Burnout and compassion fatigue: A review of conceptual and operational perspectives

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Abstract: A significant number of studies have been conducted on teacher burnout, defined as a syndrome of depersonalization, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged exposure to workplace stress (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Although research on teacher burnout is extensive, few researchers have questioned whether the operationalized construct and measured symptoms of burnout are the most appropriate in understanding teacher’s negative social-emotional experiences. This review examines the ways in which burnout in teacher populations is often defined and measured, contrasting the consistencies and inconsistencies in the context of burnout research. In addition, compassion fatigue is introduced as a construct that may better our understanding of the negative social-emotional experiences of teachers.

Keywords: compassion fatigue, teacher burnout, teacher wellbeing, mental health

The conversation around mental health in the education context is largely focused on the well-being of the student, but the professional well-being of teachers has gained significant attention among researchers due to the theoretical and practical implications of this issue. Teaching is a difficult profession and an effective solution to the potentially negative impact of the occupation on the well-being of teachers continues to elude both researchers and practitioners. Teacher attrition is financially costly for school systems and psychologically harmful for professionals. In the Canadian context, approximately 30-40% of teachers leave within the first five years in the profession, with special educators having the highest rates of attrition (Clandinin et al., 2012; Karsenti & Collin, 2013). Chronic stress from occupational demands such as heavy workload and insufficient resources can negatively affect the well-being of teachers and lead to poor mental health (Desrumaux et al., 2015).

Burnout and compassion fatigue are two constructs of poor mental health that can inform our understandings of teachers’ social and emotional experiences.
teachers must balance occupational demands with the responsibilities of adapting instruction, curriculum, and assessment to meet the diverse needs of students. Difficulty successfully meeting these demands can place teachers at risk for burnout and compassion fatigue. Specifically, in the context of teachers that work with exceptional learners, the emotionally demanding nature of the job may result in negative social-emotional experience that may be encompassed by the construct of compassion fatigue.

Although research on teacher burnout is extensive, few researchers have questioned whether the operationalized construct and measured symptoms of burnout are the most appropriate in understanding teacher’s negative social-emotional experiences. This review examines the ways in which burnout in teacher populations is often defined and measured, contrasting the consistencies and inconsistencies in the context of burnout research. Compassion fatigue is introduced as a construct that may better our understanding of the negative social-emotional experiences of teachers in their professional role, and suggests a re-examination of burnout in relation to compassion fatigue.

The purpose of this review is to examine the conceptual and operational perspectives that exist in current literature on the constructs of burnout and compassion fatigue. Current conceptual definitions of the constructs of interested will be introduced to contextualize the discussion. Existing research on burnout in teacher populations will be critiqued to identify any inconsistencies that suggest a lack of consensus within the field on the operationalization of these constructs. Compassion fatigue will be introduced as a construct that is separate but related to burnout that may better our understanding of the nature of teachers’ experiences. Compassion fatigue and burnout will be discussed in the context of teachers who work with students with exceptionalities due to the particularly emotionally demanding nature of their job. The theoretical and practical connections of compassion fatigue research on other human services professions will be discussed as they apply to teachers working with exceptional learners. This paper acts as a review of current conceptual and operational perspectives surrounding these constructs, and questions whether it is appropriate for understanding teacher experiences.

**Burnout**

The construct of burnout, first introduced by Maslach and colleagues (1981) is often used in literature as describing the negative emotional experience of professionals due to work place stress. Burnout was characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion,
(feeling drained), depersonalization (callousness towards others), and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (feeling ineffective) resulting from repeated exposure to extreme work stress (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Emotional exhaustion as experienced by “burned out” individuals was described as a feeling of being emotionally drained, and that psychologically, they are no longer able to fulfil the duties of their role (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The term depersonalization is sometimes used interchangeably with reduced feelings of empathy, and is used to describe a state wherein individuals develop negative or sometimes callous perceptions of their clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The third characteristic of burnout, referred to as reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, is used in research to describe the negative self-appraisal of professionals, specifically dissatisfaction in their achievements and their work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Burnout is considered a syndrome, suggesting that the specific symptoms are displayed in a pattern and are often chronic by nature (Mantilla & Diaz, 2012). The implications of burnout are multifaceted, with negative effects on the overall mental health of individuals experiencing burnout, the quality of care provided to clients, and the attrition of staff (Mantilla & Diaz, 2012; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). This review will consider a limited selection of research on burnout in teacher populations published between 2000-2015.

