

Alleviating Workplace Stress: What Teachers Tell Us

by

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Abstract

School teachers are consistently faced with job related stress. Research has shown signs of stress induced burnout being a prevalent factor among the teaching profession. However, more articles claim the demand for research to help prevent stress induced burnout. The purpose of this project is to converse with teachers about how they are experiencing stress and what health protective measures they utilize to alleviate it. Based on the review of the literature of teacher stress and burnout, multiple studies have used the Maslach Burnout Inventory survey and gathered quantitative data. For this research project, I conducted qualitative interviews, at one school in the Lower Mainland, BC, where I asked five teachers questions regarding workplace stressors, burnout, and the ways they attempt to alleviate stress. This process provided in-depth insights to the types of strategies they utilize to prevent stress induced burnout, and how they continue to better themselves while maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: stress; burnout; organizational structures; cyclical seasons; alleviation; physical activity

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Introduction

The teaching profession has historically been ranked as one of the highest stress related careers (Brasfield et al., 2019). Teachers have been found to experience this increased stress and emotional exhaustion which leads to high levels of burnout and profession attrition (Brasfield et al., 2019). A study done in the United States, stated that 40%-50% of new teachers are more likely to leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, not directly as a result of burnout, however due to causes of stress such as low-self efficacy, poor leadership, high job demands and poor recovery (With, 2017). This could be due to teachers with more experience being more aware of what to expect, while newer teachers are more vulnerable as they are given difficult courses and are expected to coach and provide other extracurricular opportunities for students (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Other studies claimed over half of teachers in early and secondary years were diagnosed with burnout syndrome (Arvidsson et al., 2016; Brasfield et al., 2019; Latino et al., 2021; Milfont et al., 2007; Ratanasiripong et al., 2021). Yu (2014) clearly states burnout to be a crisis of self-efficacy, a conjecture whether an individual was capable of accomplishing a task or action. When a teacher becomes incapable of producing or completing a task, a spiral effect will eventually take place, ultimately producing greater pressure in the workplace. Consuming resources teachers face, such as classroom management, time management, or lack of support from administration, lowers their self-efficacy, leading them to experience tiredness. While schools normalized health concerns for students, this was the opposite with teachers (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Teachers can easily get taken advantage of due to their good nature by putting in over 60+ hours of work per week (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). They are constantly balancing the different tasks in their jobs including classroom management, curriculum planning, reporting and assessing student progress, and leading extracurriculars.

Being a music educator of 11 years, and experiencing types of stress around teaching, I found I had more time to focus on myself when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. As my school shifted to online teaching, I was able to reflect on my own stress and found solutions to the stress I had encountered. I took the time to better myself through my health and wellness, taking an interest in exercising at least 30 minutes every day; eating a balanced diet including 40g of protein and vegetables in all meals; and sleeping

at least 7-8 hours every night. In the fall of 2020 when school shifted back to in-person learning, I was able to continue these habits in my busier, chaotic lifestyle. I noticed differences in my mood because of lack of sleep, poor nutrition, or lack of motivation to exercise. When I was able to follow my routine, I noticed less hardships and worry occurring. I was not always wishing for the day off or the weekend to arrive. There was joy within my job, rather than the stress. This life experience reflection is why I have decided to choose this topic as my area of interest. I am passionate about discussing experiences of stress and finding solutions to counteract it.

The goal of this research project was to discuss with a sample of teachers in a high school with the pseudonym, Trinity Catholic Secondary School, in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver, how they experience stress and what they do to prevent stress induced burnout. The interviews helped me to understand (1) the different ways teachers react and talk about stress induced burnout (2) what they are doing to reduce stress in their lifestyle, and (3) explore other suggestions that the teachers think would help alleviate stress.

Literature Review

Burnout, a word coined in 1974 by Herbert Freudenberger is defined as a loss of motivation, a growing sense of emotional depletion and intensifying cynicism (Wessells et al., 1989). It occurs in reaction to prolonged exposure to work-related stress resulting in a state of chronic emotional, mental, physical exhaustion, and is a psychological syndrome (Gluschkoff et al., 2016). The following literature review focuses primarily on themes that emerged regarding organizational structures causing stress induced burnout, the need for more qualitative studies, and problems identifying burnout with minimal solutions. This review confirms at its essence, burnout emerges when the demands of a job overtake a person's ability to cope with the stress.

