

“Teacher Burnout Is One of My Greatest Fears”: Interrupting a Narrative on Fire

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Abstract

Teacher burnout is often positioned as a common result of the complex demands of the teaching profession (García-Carmona et al., 2019). While there is no denying the demanding nature of teaching, in this article we present an alternative perspective on the widespread burnout discussion that distinguishes between burnout and the complexities of teacher attrition, and offer a more hopeful and strengths-based approach to the teaching profession. In a qualitative study that analyzed the anticipatory beliefs that pre-service teachers expressed in a reflective assignment for a course focused on Comprehensive School Health (CSH), we found evidence to suggest that the burnout narrative may threaten teacher candidates' self-efficacy before entering the teaching profession. We call for a disruption to the overemphasis of burnout narratives in teacher education programs as they may undermine the profession.

Key words: teachers, burnout, attrition, pre-service teachers, teacher education

Résumé

L'épuisement professionnel des enseignants est souvent perçu comme un résultat commun découlant des exigences complexes de la profession d'enseignant (García-Carmona et al., 2019). Bien que la nature exigeante de l'enseignement soit indéniable, nous présentons dans cet article une perspective alternative sur la discussion générale concernant l'épuisement professionnel qui fait la distinction entre l'épuisement professionnel et les complexités de l'attrition des enseignants, et offre une approche plus optimiste et fondée sur les forces de la profession enseignante. Une étude qualitative a analysé les croyances anticipées exprimées par des enseignants en formation initiale. Dans un travail de réflexion effectué par ceux-ci dans le cadre d'un cours axé sur la santé scolaire globale, nous avons trouvé des preuves qui indiquent que le discours sur l'épuisement professionnel peut menacer l'autoefficacité des candidats avant même leur entrée dans la profession. Nous appelons à une cessation de la trop grande importance

accordée aux récits d'épuisement professionnel dans les programmes de formation à l'enseignement puisqu'elle pourrait miner la profession.

Mots-clés: enseignant, syndrome d'épuisement professionnel, enseignants en formation initiale, formation des enseignants

Introduction

The concept of burnout is a common narrative that plays out in the public discourse and the teaching profession. Burnout and teacher retention are seemingly international problems (Craig, 2017; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Mafora, 2013), and Canadian teachers are no exception in their exposure to the sentiment that teaching is stressful enough to drive some out of the profession. Yet, this burnout narrative rests on many studies specific to the United States, and may not be directly applicable to Canadian teaching contexts. After a discussion of the nature of burnout generally and the concept of anticipatory grief, we will share research findings that indicate how this widespread narrative may be harmful for beginning teachers and attempt to reframe this commonly shared story of what it is like to be a teacher.

Burnout is a phenomenon that occurs in many helping professions and has been described in various ways. One commonly agreed upon conceptualization is as a condition that is comprised of three factors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001; Steinhardt et al., 2011). Emotional exhaustion is the central component of burnout, typically occurring when an individual feels fatigued and depleted of their resources (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008). When experiencing fatigue on the job, an interpersonal response called depersonalization occurs, making individuals cynical or indifferent to their responsibilities. Finally, the diminished sense of meaning in work negatively impacts feelings of competence and confidence, ultimately leading to a lack of productivity. Alternatively, Golembiewski (1989) conceptualized burnout as the relationship between cynicism and exhaustion across organizational and occupational settings, believed to progress in stages representing increasing degrees of maladaptive states (Golembiewski et al., 1993, 1983). In this phased model, cynicism is proposed to develop first, followed by feelings of inadequacy, then emotional exhaustion becoming apparent at the final stages of burnout (Taris et al., 2005).

Burnout can be found in numerous professions and is commonly described as an endemic issue amongst teachers (Sakharov & Farber, 1983). When teachers are emotionally depleted, they socially isolate themselves from other school staff and students, are dissatisfied with their jobs, and are less productive (Chan, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001). More recent research suggests that burnout is negatively correlated with student motivation (Shen et al., 2015). Teachers may frequently encounter challenging circumstances in their profession such as disruptive students, unsupportive parents, lack of support from administration, and/or poor relationships with colleagues (Kyriacou, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Steinhardt et al., 2011). Risk factors for teacher burnout include continually working overtime and lack of social support (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), inadequate time to recover from strenuous work (Hakanen et al., 2006), compassion fatigue, exposure to secondary trauma through their students (Koenig et al., 2018), and absence of a sense of school community (Sharplin et al., 2011).

