

Management of Job-Related Teacher Burnout in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract: The paper helps teachers in Nigerian schools manage burnout, an emotional exhaustion from excessive demands on their energy, strength, and resources. It helps them, to understand the burnout syndrome, the causes, symptoms, prevention and remedies. It emphasizes that burnout is experienced by many Nigerian school teachers and that it need not be a silent disease. It recommends that further research is necessary to document its incidence upon the teacher's physical condition and the student's education. Exposing its causes, symptoms, and types of prevention is vital if it is to be eliminated among teachers. It recommends also that management should hold regular meetings that can be used for staff support; should foster a sense of teamwork among the staff; restructure jobs so that teachers do not unduely spend as much time with particularly demanding students and assignments. Workshops in stress management or time management should be mounted regularly. [Report and Opinion 2010;2(8):36-43]. (ISSN: 1553-9873).

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1. Introduction

The term "burnout" is often described as "emotional exhaustion resulting from the stress of interpersonal contact" – an exhaustion from excessive demands on energy, strength, and resources. It is a specific type of stress-induced condition that affects individuals engaged in "people" work (Davis, 1983). The term takes on particular significance for those individuals working within the field of the helping professions, which include teachers, psychologists, social workers, mental health clinicians, and police. Papalia and Olds (1995) define the term burnout as,

A reaction to work-related stress; it involves emotional exhaustion, a feeling of being unable to accomplish anything on the job, and a sense of helplessness and loss of control. It is especially common among people in the helping professions – who feel frustrated by their inability to help people as much as they would like to (p.442).

A further explanation of the concept, according to Stueart and Moran (2002:297) is that "individuals suffering from burnout typically experience exhaustion, both physical and emotional; a negative shift in the way they respond to other people; a loss of self-esteem". Evidence

and reported experiences by teacher union-leaders and educational administrators regarding explanations of the frequent strike actions in Nigeria education demonstrate that many teachers have been suffering severely psychologically, in silence at least, that burnout is real, not simply a stylish fad or a cry of wolf by teachers, or even an excuse to cover up teachers incompetence or laziness. One of the highly articulated explanations of a concluded three-month strike actions (July-September, 2009), by university teachers in Nigeria is that their job environments have been very or extremely stressful especially by the lack of basic infrastructure, poor salary payment and poor condition of service. Oboegbulem and Ogbonnaya (2004) have found that poor working conditions, time pressure and poor school structures are some of the sources of burnout among Nigerian school personnel.

Admittedly hard data is not available relative to the incidence of burnout among teachers in Nigeria. However, there exists widespread acknowledgement in literature that teachers do burnout due to stress related to their job, that burnout is both real and a problem, that there is significant associated attrition rate, and that the need to deal effectively with teachers' personal/professional frustration related to their position is very important (Adesina, 1990; Ajayi, 1997; Ejiogu, 1997). The reality of burnout among teachers as a very important problem which needs to be recognized and treated is summed this way:

Teacher burnout has a debilitating effect on the process of education, the teachers' personal health, and the delivery of services to students. Because of these effects, a need exists to help teachers understand the burn syndrome; its causes, symptoms, preventions and remedies--- Ultimately burnout affects the children. Burned out teachers, think only of their personal survival in the classroom. They are not caring or listening to their students. At best, a burned out teacher neither prevents progress nor furthers it. At worst, since (some) children usually lack the ego strength – a cynical, negative teacher could impair their progress academically and socially (Davis, 1983:10)

A review of the available literature suggests that symptoms of burnout vary widely. It may often go undetected especially at early stage. Among the most commonly cited early symptoms are general feelings of uneasiness and distress. Gradually, the person begins to experience such feelings as boredom, irritability, and mild depression. If the burnout syndrome is not recognized and treated the individual teacher becomes less flexible and responds to students with cynicism or negativism – limited in social contacts and withdrawn from people and activities. Signs of “advanced burnout” include such teacher behaviours as missed faculty meetings, attempts to avoid all social contacts among colleagues, immersion in work (the workaholic syndrome), severe depression, and even alcoholism and drug abuse (Papalia & Olds, 1995).

A review of available literature suggests also that teacher burnout may result from factors other than those related simply to one's job. What produces stress within an individual may be totally a personal nature. Worries due to family problem, illness, or even concerns over the current social and political climate of the country, none of which are directly job-related could cause high level of stress. It is however pointed out that job stress imposes itself upon all aspects of a person's life, consequently damaging the person's health and well-being.