Organizational Structures

An organization structure is a system that defines how certain activities are directed in order for the organization to achieve goals. These activities can include rules, roles, and responsibilities (Arvidsson et al., 2016). Most of the research studied on stress induced burnout looks at the specific job description or the physiological stressors which causes

burnout. However, most studies found in this review do not address organizational structures already in place which are causing stress. Demerouti et al. (2001) claims burnout symptoms are determined by a specific constellation of working conditions within the organization. The organizational changes and administrative work among teachers are causing them to have a lack of time to engage in recovery tactics. Stress symptoms including disengagement and exhaustion, are a result of a shortage of job resources (Arvidsson et al., 2016). Arvidsson et al. found the organizational structures to be so time consuming, that teacher participants were not able to find the time to participate in the survey-based study. School organizations need to countermeasure these structures and put in place work life balance policies, programs made to ease the impact of the job demands and clarification on what the norms are for good enough work, to help teachers improve their self-efficacy to reduce stress induced burnout (Arvidsson et al., 2016).

Quantitative Research on Teacher Burnout

Much of the quantitative data gathered with regards to burnout, was collected using a reliable study measure: the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), an instrument created in 1981 by Maslach and APS Fellow Susan E. Jackson (Milfont et al., 2007). This instrument has been employed in over 90% of all empirical burnout studies (Aboagye et al., 2018). It evaluates and gathers data based on three key stress components: an overwhelming sense of exhaustion, feelings of detachment and cynicism, and a lack of accomplishment and sense of professional ineffectiveness (Michel, 2016). The MBI has more recently been categorized into five different and more specific scales, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educator Survey (MBI-ES). Not only has it been coined to be gold standard in the quantitative world, but it also takes ten minutes to complete (Michel, 2016). Most research examined in this literature review either used or mentioned this measuring tool, therefore it appears to be a worthwhile way of quantifying teacher's burnout experiences. While most research done on the subject matter is used to observe the intensity of burnout, researchers have claimed at least 15% of teachers had high burnout in two of the three dimensions (ex. exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy) and 4% had high burnout in all three dimensions after using this tool (Arvidsson et al., 2016; Brasfield et al., 2019; Gluschkoff et al., 2016; Latino et al., 2021; Ratanasiripong et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2014).

There are disadvantages to this survey such as the extreme administration cost for operating the protocol due to it being owned by a commercial company (Milfont et al., 2007) and the MBI method may not account for the context of each stressor or burnout situation pertaining to each individual. There is an overload of research using the MBI questionnaire and a need for updated and different empirical studies within this topic (Milfont et al., 2007). Milfont (2007) used the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory questionnaire to address this gap by expanding the network of teacher burnout through relating it to different well-being indicators: personal (e.g. “How often do you feel tired?”), work related (e.g. Do you feel burnt out because of your work?”), and school related (e.g. Do you find it hard to work with students?”). Additionally, a gap in this method is that it does not present how teachers are feeling while experiencing burnout. This is where qualitative research can help.

A qualitative approach can offer an in-depth perspective and context to the specific stressor or burnout situation, it also provides a voice of the participants (DeCarlo et al., 2022). One study that examined qualitative research methods was in Miller and Flint-Stipp’s (2019) research. The data was collected based on teacher reflective writings and interviews. Through this dataset, they realized the findings were never purely objective and that multiple realities could exist (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). This meant that teachers would recognize different situations based on their perceived realities and own unique experiences. These experiences, within the data collected, would then be able to answer the question “why?” to gain information about the teacher’s motivations, thinking and attitudes. This method will be able to present various thoughts on how teachers are feeling while experiencing symptoms of stress related burnout.

Where are the Solutions?