Given the common narrative that teachers are expected to work in high stress environments that challenge their abilities to cope, it is understandable that new teachers anticipate teaching to be difficult and stressful, and question whether the teaching profession is the right fit. In the midst of the widespread burnout narrative about the teaching profession, new teachers hear alarming statistics about unavoidable stress and fatigue, creating uncertainty among incoming teachers.

Separating Burnout from Teacher Attrition

The perception that teachers are leaving the profession in alarming numbers due to an overwhelming workload is common. Research on teacher attrition, or “drop-out teachers,” often quantifies the loss of teachers from the profession in terms of a financial cost (Karsenti & Collin, 2013, p. 141); the official government term used in the United Kingdom for teacher attrition is “wastage” (Craig, 2017). Research and media routinely conflate the silent crisis of attrition with burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; Rinke, 2008). While such news stories, often paired with a photo of a frazzled teacher, may attract attention and are easily understood, this narrative glosses over the complexity of teacher attrition. In this section, we will explore how the current burnout and attrition discussion both overstates the extent of the trend and oversimplifies the reasons a teacher may leave the profession.

Firstly, teacher attrition, a phenomenon that is influenced by a number of factors, is considerably variable in terms of research outcomes. Most researchers agree that attrition occurs in a U-shaped pattern, with the majority of teachers leaving at the beginning of their career or at retirement (Boorman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006). In discussing and “questioning” the research that addresses early-career teacher attrition, Schaefer and colleagues (2012) summarize the research by stating that the number of novice teachers that leave the profession within five years of starting their career may range from 5% to 50%, although the more disconcerting 40% to 50% numbers are most often cited (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011). This considerable discrepancy in statistics is understandable, given how difficult it is to obtain a definite measurement of teacher attrition. In the analysis of a five-year study that found just 4% of early teachers in Alberta had left the profession, the authors state: “The dearth of accurate data may explain why some studies on teacher induction cite alarmingly high attrition rates. Canadian scholars may be overly reliant on studies from the United States, which do not reflect the Canadian context” (Alberta Teachers Association, 2013, p. 59). Most research on teacher attrition rests on data collected by area teacher unions, regional government education departments, local school districts, or national surveys with a short-term study period (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011). Depending on the study, a teacher may be counted as a “leaver” from the profession if they have simply transferred to a different school, changed to a different public school district, moved from a public school to a private or charter school, relocated to teach in a new region or country, or simply changed from a full-time to part-time teaching assignment (Weldon, 2018). Teacher retention research also has a narrower view of “teaching” as limited to a classroom role, and may count teachers who become educational researchers, literacy consultants, administrators, or museum educators as “leavers,” even though such individuals may still self-identify as teachers (Rinke, 2008). Indeed, many consider teaching to be an identity or calling that extends far beyond the duration of a classroom assignment. To suggest that teaching is limited to a full-time classroom job in the K–12 system, as the attrition research often does, undermines the professionalization of teaching.

It is also important to differentiate attrition from temporary leaves from teaching. Longitudinal data that tracks how many teachers re-enter the profession after leaving for a period is rarely included in discussions on teacher attrition (Guarino et al., 2006), even though most leaves from teaching are for personal reasons that may not be permanent,

such as pregnancy, childcare, or a health problem (Ingersoll, 2001). Rinke (2008) urges for a new conceptualization of a teaching career as a long road with multiple entrance and exit opportunities. In their more nuanced study of teacher attrition, DeAngelis and Presley (2011) tracked over 160,000 new teacher cohorts in Illinois from 1971 to 2006 and found that once the rate of returning teachers was included, the attrition rate dropped from the 40% range to 25%, depending on the year of the cohort. Interestingly, and contrary to the common current narrative, DeAngelis and Presley (2011) also found that more recent graduates of teacher training programs were more likely to return to the profession of teaching than teachers who started their careers in the 1970s. It may be that the perceived crisis of teacher attrition, while reflecting job dissatisfaction for some, is also capturing the portability of teaching credentials in a global marketplace, the relative ease to leave and rejoin the profession, the flexibility to change positions within and between districts, and/or the usefulness of teaching as a versatile starter career for younger generations who view careers as boundaryless and are making more career shifts than previous generations in all fields (Ng et al., 2012). We concur with Weldon (2018) that attrition varies significantly from region to region and is not always negative.

