Burnout Among Teachers : Causes and Prevention

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Abstract

The teaching profession being a helping human profession, the behaviour of students, parents and administrators towards teachers is very crucial and important in determining the level of satisfaction a teacher will get in teaching. Though, teaching profession is considered to be a noble profession, but the harsh realities of the profession are putting teachers under constant stressful conditions. The stress leads to psychological strain and latter resulting into job related burnout among teachers. Not only institutional climate but also the personal factors contribute to burnout among teachers. The burnout teacher fails to perform optimally. They fail to get any pleasure in the teaching. Every step should be taken to alleviate burnout among teachers. A burnout teacher can't develop all-round harmonious personality of students. In order to prevent teachers from burnout, the service conditions of the teaching profession should be lucrative and teachers as a fraternity should get recognition and due respect from the Government and the society. In this research paper, various aspects of burnout among teachers are discussed at detail.

Keywords: *Burnout, Stress, Profession, Strain.*

Introduction:

Education is one of the important activities of mankind for it transformed man from a mere 'two-legged animal in to human being'. This transformation is carried out by the endeavour of the teachers. Highlighting the importance of teacher in the society, National Policy on Education,1986rightly pointed out, "The status of teacher reflects the socio-cultural ethos of a society; it is said that no people can rise above the level of its teachers." Similarly, Education Commission (1964-66) said, "The destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms."

Burnout probably has always been a problem in the human services but various social and political changes in the world have made people more aware of the problem now. At one time, many of the human services now provided by formal organisations were provided instead by informal community groups and structures. The society provided meaning, aid and comfort to the individual from birth to death. Thus, there was a sense of belongingness, which is rare today. Though stress was always present but more people in the past were part of a larger social community that helped them to comprehend and accept stress. This closeness of individuals with the society helped to alleviate stress, reduce strain and burnout (Cherniss, 1980). The problem of job-related burnout is certainly as old as stressful work environments and professional frustration. Earlier it was a hidden problem because, until recently, professionals had multiple options for dealing with their developing exhaustion (Paine, 1984). Increased stress on job due to changed professional trends aggravated the situation. Teachers are prone to job related burnout as they are over-burdened and have little facilities to overcome this burden.

Burnout:

Maslach (1984) pointed out that the first articles related to burnout appeared in the mid-1970s, though they were few in number and scattered among lesser- known publications. Burnout is the biggest occupational hazard of the twenty-first century (Leiter&Maslach, 2005). It is a phenomenon that has been increasing everywhere, creeping into every corner of the modern workplace. Christina Maslach was one of the first people who systematically studied job burnout in the helping professions (Schwab, 1995).

The term burnout was introduced by Freudenberger to describe the later stage of negative process of experiencing continued stress (Dixit, 1992). Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000) defines burnout as 'The state of being extremely tired or ill, either physically or mentally'. Carroll &White (1984) defined burnout as a construct used to explain observable decrement in the typical quality and quantity of work performed by a person on the job. Cherniss (1980) refers burnout as a particular kind of response on job- the tendency to treat clients in a detached mechanical fashion. The burnout person withdraws himself from work in response to excessive stress or dissatisfaction. Pines &Maslach (1978) explained burnout as a syndrome of "Physical and emotional exhaustion, involving the development of negative self-concept, negative job attitude and loss of concern and feelings for clients." Defining burnout, Leiter&Maslach (2005) points out that: (i) burnout is lost energy, (ii) burnout is lost enthusiasm and (iii) burnout is lost confidence.

Maslach (1984) listed some definitions of burnout as:

- A syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind.
- A progressive loss of idealism, energy and purpose experienced by people in the helping professions as a result of the conditions of their work.
- A state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion marked by physical depletion and chronic fatigue, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and the development of a negative self-concept and negative attitude towards work, life and other people.
- A syndrome of inappropriate attitude towards clients and self often associated with uncomfortable physical and emotional symptoms.
- A state of exhaustion, irritability and fatigue that markedly decreases the worker's effectiveness and capability.
- A process in which a professional's attitude and behaviour changes in negative ways in response to job strain.
- A condition produced by working too hard for too long in a highpressure environment.
- A debilitating psychological condition resulting from work related frustrations which results in lower employee productivity and morale.

