

TEACHER BURNOUT: A DISEASE OF THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Adamu, Lucky and Nwanze, Peter

Abstract

The problems in the educational sector are universal. One of the current problems of interest right now is the issue of teacher burnout. Teachers are exposed to work loads which produce strain, stress and / or burnout which result in diverse psychological, behavioural and physical correlates. In addition, other problems which are peculiar to our Nigerian educational system are examined. The paper also proffers some tenable solutions to the endemic problems ravaging the educational system. The solutions tendered include professional development, participation in decision making, job satisfaction and economic incentives.

Introduction

Teachers are the crux of the educational system. Their job is not about the transmission of a static body of representational knowledge, but about creating worth-while educational experiences. They thus play a vital role in carefully structuring an educational environment with which the learner, given his current knowledge and potential, can interact (Mason, 2000). Teachers therefore are dynamic instead of rigid in their approach to the dissemination of knowledge (Davis, 1999). In addition, teachers are responsible for controlling the level of student participation so that the activities within a lesson get done. Too much or too little student involvement can pose a danger to each task's completion, so the teacher must control and motivate, or push and pull, their students along (Me Farland, 2001).

Schools need teachers who are committed to school goals and values, willing to exert considerable effort beyond minimal expectations, and strongly desirous of remaining in the teaching profession (Somech and Bogler, 2002). However, studies reveal that teacher retention is a growing area of concern (Fox and Certo, 1999). Teachers are being driven out of the profession by a profusion of government guidelines and regulations as well as the institutions they work for (Cigman, 2000). These multi-faceted pressures result in teacher burnout.

The concept of teacher burnout was introduced in the 1970s (Blase, 1982; Friedman, 2000). Sakharov and Farber (1983) described burnout as the subjective experience of failure in a socially defined hero system. Blase (1982) demonstrated how teachers defined their educational goals and showed how, when they attempt to reach these goals but fail, because of stresses and demands from the organizational environment, the result is - burnout.

Causes of Teacher Burnout

There is a dual cause to teacher burnout. Organizational variables such as class size or, more accurately, student-teacher ratio, role ambiguity, overload, lack of voice in decision making, and lack of feed back from colleagues and administration (Rosenblatt and Inbal, 1999; Rosenblatt, 2001) on one hand and personal variables such as people's need to believe that their life is meaningful, that the things they do, and consequently they themselves, are important and significant on the other hand (Pines, 1993). The existential perspective is supported by research showing teacher burnout to be related to a need for self-actualization, which includes the need for success, achievement, and working at one's full potential (Schaufeli, 1998; Friedman, 2000). Rosenblatt and Inbal (1999) in particular, demonstrated that holding multiple roles in school has the potential of elevating school commitment and a sense of control over one's life, leading to the enhancement of teacher's self-efficacy, work interest, and self actualization. The organizational perspective is supported by Nias (1996) who showed that large-scale innovations affect the emotional dimension of the teaching profession. Teachers often experience intense feelings of vulnerability, self-doubt, and uncertainty with regard to their personal and professional integrity as a teacher when they are forced to implement new innovations (Woods, 1999). The problem is not the innovation per se but the fact that the teacher had absolutely no input in the innovation (lack of voice in decision making). It is expected that such feelings of uncertainty and doubt with regard to one's professional competence will negatively affect

the degree to which teachers implement innovations and the degree to which they are prepared to exert themselves on behalf of such implementations (van den Berg *et al.*, 1999). Because of these findings other researchers are calling for greater attention to teachers' personal experience and subjective perceptions of innovations (Geijsel *et al.*, 2001).

No matter the root cause, teacher burnout is a very serious issue, which must be addressed. A large number of studies show that teachers are exposed to work loads which result particularly in stress and strain (van Dick and Wagner, 2001). At least one third of the teachers can be seen as suffering extreme stress and or burnout (Boyle *et al.*, 1995). Teacher stress may thus be seen as a negative affect with diverse psychological (e.g. job dissatisfaction), physical (e.g., high blood pressure) and behavioural (e.g., absenteeism) correlates.

