? Some researchers see an important need for more empirical teacher research regarding institutional policies to stem teacher attrition:

> There is a noticeable and regrettable dearth of rigorous policy evaluation research. Our discussion of specific pre-service and in-service policies reviewed only 25 studies. While the education literature abounds with articles and reports describing or advocating particular policies, very few of them contain empirical data and analysis, and even fewer contain analysis conducted in accordance with rigorous research-quality standards. We believe that policymakers at every institutional level—school, district, state, and federal government—should commit sufficient resources to ensure a well designed evaluation whenever new policies are put in place. In the end, this will be a cost-effective strategy and will help answer many unanswered questions in the current research literature. (Guarino, SantibaÑez, Daley & Brewer, 2004, p. 67)

We need more research into how to prevent teachers from burning out. Better teacher support means less high turn-over and attrition, which is costly and counter-productive to quality education. New teachers need time and support to grow into good teachers who stay in the profession, which benefits their students, and ultimately, the taxpayers.

So what can be done? The NCTAF study (2003) recommends various strategies for stemming teacher attrition, such as better pay in poorer districts, improving working conditions (both physical and related to policies), better teacher preparation before certification (including more extensive real-life experiences with a variety of teachers—not just the cooperating student teacher), and mentoring support in the first few years of teaching (NCTAF, 2003, pg. 8).

What can teacher preparation programs do to better prepare teachers for the rigors and stress levels of teaching today? Some researchers say more research is needed to produce better

teacher induction programs to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching today (Joerger and

Bremer, 2001). Others see the need to specifically build resiliency:

> The problem thus becomes how to collaboratively design programs [in pre-service and in-service teaching] that build resiliency and thus equip teachers with the personal strategies they need in order to remain in the profession beyond five years" (Bernshausen and Cunningham, 2001, pg. 4).

Veteran teachers, too, often reach the point when a change is necessary to prevent burnout.
In a collection of essays titled *Up Drafts: Case Studies in Teacher Renewal*, eight teachers share a range of creative ways they found to stay creative and fresh in their approaches. Editor Roy Fox states that often "teachers leave and/ or change positions primarily because they care so *much*, not because they don't care at all" (Fox, 2000, pg. 172). Fox recommends change to veteran teachers as a strategy to remain fresh and prevent burnout:

> We should plan for periodic renewal opportunities such as scholarly sabbaticals, leaves without pay, role switching, trying out another grade level, internships in related and unrelated disciplines and other nourishments. Also, teachers in training need to learn that renewal is to be expected periodically throughout everyone's career. (Fox, 2000, pg. 170)

What strategies can be implemented on the local and institutional levels? For starters, schools can create policies and school frameworks that support new teachers beyond the mentored first year, perhaps continuing up until the fifth year. Something as simple as devoting time for professional networking and sharing of ideas would help, perhaps an extra prep period bi-monthly or a half-day once a month. Schools might encourage teachers to create a "critical friends" program where teachers observe each other teaching and provide informal feedback in a less threatening way than formal observations by supervisors or administrators.

But what can one person do to effect change in a small way, to start a ripple in the pond? I found the email focus group to be a particularly successful. The beauty of it was that teachers could respond—or not—in a user-friendly way and provided the flexibility of time: nobody had to attend yet another meeting and could answer at 3:00 A.M. if they chose to do so. I am seriously

considering starting an in-house email focus group in my school. I plan to start small, perhaps within my department this September. If it is successful, I might suggest it be carried to a faculty-wide level.

This small teacher research project sought to explore a question that will affect all areas of my teaching now and into my future. Although there is still much to learn, I now see stress as an inevitable but controllable facet of teaching. Hopefully my experience will one day create change in a small way in my own school; perhaps future teacher research will provide impetus for change on an institutional level, as well.

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Bonnie S█████
Subjectivity and Implementation

Subjectivity: A Reflection on the Research Process

I found the concept of teacher research a little different from "normal" research in that the teacher is both researcher and subject, which does make it somewhat difficult to be objective. (Hence, I understand the reasoning behind a "subjectivity paper"!) In my case, the line became even more blurred since much of the data came from personal journals about my own thoughts concerning stress, in addition to the data from the other teachers. Analyzing one's self is a little odd, but really, why should it be? Maybe we should all do this from time to time.

To be honest, I was not sure how this research project would go. In fact, I started to panic at one point, not really sure if I would have enough "meat" to find meaning in what information I was gathering. I added the email focus group as another source of data and found that to be very helpful because the questions were more pointed and the responses paralleled my own thoughts and feelings, which gave credence to what I was discovering about my own sources of stress.

One of the things I was worried about was not letting the hypothesis drive my data in my journals. I suspected time management was my biggest source of stress, but wanted to be honest and open enough to see if there really was something else driving it. I did find that my image of myself as a teacher was more negative, rather than positive and self-affirming; I often did not discuss what went well or what I felt was positive in my teaching. I discovered I am harder on myself than I should be. I tend to let "negative talk" invade my thoughts ("I'm not doing [whatever] well enough...I need to be more....") and now that I realize this, I can be more aware of it and hopefully control it.