The characteristics of burnout are (Maslach, 1984; Paine, 1984):

- Burnout occurs at an individual level.

- Burnout is an internal psychological experience involving feelings, attitudes, motives and expectations.
- Burnout is a negative experience for the individual for it concerns problems, distress, discomfort, dysfunction and negative consequences.
- It involves physical, emotional and attitudinal changes in negative way.

Dimensions of Burnout

Maslach (1984) provided three dimensions of burnout on which majority of scholars agree. The most agreed dimension is exhaustion-wearing out, loss of energy, depletion, debilitation and fatigue. The second dimension is a negative shift in response to others i.e. depersonalisation. It is manifested as negative or inappropriate attitude towards clients, loss of idealism and irritability. The third dimension of burnout is negative response towards oneself and one's personal accomplishments, also termed as depression, low morale, withdrawal, reduced productivity or capability. The description of these three dimensions of job burnout is as follows:

Emotional Exhaustion:Emotional exhaustion is frequently the first sign of burnout. Emotional exhaustion is caused by excessive psychological and emotional demands made on individuals working in people helping professions. Loss of energy and the accompanying feelings of weariness are usually the first distress signals. Emotional exhaustion involves feelings of depression, helplessness and hopelessness. The emotionally people feel drained up. They lack energy to face another working day. The emotional resources are depleted and there is no source of their replenishment.

Depersonalisation:Since emotional exhaustion is an unpleasant condition, it is natural for those experiencing it to attempt to find some means of coping. This may involve psychologically distancing oneself from the job. This leads to depersonalisation. This is a tendency to de-individuate and depersonalise clients or students. Excessive detachment and too little concern is an indicator of depersonalisation. This detachment intensifies into disengagement, distancing, dulling and deadness. Though, a moderate level of 'detached concern' toward clients is appropriate and necessary for effective performance in some professions but excessive detachment leads to depersonalisation. Depersonalisation refers to treating people like objects and is often reflected in the use of object labels rather than personal names while referring to clients or students.

Lack of Personal Accomplishment: The third aspect of burnout is a feeling of decreased personal accomplishment and effectiveness. A burnout individual feels that he is not accomplishing what he thought on job. It is when people feel ineffective and also feel a growing sense of inadequacy. The emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation contribute to reduced efforts for personal accomplishment in the profession. Low scores on the personal accomplishment subscale indicate lack of personal accomplishment.

There is lack of consensus regarding the sequence of three dimensions in the process of burnout. According to Golembiewski (1986) depersonalisation is the initial stage of burnout while according to Leiter&Maslach (2005) burnout begins with emotional exhaustion. Majority of scholars agree with the latter view.

Symptoms of Burnout:

Burnout affects the whole person. It affects all the aspects of the person-intellect, feelings, relationships, spirit, physical health as well as job performance. There seems a general consensus that the symptoms of burnout include attitudinal, emotional and physical components. Symptoms of burnout may be summarised as (Cherniss, 1980; Carroll & White, 1984; Maslach, 1984; Schiffman, 2006; Lee & Lovell, 2010):

- Emotional stress (manifested as anxiety, irritability, sadness or low self- esteem),
- High resistance to going to work every day,
- Noticeably less idealistic,
- Feeling tired and exhausted all day,
- Cynical towards clients,
- Blaming clients or students for their own difficulties,
- Labelling clients in derogatory terms,
- A sense of failure,
- Deterioration in performance at work,
- Psychosomatic problems (insomnia, ulcers, headaches, fatigue, high blood pressure),
- Increased marital and family conflicts,
- Anger and resentment,
- Discouragement and indifference,
- Isolation and withdrawal,
- Inability to concentrate on or listen to what client or student is saying,
- Increasingly 'going by the book',
- Avoiding discussion of work with colleagues,
- Rigidity in thinking and resistance to change,

Causes of Burnout:

Burnout is closely related with stress. Stress can lead to burnout but not all stressed persons are burnout (Pradhan, 1994). Burnout has been viewed as "A reaction to job related stress that results in the workers becoming emotionally detached from clients, treating clients in dehumanising ways and becoming less effective on the job" (Maslach, 1984). The literature shows that burnout is caused by stress as whole, stress from the role which person takes within the organisation as well as stress from life events. Stress, in general, means the pressure people feel in life. Stress is a body condition that occurs in response to actual or anticipated difficulties in life. It is a state of psychological or physiological imbalance resulting from the disparity between situational demands and the individual's ability and motivation to meet those demands (Trivedi, 2005). Stress has become increasingly common in organisations, largely because of increased job complexity and increased economic pressure on individuals. As a result of these pressures, employees develop various symptoms of stress that can harm their job performance and lead to burnout.