Much of the literature claims that stress is a huge factor which influences burnout; however, there is limited research on the solutions needed to solve the stress and burnout problems. Few researchers identified specific wellness practices to be a critical factor in the decrease of symptoms that caused stress induced burnout. Some claimed that supporting a balance between effort and reward, and practicing meditation or yoga may aid in enhancing body recovery rate from stress (Gluschkoff et al., 2016; Latino et al., 2021). More institutions need to focus on prevention and integrating content on secondary trauma and self-care in teacher education course work or having an in-school

wellness program (Brasfield et al., 2019; Latino et al., 2021; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019; Ratanasiripong et al., 2021; Valosek et al., 2021; Yu et al. 2014). Key factors in wellness programs should include enhancing sleep and physical health, as associations were observed between depression, stress, exercise and sleep (Ratanasiripong et al., 2021). In the study carried out by Latino (2021), the researcher studied teachers over a period of 8 weeks to determine whether practicing yoga would aid teachers in achieving higher body and emotional awareness to prevent burnout. Similarly, Valosek (2021) considered meditation to be an effective method in improving symptoms of burnout. Both researchers concluded that these wellness practices can play a crucial role in reducing stress, therefore decreasing the possibility of future burnout.

Most research done on the subject matter refrained from studying the details about ways to alleviate the symptoms of stress induced burnout. Using the present themes in the review of literature related to stress induced burnout, this research study further develops the understanding of ways teachers are experiencing and dealing with stress related burnout, which leads to my research question: “How do teachers talk about workplace stress and what are they doing to alleviate it?”

Methodology

In order to explore teachers’ experiences of stress, one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted with five teachers at Trinity Catholic Secondary School. Roulston (2010) states that using the qualitative method of interviewing is a powerful and effective device of listening and learning people’s emotions, perspectives, opinions, and personal experiences. Carrying out interviews allowed me to converse with the participants about their experiences, emotions, and perspectives on stress and burnout. These conversations also allowed participants to talk about how they approached stress as well. This process ultimately allowed for the collection and discussion of important details regarding the lived experiences of these teachers regarding workplace stress that may have aided in the decrease or alleviation of their stress.

Research Site/Participants

The research project took place at Trinity Catholic high school, in the suburbs of Vancouver. It is a part of the Catholic Independent Schools within the Vancouver

Archdiocese. I am an alumnus and have been teaching at this school for six years. In the past three years, the school has shown a higher teacher turnover rate, losing around 4-5 teachers per year. Of the faculty, 14 of the 35 teachers that have been teaching since I started high school have continued to work there. There are currently only 7 of the 14 teachers that have been present since I was in high school. Reasons for this include, but are not limited to retirement and teachers moving to different cities with a more affordable cost of living. Other teachers left Trinity due to stress caused by factors that affected the school during the Covid-19 pandemic. This school environment offered a good opportunity to talk to teachers about how they experience and manage work-related stress.

Permission was granted by my principal to address the 35 teachers, ranging in age from 27 to 65 if they would like to partake in this study. All staff were informed at a staff meeting and I gave them a brief overview (see Appendix B) of the project, and asked them to contact me via email if they were interested. By doing so, I would be able to ethically keep the participant's identity confidential. I connected with those interested and provided more details, which were stated in the consent form. Interested teachers read through and signed the consent form, and the interview times were arranged and established. Since I interviewed everyone who expressed interest in participating in the study, there was no particular selection process needed for choosing or excluding participants. During the process, I made sure the interviews took place in my work office, where I could pull the blinds and shut the door to obtain a safe and quiet space to keep their confidentiality. Participants were notified at the beginning of the interview that they did not have to answer all questions. They were also welcome to leave the interview at any time without any penalties or negative consequences.

Participant Profiles

The first interviewee's pseudonym is Paula. Before working in this high school (Trinity) for 26 years, she taught in an elementary school in Vancouver. She currently teaches Physical Education full-time. She also had teaching experiences in Math and Science in the past. She continues to work in this Catholic high school to be closer to home, reducing her time commuting. She has recently retired this June 2023.

The second interviewee's pseudonym is Liam. He started working at Trinity 19 years ago and had previously worked at another high school in Vancouver 10 years prior to that. He has been teaching for a total of 29 years, and he continues to teach Media Arts, Computer Science and Geology classes full-time. He helps with school technology issues, such as Wi-Fi and other technological computer problems. He also continues to work in this Catholic high school to be closer to home, as the commute to Vancouver was stressful for him.

