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Aaron Samuel Zimmerman
Texas Tech University

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Expanding the Scope of Teacher Education in an Attempt to Prevent Burnout Contagion

Aaron Samuel Zimmerman
Texas Tech University

Burnout is a significant problem that continues to plague the teaching profession. In this essay, I argue that the burnout of early-career teachers is not solely a function of personal factors (e.g., their knowledge, their beliefs, their pedagogical skills, their commitment to the teaching profession) but also a function of the organizational climates into which these early-career teachers enter. Specifically, burnout can be contagious, and, therefore, I argue that teacher educators must expand the scope of their efforts to include not only educating individual pre-service teachers but also revitalizing the organizational climates present within local schools.

The Significance and Predictors of Teacher Burnout

Burnout is a significant problem that continues to plague the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Research has found that approximately 25% of new teachers experience burnout symptoms during their first year in the profession (Fitchett, McCarthy, Lambert, & Boyle, 2018). Not only does the phenomenon of burnout negatively affect teachers' wellbeing (Parker, Martin, Colmar, & Liem, 2012), the rapid turnover of the teaching workforce also negatively affects student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). It is, therefore, imperative for teacher education programs to find ways to increase the resilience that early-career teachers bring to their work. Accomplishing this first requires that teacher education programs identify predictors of teacher burnout.

One predictor of teacher burnout relates to the nature of the teaching profession itself: If teachers are not afforded professional agency, then early-career teachers may experience a sense of regret over having decided to enter the teaching profession (Fuller, Goodwyn, & Francis-Brophy, 2013; Price & Weatherby, 2017). Another predictor of burnout relates to a teacher's personal sense of fulfillment in relation to the work of teaching: If teachers enter the profession of teaching with a specific image of what they want teaching to be, only to find that this image is unrealistic and unattainable, they may experience a lack of meaning in their daily work (Loonstra, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2009). Finally, early-career teachers may enter the field unprepared for the curricular and instructional challenges that await them, in which case their lack of knowledge, ability, and self-efficacy may predict early-career burnout (Dicke et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

In regards to addressing these predictors of teacher burnout, teacher education is limited in the degree to which it can restructure education policy or influence any given society's collective cultural regard for the teaching profession. Teacher education tends, instead, to focus on developing the knowledge, beliefs, pedagogical skills, and commitments that pre-service teachers possess in relation to teaching and the teaching profession (Ball & Forzani, 2009). This essay, however, will focus on a fourth potential source of burnout that traditionally eludes the scope of teacher education: school climate.

I want to draw the reader's attention to the phenomenon referred to as *burnout contagion* (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2000; Kim, Youngs, & Frank, 2017; Petitta, Jiang, & Härtel, 2017). I will argue that teacher educators have a responsibility to address the issue of burnout not only by attending to the commitments and skills of individual pre-service teachers but also by directly addressing negative professional climates within schools with teacher candidates. If pre-service teachers graduate from teacher education programs only to enter schools that they end up perceiving as negative professional climates, then early-career teachers are at risk of suffering burnout. It therefore behooves teacher education programs to consider the manner in which burnout contagion may end up undermining the efforts of pre-service teacher education.

Burnout Contagion

Copious research has shown that school climate contributes significantly to teacher burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Gu & Johansson, 2013). The construct of school climate can refer not only to the resources available to teachers within a given school but also to the affective quality of a teacher's professional social network (Craig, 2013; van Waes et al., 2016). Teachers who are connected to one another within a social network have access to shared resources, knowledge, and emotional support (Penuel, Riel, Krause, & Frank, 2009). In this way, a teacher's social network can not only increase the curricular and instructional resources at a teacher's disposal but can also contribute significantly to the teacher's wellbeing (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Inversely, however, cynical colleagues who manifest negative affect can negatively impact the wellbeing of teachers. In a phenomenon referred to by some authors as burnout contagion (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2000; Kim, Youngs, & Frank, 2017; Petitta, Jiang, & Härtel, 2017), teachers' emotional exhaustion is exacerbated through exposure to emotionally exhausted colleagues (Kahn, Schneider, Jenkins-Henkelman, & Moyle, 2006). In this way, negative affect—including regret, cynicism, and emotional exhaustion—can be contagious, and burnout can be transmitted from teacher to teacher within a given school (Papatraianou & Le Cornu, 2014; Pogodzinski, Youngs, & Frank, 2013).