In addition to possibly overstating the number of early teachers leaving the profession, current discussions on teacher attrition also place disproportionate blame on burnout as the leading reason to leave. In reality, burnout is only one of many factors that may contribute to teacher attrition. There are numerous push and pull factors that may influence an individual to leave the teaching profession, including job dissatisfaction, further education goals, personal family decisions, salary, workload, school climate, or the strength of a regional economy that may beckon with other opportunities (Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017). As these factors, especially teachers' salaries, can all vary significantly from region to region, caution should be exercised in generalizing from attrition studies.

Clandinin and colleagues (2015) conceptualize early teacher attrition as a long-term and “complex negotiation” (p. 2) between individual factors (i.e., resilience, burnout, demographic features, and family characteristics) and contextual factors (i.e., teacher support, salary, professional development, collaboration, the nature of context, student issues, and teacher education). Reducing teacher attrition to discrete measurable factors does not take into account the “messy and immeasurable” whole person who is making a significant career decision (Schaefer et al., 2012, p. 116). In their research, Clandinin et al. (2015) interviewed third- and fourth-year teachers to better understand

the individual and contextual factors that affected their evolving identities as teachers. Data revealed the multi-faceted pathways between burnout and attrition. For instance, many research participants shared how uncertainty over finding a job in a region where teachers are paid quite well led to a “will do anything” approach that led to accepting last-minute teaching positions they were not specifically trained for, sometimes requiring relocation, which then led to stress and feelings of burnout (Clandinin et al., 2015, p. 8). Focusing on burnout as the sole reason for teacher attrition frames the issue as an individualistic failure when there may be structural recruitment, assignment, and hiring practices that are also at play. Rinke and Mawhinney (2017) call for a broader lens in understanding attrition and advise that it is unhelpful and inaccurate to categorize leavers of the profession as simply individuals who could not cope in the classroom. Based on their interviews of successful Norwegian teachers who left the profession, Smith and Ulvik (2017) contend that it is often resilient individuals, the “highly engaged switchers” or “competence nomads,” that leave teaching in pursuit of more exciting personal professional goals (p. 931). We agree with Rodger et al. (2018) that the successful inclusion of new teachers is a shared responsibility of multiple sectors that intersect with the school context. Discussions that reduce teacher attrition to burnout create a more blaming narrative and overlook other factors, and therefore possible solutions, to improving job satisfaction throughout teachers’ career trajectories.

Anticipatory Burnout and Stress

In this section, we borrow the concept of anticipatory grief from bereavement literature, and apply it to the teaching profession, to better understand the anticipatory stress and burnout that teachers come to expect, even before they have experienced these feelings firsthand. In the 1940s, the term *anticipatory grief* was coined, emerging from the study of patients and families facing lengthy illnesses with expected loss (Lindemann, 1944). More recently, anticipatory grief has been defined as a manifestation of grief occurring when there is the expectation of a significant loss or death (Overton & Cottone, 2016). When expecting a momentous loss, individuals experience cognitive, affective, social, and cultural grief reactions over the past, present, and future (Gruenewald & White, 2006). Difficulties managing impending loss often manifest in symptoms of anticipatory

grief, which can include anger, decreased self-worth, depression, and feelings of uselessness (Simon, 2008).