The third interviewee's pseudonym is James. He has been teaching for 7 years total. His first year was at an elementary school in Vancouver, he then transferred over to Trinity high school because he wanted to be a high school teacher. He has taught Physical Education and Science. He is the athletic director and is working full-time.

The fourth interviewee's pseudonym is George. He first started working in the Trinity school setting as a Teacher Assistant in 2009. He became a teacher in 2011 and has continued to work at Trinity for 14 years. He has taught Math, Physical Education, and is currently in the Learning Resource Department working full-time. This department deals with students who have learning disabilities or have special needs.

The final interviewee's pseudonym is Anton. He has been teaching for 41 years, 19 of those years have been at other high schools in Vancouver, Abbotsford, and Newfoundland. He has been teaching at Trinity for 22 years now. He is now teaching part-time and is looking to retire within the next 2 years.

All these participants above were involved in other extra-curricular activities, such as coaching sports teams, being department heads, and leading other clubs and functions within the school setting.

Data Collection Procedures

For the purpose of data collection, a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized. This approach provides the flexibility to pursue related topics brought up by the participant while containing a general structure for the questions (DeCarlo et al., 2022). A set of prompting questions allowed the participants to share their experiences (see Appendix A). The questions were developed in such a way that would ease the participant into speaking on their own personal situations and/or experiences. The first interview

question asked was, “How did you become a teacher at this school?”. This allowed the participant to ease into the interview, and to engage them from the beginning (DeCarlo et al., 2022). This question was followed by five other questions. These questions prompted conversations about things at work that created stress; frequency and intensity of stress; what helped to reduce this stress; feedback on more resources or tools provided at a district level; and if this stress had ever led to burnout. The questions specifically about workplace stress were based on the literature by Miller & Flint-Stipp (2019) and Milfont (2007). These authors were able to ask questions about workplace stress and gather data based around their qualitative study, observing how their participants felt about this topic. The questions about stress alleviation were based on the literature by Latino (2021), who claimed that a lifestyle practice of yoga, meditation, or physical exercise helped their participants lessen stress. Although the question I asked did not specifically ask about health-related remedies due to its open-ended nature, if the participants did not discuss physical health topics, I was able to prompt them as a side question after their response. The question about more resources and tools from a district level was derived from many of the articles stating that more tools and resources need to be placed in school systems (García-Carmona et al., 2018). The results of having these extra resources should encourage teachers to practice self-care to decrease stress induced burnout.

I pilot-tested the questions on people who were not involved in the study. This helped practice interviewing as a trial-run, eliminating confusion and gaining feedback where mistakes were made. During the interview process, I did my best to make the interview about the interviewee and not the interviewer (Weiss, 1994). To do this, the questions provided were open-ended questions which allowed participants to answer questions in their own words (DeCarlo et al., 2022). I also made sure the respondent was able to speak without being interrupted. To further ensure the lack of anticipation in questions, I followed Weiss’ (1994) recommendations. For instance, questions such as “What are your feelings?” would provide the participant with a more open-ended participation, whereas a question of “You must be unhappy?” could potentially lead the participant to answer the question in a biased manner.

All of the participants granted permission to record the interviews using the audio recording app on my password-protected MacBook Pro. Some field notes were also used to capture other important information that a recording device would not pick up on

such as non-verbal communication and reactions or other contextual information such as the participants nodding or using different facial expressions. This allowed me to triangulate data sources and strengthen the trustworthiness of my interpretations of the data. It was made clear at the end of the interview that if the participants had any follow up questions, or if they wanted to verify the data, they were always welcome to contact me.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis process, I transcribed every interview. The transcriptions were used as an analytical tool to help provide a narrative given by the participants (Green et al., 2017). Once all of the interviews were transcribed, they were once again reviewed to keep transcriptions accurate and make sure that any important words or cues were not missed. I conducted a conventional content and thematic, deductive analysis on a priori themes identified in the literature and inductive analysis looking for themes that were not already identified in the literature. The a priori themes included physical activity and organizational structures. This type of analysis was decided upon as there was research on the topic of stress and burnout with limited data on what helped educators to reduce stress. The inductive analysis allowed for examination of themes that were not pre-identified in the research such as seasons, and social activities (DeCarlo et al., 2022).

