
PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER BURNOUT IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

BARBARA L. BROCK
Creighton University

This study examines the perceptions of burnout of educators currently employed in Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Data were collected from teachers, counselors, and administrators regarding their perceptions of the causes, symptoms, and prevention of burnout. Results of the study suggest that burnout is largely a symptom of workplace issues that can be identified and corrected. The long-term and destructive effects of teacher burnout warrant the time and financial support needed to improve working conditions for teachers in Catholic schools.

Burnout is a serious and commonplace problem for educators. Teachers experiencing burnout appear exhausted, distant from colleagues, and possibly become cynical toward their students and work. Their students become victims of poor teaching. Many teachers leave the profession. Others, believing they have no alternative, remain—to the detriment of themselves and their students.

Burnout is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments. First defined by Freudenberger (1974), burnout is symbolized by feelings of failure and fatigue. Maslach (1982) described it as a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing with other human beings. In the case of educators, burnout arises from the stress associated with the social interactions between the teacher helper and the student recipient. The teacher feels overwhelmed by the emotional demands imposed by students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

Manifestations of burnout also include reactions of anger, depression, boredom, and sometimes psychosomatic symptoms. Teachers who are no longer able to give of themselves attempt to eliminate their emotional burden by decreasing their involvement. They adopt attitudes of indifference, rigidity, and inflexibility toward students, and the needs and feelings of others are often disregarded (Cherniss, 1980; Farber & Miller, 1981; Maslach, 1976, 1982).

Burnout is accompanied by reduced professional performance; consequently, teachers may neglect preparation for their classes, show little interest in student achievement, and be frequently absent from school. Their growing sense of inadequacy and inability to relate to others create feelings of guilt. Self-esteem crumbles, fueling the downward cycle of burnout (Maslach, 1982).

Teachers who are particularly at risk are those who deal with many students over an extended period of time; lack the support of and rapport with co-workers, administrators, and parents; and contend with excessive paperwork and "red tape." Additional burnout factors may include monotonous schedules, unrelenting bells, repetitive administrative duties, unchanging courses, and lack of adult conversation.

Teacher burnout studies generally focus on two aspects: the personality aspect, which relates to a profile of workers with a predisposition to burnout; and the organizational perspective, which relates to factors in the workplace associated with burnout. Researchers have concluded that although personal characteristics may create a proclivity toward burnout under some work conditions, the main cause for burnout is environmental (Cherniss, 1980; Farber, 1983; Maslach, 1976). Friedman's research (1991) reported that the variables for burnout are found within the pedagogical, administrative, and physical environments of schools. According to Maslach (1982), however, burnout is better understood in terms of situational job stresses, while solutions to teacher burnout are more likely to be found within the school environment as a workplace.

When burnout occurs, the tendency is to blame the person who suffers, attributing burnout to some personality malfunction. Even the individuals who are suffering blame themselves for being weak and incompetent (Maslach, 1982). School administrators, frustrated with the myriad of problems created by burnout, blame the teachers. The actual causes of burnout are seldom discussed or identified; the burnout problem continues.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers, counselors, and principals regarding strategies to prevent teacher burnout and to revitalize burned-out teachers. The following questions guided the study:

What are the symptoms of burnout? What factors contribute to or prevent burnout? What strategies are effective in revitalizing burned-out teachers? What strategies are effective in preventing teacher burnout? What differences exist between the perceptions of teachers, counselors, and principals regarding teacher burnout?

METHOD

A random sample of 10% of teachers plus 100% of administrators and counselors of a K-12 Catholic school district was surveyed. The sample was drawn from the population of 360 teachers, 17 principals, and 16 counselors, based on a list provided by the superintendent of schools. Of the 69 surveys mailed, 45 (65.22%) were returned and useable.

The respondents were surveyed using an instrument designed after a review of the literature on teacher burnout. The validity of the instrument was determined through examination by a panel of five experts in teacher education. A pilot study was conducted to determine the appropriateness of the questions. Cronbach's Alpha was used as the measure of internal reliability.

