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Ways to cope with teacher burnout factors in ELT classrooms

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Abstract

As a result of working in a stressful working environment, people commonly face “burnout”. Burnout refers to negative consequences associated with chronic job stress and it likely occurs in anyone who works with people in some capacity. Hence, it would be fair to say that burnout is not a phenomenon associated exclusively with any particular human service population (Buck: 2006). As they deal with teaching to students and organizing a relationship with the administration and many other issues all of which are related to human service and relation, teachers present one of the top 5 most stressful careers in the world (Coombe: 2008). As a result of the stressful work they do, teachers commonly face “burnout”. Teacher burnout is an issue to be taken into consideration as it affects learners as well as teachers. In order to obtain a more stress free environment and save both the learners and the teachers from psychological and physical effects of burnout, the issue of burnout is going to be studied in this paper. This study aims to give the definition, historical background and the sources of burnout as well as the harms of burnout period on ELT teachers and ways to avoid from teacher burnout. ,

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1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the phenomenon of burnout, particularly in professions related to human services. When people are exhausted from working too hard and give too much from themselves, they face burnout syndrome. According to Farber, (1991) burnout is a work-related syndrome and it occurs most often in those who work face to face with troubled and needy clients (students/customers). Maslach (1981) defines it as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind”. Research shows that teaching is one of the top 5 most stressful careers in the world (Coombe, 2008). As a result of the stressful work they do, teachers also commonly face “burnout”. Survey data suggests that teaching is considered a ‘high stress’ profession, where approximately one quarter of school teachers view teaching as extremely stressful (Kyriacou, 2001). Teacher burnout is an issue that deserves attention as it is the teachers’ duty to create a classroom atmosphere which fosters learning.

2. Burnout: Background studies

Studies related with the burnout syndrome has been an issue since mid-nineties and it has been distinguished by many people. Freudenberger (1974) defines burnout as a “symptom of emotional depletion and a loss of motivation

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and commitment". The symptoms of this syndrome includes exhaustion, a pattern of neglecting one's own needs, working long hours, feeling pressures coming from within oneself, being pressured from staff administrators, and from giving too much to the people who needs help. As this issue needed an intensive research, Maslach developed an instrument for the measurement of the probabilities of the reasons that cause burnout and this instrument is known as Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). There are 22 items in MBI which assess the three components of the burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1997, p.193). People who suffer from burnout lose their enthusiasm which is the most important point that a teacher need in a teaching atmosphere. Cherniss and Krantz (1983) believe that burnout is "the loss of commitment and moral purpose in work". In teaching losing idealism is a great danger for a teacher since this profession stands on values that come intrinsically.

3. Sources of teacher burnout

Virtually almost all discussions of burnout have suggested that it is an outcome of environmental factors (ie.societal/organizational) and personality factors. There are various studies in the field searching of the causes of teacher burnout. However, the bulk of the research evidence to date suggests that environmental factors, particularly characteristics of the work setting, are more strongly related to burnout than are such personal factors as demographic and personality variables (e.g. Maslach and Jackson, 1984). It is a fact that causes for job burnout cannot be limited only with a couple of reasons. There are many factors that affect teacher burnout; Kyriacou (2001) delineated ten of the main sources of teacher stress as follows:

- Teaching pupils who lack motivation;
- Maintaining discipline;
- Time pressures and workload;
- Coping with change;
- Being evaluated by others;
- Dealings with colleagues;
- Self-esteem and status;
- Administration and management;
- Role conflict and ambiguity

Putting them under a few headings would make it easier to deal with the idea of burnout. Among these *Environmental Factors and Personality Factors* are the ones which will be discusses in detail.

3.1. Environmental factors

3.1.1. Organizational factors

Role conflict and role ambiguity, work overload, low salary, poor classroom climate, low decision-making power, and little support from superiors and peers are the organizational factors that contribute to teacher burnout (Bryne:1994). Excessive paper work, lack of time, large classes comprising students of heterogeneous academic and language abilities, and the need to teach courses that are outside one's particular area constitute work overload on the shoulder of the teachers (Male & May, 1998). According to the OECD report released in 2009; Turkish teachers work for the longest hours and earn the lowest salary when compared with teachers working in other OECD countries. Above causes clearly show that classroom and school climate and financial problems has a powerful impact on teacher burnout.

3.1.2. Societal factors

Societal factors show a great importance in the part of teacher burnout. According to Zhang and Sapp (2007) the erosion of public respect for and support of teachers could be a reason for emergence of teacher burnout. Esteem

levels for those in the teaching profession, demands for increased productivity at a time when the financial support for education is being curtailed may have an impact on teacher burnout (Iwanicki, 1983).

3.2. *Personality factors*

Personality factors include demographic characteristics such as age and sex. Self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy and self-concept are some other variables of personality factors. Locus of control, competitiveness and sense of humor are the factors which differentiate one teacher from another one. Ozdemir (2007) states that burnout is less likely with teachers who are achievement oriented, avoid extremes of competitiveness, have internal locus of control, strong purpose in their professional and personal lives, have sense of humor, and hardiness, have high self-esteem, high self-confidence, professional self-efficacy and positive self-concept. The above mentioned points lead us to the conclusion that personality traits of the teachers also play an important role in burnout.

4. **Effect of Teacher Burnout in ELT Classrooms**

Teachers are the ones in the classroom who is responsible for the learning process. Starting from the hygienic needs to psychological needs, from academic performance to personal factors, teachers are the ones who are there to retain and solve. Teachers are responsible for encouraging the students whenever they need it. It is for this reason that teacher, being one of the most important parts of the learning process, deserves attention regarding teacher burnout. There are a number of negative effects of burnout on the part of teachers and the ELT learning environment.