By using the technique of coding, I interpreted and assigned meaning to the data by producing themes. Coding gave short labels to larger concepts or segments in the data that were similar (DeCarlo et al., 2022). While the analysis style was rigorous, it ultimately aided in keeping the trustworthiness of the data and increased the odds for analyzing high quality data (Tracy, 2010). The web-based qualitative software program Quirkos was used to help drive the coding process by organizing and sorting the data. This software allowed for immersion into the qualitative text to be able to find patterns and create categories to pull out common themes once the codes were in place (Miles et al. 2019). For example, within the first question that asked about what kind of stress was experienced at work, I identified keywords and patterns in participant answers such as 'communication', and 'deadlines', which I then grouped into the category, Work Stressors. Secondly, other key phrases were identified such as 'learning to say no', which was then grouped into the category of Personal Stressors. I combined the categories of Work Stressors and Personal Stressors to result in the theme of

'Structures at Work'. Naturally, going through the themes, my brain started resorting to counting these words. This helped to keep the work analytically honest, protecting myself against bias (Miles et al. 2019).

Each transcription used the above process which allowed me to create other categories to identify the other common themes across all participant cases. The five main common themes emerged: (1) Structures at Work, (2) Cyclical Seasons, (3) Physical Activity, (4) Social Activities, and (5) Burnout. I used these themes to describe each participant's experience regarding stress and what they do to alleviate it.

Limitations

Among the five volunteers who chose to share their experiences there were no early career teachers in the sample. Having a newer teacher share their story would have given a different narrative to the data, possibly addressing other stressors, and giving more variation to stress alleviation. As we know from the research, 40%-50% of new teachers are more likely to leave the profession, due to causes of stress (With, 2017). Secondly, four of the five of my participants are European male and one is European female. It would have been beneficial to include participants with other diverse background to gain a more comprehensive data set as racially minoritized teachers may face a whole different set of stressors. Additionally, there may be limitations based on how these volunteers handle stress than those who chose to not participate in this study. Based on how people choose to manage their stress levels, this could have played a role in who volunteered and who did not as interviewing may have been an added stressor to those who did not volunteer.

Findings

The teacher participants in this study were all very willing to share their many positive and challenging experiences regarding stress and ways they chose to alleviate it. Knowing that their identity was kept confidential, they all seemed very open to talking about their experiences. Since all the teachers possessed over five years of teaching experiences, they were able to tell rich, authentic narratives to answer the interview questions. As stated above, based on their answers to the questions, I was able to form the common themes of (1) Structures at Work, (2) Cyclical Season, (3) Physical Activity,

(4) Social Activities, and (5) Burnout to create the results to answer my research question, “How do teachers talk about workplace stress and what are they doing to alleviate it?”

Structures at Work

Although all participants discussed the love they had for teaching, the organizational structures in place at their workplace was one of the main stressors and an a priori theme that induced different sorts of stress. Participants shared their frustrations and challenges regarding this theme. James stated, “I generally feel stress from structures that are in place that prevent me from doing my job, like how things are run or why things are done.”

Some examples shared by participants of organizational structures included policy, communication from administration, or day to day routines that were put in place from administration or the district level. All participants claimed to not feel stress from being in the classroom with their students. However, stress was caused when

Admin need[ed] to have better communication or when the structures around you aren't necessarily working. The extra work you have isn't because the reporting period is here, or because you're coaching today. It's because there has been a breakdown in something that should have happened or there is a lack of policy behind something. And, because you are now doing work that shouldn't have really existed.

This theme also ties into one of the categories that three of the five participants shared about being proactive and prepared. Paula, Liam, and George explained that their proactiveness with planning and being prepared for the many situations that could occur during the school day helped lessen their daily stress. They stated that they would appreciate knowing what was going on in the school at least two weeks in advance or hold more meetings to get information out to staff. As Paula clearly stated, she “feels like they are always playing catch up.”

George stated,

being a part of things or feeling that you are a part of things, for example what are assessments or exam week going to look like? Or being a part of [making] the school schedule. When you aren't a part of it you might start to feel like the students.

If this is a continuous trend, it could lead to increased frustration and cynicism therefore causing burnout.

Cyclical Seasons

One of my interview questions asked if there were specific seasons that caused more stress than others. I wanted this question to be open-ended, allowing participants to talk about the actual seasons, or specific time in the school year that was more stressful than the others.

