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Mental Health Awareness for Teachers: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual realizes their abilities and can cope with the normal stresses of life (Bohare & Tiwari, 2020). These individuals are productive in their work, life, and communities. These people can manage their mental health challenges which can range from high to low (MHFA, 2020). Research is showing a growing need for expanding mental health support in K-12 schools. Schools are in a unique position to address today's mental health crisis among members of the education community. (Mcluckie et al., 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015; Ormiston et al., 2021). In a study of 180 school teachers, nearly 50% scored about the threshold for depression and correlated their mental health to the demands of their job (Borrelli, et al, 2014). Poor mental health in educators is associated with high job demands and low support. Longitudinal research has indicated that educators struggle with burnout, alcohol consumption, and depressive symptoms (Schonfeld et al., 2017). Early intervention strategies and awareness education can prevent mental health symptoms from getting worse even before the individual needs to seek professional treatment (MHFA, 2020).

Introduction

Teaching is a demanding profession, and it requires individuals to navigate a complex web of academic, social, and emotional responsibilities (Zhang & Yu, 2007). Consequently, many teachers struggle with poor mental health, burnout, and low wellbeing, which can have serious consequences for their job performance, workforce retention, and their students' learning and achievement. Schools are in a unique position to address today's mental health crisis among members of the education community. (Mcluckie et al., 2014; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015; Ormiston et al., 2021). Research highlights the necessity for expanded mental health support in K-12 schools, emphasizing the critical role of educators in these efforts. Mental health represents a state of wellbeing where individuals recognize their capabilities and effectively manage the normal stresses of life. These individuals remain productive in their work, personal lives, and communities, and can handle varying levels of mental health challenges (MHFA, 2020). However, in a study of 180 school teachers, nearly 50% scored about the threshold for depression and correlated their mental health to the demands of their job (Borrelli, et al, 2014). Longitudinal studies have revealed that educators often face challenges such as burnout, alcohol consumption, and depressive symptoms (Schonfeld et al., 2017). Implementing early intervention strategies and awareness education can help mitigate the worsening of mental health symptoms before professional treatment becomes necessary (MHFA, 2020).

As more research related to mental health and education begins to emerge, it is essential that these conversations become amplified, and an emphasis placed on school leaders to look for ways to support the mental health and wellbeing of educators. Studies show that with proper care and treatment, people with mental health challenges can improve their condition and recover (MHFA, 2020). As we enter a post-COVID-19 world, and work with educators who struggle with

mental health challenges, school leaders can learn ways to support teachers and principals with early intervention techniques.

Review of the Literature

Teaching is a rewarding profession; however, national data indicate that it is also highly stressful, with chronic stress linked to adverse health outcomes (Harmsen et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2016; von Haaren-Mack et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Mental health is crucial for daily functioning, impacting various areas such as work performance and the ability to manage job-related stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Gray et al. 2017)). The World Health Organization (2006) defines mental health as a state of wellbeing where individuals effectively manage the normal stresses of life, allowing them to work productively and contribute to their community. The teaching profession, including university life, is characterized by high stress and burnout rates, which can adversely affect mental health (Geving, 2007; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Teachers face considerable demands, including high expectations to effectively manage classrooms and contribute to student learning gains (Fontana & Abouserie, 1993). These tasks become even more challenging with large class sizes, diverse learning needs, and variability in school-wide resources and funding. Given these occupational demands, it is unsurprising that teachers experience significant levels of stress. Teacher stress is pervasive, with high levels reported universally across countries and grade levels (Fontana & Abouserie, 1993). Teacher stress refers to negative emotional experiences, such as frustration and depression, which arise from occupational demands like adapting the curriculum to meet diverse student needs and managing behavioral challenges in large class sizes (Kyriacou, 2001). Grasping the factors that influence teacher retention within the educational environment is crucial for maintaining a workforce of skilled and motivated educators. This literature review explores research on teacher retention, mental health

and the COVID-19 pandemic, causes of burnout, the role of leadership support in supporting teachers' mental health, and potential intervention strategies to support educators' mental health. Each of these themes is a key factor in ongoing research related to mental health and the education community.

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention refers to PK-12 educational settings and keeping teachers employed year after year. High teacher turnover rates are disruptive to schools leading to increased costs for district leaders. Studies have shown that several factors affect teacher retention, including the teacher's work environment, level of responsibilities, professional development opportunities, work and professional life balance, administrative support, and competitive salary pay scale (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Doherty, 2020). Currently, teacher retention rates continue to be a significant issue. Teacher attrition is notably high early in their careers, with one-third leaving within three years and half of novice teachers exiting the profession within the first five years. In contrast, more experienced teachers tend to stay in the profession longer than their less experienced counterparts (Billingsley, 2004; Boe et al., 1997; Lindqvist et al., 2014; Shen, 1997).