The Need to Expand the Scope of Teacher Education

Although there are certainly personal factors that contribute to the burnout of early-career teachers (Loonstra et al., 2009), a given school's professional climate has the potential to cultivate feelings of cynicism, regret, and emotional exhaustion. If early-career teachers enter schools in which colleagues outwardly express symptoms of burnout, this perception of negative affect is likely to color their own perspectives. If early-career teachers cannot buffer themselves against the negative emotional effects of their professional social network, then the commitment to teaching built up during their pre-service teacher education may be undone as soon as they enter the field (Voss, Wagner, Klusmann, Trautwein, & Kunter, 2017). For this reason, I argue that it is essential for teacher education programs to reframe their missions and to look beyond the preparing of individual teachers for teaching towards addressing unhealthy school climates within local schools. Teacher educators must be mindful of—and must devise ways to help their students to address—the phenomenon of burnout contagion. Even as teacher educators attempt to cultivate pre-service teachers' professional knowledge and skills (Ball & Forzani, 2009), as well

as pre-service teachers' personal commitment to the profession (Tait, 2008), programs must prepare pre-service teachers for the prospect of burnout contagion.

One way to achieve this end is to partner with local schools in an attempt to improve their professional climate (Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Lillejord & Børte, 2016). Specifically, by playing a more active role in the process of induction, mentoring, and professional development within local schools, teacher education programs can help prevent experienced teachers from professionally plateauing (Farrell, 2014; Meister & Ahrens, 2011). If experienced teachers begin to feel that their professional lives have become stale and unfulfilling, they may experience regret and cynicism, and these attitudes, in turn, may transfer via burnout contagion onto early-career teachers. By partnering with local schools and by helping these schools to maintain vibrant communities of professional learning, teacher educators have the potential to intervene in the process of burnout contagion by preemptively invigorating both early-career and experienced teachers (Day & Gu, 2014; Rigelman & Ruben, 2012). While the call for school-university partnerships is not new, the phenomenon of burnout contagion presents yet another pressing reason why teacher educators must consider such school-university partnerships to be an essential component of their professional responsibility.

Combating Negative School Climate by Accentuating the Positive

Research has shown that one of the most practical strategies that can be used to combat and reverse negative organizational climates within schools is to celebrate success rather than to dwell on deficits (Deal & Peterson, 2016). For example, administrators can create time and space for faculty efforts to be publically recognized. Likewise, administrators can facilitate opportunities for peer observations during which faculty are instructed to note and acknowledge one another's teaching strengths. These opportunities stand in contrast to faculty meetings or classroom observations designed to call attentions to deficits, weakness, or unfulfilled mandates (Price, 2012).

Cultivating a positive school climate rooted in trust and recognition will not occur on its own; rather, educational leaders must intentionally create the conditions and opportunities through which these organizational cultures can flourish (Hoy & Tarter, 2011; Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011). Teacher educators can assist in this effort by encouraging school administrators to create such opportunities; furthermore, teacher educators can acknowledge and celebrate the work of practicing teachers, thereby actively contributing to the cultivation a positive school climate (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Hence, combating burnout contagion requires teacher educators not only to celebrate the success of pre-service teachers but also to acknowledge and recognize the accomplishments of practicing teachers in local schools.

Conclusion

This essay has made the case that it is the responsibility of teacher education programs not only to cultivate pre-service teachers' commitment to and preparation for the teaching profession but also to partner with local schools in order to ensure that early-career teachers enter into schools that are characterized by positive collegial climates. This requires teacher educators to expand the scope of their professional responsibility beyond the preparation of pre-service teachers with

respect to content knowledge and pedagogical skill; specifically, teacher educators should accept some professional responsibility for revitalizing the organizational climates of local schools. In doing so, teacher education programs will ensure that their influence lasts beyond pre-service teacher education and that local schools remain sites of collegial support and collaboration, thus fortifying both early-career and experienced teachers against the threat of burnout.

Author Notes

Aaron Samuel Zimmerman is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education at Texas Tech University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aaron Zimmerman at Aaron.Zimmerman@ttu.edu.

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