

Act or React: How do teachers cope with stressful situations during the pandemic?

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“To have well-being you must have resilience” -Dr. Rick Hanson

Introduction

The sources of stress and fatigue for teachers in 2020 have been complex. Many teachers have experienced switching back and forth between in-person and online learning. In my research I examine how teachers are coping with the "new" stresses of day-to-day life, virtual teaching, in-person learning and their own family dynamics. The Question is: *How do teachers cope with stressful situations during the pandemic?*

Rationale

Teachers like everyone have encountered stressors, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Over the years, learning how to cope with stressors/ACEs has become a norm, but in unprecedented times, such as these, teachers are experiencing more trauma than ever. Learning how to manage these stressors is the beginning stage of changing our mindset and eventually incorporating new relaxation techniques to our daily routines.

Before the pandemic teachers were expected to do more and more without a rest period. They accepted and completed new challenges every year. So, what happens when they are now taking on virtual teaching, returning to In-Person teaching, lack of school and district protocols, national elections and summer protests. Are teachers acting or reacting to the situation or do they have an opportunity to relax from all of their new expectations?

Literature Review

While examining the article, *Amid coronavirus pandemic, teachers' mental health suffers in ways they've never experienced*, I found a study conducted by Laura Willemsen and Elisheva Cohen, which began tracking teachers since the coronavirus pandemic began, focused on a small cohort of elementary teachers in Minnesota. They found the following: (1) The level of stress is NOT sustainable, (2) Teachers have been operating in crisis mode since spring, and that any surge of energy that fueled them through the pandemic's initial months has been depleted. (Luthra, 2021)

In pre-pandemic times, the life of a teacher was hard, and would take a toll on their mental and physical health. A study conducted pre-pandemic by English researchers, found that an increasing number of teachers faced mental-health issues which included sleeping problems, panic attacks, and anxiety issues contributing to teachers leaving the profession. Now, with the trauma of living through a pandemic, ongoing racial and economic inequities, lack of adequate technology, and inadequate reopening plans, teachers have internalized stress and those issues have deepened. (Flannery, 2021)

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federal of Teachers (AFT) this year launched a “Trauma Benefit” program, which includes counseling for teachers who have experienced events in “infection by contagious disease” or “major disaster.” There are mental health webinars, wellness town halls and even online yoga. Randi admits the resource has not been utilized as much as she envisioned and attributes the underuse, to the stigma of recognizing mental health problems and the lack of awareness. (Luthra, 2021).

Methodology

Through surveys this study sought to find solutions to ways we can save our educators from “Teacher Burnout” and begin to move them to practicing “Self-Care”. The research examined how educators throughout the District of Columbia Public School system are dealing with stress during the pandemic and how they have developed their own practice of “Self-Care”. I surveyed teachers that work in all eight quadrants of the city to explore how stress has affected them during the pandemic. I also wanted to know how and if they are relaxing. Ninety-eight (98) teachers answered a fourteen (14) question electronic Google survey. It was sent through the Washington Teachers’ Union (WTU) Morning Brew and allowed for anonymity.

Data Analysis

Since March, 2020, teachers have been under massive amounts of stress. The survey results show that some of the new found stressors are virtual teaching (39.8%); returning to in-person teaching (32.7%); and dealing with the lack of school protocols (10.2%). Their feelings have been magnified (intensified), from burnout (15.3%) to frustration with IMPACT and the lack of support from DCPS (16.3%) and finally with 23.5% experiencing emotional fatigue. Teachers have spent an excess of 4-6 hours after their tour of duty on the computer and 71.4% of them have to force themselves to leave their workspace. Our teachers have had a hard time creating boundaries for themselves.

When asked about relaxation teachers reported a variety of methods such as sleeping, exercising, listening to music, playing video games, talking to friends, and using meditation and mindful moments. After participating in their favorite relaxation technique teachers say that they feel Relieved, Refreshed and Rejuvenated. But they do not take the time needed to effectively achieve a true state of relaxation. Many teachers only relax anywhere from 20 - 50 minutes a day when they have been working anywhere from 9 - 15 hours a day.

The teachers were also asked if they had participated in a Central Office led professional development which speaks to their social emotional learning (SEL) and relaxation techniques, 48% said that they have. But what is alarming is that 38.8% of the teachers have not been introduced to or participated in that same type of professional development on the local school level.

Recommendations

Recently, more “self-care” and mindfulness training have been provided to educators through their unions and personal doctors. Recently, these trainings have been negotiated in teachers’ contracts. As the plans for in-person or virtual learning continue to develop, there are many avenues that the administration and teachers can use to assist in the maintenance of the Social/Emotional well-being of the staff. Some ideas to help create a relaxing atmosphere in the building are: (1) create a buddy system pairing seasoned teachers (10+ years) with new teachers (0-5 years), (2) facilitate whole school “Mindful Moments” during morning breaks such as Home room or Morning Circle time, or (3) a “Walking with the administration” program. These stress-reduction activities as well as others will benefit the whole school creating an atmosphere of relaxation and calm enhancing the morale of the teacher and in turn elevating student achievement. I recommend further study to determine if my ideas for creating more whole-school mindfulness strategies are feasible.

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