George said the beginning of a new school year to be potentially a stressful season. George stated,

That's where you realize how well everything was planned in the spring [of] the previous year. What do classrooms look like? How is everything set up? You know the least about your students, and there is uncertainty about what's going to happen and there's the highest level of expectations that everybody has for themselves. Everyone is trying to manage all of those things.

The beginning of a new school year is a time when teachers need to be proactive and reflective based on what happened in the previous year. This reflection enabled the participants to create new solutions to previous problems and not create further problems in the future. This process can start as early as June to prepare for the next school year and have clear goals from the start of the new school year.

The season of winter, one of the first inductive themes, was brought to my attention from three of the five participants and not in the way that I expected. The winter season can bring on many different stressors, such as assessment reporting and deadlines, report cards, and different sport extracurriculars including basketball. Paula, George, and Anton claimed that the absence of light or not being around sunlight made for longer days and brought on more stress. Because Paula taught in a gym where there is no access to windows or teaching outside, she said that she had to make the effort to walk outside to get some daylight during school hours.

Paula stated that she suffered from Seasonal Affective Disorder, a pattern of recurring depressive episodes. Shorter days and less sunlight were thought to be linked to a chemical change within the brain (Sandkühler et al., 2021). "You arrive at work in

the dark, you go home in the dark,” Paula stated. This characteristic stated that stress in the winter season could also be tied to more personal health factors, as well as external factors from working in the school.

Physical Activity

Physical activity is one of the first themes that I was able to create when asking the question about what helps to alleviate the participants' workplace stress. This theme has been discussed in the literature, making it one of the a priori themes. Latino (2021) claimed regular exercise such as yoga may aid in enhancing the body recovery rate from stress. I was hoping to have the participants discuss their experiences with stress, and if a form of physical activity was helping, or was going to help them with their stress and burnout. All participants claimed that they carried out some forms of physical activities to keep their stress levels low. George and James both stated that they proactively scheduled their physical activity to keep stress at a low level. George stated, he

Plays soccer leisurely, and wasn't sure that it's directly correlated to reducing stress. [He] thinks it's just been part of a lifestyle. But if [he] didn't do it, then yeah, it would be an issue. When you aren't maintaining an active lifestyle, you definitely feel it.

Walking was a category within this physical activity theme. The frequency of this word appeared across all interviews a total of nine times. This was greater than words such as yoga or stretching, which appeared three times, and cycling or bootcamp (a workout that can include a mix of aerobic, high-intensity interval training and strength training, modeled after military training (Gimlin & Buckingham, 2019)), which both appeared once. James, Paula, Liam, and Anton all walked regularly outside whether to “walk the dog” as stated by Liam, or “make the walks routine” as stated by James. Paula stated, she “really notices the stressful times, when [she] doesn't walk regularly.”

Social Activities

Social support is exceptionally important for managing good physical and mental health, as positive social support of high quality can enhance resilience to stress (Ozbay et al., 2008). This is another theme that was not present in the literature. All participants but George claimed that they either took part in social activities, such as talking with family

or friends, or having an alcoholic beverage to help reduce the intensity of stress after a day's work. Even though drinking alcohol might not be the best coping mechanism, Paula unapologetically stated that, she does acknowledge that her wine consumption goes up. She finds it helps to relax her, so she can sleep. Anton also claimed to have a glass of wine over dinner with his wife to talk about their day. Other than alcoholic consumption, Paula, and Liam both felt the need to mention bringing in social activities within the school culture. They both discussed the importance of bonding and having fun with staff members by bringing food in for a staff meeting, and allowing staff members to socialize before the meeting, as by stated Liam. Paula claimed,

We need to organize social events such as playing a game of volleyball or something. Why aren't we doing fun stuff? I think the admin. is doing a disservice. There are all these facilities, and nothing is offered for the staff. Ideas such as these may help the staff's [physical] health and mental health.

James did claim he liked to talk about work hardships and joys a lot. [He does] talk about it with people [he] trusts at work, or home such as [his] mother and sister because it's easier to talk to them.

Burnout

Three of the five participants were willing to share their experiences with burnout. While they never specifically felt burnt out, they felt they were close to burning out.