The Woes of a Teacher: The Nigerian Element

The major problem of teacher education is that the teachers we train are not sufficiently prepared in order to meet the complex demands of the teaching process in Nigerian schools and colleges (Adaralegbe, 1982; Gidado, 1995). In addition to poor quality teachers we are also dealing with a poor quantity of them. The Nigerian adage that "a teacher's reward is in heaven" is an attestation to the low esteem which Nigerian teachers have been accorded as well as their very poor conditions of service (Dorotolu; 2000; Isikwue and Ochu, 2000).

A society cannot hope to advance technologically without a sound scientific foundation. It is through the pragmatic activities and effective roles of highly motivated science teachers that the pupils in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions are endowed with the science culture (ability to reason logically as well as coherently). This is why when Akale (1991) and Fafunwa (1999) were commenting on the significance of reassessing science education curriculum for national development they both observed that the teacher's factor was perhaps the most crucial in the execution of the science, technology and mathematics curriculum objectives in any society.

Proper finance is a major problem in third world countries. In the case of Nigeria we are suffering from the "poor economic conditions" of an oil rich nation (Omoregie, 1995). The situation has placed the educational sector in dire straits. From 6 universities in 1970, and 13 in 1975, the number of Federal Government universities has risen to 25. Accordingly, the total student population increased from 2,754 in 1965 to 259,904 in 1998, representing an increase of 9,337 percent within three decades (Obikoya, 2000; Ukeje, 2002). This significant increase has had a devastating impact on government's ability to cope with infrastructural provisions, equipment and teaching facilities, quality of academic staff, and all aspects of the educational programmes. We have just described the university situation and we all know the condition of our free primary schools. To this presently hopeless situation the government now wants to add 120 Federal Government Secondary Schools to its financial woes. How can the government be shouting that it has no money and at the same time enacting policies which increase its financial burdens? The result of all this mess is that the academic staff in the different levels of the educational system have turned their primary assignments into secondary ones (Aina, 2000). There is a general lack of motivation, which stems in part from lack of opportunities for self actualization.

Tackling Our Problems

In order to transform the educational system and the nation as a whole, we have to focus on the teachers, who are the bedrock of the educational institution. As such, the suggestions that are proffered here centre on the teachers.

Professional development

Kwakman (1999) defined professional development as "the process in which individual teachers acquire new knowledge, skills, and values for the constant improvement of the quality of their services". Whether teachers develop professionally depends on the characteristics of the teachers themselves and also on the characteristics of the environment in which the teachers work and function. Fullan (1993) and Kwakman (1998) are of the opinion that teachers themselves should take the initiative in the domain of professional development, which may include keeping up with the relevant literature, participating in training activities, and experimenting with different didactic methods.

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In this same vein, Teacher Professional Growth Plans (T.P.G.P.) should be instituted (Fenwick, 2001). A supervisor, who also makes sure that the teachers conform to government- specified teaching quality standards, reviews the programmes annually. In addition, TPGPs reflects a general emphasis on lifelong learning. Critics of life long learning argue that the yoking of personal learning to vocational ends subject an individual's whole learning life to measures of organizational productivity and efficiency (Martin, 1999), turning living itself into an endless human resource development enterprise (du Gay, 1996). The authors acknowledge the criticism but offer a rebuttal. The commodity we are selling as teachers is knowledge. Thus, like the car dealer on the road, our job is to sell the most current commodity in our stock.

Teacher Participation in Decision Making

For teachers to be involved in decision making means that they individually experience the influence of their participation in decision making within the school organization (Geijsel *et al.*, 2001). This implies empowerment on decisions that affect midlevel policies regarding school functioning: those that are broader than a single classroom, but still clearly related to the improvement of learning environments (Marks and Louis, 1997). Teacher participation in decision-making thus leads to the successful implementation of large- scale educational innovations by teachers (Rinehart *et al.*, 1998). Why is this so?