Burnout in the workplace is also a management problem. Stueart and Moran (2002) assert that:

“It is important to try to prevent burnout because it is rarely confined to one worker. If one worker complains of the work environment and/or questions the worth, rewards or necessity of his or her work, it is sure to have some effect on co-workers. To keep burnout from spreading, managers need to recognize the symptoms and prevent it wherever possible (p.297)

All these problems imply that burnout syndrome among teachers is an important subject and should be studied. This paper highlights some of the factors that may help in the management of teacher-burnout in Nigerian schools. It specifically highlights the causes, symptoms, preventions and remedies of teacher burnout in Nigerian schools. Management in the context of this paper refers to seeking out alternatives, resolving conflicts bringing about changes, creating problem solving and decision-making. It comprises measures taking to cope with trying periods, so that a state of psychological and physiological equilibrium is established and subsequently maintained.

2. Causes of Teacher Burnout

Sparks and Hammond (cited in Davis, 1983) in their review of the literature related to teacher burnout, conclude that the predominant causes of this syndrome are a sense of isolation, poor interpersonal relationships, feelings of responsibility without power, role conflicts, life changes, lack of time to relax, school policies and practices and public criticism of teachers and schools. These authors specifically mention involuntary transferal, managing disruptive children, notice of unsatisfactory performance, threats of personal injury and overcrowded classroom as major stress factors among teachers.

Stueart and Moran (2002) assert that Burnout results from emotional strain and stress of interpersonal contact, especially dealing with people who are having problems, such as children with special needs.

Oboegbulem and Ogbonnaya (2004) explain that stress results when a teacher's working or living condition or circumstance makes demand beyond his capacity to handle physically or emotionally. It could be in form of disturbance in the system, strain, obstacles in the path of achieving goals, conflicting demands, uncertain role prescription such as ambiguity or role conflict and tasking work conditions. Ejiogu (1997) observed that there are many stressful factors in teaching that serve to increase the likelihood of burnout among members of this profession. Among the specific factors cited are perceived lack of satisfaction, minimal administrative support, relatively low pay, inadequate teaching preparation, administrative trivia and excessive paperwork, and that in education frequently attention is focused on the things that go wrong. Adesina (1990) offers an interesting observation namely, lack of, or inappropriate training. He suggests, that the major cause of burnout for many teachers is that they have not received adequate training in order to develop and implement appropriate student programme. He asserts,

Full professional preparation makes the task of teaching easier. Teaching is a wearing work and makes large demands on the nervous power and vitality of the teacher. When young people breakdown as a result of the strain of teaching, they do so more from worry and irritation rather than from the work of teaching itself. The direct cause of much of the worry and irritation is the fact that these young people undertake to do what they do not know how to do (p.174)

Other sources of burnouts are position-specific factors. These according to Davies include:

- (a) Unrealistic expectations relative to pupils' progress and perceived lack of success as a teacher. Some teachers tend to view themselves as "super teachers". They

frequently place upon themselves unrealistic expectations and when they are unable to meet such expectations, they consider themselves failures, they blame themselves for lack of sufficient pupil progress, leading to low esteem and possibly burnout.

- (b) Direct and continuous contact with difficult students. Among regular classroom teachers, the presence of one student who are considered difficult to control in the class is frequently cited as a major source of teacher stress. Yet many teachers deal on a daily basis with not just one or two but large numbers of students who are considered difficult; and throughout not only the entire school day but the total year.

- (c) Emotional drain of giving but not taking. Similar to others who work in the so-called helping professions, teachers often discover themselves emotionally drained by their perceived need and responsibility to help others. Some labour under the false assumption that they are the only ones who can help a particular student. Some teachers work with students who present complex problems. Frequently, such students come to the teacher not only with academic difficulties but with personal and social needs – they are very demanding, not only the teacher's skills and expertise, but a good share of personal attention and life.

Soon, the teacher often develops feelings of helplessness and frustration, and as the problems of students accumulate, the teacher's frustration increases. Furthermore, some teachers tend to take all of their students' problems home with them, causing varying degrees of disruption in their personal life.

- (d) Isolationism and perceived lack of belonging. Some teachers, especially special education teachers continue to be isolated – physically, psychologically, and professionally – from colleagues, which perhaps may be their own fault. They isolate themselves from the mainstreams even from their own peers, in many environments. Many special education teachers especially appear to suffer less from physical isolation than from lack of available colleague support system in their immediate working environment. They appear to be perceived by other

teachers as “different” – outsiders. Often they appear to withdraw even more from the total school environment, including regular contact with peers. A perceived lack of belonging, along with the loneliness that often accompany this feeling, appear to be one of the greatest sources of stress to these teachers.