Teachers' motivation to remain in the teaching profession is enhanced in a supportive environment (Harrison, 2020). Their well-being, job satisfaction, and dedication improve when principals lead by encouraging collaboration, empowering teachers, and providing them with learning opportunities (Williams, 2018). Teachers who feel valued and supported are more likely to stay in the profession (Shell et al., 2023). Additionally, a positive school climate combined with a strong relationship with colleagues and students can enhance job satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of teacher turnover (Doherty, 2020). Principals and school leaders who provide clear communication, recognition, and faculty support can impact teacher morale and teacher

retention. Numerous studies have shown that supportive leadership styles are associated with higher levels of teacher satisfaction and retention. Conversely, a lack of administrative support can lead to increased stress and burnout, contributing to higher turnover rates (Shell et al., 2023).

To keep teachers motivated, principals should foster a positive school culture, address issues effectively, communicate clear goals, ensure the availability of appropriate resources and curriculum materials, provide professional development opportunities, and set realistic workload expectations (Williams, 2018).

Teachers' Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite their continuous efforts to cope, teachers have experienced a decline in mental health (Asma-Ul-Ferdous & Shifat, 2020). The consensus is that anxiety, depression, and stress are the most common challenges during destabilizing situations like the pandemic. Anxiety manifests physical symptoms such as increased excitement, muscle tension, panic attacks, and fear. (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Research indicates the importance of teacher interactions with colleagues, noting that isolation can significantly increase anxiety levels (Huang et al., 2020). Depression predominantly impacts mood (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), whereas stress is marked by continuous activation and tension, frequently resulting in irritability (Antúnez & Vinet, 2012). Stress emerges as a response to environmental demands and can trigger both anxiety and depression (Ruiz et al., 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on the mental health of educators. The sudden shift to remote learning, increased workload, and concerns about health and safety have created unprecedented challenges for teachers (Robinson et al., 2022). Recent studies indicate that the pandemic has significantly heightened teachers' susceptibility to stress, anxiety, and depression. Contributing factors include the necessity to adopt new teaching strategies, revamp

learning materials (such as digitizing and ensuring accessibility), dealing with network connectivity issues, managing disruptions to work-life balance, and coping with potential COVID-19 infections. Numerous factors have been recognized as contributing to the mental health challenges faced by teachers during the pandemic. These factors include the increased workload from developing and delivering online lessons, the insufficient training and support for remote teaching, and the ongoing uncertainty regarding the pandemic's progression. (Robinson et al., 2022). Additionally, concerns about personal and family health and the safety of their own students have added to the stress experienced by educators.

Anxiety can be a serious detriment for both employees and employers, specifically in the occupation of teaching (Jones-Rincon & Howard, 2018). A number of demographic, occupational, and psychosocial factors were associated with anxiety disorder in public school teachers. Numerous studies (Bauer et al., 2006; Bellingrath et al., 2009; Borrelli et al., 2014) have found an association between occupational and psychosocial factors and anxiety symptoms and diagnoses in teachers. Although various demographic, occupational, and psychosocial variables were significantly associated with anxiety disorder criteria, causation and directionality cannot be determined. Goddard, O'Brien, and Goddard (2006) found that teachers in their first two years of teaching experience lower levels of supervisor support, face increased work pressure, and have less managerial control over their curriculum. Furthermore, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization rates peak after 15 months of teaching. These symptoms often contribute to increased rates of anxiety disorder and other psychological issues (Acquadro Maran et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2009). Studies have shown that teachers with higher levels of perceived stress and lower physical quality of life are more likely to meet the criteria for anxiety disorder (Paramasivam, 2015). The SF-36 Medical Outcomes Health Survey (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992)

highlights that quality of life is a component of overall wellbeing. Teachers with high resilience to occupational stressors tend to report better overall health perception and greater job satisfaction. Those who perceive their health in a positive way are typically less neurotic, experience fewer physical illnesses, and feel less tired compared to others (Pretsch et al., 2012).

