Therapeutic Professional Development:
Supporting the Mental Health of Teachers

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Abstract: The education system will benefit monetarily and morale-wise if teachers are required, as part of their professional development, to engage in therapy sessions sponsored by the schools in which they work. The solution to teacher burnout is to find ways to help teachers maintain a sense of control at work. Regular mindfulness meditation has proven that schools would be well-served to make ongoing, group therapy a required aspect of teacher professional development. Therapeutic professional development would cost no more than already budgeted for professional development and may even be administered by existing school personnel. The benefits to learning in schools would more than repay the effort put into support of teacher mental health.

Teacher attrition costs school districts a conservatively estimated $20,000 per teacher who leaves the profession. Teacher burnout is a major cause of teacher attrition for both beginning and veteran teachers. Minimizing teacher burnout saves schools substantial amounts of money (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Burnout is defined as a perceived gap between expectations of performance and actual performance, what Friedman (2000, p. 596) describes as "a discrepancy between expected and observed levels of the individual's professional self-efficacy." Teachers, especially first-year teachers, often put pressure on themselves to be perfect in the performance of their job. This tendency has been described as a clash between teachers' irrational beliefs about job performance and what they are actually able to do in the workplace. The result of this clash is that teachers feel a sense of low self-efficacy at work and feelings of low self-efficacy causes teachers work-related stress (Robertson & Dunsmuir, 2013). To make matters worse, teachers with feelings of low self-efficacy also tend to have feelings of depression and anxiety (Paver, 2009). Depression and anxiety are often exacerbated by the negative coping mechanisms teachers sometimes use, such as escape-avoidance, self-blame, and misplaced aggression (Austin, Shah, & Muncer, 2005).

Floden (forthcoming, p. 4) makes the same point without describing teacher beliefs as irrational when he relates burnout to teacher expectations in the following way: "Circling back to expectations for teachers, the positive path forward might be not to lower expectations for teachers, but to have high expectations that are closely aligned with central purposes of schooling. Burnout comes, not from having to work too hard, but from having too much effort put into extra work that does not contribute to core goals [related to psychic rewards of teaching]." If Floden is right then problems associated with teacher burnout, demoralization, and attrition will not be finally fixed until structural changes occur at schools.

Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi (2021, p. 1) point out that traditional approaches to schooling were shaped to some extent by the aspirations of teachers. That is to say, in their operation schools once may have been guided by "a commitment to a social benefit through the development, support and improvement of the pupils, and this commitment used to override workplace challenges and help teachers deal with stress." But Skinner and her co-authors continue to note: A bureaucratized and managerial approach to the operation of schools has contributed to teachers' loss of commitment to the job, erosion of professional identity, diminishment of instructional confidence, and development of a sense of estrangement in

teacher-student relations. Common stressors in this managerial work environment include organizationally established performance targets, increased workloads, increased accountability, and curriculum revision. Student disrespect and inattentiveness also press down on teachers (Beaudoin, 2019). School climates of problem-saturated conversations, especially about students; teacher cliques; and gossip add stress to teachers' work lives, too. These sources of stress combine to make teachers lose a sense of control over events at work (Huk, Terjesen, & Cherkasova, 2019). The solution to teacher burnout, then, is to find ways to help teachers maintain a sense of control at work.

Solutions to the problem of returning a sense of control to teachers in their place of work range from the recommendation by McLeish (2008) that, perhaps against all odds, teachers find personal time for relaxation and revitalization to Creasey's (2019) hope that, despite teachers' inability to accomplish this on their own, schools may morph into cultural centers of social support for all those who work there. However, there is a third way available to tame most teacher stressors, one that runs between individual teachers taking personal time for themselves and groups of teachers trying to revolutionize the whole school culture. Kirk and Walter (1981) suggest that teachers form support groups among their colleagues to address specific problems and thereby form a sense of sharing and assisting in a process of helping each other master workplace stressors. A good way to facilitate this process of formation of teacher support groups is via therapeutic professional development.

Regular mindfulness meditation, of a variety of forms, has proven useful in renewing teachers' sense of self-efficacy at work. Schnaider-Levi, et al. (2017) engaged teachers in an Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR) meditation technique. Participating teachers engaged in weekly group and weekly individual meeting for twelve weeks running. In the sessions teachers identified thoughts about work that caused them stress (e.g., "My students don't like me."). Then session leaders guided teachers through questions about their thoughts and a set of turnarounds about their thoughts (e.g., "I don't like my students." or "I don't like me." or "My students do like me."). Following the intervention, participating teachers described a sense of centeredness and a greater ability to accept reality. They reported improvements in setting boundaries, flexibility of thought, and self-awareness. These improvements assisted them in coping with the complex and dynamic nature of their profession. Similarly, Czerwinski, et al. (2021) offered teachers the opportunity to engage in the use of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). In this case, after taking a battery of tests to assess participants' feelings of stress, teachers engaged in group therapeutic coloring sessions. Participants received video training about the usefulness of developing mindfulness through coloring tessellated, mandala images. After the training, participants were given the mandalas and crayons and instructed to color the images during their free time, especially if they were dealing with stressful situations prior to the coloring exercise. The intervention lasted one workweek. At the end of the intervention week, participants retook the battery of tests. Participation in the coloring mindfulness activity decreased feelings of burnout, stress, and anxiety, and increased a sense of resilience at work.

