The Relationship Between Teacher Burnout And Student Misbehavior

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Abstract

This study examined the of seriousness at which agriculture teachers view the misbehavior of students enrolled in their agriculture programs today and sought to determine if the level of seriousness of student misbehavior in agricultural education has changed over time. The participants in the study were 165 agricultural education teachers in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. These teachers rated 77 misbehaviors according to how serious a problem it creates for them in their agriculture programs. No misbehaviors received a rating higher than 2.0 on a scale that had 4.0 as the critically disruptive behaviors. This indicates that student misbehavior is not a serious problem in agricultural education and that instruction is, at most, minimally disrupted. The teaching profession is one of the most visible professions in the world, and even though significant improvements have been made in student achievement, society continues to expect more from its teachers. As the gap widens between the public's expectations of education and the teachers ability to deliver that education, burnout will continue to be a concern. This study sought to determine the level of burnout experienced by agriculture teachers in three southeastern states using the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educator's Survey. The study found that agricultural teachers experience moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, low levels of depersonalization in relationships with students, colleagues and others, and a high degree of personal accomplishment in their work. An agriculture teacher's gender, academic degree, field preparation method, and annual contract length do not seem to influence teachers' responses on each of the sub-scales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory nor do the size of the school, the type of community, and the size of the agricultural education department. The age and years of teaching experience of the agriculture teacher is related to depersonalization scores, but not to emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Introduction

Ask parents to identify the problems facing schools today, and they are likely to respond that a lack of discipline among students is a serious problem (Rose & Gallup, 2000). The public has identified discipline as a predominant problem in schools during the past 20 years and contends that stricter disciplinary measures are the essential factor in improving schools (Langdon & Vesper, 2000). The public perceives that managing student behavior is an important component of the teacher's duty (Pestello, 1989). Unfortunately, the physiological, cognitive and moral dimensions to behavior make it difficult for instructors to diagnose and treat misbehavior (Blakeney, 1990).

The job of being an agricultural education instructor is both demanding and challenging. Agriculture teachers draw upon physical, emotional and intellectual resources in order to be effective in the classroom (Cano, 1990). Teachers often find themselves working well beyond a 40-hour week as they supervise student projects, coach career development teams, evaluate student work and prepare lessons (Straquadine, 1990). The long hours at work, coupled with the stress of teaching could eventually lead to debilitating health problems (Vaughn, 1990). Furthermore, the hazards of laboratory instruction are aggravating stress factors that often lead to chronic health problems and absence from the classroom (Lee, 1990). As a consequence, agriculture teachers are prone to experience a condition called "burnout".

Much of the research in the area of burnout can be traced to Herbert Freudenberger, a psychologist practicing in New York during the 1960's and 70's, who used the term to describe the effects of overwork, exhaustion and frustration he experienced while operating a free clinic for drug users and indigent persons. Freudenberger (1974) defined the problem as one of chronic exhaustion and frustration resulting from continued devotion to a goal or principle that has failed to produce a corresponding reward

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Teacher burnout

Maslach (1981) defined burnout as a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and loss of a sense of personal accomplishment. This condition evolves primarily in individuals who work in human services occupations such as education, social work, police and emergency services. Burnout is manifested in the following ways: work overload, lack of control over one's work environment, lack of community among teachers in the school, lack of fairness in work assignments and the uneven distribution or absence of rewards (Maslach, 1981). Teachers are agents of change for many social problems including drug and alcohol abuse, physical, and mental abuse among young people (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996). In addition to these problems, teachers are also expected to provide individualized instruction and enrichment activities even though 24% of America's classrooms are overcrowded (United States Department of Education, 2001). In the face of these challenging tasks, teachers must perform even though the necessary human and fiscal resources are often lacking (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996). Mullins (1993) reported that the daily job demands placed on teachers were major causes of unrelieved stress. In recent years, the credibility of teachers has been eroded as the public offers competing and often conflicting solutions to the problems of education (Gough,

2000). A consequence of these conditions has led teachers to leave the profession prematurely (Malach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996).