According to a longitudinal study, elementary school teachers experiencing higher levels of stress and more symptoms of depression tend to create classroom environments that are less conducive to learning (King & Kokores, 2017). Notably, students who started the school year with weaker math skills and had a teacher with more depressive symptoms showed the lowest rates of achievement (McLean & Connor, 2015). When teachers experience elevated levels of stress, children tend to exhibit lower levels of social adjustment and academic performance (Hoglund et al., 2015; Khasawneh, 2020).

Teacher Burnout

Freudenberger (1974) introduced the concept of burnout syndrome, describing it as "a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one’s professional life" (p.160). He explained that burnout, whether professional or personal, occurs when an individual becomes exhausted due to excessive demands on their "energy, strength, or resources" (p. 159). Burnout is defined as a state of mental or physical stress and exhaustion, which can result in mistakes and difficulties in both daily and professional life (Hayes et al., 2022; DeGraves et al., 2024; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024). Employees who are overworked and subjected to high-stress environments with minimal compensation over extended periods tend to experience burnout (Borrelli et al., 2023, DeGraves et al., 2024; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024). Burnout can result in both short-term and long-term effects on the body and mind, including depression, emotional exhaustion, insomnia,

job turnover, and even suicide. (Borrelli et al., 2023, DeGraves et al., 2024, Du et al., 2024, Hämmig, 2024).

Extensive research has identified several factors that contribute to teacher burnout, including heavy workloads, long hours, lack of administrative support, and emotional demands of the job (Agyapong et al., 2022). Experiencing these stressors often results in exhaustion, resentment, and a reduced sense of personal achievement, which are key indicators of burnout. In most professions, occupational stress is linked to the intention to quit. Teachers who report daily or weekly stress are more likely to indicate higher rates of attrition. (Billingsley, 2004; Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Kyriacou, 1987). Research indicates that newer teachers face considerable stress, and multiple studies reveal that about half of them leave the profession within their first five years (Haberman, 2007; Shakrani, 2008; Shen, 1997). School location can also impact stress, with teachers from schools in urban communities reporting higher stress levels than other regions (Haberman, 2007). Additional stressors in the teaching profession include overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, heavy workloads, and encroachment on personal time. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) investigated both direct and indirect factors influencing teachers' motivation to leave the profession. They discovered that a lack of belonging, and emotional exhaustion acted as mediators in the relationship between job satisfaction and the desire to leave the teaching profession. A stressful work environment has been linked to a higher incidence of stress-induced illnesses among teachers. As a result, teachers report experiencing more physical health problems, such as hypertension, headaches, and cardiovascular disease, as well as mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and somatic disorders, when compared to other professions (Dworkin et al., 1990; Yang et al., 2009). Teachers often report a lower quality of life,

and a shorter life expectancy compared to individuals in other professions (Shakrani, 2008; Yang et al., 2009).

Concerns around educator mental health have intensified in recent years, as studies continue to highlight widespread stress, burnout, and emotional fatigue within the teaching profession. Although RAND's 2023 State of the American Teacher survey indicated some improvement from the pandemic's peak, teacher well-being remained notably lower than that of other professions, with 58% reporting frequent work-related stress (Doan et al., 2023). This persistent disparity underscores the ongoing challenges faced by educators in maintaining emotional resilience. By 2024, a national survey found that 60% of educators reported burnout and 22% had difficulty coping, underscoring the persistent strain on the profession (Effective Educator Development, 2024). These challenges are compounded by increased workloads, limited time, and the emotional toll of supporting students through trauma and behavioral issues.

In response to growing concerns about educator well-being, many schools and districts have expanded their mental health supports—but significant gaps still exist. A 2023 report from RAND found that while about 75% of teachers had access to at least one type of mental health resource, only half felt those resources truly met their needs (Doan et al., 2023). To help close that gap, new legislation like the s*upporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act* (H.R. 4120) was introduced in 2025. The bill aims to fund evidence-based programs, peer support networks, and training efforts designed to build resilience and reduce the stigma around seeking help (U.S. Congress. House, 2025). Some states are also stepping up. In Texas, school staff are now required

to complete mental health training that focuses on trauma-informed practices and early intervention (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

Despite ongoing efforts to support educator well-being, systemic challenges remain entrenched. The American Psychological Association (Effective Educator Development, 2024) emphasizes that wellness initiatives must be approached as comprehensive, long-term commitments at the schoolwide level, rather than as superficial or temporary solutions. Scholars highlight the importance of protecting instructional time, minimizing administrative overload, and promoting transparent, bidirectional communication between educators and school leadership. As institutional awareness increases and policy frameworks adapt, meaningful progress will depend on sustained investment, cultural transformation, and a collective commitment to prioritizing the mental health of educators—key agents in shaping educational outcomes.