The first section of the survey provided respondents with a definition of burnout and gathered demographic data. Remaining portions of the survey consisted of questions pertaining to the respondents' perceptions of the following burnout issues: symptoms, contributing factors, preventive strategies, revitalization strategies, and personal experiences. An opportunity for comments was included with each question. In addition, respondents who had experienced burnout were invited to participate in a telephone interview. Of the 13 respondents who indicated an interest in being interviewed, only 7 met the criterion of having experienced burnout. Telephone calls to the seven respondents resulted in four telephone interviews.

RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of respondents were employed in elementary or K-8 Catholic schools; nine respondents were employed in Catholic high schools. School populations ranged from less than 100 to 1500, with the majority of school populations ranging between 101 and 700 students. Tables 1 and 2 provide specific descriptions of the schools and their populations.

Table 1
School Types

N = 45	
School Type	Percentage
Elementary Schools	24 (53.33%)
Middle Schools	12 (26.67%)
High Schools	09 (20.00%)

Table 2
School Populations

N=45	
Population	Percentage
Under 100	01 (02.22%)
101-300	13 (28.89%)
301-500	13 (28.89%)
501-700	09 (20.00%)
701-900	01 (02.22%)
901-1100	01 (02.22%)
1101-1300	04 (08.89%)
1301-1500	01 (02.22%)
1501 or more	01 (02.22%)
No Response	01 (02.22%)

According to 34 (75.56%) of the respondents, between 1 and 10 teachers in their schools were suffering from burnout. The teachers experiencing burnout were reported to have taught between 11 and 15 years. Table 3 reports the number of teachers suffering burnout, and Table 4 reports their years of teaching experience.

Table 3
Number of Teachers in Respondents' Schools
Who Have Suffered Burnout

N=45	
Number	Percentage
0	09 (20.00%)
1-5	24 (53.33%)
6-10	10 (22.22%)
11-15	0 (00.00%)
15-20	2 (04.45%)
21-25	0 (00.00%)
26-30	0 (00.00%)
31 or more	0 (00.00%)

Table 4
Years of Teaching Experience of Burned-Out Teachers

Years of Teaching Experience	Percent of Respondents Selecting This Category (Rank Ordered)
11 to 15	18 (40.00%)
16 to 20	12 (26.67%)
6 to 10	11 (24.44%)
1 to 5	10 (22.22%)
21 to 25	06 (13.33%)
26 to 30	04 (08.89%)
31 to 40	02 (04.44%)
41 or longer	00 (00.00%)

Respondents could select more than one category of teaching experience.

ABSENCE OF BURNOUT

Nine respondents (20.00%) reported that no teachers in their school suffered from burnout. The reasons for the absence of burnout in their schools ranged from “a congenial staff” to “a principal who maintains high staff morale.” Table 5 presents in rank order the reasons for the absence of burnout in the reporting schools.

Table 5
Reasons Attributed for the Absence of Burnout

N = 9				
Reasons	Teachers	Counselors	Administrators	Total Group
Congenial atmosphere	4 (44.44%)	1 (11.11%)	3 (33.33%)	8 (88.88%)
Spiritual growth opportunities	4 (44.44%)	1 (11.11%)	3 (33.33%)	8 (88.88%)
Parental support	3 (33.33%)	1 (11.11%)	3 (33.33%)	7 (77.78%)
Part of a Catholic ministry	3 (33.33%)	1 (11.11%)	3 (33.33%)	7 (77.78%)
Well-behaved students	2 (22.22%)	1 (11.11%)	3 (33.33%)	6 (66.67%)
Vocation to teach	3 (33.33%)	0 (00.00%)	3 (33.33%)	6 (66.67%)
Principal maintains high morale	2 (22.22%)	0 (00.00%)	3 (33.33%)	5 (55.56%)
Staff development	1 (11.11%)	0 (00.00%)	1 (11.11%)	2 (22.22%)
Excellent teaching preparation	0 (00.00%)	0 (00.00%)	1 (11.11%)	1 (11.11%)
Strong teachers hired	1 (11.11%)	0 (00.00%)	0 (00.00%)	1 (11.11%)
Respondents could select more than one category.				