When the anticipatory grief literature is considered in the context of teacher burnout discourses, the two have alarming parallels. When students are presented with the idea to expect burnout, it is likely that they will anticipate a difficult or exhausting career ahead. It has come to our attention that burnout rhetoric has become commonplace in teacher training programs. For example, student teachers may be presented with demoralizing statistics suggesting that 40–50% of new teachers will leave the profession after only three years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), or the finding that 30–40% of graduated student teachers never become teachers (Nordic Councils of Ministers, 2008). Reasons for attrition and burnout are not carefully parsed out when blindly sharing these statistics with students, adding to the issue. This practice is particularly problematic in teacher training, as pre-service teachers have few resources to refute the burnout conversation. In the absence of experience in the classroom, pre-service teachers' anxieties about their looming profession grow, creating uncertainty about the career they have chosen. Further, the larger narratives about teacher burnout, early teacher attrition, and the taxing nature of the profession are reinforcing, resulting in a daunting portrayal of the field being presented to teachers at the beginning of their careers.

When the burnout narrative is perpetuated in teacher training programs, whether intentional or not, a sense of helplessness is created among student teachers. Our research suggests that such discourses are likely to lead to anticipatory stress and may even perpetuate attrition and burnout.

Current Study

In 2018, the University of Calgary was first to offer a mandatory Bachelor of Education (BEd) course on Comprehensive School Health (CSH; Russell-Mayhew et al., 2017). The CSH framework emphasizes the need for a multifaceted approach to school wellness and identifies teachers as critical to creating healthy school communities. Within the course, BEd students were encouraged to develop strategies for addressing health-related issues at schools, including mental health, physical health, and social-emotional learning, for themselves and their future students. One assignment, titled “Letter to Your Future Teacher Self,” asked students to reflect on: (a) the impact of the course on their emerging

identity as a teacher, (b) how the course impacted them personally in terms of their health attitudes and behaviours, and (c) how the course impacted their plans as a teacher.

The data presented in this article was collected in the winter of 2019, during the second year that the CSH course was offered. A total of 172 (of 482) BEd students consented to share their letter assignment for research purposes. Students in this sample were in both elementary ($n = 87$) and secondary ($n = 85$) specializations. A broad range of subject areas was represented within this sample, including: physical education, English language arts, inclusive education, science, math, French, social studies, and early childhood education. All students were enrolled in the CSH course during their last semester of the BEd program, immediately before their final field placement, and presumably months before embarking on their teaching careers. Participants provided informed consent for their assignments to be used for this study, which was granted ethics approval through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary.

Method

Data were analyzed qualitatively by use of thematic analysis. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis captures important patterns within the data in relation to the research question and provides rich and detailed accounts of data. More specifically, our team employed inductive thematic analysis, which means that we took a “bottom up” approach to better understand the data in front of us. This inductive approach meant that we let the data drive the themes, instead of organizing information based on pre-existing coding frames or our preconceptions about the topic.

Analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step method. Following the steps as outlined assisted in uniformity among coders. Steps to this procedure included:

1. Familiarizing ourselves with the data (as a group, we read student letters, reflected on and discussed the content);
2. Generating initial codes (analysis team discussed points of interest and surprise, and made notes in the letter documents to capture first impressions and codes);

3. Searching for themes (refocusing on the broader level of themes, the analysis team discussed the codes being generated and organized these into higher-level categories);
4. Reviewing themes (as more letters were analyzed, analysis team refined codes to reflect data accurately);
5. Defining and naming themes (articulating the essence of what each theme captured and re-named when necessary); and,
6. Producing the report (extracting salient evidence from the data to support themes).

Letters were collected and uploaded to Nvivo computer software for analysis. Nvivo allows for the collection, organization, and analysis of various types of qualitative information and enabled the team to structure and visually portray the data in an organized manner. Nvivo does not assign codes or analyze information itself; however, asking questions of the data was simplified using the features of this software. In order to ensure reliability among the coders, the lead research assistant oriented two coders to the thematic analysis procedure. The team simultaneously and independently coded the same 10 letters and reviewed the initial codes and themes that emerged. During this initial stage, the team ensured everyone's coding was data driven and in line with the others' descriptions. Discussions among the group occurred in order to attend to discrepancies. Once consistency between codes and themes was met, each person was assigned 81 additional letters to analyze on their own using the Nvivo software. Independently, coders adhered to the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). In subsequent months, the research team met three times to present the codes and themes they generated based on their independent coding. These meetings allowed for an opportunity to refine themes and discuss the core of what each theme was describing. Some themes were collapsed with others, while others were deleted. In addition, salient quotations that solidified the descriptions of the themes were extracted from the data, resulting in a master list of inductive coding.