In summary, the cause of stress that lead to burnout among teachers are many and varied. They include the following:

- Excessive paperwork and record keeping
- Frequent required meetings
- Lack of administrative support, often at the building but also at the state level
- Perceived ineffective communication and lack of cooperation with colleagues, parents and administrators
- Lack of role clarity and discrepancy between teacher’s perception of role and others’ expectations.
- Lack of time, energy, and skill required to plan and implement appropriate and effective instructional programmes for students with complex learning and behaviour needs.
- Inappropriate training (perceived or real) required to carry out specific job responsibilities effectively.

3. Symptoms of Teacher-burnout

Some of these problems affect all teachers, while other appear to be more directly related to the myths and realities surrounding the field of education. For some teachers one specific factor appears to result in an overwhelming amount of stress, while for others it is the cumulative effect of several factors that seems to produce a high level of anxiety. It should be noted that many of the factors are overlapping, interactive, and interrelated.

Regarding the symptoms of burnout Papalia and Olds (1995) write further that burnout is usually a response to long-term stress rather than an immediate crisis and that its symptoms, include fatigue, insomnia, headaches, persistent colds, stomach troubles, alcohol or drugs. A burned-out worker may quit a job suddenly, pull away from family and friends and sink into depression (p.492). Other symptoms are peptic ulcer, palpitation, colitis, asthma, cardiovascular disease, self-induced phobia and some severe cases of depression.

4. Suggestions for Remedying Burnout

Johnson (1967) in Schiefelbusch and McCormich (1981:109) says “A problem has members”. Teacher burnout, like cases of alcoholism, typically affects not only the teacher himself but many others – family members and co-workers as well, who need to develop a greater awareness of the problem and become involved in teacher treatment programme. Thus because teacher burnout normally affect others in the teachers environment as many significant others as possible necessarily need to be involved in any burnout prevention activities. This why Weiskopf (1980), cited in Davis (1983:18) says “preventing burnout is not solely the responsibility of the teacher. Administrators, parents, supervisors share in the success or failure of a teacher in preventing burnout. In most local school systems, teacher-related stress has been dealt with on both the individual and group or system levels. Although many stress-related problems for teachers are caused by the system – and therefore demand change, support and involvement at the system level, many teachers benefit from their individual initiative, with or without the support of administrators, supervisors, colleagues or counselors, in developing effective coping strategies. Stueart and Moran (2002) suggest that the individual burnout teachers should remedy their condition by structuring their lives outside of their work to give them a sense of comfort and control – they should pursue an active life outside of their work environment. The authors suggest also that the managerial responsibilities for aiding teachers with burnout should include knowing the symptoms of burnout and making them (teachers) families with them, holding staff meetings that can be used for staff support, and fostering a sense of teamwork among the staff. If staffing patterns permit, the head teachers (or principals) may also restructure jobs so that teachers do not spend as much time with some particularly problem children, or should revise schedules to shorten periods of time spent of some particularly demanding assignments. Workshops in stress management or time management can also be useful. Other specific suggestions may help teachers are discussed below:

4.1 Detect Stress Symptoms Early

Learn to recognize the early signs of burnout, such as vague feelings of distress and uneasiness. As Feldman (2004) asserts, one can not cope with burnout until he knows what is causing it. Attempt to deal with these symptoms

before more serious symptoms develop. Do not be producing high levels of stress, try to arrive at reasonable solutions, through joint planning to remedy the problem.

4.2 Learn to Delegate Responsibilities

Part of the teacher's problem may be an unwillingness to give up control. Some teachers feel too busy to delegate- feel they don't have time to invest in delegating and supervising someone else. Others often feel guilty dumping on others undesirable or grant work. Some have difficulty depending on others. They are imprisoned by the mentality: "if I don't do it myself, it won't get done right". Others are afraid of becoming dispensable, that if someone else can do their job they would no longer be needed or have value.

