Chapter 14

Stress Management to Enhance Teaching Quality and Teaching Effectiveness: A Professional Development Framework for Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful professions, with a high attrition rate resulting from teacher stress and burnout. This chapter addresses the problem of how to enhance teaching quality and effectiveness by providing teachers with professional development in stress management, specific to the stressors of teaching. Existing research has clearly identified the key stressors for teachers, and evidence-based stress management approaches have been shown to be effective in mitigating teacher stress and improving teaching quality. However, there is little evidence that such professional development approaches have become integrated into the teacher training or continuing professional development curricula for teachers. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of how teaching quality can be improved with a professional development framework of targeted approaches in stress management, which are aligned with the needs of individual teachers and whole schools.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a well-established concept in the psychological literature, and teaching, in particular, is recognized as a highly stressful profession (Hartney, 2008). Recent research shows that teacher training does not typically include stress management (Harris, 2011) and, as a result, teachers often feel poorly prepared to respond appropriately to the stressors of the job (Kerr, Breen, Delaney, Kelly, & Miller, 2011). Teachers’ ability to manage professional stress impacts their teaching effectiveness and can lead
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to burnout, which in turn, impairs teacher effectiveness (Steinhardt, Jaggars, Faulk, & Gloria, 2011). Evidence indicates that poorer stress management results in lower quality teaching (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008), and, in turn, that effective stress management leads to improved teaching competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Despite a promising growth in evidence-based professional development approaches, focused on both stress management for teachers and improvements in teaching quality by addressing the key sources of teacher stress, these approaches have yet to be brought together into a comprehensive framework. The objective of this chapter is to fill this identified gap in the literature, and to provide recommendations for specific, tailored, and context specific professional development activities devoted to stress management.

The objectives of this chapter are: firstly, to review teacher-specific stressors, which impair teaching quality and effectiveness; secondly, to identify evidence-based professional development approaches to reduce teacher stress, improve teaching quality, and enhance teaching effectiveness; and thirdly, to provide a framework of professional development approaches that can be used proactively for teacher stress management, or that can address problems as they arise.

BACKGROUND

The term “stress” has entered our everyday language and taken on a variety of meanings. For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, it is helpful to define what the discipline of psychology defines as stress. The term “stress” is commonly used to describe an unpleasant internal state, often triggered by external sources or “stressors;” for example, occupational stress arising from a difficult work environment. This description fits with early definitions of stress based on the body’s response to threat or danger, known as the “fight or flight” response (Cannon, 1932), through a process of alarm and exertion to escape or fend off an attack (Selye, 1956). Although Selye’s early work identified two types of stress -- distress (negative stress) and eustress (positive stress) -- the overwhelming focus of the stress and stress management literature to date, has been on the consequences, avoidance, and reduction of distress.

As research into stress and its effects has accumulated, so has the negativity with which stress is viewed. Not only does physiological research frame stress in terms of a response to imminent harm, it also evidences that stress causes direct and indirect damage to physical health. Numerous studies have confirmed Selye’s original hypotheses concerning the harmful effects of stress on the body. As a result, stress is implicated as a cause or a precipitating factor in numerous diseases, ranging from everyday health problems such as the common cold (Cohen, Tyrrell, & Smith, 1991) and the healing of wounds (Marucha, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Favagehi, 1998) to life-threatening conditions, such as coronary heart disease (Kivimaki et al., 2002) and cancer (Laudenslager, Ryan, Drugan, Hyson, & Maier, 1983). Additionally, the evidence shows that stress directly or indirectly triggers a variety of mental health problems, ranging from common conditions such as depression (Shu Mi et al., 2015) and anxiety (Wiegner, Hange, Björkelund, & Ahlborg, 2015), to rare mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder (Weiss et al., 2015) and schizophrenia (Corcoran et al., 2003). Over the longer term, exposure to stress is implicated in the majority of physical and mental disorders (Sapolsky, 2004).

The field of stress studies eventually gave birth to concept of burnout (Maslach, 1978), defined as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors at work. There are three central dimensions to burnout: exhaustion; depersonalization, defined as a cynical or indifferent attitude towards others; and inefficacy or reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burn-