Findings

In the letters, BEd students wrote about their passions for teaching, teacher wellness, the critical role of teachers, CSH principles and tenets of learning, promoting health to their students through role modelling, anticipatory burnout, and professional expectations for

the future. For the purpose of the current discussion, we decided to focus on teacher burnout and attrition, and therefore selected two themes from the analysis to discuss in detail: anticipatory burnout from the teaching profession and exaggerated expectations that BEd students place on themselves for their future practice. These particular themes were elected as they distinctively stood out as negative relative to otherwise neutral or positive themes. Additionally, the narrative about burnout likely threatens teacher candidates' self-efficacy before entering the teaching profession and the research team saw this as an opportunity to highlight these concerns and offer practical considerations to rewrite the narrative. Within the anticipatory burnout theme, a subtheme emerged and illustrated BEd students' fears about the demanding nature of teaching. Within the exaggerated expectations theme, subthemes including social contagion of stress between professionals in the school community and education training programs, and arguably unrealistic expectations placed on the self to perform at a very high level were evident.

Anticipatory Burnout

The BEd students explicitly acknowledged feeling overwhelmed with the looming stressors perceived to be associated with teaching. Multiple students wrote about being presented with a statistic early in their program that had stayed with them for years, namely that 25% of them would leave the profession within five years. One student shared, "In our first lecture, pre-service teachers buzzed with excitement and purpose. The person welcoming us to our new paths told us all, '25% of you will not remain in this field after the first five years.' I was crushed" (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist). Just as this student reported, another shared that their "deepest heartbreak has been finding out that one in four people might not make it in this work" (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist). Students experienced distress that their futures could be in peril upon hearing these rates of attrition, while also feeling fearful of their impending stress. It appears that burnout narratives and attrition rates are presented repeatedly to students, seemingly without constructive purpose, or at least without contextualization. As another student wrote,

Throughout the program I learned more and more the pragmatics of teaching, and the frustrations that can lead to burnout, stress-leave, or to considering leaving the field. I remember entering the fourth semester of the program in

January and feeling so defeated. Not because I felt like I couldn't handle the field, or the workload, or the pragmatics. I felt defeated because I had just spent a year and a half being reminded that there is a 25% chance I won't make it. One in four of my colleagues and peers, who I have worked hard for, encouraged, and been supported by, might not be my colleagues by 2025. How depressing. (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist)

Evidently, presenting startling statistics to students during their training programs has a pronounced impact on their present and future outlook, clearly influencing their attitudes and expectations for teaching as a career.

It appears that attrition rates are invoked often during teacher training, alongside a troubling rhetoric that positions teaching as labour intensive, taxing, and emotionally draining. Throughout the assignments that we analyzed, a sense of anticipatory burnout was apparent. Signs of anxiety and hopelessness emerged, resembling the symptoms found within anticipatory grief literature. As a result of being told of the profession's demanding nature, these students braced themselves for the worst outcomes, wondering if they would ultimately be included within the next published attrition and burnout statistics. One BEd student shared,

My experience as a pre-service teacher thus far has been very positive, but I see how becoming over-burdened is easy and dangerous; not just over-burdened with workload, but also with the emotional labour of caring for students and advocating for their needs. (Bachelor of Education Student, Secondary specialist)

Such comments suggest that BEd students may be learning negative expectations and fears related to the teaching profession alongside pedagogy in their programs.

In addition to hearing multiple generalizations about the fatigue and hardship inherent in becoming a teacher, students' anticipatory burnout also was reinforced by their instructors, peers, practicum supervisors, and practicum settings. One student wrote, "One of the surprising ways the course has impacted me is hearing the level of stress and anxiety from fellow colleagues" (Bachelor of Education Student, Secondary specialist).