SYMPTOMS OF BURNOUT

Respondents who reported working with colleagues who were burned out described the symptoms as irritability, lack of enthusiasm, dissatisfaction, fatigue, and overwork. A sampling of their written comments includes:

- Blames students for things going wrong in the classroom.
- Doesn't take responsibility.
- Falls asleep at morning meetings.
- Forgets to show up for meetings.
- Complains about students.
- A study in the past.
- Not willing to grow.
- Won't go to activities because she doesn't get paid for it.
- She and her own children seem to have constant health concerns.
- Often makes comments like, "Is it really worth it?"

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The two main factors contributing to burnout were reported as overwork (60.00%) and student discipline problems (55.56%). Other factors included assumption of parental roles, problems with parents, and a lack of appreciation from both parents and principals. Respondents commented, "Overwork is [the] number one [factor]!" Some burned-out teachers are "tired, work only because they have to financially, and would retire if they had an adequate pension." A principal suggested that some teachers experienced burnout because their "gifts were not suited to teaching." Table 6 provides a rank-ordered list of the factors and their percentages.

Table 6
Burnout Factors Rank Ordered by Total Group Compared to
Percentage of Selection in Subgroups

N=45				
Factor	Total group	Subgroups		
	N=45	Teachers n=23	Admin. n=10	Counselors n=12
Overburdened with work	27 (60.00%)	13 (56.52%)	8 (80.00%)	6 (50.00%)
Discipline problems	25 (55.56%)	14 (60.87%)	4 (40.00%)	7 (58.33%)
Assuming parental roles	16 (35.56%)	10 (43.38%)	3 (30.00%)	3 (25.00%)
Problems with parents	13 (28.89%)	6 (26.09%)	4 (40.00%)	3 (25.00%)
Unappreciated by principal	13 (28.89%)	5 (21.74%)	3 (30.00%)	5 (41.67%)
Unappreciated by parents	13 (28.89%)	5 (21.74%)	4 (40.00%)	4 (33.33%)
Lack of professional treatment	10 (22.22%)	6 (26.09%)	1 (10.00%)	3 (25.00%)

Respondents could select more than one category; thus percentages per category will not total 100%.

Telephone interviews (see Appendix) with respondents suggested that special education (not a survey item) was also a challenging issue that may be a contributor to teacher burnout. Teachers reported that parents, disenchanted with local public schools, were putting their special needs students into the Catholic schools thinking that the private schools will “fix them.” Classroom teachers reported teaching 28 to 30 students in a classroom while struggling to cope with learning and behaviorally disabled students without benefit of a special education teacher.

STRATEGIES TO REVITALIZE TEACHERS

Respondents were asked to select strategies to revitalize teachers who are suffering from burnout. Responses ranged from “openly discussing burnout” to “decrease in workload.” Table 7 reports the rankings of the total group, as well as the breakdown according to teachers, counselors, and principals.

Table 7
Revitalization Factors Rank Ordered by Total Group Compared to Percentage of Selection in Subgroups

N=45

Factor	Total group	Subgroups		
	N=45	Teachers n=23	Admin. n=10	Counselors n=12
Discuss burnout	24 (54.44%)	10 (43.48%)	7 (70.00%)	7 (58.33%)
Recognize efforts	24 (54.44%)	12 (52.17%)	3 (30.00%)	9 (52.17%)
Spend time with teacher	18 (40.00%)	7 (30.43%)	5 (50.00%)	6 (50.00%)
Provide paraprofessional	18 (40.00%)	10 (43.48%)	1 (10.00%)	7 (58.33%)
Assist with parent problems	16 (35.56%)	9 (39.13%)	4 (40.00%)	3 (25.00%)
Give time off	14 (31.11%)	8 (34.78%)	2 (20.00%)	4 (33.33%)
Decrease workload	13 (28.89%)	7 (30.43%)	1 (10.00%)	5 (50.00%)

Respondents could select more than one category; thus percentages per category will not total 100%.