Schussler, et al. (2018) engaged teachers in a mindfulness-based intervention, Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE). Presented as part of professional development for teachers in the school where the study was done, CARE PD aimed to improve teachers' well-being through a variety of iteratively presented pedagogical activities: small- and large-group discussion, direct instruction, mindful exercises, and personal reflection. CARE PD included 30 contact hours in four daylong sessions over a 6-week period and a booster session 2 months after

the fourth session. Participants received a workbook and practice CD to initiate their own personal practice beyond the program. They also received coaching calls on the phone. One year after the booster session, participants were individually interviewed about their participation in CARE PD. Even though a year had passed, teachers showed higher levels of adaptive emotion regulation and mindfulness and lower levels of psychological distress and time urgency on quantitative measures pre-intervention versus post-intervention. Most importantly, Schussler and colleagues (2018) discovered the key to success of the intervention was not in reducing the amount of stress participants' felt. Instead, CARE PD helped participants recast their stress as controllable.

Affirmation of this central principle of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), that reconceptualizing one's circumstances as controllable leads to reduction in stress, was also found by Cheek, et al. (2003). After an introductory session in which participants were informed of the procedure of the music therapy intervention they were about to begin, participants were asked to bring to the next session a song that was meaningful to them both in terms of their career and in terms of three facets of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. For the next five weeks the cognitive behavioral music therapy treatment group listened to individual teachers' music selections. The groups discussed the selections as they related to their current stressors. Discussion also turned to consideration of how the shared musical experiences facilitated participants' relaxation and cognitive restructuring efforts. The group worked through two to three music selections weekly. The study included a control group of participants who received CBT as their intervention without any music therapy involved in the sessions. The music therapy group exhibited greater improvement on the three aspects of burnout — emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of accomplishment — than did the CBT-only group. McKay & Barton (2018) achieved much the same results in their study that used art as the basis of CBT. Art objects and activities were used to increase participants' awareness of personal and contextual resources supporting resilience and well-being. This enabled the teachers taking part in the intervention to reimagine their professional lives in ways leading away from burnout and demoralization and towards resiliency and efficacy. Maag (2008) found a most practical result of rational-emotive therapeutic professional development. It helped teachers stay composed when dealing with disagreeable students. As teachers, repertoire of responses to challenging behavior among students deepened and expanded, feelings of competence and capability replaced feelings of lack of control at work.

The results of CBT interventions carried out by school counselors with their teacher colleagues have also been outstanding. Clemens (2007) studied a group of teachers engaged in consultation with school counselors. The school counselor helped the teachers assess their thinking about problem student behavior, the best ways to respond to stress caused by the disruptive behavior, and how to bring about positive change in the classroom. Improved teacher mental health and emotional well-being at work was the outcome of teacher consultation with counselors. Warren (2013) also chronicled teacher participation in online and face-to-face consultations with their school counselors on topics related to teachers' beliefs about their ability to do their job well. Both online group and individual face-to-face sessions supported teacher mental health, with the face-to-face sessions slightly outperforming online sessions. Improvement in teacher mental health saw, indirectly, improvement in student success. In addition, participation in group therapy sessions tended to facilitate the formation of social support systems among participants, especially in the creation of teacher support groups that minimized feelings of isolation and loneliness in the workplace. In this way, therapeutic

professional development realized Kirk and Walter's (1981) recommendation that teachers form workplace support groups to ward off and overcome sources of stress at work. Working together in mutually supportive ways returns to teachers a sense of control over events at work. This is a powerful antidote to teacher burnout.

Taken together, these scattered successes provide strong evidence that the education system will benefit both monetarily and morale-wise if teachers are required, as part of their professional development, to engage in consultative therapy sessions sponsored by the schools in which they work. Schools would be well-served to make ongoing, group and/or individual therapy a required aspect of teacher professional development. Two hours of CBT therapy per week per teacher, just eight hours per month, carried out in any or all of the versions discussed above, would provide a cost savings to schools and school districts in the form of teacher retention. Therapeutic professional development need add no cost to existing budgets for professional development and may even be administered successfully by existing school personnel. Concerns about stigma associated with explicit services to support the mental health of teachers may be met by mentioning the cost-savings and team-building results of the interventions. As teachers begin to work on their own and in conjunction with colleagues in a strong spirit of mutually supportive morale and the school becomes a place of student engagement and achievement, concerns about "crazy" teachers will likely fade. The benefits of ongoing therapeutic professional development for teachers would more than repay the effort put into supporting teacher mental health. As Friedman, (2000, p. 595) observes, "In-service training for all kinds of professionals has proved to be a potent means of reducing stress and burn-out."

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