Similarly, another student described a sense of competition, where individuals compare how busy their lives are, no doubt adding to the idea that teaching is too demanding to lead a balanced life:

I see many teachers who wear their exhaustion and ‘over-worked-ness’ as a badge of honour. I get it, I’ve been there. Comparing war stories with other parents of how busy you are, how many kilometers you put on your car driving your kids to and from sports and activities, telling them you haven’t showered in a week like it’s a competition and the most exhausted one with the worst self-care wins.... It wasn’t until I was into my second semester of this program that I quickly realized that I couldn’t be that person anymore, and most importantly didn’t want to be.... Taking comprehensive school health combined with seeing so many teachers in burnout solidified it for me. (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist)

The idea of stress and anticipation being contagious between peers and colleagues was evident, further enhancing the felt pressures of the profession. While in their field placement, one student described the mounting stressors experienced, challenging their ability to manage their professional identity:

Through this course and my most recent field experience, I now realize the importance of self-care. During my practicum, a surprisingly large number of students in my class had experienced trauma and had a difficult time engaging in learning activities. There were several students who had learning and behaviour challenges that made teaching incredibly difficult at times and I found that I would often leave the school feeling exhausted, emotionally drained, and grateful to have made it through the day. By the time the practicum was nearing its end, I had used up nearly all of the gas in my tank and I was running on fumes, hoping and praying that I would make it to the finish line of the semester. I had become a negative person whom I hardly recognized. (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist)

It is evident from this excerpt that this student, and potentially others, want strategies to improve their self-care and face the complex demands of the school environment. Focusing on the problem of burnout without preparing BEd students for possible

solutions decreases their self-efficacy and optimism. All together, the letter assignments suggest that conversations on burnout and attrition with trusted colleagues and fellow students have a powerful and enduring influence on BEd students.

Exaggerated Expectations

Our analysis also found that BEd students placed exaggerated expectations on themselves, compounding the stress and fear of burnout that had been evoked through statistics and discussions on early teacher attrition. Numerous individuals mentioned setting high standards for themselves to reach early on, if not immediately, in their teaching careers. One student wrote, “There are a lot of steps that I wish to take, but I am hopeful that I will be able to implement them all within my first few years of teaching” (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist). While goal-setting can be a valuable and motivating practice for all professionals, setting unrealistic goals, such as implementing all of the CSH framework into one’s teaching within the first few years of becoming a teacher, or rallying for change at the community level, may have the opposite effect. BEd students wrote about performing at an incredibly high level in the classroom, showing little room for exceptions. They wrote about always being a role model to their students, consistently teaching with a socially inclusive framework, and constantly incorporating body breaks in their lesson plans, for example. Students also described being the best educators they could be, regardless of circumstances that occurred outside of their control, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

When I envision myself as a health champion, I picture myself having a healthy body as well as a healthy mindset. This should be the case no matter what my situation is and how busy I am. Once I have ensured that my own health is in excellent condition I can focus on being an advocate for others.
(Bachelor of Education Student, Secondary specialist)

This quote illustrates the extreme standards and expectations to which BEd students hold themselves accountable. Language and sentiments such as “no matter what” and “always” appeared throughout letters, indicating that students expected themselves to be capable of a high degree of consistency and competency in their teaching practice.

Not only did BEd students write about the lofty expectations they had placed on themselves to be impeccably balanced role models for their students, they also placed a great deal of pressure on themselves to handle the complex and multifaceted roles of an educator. As one student wrote, “Education is so much more complex than I had imagined years ago. Being an educator is stepping into the role of support system, colleague, health promoter, caring instructor, builder, creator, policy holder, safety advisor, team member, and role model” (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist). It is clear that the pressure to be a constant role model and to fulfill multiple obligations is keenly felt by BEd students.

In addition to feeling responsible for the learning outcomes of their students, these BEd students also believe that they are critically responsible for influencing the greater school system and community. While policy, research, and community partnerships are elements of the CSH framework in creating healthy and positive environments for students to learn and grow, these BEd students are taking the expectation to an unrealistic level. Instead of understanding themselves as having a role to play in broader community concerns, some BEd students place these issues on their shoulders directly, anticipating having to tackle issues at both the classroom and policy level. One student eloquently wondered about their positioning as an educator:

Often over the progression of this degree, it has felt like we are told as teachers it is one of our sole responsibilities [to ensure student well-being], even to the exclusion of teaching educational content. As I embark on my teaching career, I already feel overwhelmed with the expectations that I feel are placed upon me; on the critical and seemingly everlasting ways that I can and will affect my students’ lives either positively or negatively. (Bachelor of Education Student, Elementary specialist)

In their letter assignments, students reported overwhelming stressors and responsibilities being placed upon them, inevitably adding to their workload. These high expectations either set by others or the BEd students themselves are an influential factor in the broader burnout conversation as they are likely fueling stress levels for these beginning teachers.