1. When the teachers suffer from emotional exhaustion their productivity reduces. Such teachers experience lack of enthusiasm to prepare lessons, difficulty in motivating themselves to come to work. As it is the teachers' duty to build bridges between themselves and the students, the effectiveness of language learning decreases in parallel to the burnout levels of the teacher.
2. As a result of the loss of energy, loss of memory and lack of interest in the subject matter, demotivation on the side of the teacher comes into being. As motivation of the students has direct relation to their success, this situation may result in reduction of success on the students' side.
3. Depersonalization is another threat to success in ELT classrooms. When teachers experience burnout, they develop a negative attitude towards the learners. Such kind of relationship between language learners and teachers may affect learners' motivation, beliefs and feelings towards the teacher and no doubt for language learning in a negative way (Williams and Burden: 2000).
4. Teachers who fall victim to burnout are likely to be less sympathetic toward students, have a lower tolerance for classroom disruption, be less apt to prepare adequately for class, and feel less committed and dedicated to their work (Bryne: 1994). They develop negative feelings towards the language learners. Such feelings may lead to demotivation and learners' also develop negative feelings towards the teacher and language learning.
5. Anger and violence may also emerge, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence and increasing the teacher's stress and burnout (Buck: 2006). Teachers suffering from burnout lose their motivation; develop negative attitudes towards their students, jobs and the people they work with. Consequences of stress and burnout are damaging for teachers, students and the education field in general.

6. As Ozdemir (2007) suggests, language development takes place where students can express their ideas and emotions using the language as a tool of communication. However, teachers who suffer from burnout would be indifferent to such needs. Research supports the contention that stress affects teachers' effectiveness with students (Blasé: 1982). When teachers feel good about their work student achievement rises (Black: 2001).
7. Teacher enthusiasm is believed to be contributing to the effective language teaching and learning (Williams and Burden: 2000). Teachers experiencing burnout are less likely to engage the class or provide motivation for the learner. Teachers who are experiencing burnout teach less enthusiastically and creatively. They become less committed to teaching which has direct bad effects on language learning. Because; as Williams and Burden (2000) suggest; it is the role of the language teacher to help learners to find ways of moving into their next level of understanding the language.
8. Teacher burnout reduces the productivity of the teacher and their teaching effectiveness may decline. As a result of burnout, the coping mechanisms may fail to stem the demands and then stress increases and threatens the teachers' mental and physical well-being which leads the teachers to quitting. According to Griffith, Steptoe & Copley, during the school year, stress can lead to a higher frequency of absenteeism (1999) which results in early retirement. This brings out the problem of having competent teachers available to teach and serve learners. This situation is a sign of failure both for the teachers' and the students' side. However, teachers who leave their jobs at an early age have less negative impact on students than those who burn out but remain in teaching. Such teachers are less task oriented behavior and provide fewer positive reinforcements to their students (Koon: 1971).
9. With the effect of the teachers' inability to protect themselves against threats to their self-esteem and wellbeing (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978) may lead the teacher to feel neither responsible nor accountable for students' behavior, learning, or anything else. They may come to the point where they believe that whatever they do could not make any significant difference in the lives of their students and that they see no reason to continue caring and giving any serious effort.

5. Strategies to cope with burnout

While the causes and the possible effects of burnout in ELT classrooms have become a subject to many studies done on the area, strategies to overcome this period of lost haven't been discussed enough. The last part of the study will focus on some of the strategies that could be considered to overcome burnout in ELT teachers.

Teachers should:

- Try to find opportunities to go abroad for educational and social purposes.
- Identify the problems they face both personally and academically.
- Spend at least one hour a week doing something for themselves.
- Try to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified.
- Discuss their problems and express their feelings to others.
- Make sure that they have a clear job description.
- Get the necessary administrative support.
- Have their financial problems solved.
- Devote more time to particular tasks.
- Have sufficient in-service training.
- Take action to deal with problems.

Recognize their limitations.
 Have a healthy home life.
 Plan ahead and prioritize.
 Try to relax after work.
 Avoid confrontations.

According to Kyriacou (2001), who draws from an Education Service Advisory Committee report (1998), offers the following advice for institutions;

Consult with teachers on matters, such as curriculum development or instructional planning, which directly impact their classrooms.

Provide adequate resources and facilities to support teachers in instructional practice.

Provide clear job descriptions and expectations in an effort to address role ambiguity and conflict.

Establish and maintain open lines of communication between teachers and administrators to provide administrative support and performance feedback that may act as a buffer against stress.

Allow for and encourage professional development activities such as mentoring and networking, which may engender a sense of accomplishment and a more fully developed professional identity for teachers.

If the teachers feel self-confident and happy, they can overcome the difficulties that they face and become self-confident about their job. In order to overcome the difficulties that come along with the burnout period, the teacher should take actions and use strategies of some kind. These strategies can change depending on the problem that the teacher faces. If implementing a solution is possible, direct action can be considered as the best strategy for reducing job stress. However, sometimes these strategies may not be possible to implement. In that case, tentative techniques may become a solution to the teacher who faces burnout.

6. Conclusion

Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind (Maslach, 1981). Burnout is clearly an increasing problem in the teaching profession. The issue of teacher is very important to schools and education systems. Teachers deal with students, over-protective parents, indifferent and negligent administrators, low payment and system policies, and personal troubles. However, they try to do their best to be effective for their students. Teachers' demographic as well as personality factors and other environmental factors or situational factors cause burnout.

Teachers and institutions should identify these problems and take actions to avoid unpleasant and discouraging factors. Both organizational and personal prevention precautions are needed in order to get rid of the psychological and physical symptoms of burnout. It is obvious that teachers will be doing their jobs more effectively as long as they work in an stress-free and relaxed working environment.

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