Henriott and Firestone (1984) and Duke and Gansneder (1990) identify two main domains of decision making in schools with regard to teachers' participation in decision making: the technical domain, which deals with students and instruction (e.g. instructional policies, classroom discipline policies, and resolving learning problems), and the managerial domain, which deals with school operations and administration (e.g., setting school goals, hiring staff, allocating budget, and evaluating teaching). Participation in the technical decisions refers to those decisions that facilitate teaching and thus have an immediate relevance to the teacher's own classroom (Conley and Bacharach, 1990): Participation in the managerial domain, on the other hand, widens the focus of teachers from the immediate outcomes of their own classroom to the organization as a whole. In addition, it allows teachers to protect their own interests and at the same time get information on the shaping of decisions which they would not otherwise be privy (Cropanzano and Folger, 1996).

The Relationship Between Participation and Commitment

The most widely accepted and used theme in most definitions of commitment focuses on the psychological bond or identification of the individual with an object that takes on a special meaning and importance (Buchanan, 1974). Committed teachers may have strong psychological ties to their school (organization), their students, or their subject matter (profession) (Bilingsley and Cross, 1972; Firestone and Pennell, 1993; Cohen, 2000).

There is a positive link between participation in decision making and commitment (Louis and Smith, 1992). This may be due to the fact that man as a rule enjoys initiating his own ideas rather than responding to the proposal of others.

Job Satisfaction

Looking at the problem superficially some remedies are easily tenable. The old adage "grin and bear it" comes to mind. If one can find joy and satisfaction in what one does, then he or she may be able to reduce some of the effects of stress. Teachers derive a great deal of job satisfaction from their relationship with current and past students who keep in touch with them and form relationships with parents and colleagues (Dinham, 1995; Bogler, 2001). A more relevant corollary is that student achievement is a critical source of teacher satisfaction, a finding that draws implication on teachers competence and efficacy (Bogler, 2001).

Aid and Incentives in the Transformation Game

Incentives are a good way of getting teachers off their backs and back on their feet again. School-Based Performance Award (SBPA) programmes provide teachers with pay bonuses for the achievement of specific school wide educational goals. The group nature of the goal is designed to encourage teacher collaboration for goal achievement (Odden and Kelly, 2002). Studies of student

achievement gains in the United States have shown that by a variety of measures, student achievement has increased under performance pay plans (Smith and Mickelson, 2000; Kelly *et al.*, 2002).

A vibrant teacher's trade union is needed to take care of the collective interests of its members. Often times, however, their hard-line stance draws a lot of criticism. Some critics accuse American teachers' unions of diluting or derailing educational reform efforts, of undermining the authority of administrators, and of impeding economic restructuring and prosperity (Peck, 1988). Other critics claim that they pursue narrow self interests, protect incompetent teachers, and raise the cost of education without improving the quality of education (Poole, 2001).

Nigerian Union of Teachers is on the other side of the spectrum. They are just not serious. It is the Nigerian Teachers Registration Council which registers teachers and not the Nigerian Union of Teachers. It is the unions that should know who is qualified to be registered so that they can protect the professionalism of their occupation. Rather, they are toothless bulldogs that are constantly being accused of misrepresenting the teacher's interest and professional aspirations (Obagah, 2000).

Conclusion

Educational research has been criticized in most parts of the world. The reasons for the criticism are that the research first, does not provide the answers to the questions that government and policy-makers ask; second, does not help professional practice; third, is fragmented into lots of small- scale case studies which so often extol their uniqueness and fourth, is too often inaccessible in terms of publication and language (Pring, 2000). However, constructive ideas are better than criticisms. Instead of criticizing the system, we should all join hands to find better solutions to the endemic problems in our educational systems. Some of the ideas proffered here are quite feasible and should be looked into here in Nigerian.

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