Most of the respondents’ written comments concerned strategies to assist teachers with their workload and address student discipline and parent issues:

- Decrease workload without showing favoritism.
- [Provide] more preparation time.
- Decrease load so teacher can concentrate on [fewer] areas.
- [Provide] aides to lessen the load.
- Support parents with parent problems.
- Have a dean of students for out-of-hand problems.

Low salaries and few incentives (not survey items) were also cited in writing as contributors to burnout:

- Low pay and low self-esteem contribute greatly.
- Provide incentives for hard-workers.
- Increase salary.
- Pay for enrichment courses to revive teaching.
- Give incentives for hard workers and increase pay to match that of public schools.

A few respondents wrote about the importance of teacher recognition, the need for personal renewal, and the principal's responsibility to create a positive work environment. Principals wrote that part of their responsibility was to help teachers develop professionally:

- Increase recognition. All teachers would benefit from this; all need to feel appreciated.
- Build personal leave time into the contract.
- Encourage mental health days.
- Create a positive work atmosphere.
- [The principal] shouldn't complain herself. The principal needs to be visible in the building. [Principals] should help teachers get a good assessment of their gifts and help to focus on building strengths.
- Help teachers take personal responsibility for their performance.

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT TEACHER BURNOUT

Respondents selected strategies that principals could use to prevent teacher burnout. Preventive strategies selected by the total group of respondents ranged from "involving faculty in school decisions" to "time for teacher collaboration."

The top five ranked responses for the three subgroups of teachers, counselors, and principals were compared to each other and the total group. The only item ranking in the top five for each of the three subgroups was "involving faculty in school decisions." Most of the five highest-ranking items were shared by two of the groups. However, some items selected as effective strategies for subgroups were not included in the top five for the total group. For instance, "listening to teacher concerns" ranked first for the teachers and ranked sixth on the list for the total group. "Discussing burnout with faculty" ranked second on the counselors' list and ranked eighth on the list for the total group. "Providing increased recognition for teachers" ranked third on the list for principals and ninth on the list for total respondents. Table 8 ranks the top choices for the total group and reports the percentage of

respondents selecting the item from each of the three subgroups. Table 9 reports the top four ranked items for each of the subgroups.

Table 8
Burnout Preventive Factors Rank Ordered by Total Group Compared to Percentage of Selection in Subgroups

Factor	Total group N=45	Teachers n=23	Subgroups Admin. n=10	Counselors n=12
Include teachers in decisions	21 (46.57%)	9 (39.13%)	5 (50.00%)	7 (58.33%)
Have rapport with teacher	16 (35.56%)	8 (34.78%)	3 (30.00%)	5 (41.67%)
Decrease teacher workload	16 (35.56%)	8 (34.78%)	4 (40.00%)	4 (33.33%)
Provide planning periods	16 (35.56%)	8 (34.78%)	4 (40.00%)	4 (33.33%)
Address spiritual needs	16 (35.56%)	8 (21.74%)	4 (40.00%)	4 (33.33%)
Listen to teacher concerns	14 (31.11%)	10 (43.48%)	1 (10.00%)	3 (25.00%)
Allow time for teacher collaboration	14 (31.11%)	7 (30.43%)	3 (30.00%)	4 (33.33%)
Respondents could select more than one category; thus percentages per category will not total 100%.				

Table 9
Burnout Remedies Rank Ordered by Teachers, Counselors, Administrators

Rank	Teachers	Counselors	Administrators
1st	Increase teacher recognition.	Increase teacher recognition.	Burnout discussions.
2nd	Discuss burnout with teacher.	Discuss burnout with teacher.	Send teacher to a conference.
	Provide paraprofessional.	Provide paraprofessional.	Pay more attention to teacher.
3rd	Assist with parent problems.	Provide attention to teacher.	Provide teacher with new challenge.
			Assist with parent problems.
4th	Give teacher time off.	Decrease workload.	Encourage leaving the profession.

The written comments of nine respondents suggested that increasing salaries would prevent teacher burnout. Their concerns revolved around the disparity between public and parochial school salaries as well as the salary inequities within diocesan schools.