Discussion

In the current study, we explored the emergent themes from letters written by BEd students assigned as part of a course on CSH. The findings from our study indicated numerous factors lead pre-service teachers to worry that they will become chronically stressed and leave the profession, ultimately becoming part of the commonly linked burnout narrative and attrition statistics of teachers world-wide. BEd students discussed hearing about the common experience of burnout alongside upsetting statistics about teacher attrition during lectures and throughout practicum experiences, and also reported that the culture of teaching was infused with rhetoric that teaching was an exhausting and highly stressful occupation. Further, BEd students wrote about the exaggerated expectations they had for themselves throughout their teaching careers.

The stories that are told about a profession matter, both for public perception and to members of the profession. Framing teaching as a highly stressful career with high attrition in early career stages is demoralizing and, as explored in the section that teased out burnout from complex attrition rates, may not even be accurate for all Canadian teaching contexts. Indeed, such discussions on early teacher attrition and burnout may actually contribute to the problem they purportedly seek to improve. Some researchers posit that cynicism can be the first catalyst in the burnout cascade (Taris et al., 2005). Few things would create cynicism and doubt more than repeatedly reminding a novice of a profession that they are taking on an incredibly stressful role and there is a strong chance they will not last. Our research indicated that these burnout and attrition discourses are creeping into teacher training programs and may be priming future teachers to expect burnout and to leave the profession before even starting in a paid position. Given these troubling comments that suggest novice teachers may fulfil expectations about burnout and attrition, we agree with Schaefer and colleagues (2012) that there is a need to change the broader discussion on retaining early teachers to one that focuses on sustaining all teachers for the duration of their careers.

The current focus on burnout and teacher attrition reinforces a deficit-focused model that places the blame on individuals rather than looking at systemic factors. Given that attrition rates are complex and reflect both the strengths and issues of teaching, and have been reduced to a negative story about the stressful nature of the profession, it may be more useful to focus on the teachers who stay in the profession and the school

communities that support them. Focusing on resilience, rather than attrition, is a hopeful and more strength-based approach. A recent systematic review of interventions aimed at increasing teacher resilience suggests that there are multiple strategies and professional learning initiatives from a more positive approach that can improve job satisfaction and well-being for teachers, and that interventions aimed at change at the school level show the most promise for countering burnout (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

Rewriting the Narrative

We pose the question: *How do we interrupt the discourses about burnout in teacher training?* Answering this question is imperative to reversing the damaging impact the burnout focus has had on the reputation of teaching as a profession. In contrast to the deficit or problem-solving approach, a strength-based approach focuses on current successes and seeks to build upon them. Indeed, many schools have employed a strength-based approach to improve a number of variables for students (Climie & Mastoras, 2015; Seligman et al., 2009). This strength-based paradigm can also be applied to teachers and to the stories told about the broader teaching profession. In an article advocating for strength-based professional development for teachers, the authors rely on research to recommend that focusing on the positive nature of one's work is more effective in improving performance than focusing on burnout prevention (Zwart et al., 2015). By shifting focus toward the rewards of becoming an educator, discussions about burnout may be interrupted.

There are numerous embedded strengths that can and should be pointed out in any discussion on teacher attrition, as the statistics on teacher attrition often erroneously count migration, temporary leaves, or moving to a different educational role as attrition (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011). Migration is illustrative of how teaching is a versatile and flexible career. There are numerous ways to change jobs within and between school districts to accommodate relocations, or for individuals just seeking a change. While relocations make measuring teacher attrition difficult, it should be considered a strength that teaching credentials are highly portable and can open doors in a new, or even foreign, location. Teaching allows for long-term leaves and later re-entries, which is a clear strength. It is not uncommon for teachers to leave for many years to focus on raising their children and then re-enter the teacher workforce later in their lives, a practice that may be more difficult to accomplish in other fields. Indeed, teaching is unparalleled as a profession for complemen-