Schiffman (2006) categorised stress into two types- creative stress and burnout inducing stress. The way one respond to stress determines the kind of stress one is experiencing. Creative stress encourages one to take challenging tasks but in burnout inducing stress one is not ready to accept the challenges rather he surrenders. Individuals perceive stress in response to certain objective social conditions. These conditions are perceived as stressful when the demands on individuals exceed their abilities or when individuals are unable to fulfil strong needs or values (Sahu, 1992). No work situation will produce the same perception of stress on all individuals. Burnout is unique for every person. There is a general sense of agreement in the literature that burnout can be caused by organisational factors, unresolved personal career factors or by interaction of both (Carroll &White, 1984; Dixit, 1992). The causes of burnout may be individual or organisational (institutional)-

Individual Causes of Burnout: Individual causes of burnout include unrealistic expectations, high ideals, workaholic tendencies, inability to make constructive use of leisure, ambivalent commitment and various personality traits. There seems a general agreement that burnout prone individuals are emphatic, sensitive, humane, dedicated, idealistic, people oriented, anxious, introvert, over enthusiastic, weak and unassertive in dealing with people, impatient and intolerant, submissive, unable to exert control over a situation, passively yield to demands and susceptible to over identification with others (Carroll &White, 1984).Specific personal factors contributing to the experience of job burnout may be genetic endowment, temperament, growth and development, physical health status, education and skills, training, motivation and interests, behaviour patterns, personality dynamics, mental health status, work history and general life experiences. The negative changes in attitude and behaviour that characterise the burnout syndrome in the professionals is an individual phenomenon and not all professionals experience job burnout (Wilder &Plutchik, 1984). Age and sex are two other personal characteristics found to be associated with burnout.

Institutional Causes of Job Burnout: The causes of job burnout in the institution include environmental role ambiguity, co-worker stress, inappropriate reward system, lack of promotional opportunities, career dead end, excessive working hours, client overload, powerlessness, role-person mismatch, insufficient role feedback, internal norms and standards of the institution, style of leadership, decision making processes, etc. (Carroll &White, 1984). Overwork is commonly considered a major cause of burnout. But, Dixit (1992) opined that overwork is seldom a cause of burnout if organisational objectives are clear and commitment to those objectives exists.

Burnout among Teachers:

It is often said that teaching is one of the noble professions but the realities of classroom life and institutional environment have made teaching a stressful profession. As a result, many teachers are experiencing that their feelings about themselves, their students and their profession are becoming negative than they were initially. Such teachers do not derive any pleasure from teaching; rather they take it as a routine work. For them, teaching is no more a source of satisfaction. This develops among them a sense of frustration, loss of enthusiasm and alienation from job. These teachers are susceptible to developing chronic feelings of emotional exhaustion

and fatigue, negative attitude towards their students and a loss of feeling of accomplishment on the job (Trivedi 2005). Singh (1997) defines teacher burnout as, "A stress reaction to the pressures and routines of a teacher's assignment. It may be manifested by physical (fatigue, sleeplessness), psychological (moodiness, irritability) and attitudinal symptoms (decreased caring for students). Though researchers differ in their exact definition of teacher burnout; all indicate that it is a response of teachers who have trouble coping with the stress of the job (Schwab, 1995).