Morgenstern (2000:171) however points out the delightful aspects of delegating responsibilities: "It allows for a very healthy interdependence among people. When you work as a team, it brings people together. Relationships solidify as you share the workload and learn to rely on one another". More important, a good deal of teacher stress often can be alleviated if only the teacher can learn to more effectively delegate job-related responsibilities. Very often the teachers job is made a great deal less frantic if certain responsibilities currently being handled by the teacher is dedicated to assistant teachers, teacher aides, volunteers and secretaries. The teacher has option to delegate to (1) experts, someone who can do it better, faster, more efficiently than he can, which makes instant time saving; (2) an equal, someone who is just as qualify as he does, and who can do it just as well as he can, with minimal time on his part to explain the job and give guidance (3) beginner, someone who doesn't know how to do it as well as the teacher but requires the teacher to invest some time to train and supervise him. Great rewards are accrued to this: The teacher becomes a mentor and a helper of someone to shine, this enhances his confidence in his abilities. As Morgensterns emphasizes, teachers should especially delegate the following kinds of jobs: (a) tasks they are not good at doing, and someone else can do better; (b) tasks they do not enjoy; (c) tasks that deplete them of energy or time needed for more important activities. Effective delegation of responsibilities could also enhance individual and school organization and coordination which can also minimize teacher-stress and burnout (Oboegbulem et al.).

4.3 Keep Informed and Professionally Active

One major source of stress for teachers is the fact that they frequently get so caught up with day-to-day activities that they do not stay fully informed of the critical issues in the field including their own professional rights as teachers. As McCay (1989) suggests, teachers can increase their output and reduce stress as they increase their capacity to get accurate, clear, fast impressions of what is going on around them, especially their profession. Among the numerous ways of "keeping above" professionally are participation in the activities, programmes of professional organizations and unions like the Nigerian Union of Teachers, the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria, and the Classroom Teachers Association.

Teachers should subscribe to professional journals; attend professional meetings and conferences; organize local and professional rapsessions. They should participate in inservice training, seminars and workshop sponsored often by the Schools Board, Ministry of Education, Nigerian Union of Teachers, Teacher Registration Councils of Nigeria (TRCN), the Nigerian Teacher Institute (NTI) and the Science Teachers Association of Nigeria (STAN). If nothing else, participation in such activities tends to prevent professional isolation. Although participation in such activities may not necessarily provide solutions to specific job-related problems, often it provides a forum for sharing ideas and frequently make the teacher aware of not only their rights but also that they are not alone in having to deal with certain problems and issues. This awareness may help to reduce stress (Fajana 1997). The recent successfully concluded legal battle, undertaken by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) against the University of Ilorin in defence of their 42 colleagues whose appointments were illegally terminated by the University has shown teachers that membership to professional associations can serve as haven for their psychological, social and job security.

4.4 Seek and Demand Needed Training

Many teachers have discovered that their professional roles and responsibilities have evolved into something substantially different from that for which they were trained, or simply, that they are not meeting up their professional requirement for the work they do. For many of these teachers, the stress that they are experiencing is largely related to the fact that they have not had the appropriate training for carrying out their responsibilities effectively. For their own personal mental health and professional growth, they should

make their training needs known to the necessary authorities. Local school districts, state departments of education, and university teacher training programmes collectively need to respond to this growing training need. Teachers, who are the ones on the firing line may have to take initiative to obtain such training. One way teachers can take initiative for their professional growth is by studying professional books. Adesina (1990) opines that,

Every teacher should have his own little library, however small, and should form the habit of professional reading. It is by doing so the teacher retain his consciousness as a teacher and stimulate young members of the profession along the lines of professional success. It is by doing so the teacher can be current or keep himself from stagnation and frustration (P.175)

4.5 Engage in Public Relations

Many teachers do great things and invest much of their time and self for their students, their school, and the community at large. Often they perform above and beyond the call to duty by doing extra things to help. Notwithstanding their efforts have often not been significantly appreciated by beneficiaries of their service (Nwikina, 2009). However, teachers should continue and even increasingly widen out in their relationships with the community and its agencies. They should relate well with the privileged and less privileged of the community. For instance, they should visit relevant funeral, wedding and other ceremonies in community and where possible make practical contributions. They should contribute to the welfare of the under-privileged. They could encourage and lead their school children to clean or plant ornamental trees and flowers at relevant places in the community, and to consider what more to do to improve the condition of the school and the general society. They should be involved in volunteer works for community growth and welfare.

The advantages for doing these are mammoth. For examples, it has been shown that it brings deeper, richer and far more enjoyable rewards: it heighten people physiological demeanor and psychological well-being. People who volunteered have been found to be happier, healthier and live longer than those who do not

(Nwikina, 2009). This explains the proverbial saying that “There is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving”.