ting the life cycle and demands of parenthood both in terms of daily hours, yearly holiday schedules, and long-term parental leaves. This is a feminist, family-friendly strength of the profession that may continue to attract adults who intend to have children as long as the majority of other fields lag so far behind in accommodating working parents. Lastly, teaching can be a great foundational career that can prepare someone for a variety of fields, including business, the non-profit sector, government, or further educational research. Teaching can occur in a myriad of contexts; the art and science of education can inform and enhance multiple career paths. To categorize a teacher who moves on to a second career, administration, or higher degrees within education as someone who could not handle the demands of the classroom, a “drop out,” “loss,” or “cost” to the profession, is antithetical to the very essence of education, which prizes self-directed growth and all learning.

In regard to mentoring in pre-service teacher training, He (2009) advises that a strength-based approach should start from the very beginning of teacher preparation and provides various practical strategies for mentor teachers to guide student teachers to set reasonable goals, cultivate satisfaction, and retain optimism about their teaching. We concur with He’s (2009) assertion that such a strength-based approach could be contagious in a school setting, benefitting teacher educators, mentor teachers, pre-service teachers, students, and schools alike. Perhaps a greater emphasis on mental health literacy and training in teacher preparation programs, as urged by Levine Brown et al. (2019), that includes practical strategies on how to enhance well-being in teacher preparation programs, could simultaneously support both student and teacher well-being.

Similarly, we submit that the CSH paradigm is consistent with a strength-based model and a vital pathway for improving teacher well-being that can have ripple effects on a whole school. Health and well-being are resources to draw upon, not additional tasks to be completed. The CSH approach seeks to protect and improve these powerful resources for all members of a school community. In a recent review of the literature on teacher well-being, McCallum et al. (2017) deliberately eschewed the common focus on stress reduction and avoiding burnout, and instead concentrated on enabling and sustaining initiatives that promoted teacher well-being and, in turn, their teaching. McCallum and colleagues (2017) found numerous studies that supported both teachers’ and students’ well-being and advised that teachers are more satisfied with their work and life when all

domains of well-being are valued. CSH strategies should not be presented as an additional demand on teachers' time, but rather opportunities to protect and foster the strengths already present in teachers and schools for the benefit of all.

Limitations

The findings from the current study must be considered relative to its limitations. This data was extracted from a school assignment with guided prompts, where students were interested in doing well. Students' responses were undoubtedly influenced by the assignment criteria and expected audience of a course instructor and thus may not be a complete and totally honest depiction of their beliefs and opinions. As a result of this, we focused not just on the themes that supported our interpretations, but also tried to focus on variance in the data. Had this not been an assignment, there may have been more tensions that emerged from the letters. Despite these limitations, we feel that surfacing these tensions in developing teachers and teacher training is important to disseminate. Future research on how teacher training programs can prepare BEd students for the complexities of the profession and the importance of prioritizing their own well-being—without priming them to expect burnout or fear attrition in the process—is needed.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shared some of the findings expressed by pre-service teachers for an assignment that asked them to write to their future teacher self. This task was given on the cusp of students presumably beginning their teaching careers, and thus provided a glimpse of the emotions and expectations felt by a new teaching cohort. We found multiple comments that indicated BEd students are negatively impacted by discussions that focus on burnout and attrition. Our findings demonstrated that pre-service teachers are already anticipating stressful working conditions and setting exaggerated expectations for themselves in an attempt to cope with a demanding professional role. Consequently, we argue for a shift in the conversation around teacher attrition and burnout. The current narrative that overstates and oversimplifies burnout as the reason for high teacher attrition is not only potentially inaccurate for Canadian teaching contexts, but also, and more importantly, undermines the teaching profession. Such discourses could deter people from

entering, practising, or re-joining the profession, and are creating anticipatory stress and burnout for beginning teachers. We acknowledge that teaching is a demanding profession, but it is also a rewarding and meaningful profession that has many strengths. Indeed, we submit that a strength-based approach, consistent with the CSH paradigm, is called for to retain and sustain all teachers throughout their career.

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