Focusing on the positive aspects of my day and my teaching is one of my goals for next year.

As I mentioned in my research plan, there was some irony about adding journaling to an already busy schedule, and I admit it did require some self-discipline sometimes. But it was well worth the time spent, even if I wrote for only a few minutes.

Another important thing I learned is that I need to reach out when things get overwhelming. All of us experience similar stress and teaching well is often not easy, but fellow teachers can be a wonderful resource for each other. My only hope is that someday I will be able to help and support new teachers the way my colleagues and teacher friends have supported me.

I thought the process for the course of research was productive. I think first learning about teacher research (in the 510 and 601) classes was important to understanding the purpose and value of it. To be honest, I was not familiar with the concept of teacher research before this class, but after reading about it in our class assignments and doing my own research, I find more instances of teacher research popping up in other readings and conversations with other teachers.

In the 602 class, writing a research plan helped me focus and think critically about how and when I would implement the research process. I liked that we were free to change elements as we saw fit (I ended up throwing out—actually, simplifying—a very detailed daily agenda I had created, which right away I found cumbersome and time consuming to use).

Having a small group from class to work with was also very helpful. Sometimes after class during the week, especially if I had been tired during the last class, I found

myself puzzling over some aspect or not sure if I had clearly understood some concept. It was easy to email and ask a question, and I liked that we got together to discuss how the research was going. My group members were very helpful and supportive, and I hope I was to them, also. I think we gave each other good ideas and enjoyed each other's company, as well as appreciating input and feedback on research issues.

The chose the simplest form of coding, which worked well for my topic and kinds of data I had. I used a separate color highlighter for each source of stress (parents, grading, etc.) and it was very easy to highlight more than one color in a passage. I started seeing patterns about halfway through the project and decided to color code from time to time, rather than waiting until the very end.

All in all, I found that even though the research process was a lot of work, it was a good introduction to the teacher research process. I gained a new understanding of the value of teacher research and how it can help each of us as individuals and as a profession. Hopefully, as teacher research becomes more widely accepted as "scholarly," it will add more qualitative research to the more traditional quantitative research already available.

Implementation: Where Does the Research Go From Here?

Now that this small research project is over, how does it stay meaningful and how might I use it in "the real world"? For myself, I hope to continue journaling as a source of stress relief as well as a vehicle for reflection. One of the most important things I learned from this research is that journaling is a very helpful tool in relieving stress for two reasons. First, I found it to be a very useful tool to identify the sources of my stress

and helpful in planning a course of action for change. I also used it as a means of reflection and articulating thoughts; I found the writing helpful as a *process* for relieving stress. I plan to journal more frequently now on a regular basis, focusing more on what I have accomplished each day and other positive elements.

When I first proposed a support group in my department that would meet weekly after or before school, I got a lukewarm reception because everyone is already so busy and stretched to the maximum in time and energy. The one planning period I had with other teachers worked out well as a mini-support group of sorts, and their input was valuable. But I can see why having yet another meeting to attend would not be so well received.

By contrast, the email focus group worked very well. Teachers who were involved told me they liked sharing their ideas, and since it was email based, was user friendly and had a low time commitment and was time flexible. People could respond if they choose to as time allowed (or not), and they could articulate their thoughts in writing. It also created a record of conversation that could be saved and referred back to at a later time. People included links to helpful resources in their responses occasionally, too.

So, to reach beyond myself and hopefully bring this to a slightly wider audience, I plan to propose an email focus group for my department once we get underway in September. I think it would be a good idea to start small, within my department first, and if it is successful, propose that we take it to a faculty-wide level and use it as a type of forum for discussing issues going on in the school. One person could volunteer to be a moderator (for half-year terms?) and we might all find solutions to problems, as well as

generate ideas that would benefit us, the students, or the school. Our district is very interested in promoting the use of technology, so I think they would be open to using it in this way. Who knows? Maybe it could become a model for other schools.

How will the issue of teacher stress play out down the road statistically in rates of teacher attrition? I hope that teacher education programs will catch on and consider training new teachers to be more resilient and prepare them for the rigors of teaching, and make them aware of the potential for burnout. Maybe they will be less likely to experience the anxiety I did when my idealism crashed up against the demands on my time, energy, and confidence. Perhaps pre-service English teachers could learn alternate types of assessment and grading that would make assessment more meaningful and less time consuming for teachers. (One teacher gave me a book called *How to Reduce the Paper Load* which I plan to devour after writing this paper!) Perhaps learning better time management skills should become part of pre-service and in-service training. And in a utopian wish, maybe one day schools will give an extra prep period once a week for time to catch up with work, or time to network with other teachers in anyway they see fit for their needs—to discuss teaching or curriculum issues, generate ideas, create solutions to problems, or discuss how to help students they are puzzled about. Or...maybe just enjoy each others company, to relax and laugh a bit. Now *that* would relieve some stress.