- Increase pay to match that of public schools.
- We need a fund to pay teachers who take on extra duties.
- An established diocesan salary scale would help.
- All teachers should receive the same salary based on experience and educational credits no matter in what parish they teach. Right now it depends upon the economics of the parish. Wealthier parishes can afford to pay their teachers a higher salary and those from inner city receive help from the government, title programs, etc. There should be a balance.

A second issue that surfaced in respondents' written comments was teacher development. Administrators who seemed to consider it their responsibility to assist teachers in maximizing their potential wrote comments regarding development:

- Provide opportunities and encourage teachers to take opportunities to visit with colleagues.
- Work with teachers in their strength areas; focus on what they do well and help them do that better.
- Minimize teacher limitations by helping to compensate for them.
- If their [teachers'] gifts don't fit teaching, help them work through to a new profession that does fit.

One principal wrote about beginning teachers and the possibility of their falling victim to burnout:

Educate beginning teachers about perils of burnout and learning to say no discriminately. Also, protect beginning teachers by weighting different committee assignments. Don't give the most demanding jobs to new teachers. Not fair, but often seasoned staff will want to give [the tough jobs] to the new kid.

Suggestions from respondents who were interviewed focused mainly on special education. They reported that teacher burnout would be minimized and students better served if the diocese either 1) hired special education teachers to assist with special needs students or 2) hired special education consultants to provide student testing and assistance to teachers. Less effective strategies included 1) decreasing the class size in K-8 schools, given the number of special education students attending; and 2) screening students who enter to decrease the number of special needs students for whom the diocese does not have programs.

Asked if they were currently experiencing teacher burnout, 7 (15.56%) replied affirmatively; 24 (53.33%) responded that they were not; and 14

(31.11%) did not respond to this question. Of the seven teachers who responded that they were experiencing burnout, 3 (42.86%) reported that they would possibly leave teaching.

Questioned about their past experiences with teacher burnout, 20 (44.45%) respondents said that they had never experienced teacher burnout, 6 (13.33%) did not respond to the question, and 19 (42.22%) responded that they personally had experienced burnout. Respondents who reported personal experiences with burnout were asked to identify strategies that they used to recover. The strategies most often mentioned related to decreasing workload and discipline problems, time away from teaching, moving to a different school, and changing their attitude. One simply said, "I weathered through it; it got better." Examples of their written comments include:

I traveled extensively that summer and totally refreshed myself. The next school year I allowed myself one school evening a week free of school work.

[I used] time off for vacation in summer [as a] time to "sound-off" with other teachers experiencing the same thing, [used] encouragement from experienced teachers who know teaching gets easier over time.

Got out of teaching for a while; left the profession for a year; took time off from teaching; left teaching for counseling.

I left a negative school with little administrative support; changed locations but only after refocusing; changed schools and job; [moved to a school with] a new principal who was sensitive to my workload.

I began taking personal responsibility for my growth as a professional; got help to refocus on my talents [and pursued assignments] that I could do with my gifts and talents; became more positive; discussions with the principal, other teachers, and family.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The symptoms of teacher burnout described by respondents in this study were consistent with symptoms of burnout described in the literature on teacher burnout (Cherniss, 1980; Farber, 1983; Friedman, 1991; Maslach, 1976). Burnout causes, reported as overwork, discipline problems, assuming parental roles, problems with parents, and a lack of appreciation, also were consistent with the literature on teacher burnout. However, written and interview comments of respondents indicated that low salaries and special education issues, neither of which were listed as items on the survey instrument, were also factors in teacher burnout.

Few differences existed between the strategies suggested by teachers, counselors, and principals to revitalize teachers who were burned out. All of them believed that openly discussing burnout with the teacher and providing recognition were important. Yet none of the respondents who indicated they had recovered from burnout mentioned discussing the subject with their principal or receiving any increased recognition. They reportedly handled the burnout themselves, discussed it with family and colleagues, and in some cases, changed to a different school.

Findings of the study indicate that principals have the opportunity to become more proactive in preventing burnout and working with teachers to resolve their burnout problems. While two of the causes of burnout identified in this study are beyond the immediate control of principals, most of the burnout factors reported reside within the school as a workplace. In either case, principals can and should make efforts to lobby for and create optimal working conditions for teachers.