The three types of behavioural reactions develop in burnout teachers. The first is development of chronic feelings of exhaustion. Teachers in this stage express feelings of being tired, irritable and emotionally drained. Emotionally exhausted teachers often develop negative, cynical attitudes towards their students. This change in attitude leads to the second behavioural symptom of burnout, depersonalisation. A teacher displays depersonalised attitude by withdrawing from contact with students. The depersonalised attitude of the teacher is further reflected when he treats students as the impersonal objects, calling them derogatory names or using labels to describe individual students. The third aspect of teacher burnout occurs when teachers begin to feel that they are no longer accomplishing anything worthwhile in their work. When teacher feel they are no longer making a difference in students' lives they find that their profession offers few rewards only. Sources of stress on teachers include-role related stress, classroom indiscipline, students' apathy, difficulty in developing appropriate instructional material for students with special needs, lack of sufficient time for professional development, relationships with administrators, colleagues and parents, large classroom size, lack of resources, isolation, fear of violence, limited promotional opportunities, inadequate salaries, involuntary transfers, excessive paperwork etc.

Prevention of Burnout:

As burnout results from the interaction of people and environment, there are two ways to reduce burnout in institutions: by strengthening individual resources to cope with stress in their work setting and reducing the demands and stress that individuals experience in their environment. The traditional approach to reducing burnout has been to wait until it goes away, until work environment happens to evolve into a place that is just the way one like it. The other approach may be to go on vacation as rest and relaxation on a vacation can help recover and give the strength to deal with the challenges and stress on the job. Cherniss (1980) identified four ways to alleviate burnout:

a) Reduce or eliminate external job demands.
b) Change personal goals, preferences and expectations.
c) Increase the workers' resources for meeting the demands.
d) Provide coping substitutes for the withdrawal characteristics of burnout.

Pines (1984) recognised four specific sites or levels for intervention against job burnout-individual, interpersonal, workplace and organisational.

a) Individual level interventions are designed to strengthen an individual's ability to deal with job related stress.

b) Interpersonal level interventions attempt to strengthen interpersonal relations or workgroup dynamics either to decrease stress or to support individual's abilities to deal with stress.
c) Workplace related interventions seek modifications in the immediate work environment intended to reduce stress or ameliorate it in some way.
d) Organisational level interventions include change in policies, procedures or structure of the organisational factors related to job burnout.

To ameliorate burnout four approaches have been in use: the authoritarian-moral approach, clinical approach, training approach and the work environment approach, but all of these focus on any one aspect of burnout. These imbalanced approaches failed. In this regard, it is essential to develop intervention strategies that address simultaneously both person and the environment. Though strategies may be grouped into individual-based intervention or environment-based intervention but for being effective they should be used simultaneously.

Interventions Designed for the Institutions: Though factors contributing to burnout can be found at the level of the individual, the work setting and the larger social context, the most useful point of intervention is the job and work setting. It is easier to restructure a role than to restructure the character of either an individual or society. Prevention of job burnout is far more effective and less costly than its treatment. The treatment of job burnout also entails making changes in the structure, policies and work procedures of the organisation/ institutions in order to mitigate or eliminate stress and frustrations emanating from the work environment (Carroll & White, 1984). Work environment related interventions include: improving hiring procedures and on-the-job training, offering high quality relevant and practical orientation programmes for new employees, granting time outs, job changes, recognition of personal efforts; encouraging and assisting staff to identify and achieve career goals and objectives, adequate compensation for work, commensurate increase in salary with increase in workload (Cherniss 1980). There are five possible points of intervention in any human service agency or institution: staff development, the job and role structure, management development, organisational problem-solving & decision making and programme goals & guiding philosophies of the institution (Cherniss 1980).

Interventions Designed for the Individuals: The foremost step in intervention is giving a relief from stress on the job to the affected individual. This may be done by giving the person time off away from the institution, allocating less stressful job within the institution or to reduce his/her workload. The importance of good physical and mental health can't be ignored in treating job burnout. So, thorough physical examination and personal counselling is recommended. Stress management techniques and need gratification skills could be provided to professionals.

Conclusion:

Burnout is manifestation of prolonged stress in life. The factors causing stress in may be institutional or personal ones. The institutional climate is a crucial factor in development of job-related burnout. If the working conditions of the school/ college are harsh and teacher is unable to get his/ her legitimate dues at time and with respect, he will feel stressed. Prolonged stress at workplace will lead to burnout among teachers. Personal life of teacher may also affect his performance in the school/ college. Preventive measures should be taken to minimise the

occurrence of burnout among teachers. Only a satisfied and cheerful teacher can perform his duty optimally.

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