Student misbehavior

Student misbehavior can be defined as any behavior that interferes with the effectiveness of the teacher's instructional plan or a student's ability to learn (Stebbins, 1971). There are three variables in most instances of misbehavior: the student with the problem, the environmental conditions under in which the problem occurs, and the teacher (Debruyn, 1983). The variable that can be controlled with the greatest ease is the teacher's behavior. Thus, the teacher must not only diagnose the problem, but take steps to adjust instruction and interaction with students to deplete the inappropriate behavior (Debruyn, 1983). Students recognize that teachers play a major role in curtailing inappropriate behavior through the employment of effective instructional activities (Supapron, 2000; Doyle, 1986)

When misbehavior reaches a certain point, instruction fails to have its desired effect on the students. Recognizing the seriousness of behavior in the classroom is an essential part of teaching. Teacher-preparation programs should understand the problems confronting teachers in the classroom with regard to student misbehavior if instruction is to work and students are to learn. Providing teachers with valuable tools to manage student behavior effectively could slow the teacher attrition rate in agricultural education (Moore & Camp, 1979). Stebbins (1971) found that teachers rarely communicate among themselves to any depth about the subject of student misbehavior even though the stress generated by misbehavior was of greater concern than other working conditions (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Since most teachers spend the majority of their workday almost exclusively with pupils, most teachers tended to formulate their own definition of misbehavior and handle those misbehaviors accordingly (Borg & Riding, 1991).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if a relationship exists between student misbehavior and teacher burnout in agricultural education. To accomplish this, the study proposed to:

1. Assess the attitude of burnout of a sample population of agricultural education teachers through employment of the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

2. Assess the ability of agricultural education teachers to cope with student misbehavior through employment of a survey instrument. This instrument gathered data on teacher responses to 77 different behaviors exhibited by students.

3. Compare the findings from the two surveys to determine if student misbehavior and teacher burnout are correlated.

Procedures

This descriptive study utilized a proportional sample of 248 agricultural education instructors in three Southern states. The student misbehavior survey instrument developed and validated by Camp and Garrison (1984) served as the basis for instrument design. Additional refinements were made to the instrument based on the findings of Burnett and Moore (1988). The instrument gathered demographic data and asked respondents to rate 77 behaviors according to how serious a problem they created for them in their respective agriculture programs. Two statements were added regarding the unauthorized use of the Internet and the presence of plagiarism in student work (Vernon, Bigna, & Smith, 2001). The revised instrument generated a Cronbach's Alpha of .98. The rating scale ranged from 0 (Not a problem) to 4 (Critical – Behavior is unmanageable and instruction is halted)

The Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educator's Survey (MBI-ES) was the instrument used to determine the frequency of burnout in respondents. The MBI-ES is the predominant instrument used to assess burnout in teachers and educational administrators (Maslach, Jackson & Schwab, 1986). The MBI-ES consists of 22 statements describing the feelings an individual might have as a result of being over-stressed or burned out. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency at which they experienced these feelings by selecting from a list of six response choices. that ranged from 0 (Never) to 6 (Everyday). The MBI-ES measures burnout on three sub-scales: Emotional Exhaustion – Chronic emotional fatigue resulting from counseling and teaching a large number of individuals on a continual basis; Depersonalization – An indifferent and negative attitude toward students characterized by the use of disparaging labels to describe students.; and Personal Accomplishment – The contribution a teacher makes for the well-being and intellectual advancement of students. Feelings of low personal achievement can lead to burnout. The response scale for personal accomplishment is different from the other two sub-scales because the scoring is reversed. That is, a score of less that 32 on the personal accomplishment sub-scale means a high degree of personal accomplishment. The response categories and their corresponding values for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment on the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996) are presented in Table 1. The individual scores for each question pertaining to a category of burnout are added together, resulting in the potential scores depicted in Table 1.

Table 1
Response Categories for Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment on the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey

Response Category	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
High	27 or over	13 or over	0-31
Moderate	17-26	7-12	32-38
Low	0-16	0-6	39 or over

Note. The numerical values for the personal accomplishment subscale are reversed. A score of less that 31 on the personal accomplishment sub-scale indicates a high degree of personal accomplishment.

The MBI-ES is not designed to label individuals as burned out. Instead, it is most beneficial in identifying areas within the school system that would improve the working conditions for teachers. A study by Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) and Gold (1984) validated the three-factor structure of the instrument. Iwanicki and Schwab's (1981) measure of internal consistency yielded a Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha of .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, .76 for Depersonalization, and .76 for Personal Accomplishment. Gold's (1984) Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha yielded .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, .74 for Depersonalization, and .72 for Personal Accomplishment. This study yielded a Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha of .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, .75 for Depersonalization, and .77 for Personal Accomplishment.