Respondents expressed frustration with the numbers of special education students they were expected to serve, given their lack of expertise in this area and the unavailability of a special education specialist in the building. According to respondents, the school district lacks the personnel to perform special education testing and diagnosis and to provide programs for special needs students. Developing special education programs that serve the schools or denying enrollment to special needs students for whom services are not provided could diminish teacher burnout. This is a dilemma that requires balancing the justice of providing a Catholic education to all students with the financial feasibility of developing extensive special education programs. In this situation, the school principals have no power to resolve the situation. However, they are in a position to speak for the beleaguered teachers and underserved students in their schools and to lobby for improvements in the system.

A second burnout factor the solution to which lies beyond the walls of the school is the salary issue. The issue of salary was noted through written comments of respondents in this study as a contributing factor to burnout. Concerns revolved around disparities between public and parochial teacher salaries as well as inequities among diocesan schools. Salary becomes a burnout factor when it is linked to the self-esteem of the individual. Self-esteem is a personality variable and a critical factor in the predisposition of teachers to burnout. Not only does it have an effect on individual perceptions of personal accomplishment, it also functions as a lens through which effects of the organizational factors filter (Byrne, 1992). Some individuals perceive salary and/or recognition as salient indicators of their self-esteem. Thus a low salary or a salary lower than one's counterparts is a contributing factor to low self-esteem, and subsequently, burnout. The salary issue described by respondents in this study is not unique to this diocese. The teaching profession in

general, and Catholic schools in particular, struggle with this issue. Again, principals may not have the power personally to resolve the issue; yet they need to stand in support of whatever equitable salary solutions can be gained for teachers.

Most of the suggestions that respondents made for preventing burnout and revitalizing teachers are clearly within the province of the building principal. For instance, lack of recognition was reported as a major factor in burnout. For individuals for whom recognition is a strong determinant of self-esteem, little attention and recognition for their efforts typically result in decreased productivity and a loss of enthusiasm for their work. Increased recognition from the principal for all teachers would be a positive step in burnout control.

Although teachers, counselors, and principals reported some variance in how they prioritized strategies, the three groups agreed that faculty should be involved in school decisions. Other items that ranked within the five most important by each of the three subgroups included equalizing teacher workloads, providing planning periods, establishing rapport with teachers, listening to teacher concerns, discussing burnout with faculty, recognizing accomplishments, providing spiritual growth opportunities, and sending teachers to occasional conferences. Principals should note that conferences and spiritual growth activities were reported by the total group as solutions but were not among the top choices of teachers, who favor solutions that provide relief from their overwhelming workloads.

Individuals who had recovered from teacher burnout and a few principals commented that sometimes teachers have selected the wrong profession or made an inappropriate choice within the education profession. Some of the respondents who recovered from burnout did so by leaving teaching and moving into counseling or administration. According to comments from some of the principals, it is their responsibility to help teachers determine where their gifts lie and redirect them into alternative career choices when appropriate. That may mean suggesting a career outside the teaching profession.

Burnout, regarded as a symptom of a larger problem, bears the promise of a solution. Results of this study suggest that burnout is a symptom of workplace issues that principals can identify and correct. Given the long-term destructive effects of teacher burnout on students and teachers, the time and financial support needed to improve the workplace for teachers are clearly warranted.

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Barbara Brock is Education Department chair and director of school administration at Creighton University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Barbara L. Brock, Education Department, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Have you experienced teacher burnout?

Have you completely recovered?

How did you know that you were experiencing burnout?

How did you feel?

Why do you think you became burned out?

How did you help yourself recover?

Did anyone else help you?

Did your principal offer assistance?

What could have been done to prevent burnout?

By your principal

By the district

By colleagues

During pre-service training

During your first year of teaching

What suggestions do you have for teachers experiencing burnout?

What suggestions do you have for principals struggling to help teachers overcome burnout?

What suggestions do you have for principals who want to prevent teachers from becoming burned out?

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