However, the majority of studies done on burnout in the teaching profession have concentrated on the burnout rate according to teaching level and the three dimensions of burnout; emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment (Dopmeijer et al., 2022). To some extent, they consistently showed that symptoms of burnout were higher among teachers at the secondary level than among teachers in elementary schools (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1984; Burke & Greenglass,1989; Feitler & Tokar, 1982; Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982; Schwab et al., 1986).

Burnout often arises in negative work environments and can severely affect employees' mental health, in addition to harming the school and student achievement. Often, symptoms are not realized nor are they commonly verbalized by individuals. Ultimately signs and symptoms are

manifested through behaviors. School leaders should provide support during the early stages of burnout to prevent long-term effects.

Leadership Support

Leadership support encompasses the guidance and instruction provided by individuals in leadership roles within a school campus or district, spanning PK-12. This includes instructional coaching, professional development, resource coordination, operations management, and student services. Research indicates that teachers who lack administrative support are more likely to leave the profession compared to those with high administrative support (Thibodeaux, 2014). Additionally, Podolsky et al. (2016) found that administrative support is frequently cited as the primary factor influencing teachers' decisions to leave or remain in the profession or at a particular school. The literature highlights the strong links between teacher retention and motivation, leadership styles, and the level of administrative support (Manyok, 2015; Flores & Shuls, 2024; Lochmiller et al., 2024). These elements are interconnected and collectively shape the educational environment. Effective leadership is vital for enhancing teacher retention. Flores and Shuls (2024) suggest that a positive school culture, coupled with strong professional development, teacher autonomy, and supportive administration, can promote teacher retention. Teachers exhibit self-determination when principals inspire, respect, acknowledge, and consider their needs. In contrast, in environments where leaders emphasize failures or provide negative feedback, teacher motivation diminishes (Williams, 2018).

Strong leaders who understand the infrastructure of a department or organization and are skilled at improving conditions to support an efficient and integrity-driven work environment can

significantly decrease the likelihood of burnout and turnover (Borrelli et al., 2023; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024).

Vari et al. (2018) studied the role of school leadership in motivating and retaining teachers. They emphasized that improving the quality of the school leadership can impact teachers' job satisfaction. Shuls and Flores (2020) explored teacher retention policies in highly effective school districts and found that promoting teacher voice, supporting teacher induction, and implementing thoughtful development programs were key factors in retaining teachers. Their research suggests that successful schools often adopt these practices, even without explicit teacher retention policies. Valdes-Gonzalez (2024) used thematic analysis to indicate that leadership style, organizational culture, and intrinsic motivators are key factors in determining teacher retention. To mitigate negative outcomes such as burnout, strategic leadership methods should be employed to ensure staff feel supported. A supportive leadership team that upholds ethical standards fosters trust, which in turn positively impacts employee engagement and motivation (Borrelli et al., 2023; Du et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024).

Impact of Poor Mental Health on Teachers

Research consistently demonstrates that declining mental health among educators undermines their professional efficacy. For instance, Bader (2024) reported that nearly half (48%) of K–12 teachers experienced a deterioration in mental wellbeing that they perceived as impairing their instructional capabilities. Dabrowski et al. (2024) further identify that the prevalence of superficial or poorly resourced wellbeing initiatives often exacerbates teacher workload and contributes to feelings of inadequacy and burnout. Such a mismatch between the demands placed on educators and the supports provided heightens their vulnerability to emotional exhaustion.

The interdependence of educator and student wellbeing is well documented in recent literature. Dabrowski et al. (2024) found that high levels of teacher stress correspond with diminished capacity to cultivate the positive teacher–student relationships essential for student engagement and mental health. Conversely, educators who effectively manage personal stress foster more supportive learning environments, thereby enhancing student outcomes (Dabrowski et al., 2024). K12 Dive (2022) similarly cautions that stressed or anxious teachers may lack the attentional bandwidth to recognize and address emerging student mental health concerns, compounding challenges within the classroom.

Current policy and practice often prioritize student mental health interventions while overlooking the parallel needs of educators. Dabrowski et al. (2024) argue that assigning teachers the role of mental health guardians without adequate training or resources increases their isolation and risk of burnout. This situation is mirrored internationally, where Patrick et al. (2024) report that 46.8% of Australian educators are contemplating departure from the profession within a year due to mounting pressures, a trend exacerbated by declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs. Addressing educator mental health through comprehensive, sustained support is therefore imperative not only for teacher retention but also for cultivating a stable, effective educational environment.