A Pearson Product Moment Correlation was computed between the aggregate scores for each of the burnout sub-scales on the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the aggregate score on the misbehavior instrument. The agriculture teachers were mailed an introductory letter and survey instrument. Subsequent mailings to were made non-respondents and the final response rate was 67% (n = 165 respondents). Early responders (n = 127) were compared to late responders (n = 38) and no significant differences were found to exist (Miller & Smith, 1983).

Findings

Males made up 76% of the sample. Teachers with a degree in agricultural education comprised the majority of respondents (86.7%), and 48.5% had either earned an advanced degree beyond the baccalaureate level or had completed some type of post-baccalaureate work. One-third of all teachers in the sample (n = 109) held 12-month contracts. The largest groups of respondents teach were single-teacher programs (42.4%) and two-teacher programs (38.2%). Rural schools with enrollments between 1000 and 2000 students made up slightly more than half of the communities in which the agricultural education programs in this study were located. Seventy-six percent of the schools in the sample operated on a block-schedule format.

Agricultural education instructors and burnout

Using Maslach's scale as described in Table 1, 48% of the respondents reported a low degree of emotional exhaustion from their work. The mean score for respondents was 18.20 (SD = 10.47) indicating moderate emotional exhaustion. Almost 33% of participants experienced moderate degrees of emotional exhaustion and 19% reported a high degree of emotional exhaustion. However, at least a few times per month, some teachers in this study feel completely exhausted at the end of the school day (M=3.20, SD=1.62) and emotionally drained by the experience (M=2.91, SD=1.62). A few teachers also report that they believe they are occasionally putting too much effort into their work (M=2.76, SD=1.73). To an even lesser extent, teachers are finding themselves frustrated (M=2.35, SD=1.57) and burned out (M=1.88, SD=1.53) from the teaching experience. Finally, teachers rarely find themselves adversely reacting in situations where they must work with others (M=1.17, SD=1.27). Teaching and working with others is not overly stressful (M=.87, SD=1.06) to agricultural education teachers. Table 5 presents respondents' scores on emotional exhaustion on the job.

For depersonalization, the overall mean score for respondents was 5.96 (SD = 5.21). Sixty-four percent of respondents reported that they were experiencing a low degree of

depersonalization in their relationship with others (M=1.45, SD=1.45) while 24% reported moderate degrees of depersonalization and 12% reported high degrees of depersonalization. They perceived that students were blaming them for their problems only a few times during the academic year. Teachers rarely exhibited a callous attitude toward others (M=1.49, SD=1.69) and their concern that their teaching role was hardening their emotions was similarly infrequent (M=1.24, SD=1.54). An uncaring attitude toward students (M=.96, SD=1.37) and a disposition to treat students as impersonal objects (M=.95, SD=1.21) occurred in very rare instances. Table 6 shows the respondents' scores on depersonalization.

For personal accomplishment, the mean score for respondents was 8.04 (SD = 5.98). None of the individual respondents scores fell outside of the high personal accomplishment range on the scale. All of the scores were in the range identified by Maslach (1996) as indicative of high personal accomplishment. Teachers feel exhilarated by working with students and energetic about their work. They deal with emotional problems in a calm manner and are adept at expressing empathy towards students. They see themselves as being influential in helping students solve problems. Respondents believe they have accomplished many worthwhile things and are a positive influence in the lives of students. They also create a relaxed learning environment in which students can learn. Table 7 describes respondents' scores on personal accomplishment at work.

Agriculture teachers and student misbehavior

A majority of respondents did not find any of the 77 behaviors addressed by the questionnaire to be of such seriousness that the class was more than minimally disrupted. Overall, teachers perceived student behaviors to be relatively easy to manage. The item with the highest mean score was that students have a negative attitude toward school (M=1.88, SD = 1.06). This was followed closely by students talking without permission during a class or formal assembly (M=1.85, SD=0.90) and the students' failing to take responsibility for their actions (M=1.83, SD=0.97). Teachers also ranked highly the students' failure to bring essential materials to class (M=1.82, SD=0.94) as well as the tendency for students to act in a clowning or foolish fashion (M=1.73, SD=0.91). Teachers ranked certain passive misbehaviors higher than others, such as inattentiveness (M=1.57, SD=0.87) and a failure to complete in-class assignments (M=1.53, SD=0.87). Students also exhibited active misbehaviors such as interfering with the work of others (M=1.55, SD=0.79) and displaying hyperactivity (M=1.51, SD=0.84). On the scale used in the study, these ratings do not constitute serious misbehaviors. Table 2 depicts the mean scores for each item on the Maslach Burnout Inventory.