James talked about a time four years ago when he was a part of many school trips. He was involved in different extracurricular activities and because he did not feel supported from administration this led to exhaustion. He mentioned this to be the "most burned out [he] felt."

Burnout not only stands for a growing sense of emotional depletion, or a loss of motivation it can also be defined as intensifying cynicism (Wessells et al., 1989). George claims he had

felt increased levels of cynicism, with increased levels of frustration and negativity. Feeling things as if something won't work or it is pointless. [He] would have conversations in small groups and start to project negative emotions on to other people and on the future endeavors."

Research states that stress is contagious (Markin, 2022). Having a continued sense of cynicism can be a toxic atmosphere to be a part of.

Anton mentioned that he was close to burnout in 2021, when he took on an English 11 class mid-November after a teacher was asked to leave. He felt he was “trying to do good for the school and didn’t want to say no.” He also mentioned the students he taught in this class to be “coming out of COVID, and their [English] skills being weak.” He did his best to try and get them up to speed. His teaching strategy of explaining to them why he was doing certain tasks helped the students to “buy in.”

Discussion

I used qualitative analysis to assess the experiences of the different stressors and alleviation of stress among high school teachers. Doing this research project as a qualitative study and being able to talk with the participants about their experiences with stress and stress alleviation enabled me to come across similar results to the literature and new results that the literature did not include. My findings from this study indicated that all teachers were willing to share their similar and different experiences with regards to stress and burnout. These teachers were happy to share their strategies they use to alleviate stress and give suggestions to better the education workplace.

Firstly, my findings demonstrated the many flaws within organizational structures, such as policy and procedures, communication from administration, or day to day responsibilities. These structures were causing stress among teachers, which aligned with the literature. The participants expressed that being proactive and making their day plans well in advance contributed to a decrease in stress. This data indicates that such proactivity assists teachers in handling unforeseen structural stressors that may arise from uncontrollable day-to-day routines.

My findings also demonstrated that all teachers who interviewed took part in physical activities such as walking outside, yoga, or high-intensity interval training proactively to reduce stress which aided in recovery rate— a concept well supported in prior literature. The category of walking outside was shared amongst most participants, and they all seemed to enjoy discussing this topic.

The season of winter emerged as an additional stressor, which had not been previously addressed in the literature. It appeared to cause stress among high school teachers due to the lack of sunlight, resulting in longer days. This particular factor can be associated with the theme of physical activity since shorter days restrict opportunities for exercise and outdoor walks. This observation further strengthens my belief that the absence of exercise can itself become a stressor. Throughout the cyclical school year, specific seasons stood out as particularly prone to stressful situations. For instance, the basketball season, spanning from late November to mid-March, and the beginning of the school year presented increased potential for stress. Participants emphasized the need to proactively front-load and plan for these demanding periods. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of reflecting on these experiences afterward as a means to enhance future preparations for the following year.

Furthermore, within the final inductive theme, four out of five teachers expressed the recommendation to foster more social connections with colleagues and engage in conversations or venting about stressful situations with family or friends. They emphasized the importance of dedicating time to share feelings and engage in dialogue with colleagues, as it allows for empathy towards one another's situations and experiences. Administrators play a crucial role in facilitating this by setting aside dedicated time for such interactions to take place.

The section on burnout exemplified the existence of numerous combinations of stressors that significantly increased the likelihood of teachers experiencing burnout. As mentioned earlier, these stressors played a role in each participant's experience of burnout, as evident from the identified themes. Notably, all three participants who reported experiencing some form of burnout attributed the effects to the organizational structures at their workplace.

The participants suggested that the administrative team add more social activities, such as playing a sport activity or engaging in conversations to bond with other staff members. These findings could potentially have important implications on the development of providing more resources for teachers at the school level to aid in proactively reducing stress induced burnout. The participants' suggestion of these resources included bringing in health instructors or massage therapist; receiving more directions and making sure things are similar between schools from the district; bring in

sensitivity training specialist to go through general professionalism with all staff members; or supporting administration from the top down so they could continue to grow and develop their skills over time. These findings could also contribute to the existing literature, in that most of the literature above stated that there was a need for more ideas on ways to alleviate stress (Gluschkoff et al., 2016; Latino et al., 2021).