4.6 Seek to be Professionally Developed

Dalton (1989) maintains that professional development can be an important means of the teacher personal renewal to help combat burnout and professional obsolesce. He argues that obsolesce occurs when staff lose the technical, interpersonal, and political skills necessary to perform their job roles. Teacher positions are so demanding in time and pressure that burnout and obsolesce are ever-present dangers. Effective professional development programmes can promote self-renewal and help teachers to stay current and relevant in the midst of a demanding and ever-changing profession.

4.7 Keep Active and Stimulated in Your Own Personal Life

As noted by Davis, much of the research that has been conducted dealing with stress among various groups of professionals suggests that job-related stress can be reduced through the positive use of leisure time. The bored, fatigued teacher on the job is frequently the same bored, fatigued person at home. One of the advanced symptoms of personal burnout is often total immersion in work. More frequent work breaks, “forced” vacation times, physical activities, hobbies totally unrelated to job, exercises and other diversions are often good methods for controlling burnout. Feldman (2004) suggests that teachers should make exercise a part of their life, that they should have a good night’s sleep, eat well and be physically prepared for stress since it takes toll on the body.

Papalia and Olds (1995) summarise the measures that help burned-out teachers as cutting down on working hours and taking breaks including long weekends vacations. Others are exercise, music and meditation. The advise by McCay (1989:13) is also relevant and timely namely, that teachers should learn and practice self-management/organization. He says “As you refine your techniques of self-management, you may expect as a first dividend a release from pressure of time (and of work)”.

4.8 Recognize the Positive Aspect of the Job

Admittedly, some teachers appear to be in job situations that are truly endangering their physical and mental health and possibly the only viable solution for them, their students and perhaps the school administration, is for them to leave their position. This include both teachers who at one time were fulfilled personally and professionally

by their work and who were excellent teachers by objective standards, and those who probably are in teaching for a number of reasons – all of them wrong.

However, the vast majority of teachers who find themselves experiencing symptoms of burnout fail to recognize the more positive aspects of their job, instead focusing exclusively on its deficits. This is not to suggest that teachers should ignore job-related problems. Rather, many teachers appear to allow relatively minor job-related frustrations to grow and engulf them completely. Some teachers often tend to dwell on what is wrong, not on things that are right. Possibly the system promotes such behavior. For instance, it is common to hear that “teachers rewards are in heaven, not on earth and now”, and that “teachers’ salary and condition of service are poor”, at least in a relative sense. Ejiogu (1997:45) says “the present apparent devaluation of the teacher and his job (in Nigeria) has no doubt set in motion of self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the teacher internalizes a low opinion of himself/herself and the job”. Teachers should however focus at the positive aspect of their job. Since the ancient times it has been imbued with nobility and dedication of purpose by philosophers and poets. For instance Cicero (cited in Sadker & Sadker, 1998:25) once asked “what noble employment is more valuable to the state than that of a man who instructs the rising generations?”. Definitely none. Henry Adams (also cited by Sadker et al) says also “a teacher affects eternity; he does not know where his influence stops”.

Feldman (2004) has further, an encouraging advice, namely, that teachers should “maintain an appropriate perspective on the events of life”, and that they should “make peace with stress”. He asserts that,

A life that presented no challenges would probably be – boring. So think about stress as an exciting, although admittedly sometimes difficult, friend. Welcome it, because its presence indicate that your life is stimulating, challenging, and exciting – and who would want it other way? (p.374)

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Teacher burnout in Nigerian schools is real, not a stylist fad. It has debilitating effect on

the process of education, on the teacher’s personal health and on the delivery of services to the students. Its proper management is vital. Teachers may find the above information helpful in understanding the syndrome, its causes, symptoms, prevention and remedies that aid in the management of the disease. Further research is necessary to document its incidence upon the Nigerian teacher’s physical condition and the student’s education. Burnout need not be a silent disease. Exposing its causes, symptoms, and types of prevention is vital if it is to be eliminated among Nigeria teachers. It recommends with emphasis that the school management should know the symptoms and make teachers be familiar with them; should regularly hold staff meetings that can be used for staff support; foster a sense of teamwork among the staff; and should restructure jobs so that teachers do not unduly spend as much time with particularly demanding students and assignments. Workshops in stress or time management should be mounted regularly. More teachers should focus on the more positive aspects of their job instead of focusing exclusively on the negative.

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