Table 2
Mean Scores of Respondents on Burnout SubScales

Item Description	Mean	SD
Emotional Exhaustion		
I feel used up at the end of the workday.	3.20	1.62
I feel emotionally drained from my work.	2.91	1.62
I feel I'm working too hard on my job.	2.76	1.73
I feel frustrated by my job.	2.35	1.57
I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.	2.15	1.67
I feel burned out from my work.	1.88	1.53
Working with people all day is really a strain for me.	1.17	1.27
I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.	1.11	1.25
Working directly with people puts too much stress on me.	.87	1.06
Depersonalization		
I feel students blame me for their problems.	1.45	1.45
I've become more callous toward people since I took this job.	1.49	1.69
I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.	1.24	1.54
I don't really care what happens to some students.	.96	1.37
I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal objects.	.95	1.21
Personal Accomplishment		
I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students.	1.54	1.49
I feel very energetic.	1.46	1.41
In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.	1.45	1.54
I can easily understand how my students feel about things.	1.32	1.52
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.	1.26	1.31
I deal very effectively with the problems of my students.	.90	1.32
I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.	.87	1.17
I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students.	.78	1.18

Note. 6 = Never; 5 = A few times a year or less;4 = Once a month or less; 3 = A few times a month; 2 = Once a week; 1 = A few times a week; and 0 = Everyday.

The least serious school rule violations observed by teachers included students bringing pornographic materials to school (M=.18, SD=0.38). Teachers also reported a low frequency of students bringing unauthorized persons onto campus (M=.26, SD=0.49). Other behaviors that occurred with such low frequency and intensity that they were unlikely to be a problem include political activism by students (M=.11, SD=0.46) and their participation in unauthorized political protests (M=0.007; SD=0.32). Very serious behaviors such as murder or attempting to commit murder (M=0.005; SD=0.44), and committing rape or attempting rape (M=0.008; SD=0.48) also occurred at a very low frequency. Table 3 lists the top 40 misbehaviors observed by respondents.

Table 3
The Description Of Misbehaviors And Their Rank and Mean

Description	Present Study n=165	
	Mean	Rank
Having a negative attitude toward school	1.88	1
Talking without permission	1.85	2
Failing to assume responsibility for actions	1.83	3
Failing to bring necessary materials to class	1.82	4
Displaying clownish and foolish behavior	1.73	5
Failing to follow instructions	1.68	6
Inattentiveness during class	1.57	7
Interfering with work of others	1.55	8
Failing to do in-class assignments	1.53	9
Being disrespectful toward other students	1.53	10
Displaying abnormally active behavior	1.51	11
Using profanity/abusive language	1.50	12
Absenteeism (truancy)	1.49	13
Failing to submit homework on time	1.48	14
Teasing others	1.46	15
Making inappropriate comments to others	1.45	16
Consuming food and/or beverages	1.44	17
Being dishonest toward teachers and others	1.44	18
Being disrespectful toward authorities	1.43	19
Exhibiting an ambivalent attitude	1.38	20
Abusing privileges	1.35	21
Failing to submit homework at all	1.35	22
Being tardy to school	1.35	23
Being tardy to class	1.34	24
Cheating on tests and in-class assignments	1.33	25

Note. 0 = Not a problem – never observed or is in no way a problem, 1 = Minor – behavior is easily managed and instruction is, at most, minimally disrupted, 2 = Moderate – behavior requires moderate effort to manage and instruction is, at most, moderately disrupted, 3 = Major – behavior is handled with great difficulty and instruction is, at most, severely disrupted, 4 = Critical – behavior is unmanageable and instruction is halted.

The Relationship Between Student Misbehavior and Teacher Burnout

The computation of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Between The Aggregate Student Misbehavior Score and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment scores did not yield any significant correlation. No significant relationship was found to exist between student misbehavior and teacher burnout.