Intervention Strategies to Address Mental Health for Teachers

To address the potential mental health challenges faced by teachers, several support and intervention strategies have been suggested. These include offering professional development opportunities centered on mental health, providing access to mental health resources and counseling services, and fostering a supportive school environment that promotes open communication and collaboration (Robinson et al., 2022). Additionally, implementing flexible

work arrangements and encouraging self-care practices can help teachers manage stress and prevent burnout. The adverse effects of teacher burnout are far-reaching, impacting not only the mental health of educators but also potentially harming the classroom environment, student wellbeing, and academic performance.

A growing body of evidence suggests that fostering collegial relationships among educators is vital for promoting wellbeing and reducing emotional exhaustion associated with the teaching profession. Recent initiatives have focused on enhancing the relational climate among educators, emphasizing the significance of trust and connectedness within educational settings. This focus is particularly critical in light of the emotional demands placed on educators, especially during periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where solidarity and collegial support were deemed essential for coping with increased challenges (Patrick et al, 2024).

Given the seriousness of burnout, implementing preventative measures is crucial. These measures include fostering a positive work environment through team engagement exercises, ensuring proper staffing, and clearly defining work roles and responsibilities (Borrelli et al., 2023; DeGraves et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024). Some organizations have adopted holistic approaches to prevent burnout by encouraging self-care strategies including breathing exercises or meditation and increasing teacher accessibility to therapy. Other organizations hold recognition and inclusion events to show their appreciation for their teams. By developing a school culture where it is acceptable to ask for help during physical or emotional challenges, leadership can reduce stressors that lead to burnout (Borrelli et al., 2023; DeGraves et al., 2024; Hämmig, 2024).

Several factors contribute to teacher stress, with school-related issues like negative student behavior (e.g., disrespect, inattentiveness) being significant predictors of teacher burnout

across all grade levels (Beltman et al., 2011). While school climate impacts teacher stress, heightened teacher stress may also influence the school climate, often leading to elevated levels of staff absenteeism, early retirement, and turnover in the profession (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008, Gray et al., 2017).

Mindfulness and stress management-focused professional development programs enhance teachers' ability to maintain present-moment awareness in a non-reactive way, enabling them to connect with their own experiences and with others with ease, patience, and kindness (Bishop et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Roeser, 2014). Skills are developed through a series of exercises, including body scans, breath awareness, meditative movement, enhanced emotional awareness, and the cultivation of positive emotions towards oneself and others. Well-designed studies have demonstrated both psychological and physiological benefits, as well as improvements in the quality of teaching and wellbeing (Roeser, 2014; Weare, 2014).

Finley and Jones (1986), using a sample of Australian teachers, found that factors associated with acute psychological distress varied depending on the teaching level. For both elementary and secondary teachers, student discipline problems were linked to psychological stress. However, lack of colleague support was a risk factor specifically for elementary teachers, while insufficient supplies and equipment were identified as risk factors for secondary teachers.

Mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and enhance well-being (Hoffman et al., 2010). It involves cultivating a mental state of nonjudgmental awareness of present moment

experiences, including sensations, thoughts, bodily states, consciousness, and the surrounding environment, while fostering openness, curiosity, and acceptance (Hoffman et al., 2010).

Conclusion

By understanding the factors contributing to mental health challenges and implementing effective support strategies, schools can create a more resilient and supportive environment for educators. This can lead to improved outcomes for both teachers and students. Teacher mental health is a critical concern with far-reaching implications for educational outcomes. Effective leadership plays a crucial role in creating supportive work environments, implementing intervention strategies, and promoting a culture of openness and support. Intervention strategies such as professional development in mindfulness and stress management, providing access to mental health resources, and creating flexible work arrangements can help mitigate stress and prevent burnout. By addressing these issues, schools can enhance teacher retention, improve classroom environments, and ultimately, benefit student wellbeing and academic performance. In addition to leadership initiatives and intervention strategies, fostering a school culture that prioritizes the mental health of teachers is vital. This includes recognizing and addressing the unique stressors that educators face, such as workload, student behavior, and administrative demands. Schools should promote open communication, allowing teachers to voice their concerns and seek support without fear of judgment. Professional development should not only focus on academic excellence but also on equipping teachers with tools to manage their mental health. By creating a comprehensive support system that includes access to counseling services, peer support groups, and mindfulness practices, schools can cultivate a resilient teaching

workforce capable of navigating the challenges of their profession while maintaining their wellbeing.

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