Overall, the interviewing process was satisfactory and smooth. Once the interviews began, all participants were very perceptive to the questions, and everyone answered the questions to the best of their ability. No one left the interviews or seemed to feel uncomfortable.

If the opportunity arose to redo the project, more time would be an asset as a mixed-methods approach would be superior in ability to collect data. As interesting as it was to sit with people and listen to them share their experiences about stress, I feel adding a quantitative survey to this would aid in getting a larger data set. Similar questions could be asked in a quantitative style. This approach might be more accessible to teachers who might not have had the time to sit and interview. A survey would give the ability to collect data from a larger pool of diverse teachers, ranging in age, gender, or experience.

Recommendations for policy and practice changes within the school systems should encompass various aspects within each organization. For instance, providing teachers with more dedicated time to work on curriculum, report cards, and extending deadlines can significantly alleviate their workload. Effective communication is another vital practice that administrators must prioritize by clearly conveying expectations and daily routines well in advance, thus enabling teachers to be adequately prepared. Furthermore, districts and administrations should actively strive to educate teachers about self-care. One effective approach could involve inviting health specialists to provide professional development sessions, where they can share strategies for preventing stress and burnout. By encouraging teachers to prioritize their well-being, the aim is to enhance their effectiveness as educators and create a positive learning environment. Therefore, it becomes essential for teachers to engage in professional development activities that specifically focus on stress management and well-being. By investing in these areas, educators can further enhance their skills and contribute to a healthier and more productive educational setting.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored what teachers express about workplace stress and how they alleviate it. Teachers highlighted different ways that they alleviate their stress. They offered suggestions at the district and school levels to help other teachers become more proactive in their workplace life to reduce stress induced burnout. It will be important for future studies to expand the knowledge on structural organizations and look for ways to change the work environments teachers are placed in. It is critical for future research to study different school districts worldwide, and observe what settings are helping teachers be stress-free. Teachers need to be educated on being proactive about their own health and wellness to prevent stress induced burnout to therefore make a more healthy and calm work environment for future students. In essence, the journey towards alleviating teacher stress and burnout requires a multi-faceted approach that acknowledges the complexities of their work and provides them with the necessary tools and support. By prioritizing teacher well-being and implementing effective strategies, we can create a more sustainable and fulfilling educational system for both educators and learners.

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Appendix A. Interview questions

1. Tell me how you became a teacher here at Trinity Catholic Secondary School?

Main questions to ask:

What kind of stress do you experience at work? How often?

Are there certain seasons you stress out more? Why do you think that is?

In a season of stress, what do you do to alleviate it?

Do you think there are other things that would help alleviate your stress?

Are there things that you think could happen at the school/district level that would alleviate workplace stress for you or your colleagues?

Questions to help build on the above questions:

1. Has your work stress ever led to burnout- definition: a loss of motivation, a growing sense of emotional depletion and intensifying cynicism?
2. How often do you practice these ways to alleviate stress?
3. Do you consider yourself to be a healthy person?

(Prompt from question about alleviation of stress-depending what they answer)

4. Do you do any physical activities to help lessen stress?
5. Do you feel our district gives us enough health-related resources and tools to combat work related stress?
6. Is there a specific health related program or system you would like to see in place at our school to help decrease stress among teachers?

Appendix B. Verbal Consent Script

The purpose of this script is to inform the potential participants at Trinity Catholic Secondary School about the purpose of my research project.

Colleague members will be told the following information:

The purpose of this research project is to discuss with you (teachers), about my research question of, "How do teachers talk about workplace stress and what are they doing to alleviate it?"

The interviews will help to understand (1) the different ways you (teachers) react and talk about stress induced burnout (2) what you are doing to reduce stress in your lifestyle, and (3) explore other things that you (teachers) think would help alleviate stress.

The information shared during this interview will be compiled into a graduating essay for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Leadership, as part of a graduation requirement.

There are no anticipated benefits or risks by you participating in this study.

All information shared will be kept confidential- identities will not be revealed throughout the entirety of the process including analysis and reporting.

You may choose to not answer any of the questions, and you can stop participating at any point without negative consequences or hard feelings.

Interviews will be held one-on-one in a private setting.