Table 4
Pearson Product Moment Correlation Between The Aggregate Student Misbehavior Score and Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment.

	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
Aggregate Student Misbehavior Score	-.016	.067	.059

*$p<.05$.

Conclusions/Discussion/Implications

In spite of personal and environmental conditions that place teachers at risk of burnout, agriculture teachers appear to be managing well. Agriculture teachers see themselves as energetic and engaged professionals who are accomplishing something worthwhile for the benefit of students. They work to create an environment where learning flourishes. Building rapport with students is important to teachers, and they consider it part of their to duty to help students develop coping mechanisms to deal with everyday problems. The best interests of the students are important. As teachers get older and more experienced in teaching, they tend to develop coping skills that alleviate work stress. This research study found that teachers tended to find ways to combat fatigue and to prevent treating students as impersonal objects. Teachers occasionally worry that students blame them for problems they are experiencing, and sometimes perceive that the job has caused them to become uncompassionate. Even though the results of this study suggest that as a whole, our teachers aren't burned out, the results of the study indicated a moderate level of emotional exhaustion. Generally, the more emotionally fatigued agriculture teachers become, the more likely their teaching performance is going to suffer (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). However, the respondents in this study had very high scores on personal accomplishment, and as long as they are able to maintain that high degree of self-efficacy, the effects of emotional exhaustion should probably not be a cause for concern.

Generally, those students under the supervision of agriculture teachers are manifesting behavior that meets commonly accepted norms. This indicates that student misbehavior is not a serious problem in agricultural education and that instruction is, at most, minimally disrupted. The level of seriousness at which agriculture teachers view student misbehavior has not changed significantly over time.

The most serious behavior manifested by students in the year 2000 is a negative attitude toward school. This same behavior existed in 1988 (ranked 2nd) and in 1984 (ranked 3rd). However, there could be cause for concern when one realizes the previous number one problem in 1984 and 1988 "exhibiting an ambivalent attitude" has slid to a 20th place ranking. Is the "I don't care" attitude being replaced by a decidedly negative attitude? Students who exhibit an ambivalent attitude toward school generally have no polar opinion about school - they are unsure.

Implications And Recommendations

Some potential teachers (e.g., former state FFA officers, people with agricultural degrees working in industry.) have considered becoming certified to teach but have decided against teaching because they don't want to handle all those "unruly high school students". The reality is that high school students are not that unruly and the misbehaviors teachers can expect to handle are rather minor. This needs to be communicated clearly to potential teachers. The reality is that teachers have a high degree of satisfaction with their accomplishments, and burnout is not a major problem for those teachers who stay in the profession and develop coping mechanisms for student misbehavior.

In our teacher education classes, we need to instruct our students about the types of misbehaviors they can realistically expect to encounter while teaching. We should also provide them with suggestions and strategies for handling the top misbehaviors identified. If student-teachers know in advance that their students may have a negative attitude, will talk without permission, will clown around, etc., then they will be less inclined to take the problem personally and think they are the only ones with these types of problems. And they will be better prepared to handle these situations if they know they are coming.

Three suggestions are offered for further research:

1. Study the function of misbehavior. Denti (2002) suggests that misbehavior can be measured in four dimensions: form, frequency, duration, and intensity. This theory was not used in this study because the researchers chose to maintain consistency with two previous studies. This was necessary in order to make useful comparisons among the three studies. However, research on the function of misbehavior has merit and should be considered for further research.

2. Investigate student perceptions of misbehaviors. This study and the previous two asked agricultural teachers for their perceptions of student misbehaviors. It might be informative to ask the students. Do they identify the same behaviors as the teachers? Do they believe that these misbehaviors actually interfere with their ability to learn?

3. Study factors that increase the likelihood of burnout. Additional research might be useful in determining which individual factors and organizational factors increase or decrease the likelihood of burnout among teachers.

It is further recommended that researchers investigate the effects of induction programs for new agriculture teachers. Have induction programs successfully taught new teachers how to deal with the stress and demands of teaching agriculture, particularly for those teachers in year-round programs? It would be valuable to study the ways that teachers are socialized into the teaching profession and inoculated against common stress-causing agents. Finally, researchers should investigate burnout among teachers who have exited the profession. This study only examined those teachers still in the classroom. It would be beneficial to study those teachers who have left the profession to ascertain whether or not burnout was a contributing factor to their decision to leave.

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