**Teachers**

Extant literature on teacher burnout typically shares a common conceptual definition. The concept of burnout first introduced more than 30 years ago continues to be used today. The three symptom categories of the construct (i.e., emotional exhaustion, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization) act as a standard conceptual and operational definition for most researchers. It can be argued that burnout has moved beyond the boundaries of research and become a topic of public discourse. Professionals, and specifically teachers, are repeatedly warned about the risks of workplace stress and burnout. Recommendations on ways to manage stress to avoid burnout are made to both pre-service and in-service teachers. The reduced well-being of teachers due to their professional role continues to be a problem despite the years of research.

Burnout and compassion fatigue can be considered related but separate constructs. It is possible that burnout may not be an entirely appropriate measure of the negative social-emotional experiences of teachers, and including compassion fatigue in the conversation can help further our understanding on what those experiences are and
how to develop the best prevention and interventions programs. In order to address the limitations of burnout and relevance of compassion fatigue in understanding teacher negative social-emotional well-being, we must first discuss common conceptual and operational definitions found in existing literature. The conceptual definition of burnout remains relatively consistent across studies as the symptoms typically associated with the construct (i.e., emotional exhaustion, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization). Researchers typically utilize a modified version of the 22-item Maslach Burnout Inventory when measuring the construct (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Wang et al., 2015). There is a consensus on how burnout is defined but there is an inconsistency in what is actually measured in research.

Research on burnout is widespread, with various studies looking at the relationships between teacher burnout and factors such as school resources, student misbehaviour, classroom management, self-efficacy, and motivation (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Wang et al., 2015). A recent study by Wang, Hall, and Rahimi (2015) looked at self-efficacy and the individual attributes that predict burnout, adjustment, attrition, job satisfaction, and physical illness in a sample of 523 Canadian teachers. The authors measured burnout using the questionnaire tool (MBI; Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) originally developed in 1996, and apply the operationalized definition of burnout as first introduced by Maslach and colleagues (1996). In measuring burnout as an outcome variable, Wang and colleagues (2015) paired burnout and job satisfaction under the umbrella of “psychological adjustment.”

Brouwers and Tomic (2000) conducted a longitudinal study to measure relationship between classroom management, perceived self-efficacy, and the components of burnout. The authors defined burnout as a syndrome that occurs in professionals who work with people, characterized by the symptoms of depersonalization (excessively detached, negative, or callous response to clients), emotional exhaustion (feeling depleted of emotional resources), and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (negative self-evaluations of job performance) (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Surveys were administered to secondary school teachers from fifteen randomly selected schools in the Netherlands (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). To measure burnout in teachers, the researchers utilized the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers (MBI-NL-Ed; Schaufeli, Daamen, & Van Mierlo, 1994). The MBI is a 20-item questionnaire that consists of 3 subscales for each symptom category of burnout (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). These results indicated a need for future research to look at the separate effects of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal
accomplishment on the experience of burnout in teachers to better understand the negative social and emotional experiences in their professional role. If teachers are experiencing the sub-constructs of burnout to varying degrees and patterns, it is important to question whether burnout is an accurate label for their experience. Similar to the study by Wang et al. (2015), Brouwers and Tomic (2000) relied on an existing definition of burnout to measure the emotional experience of teachers. A unique distinction from Brouwers and Tomic (2000) was that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization act as the core of burnout, and mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment.

Consistent with other research (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Van den Berghe et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2015), Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) introduced burnout as a syndrome of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment. A unique aspect of the study was the operationalization of burnout using only two dimensions of the construct, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, while initially defining it based on the three characteristic symptoms. Despite not measuring all three symptom categories of burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced feelings of personal accomplishment) the authors used a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory to collect questionnaire data from participants. These authors used a standard conceptual definition of burnout and a questionnaire tool used across other research despite only measuring two of the three dimensions of the construct. The findings from this study suggested that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization should be analyzed as separate constructs. If burnout is theoretically defined as consisting of all three symptom dimensions, but in its operationalization is measured using only two sub-constructs, the question remained whether the salient construct is what the researcher intended to measure. Further, the researchers suggested that one or two of the sub-constructs act as the key aspects of burnout so it is important to question if it is necessary to have the label of burnout, or if researchers should be focusing specifically on the dimensions as separate and distinct experiences.

**Compassion fatigue**

The term compassion is generally defined in dictionaries as an awareness of the suffering of others and an impulse to relieve it (Radey & Figley, 2007). The construct of compassion fatigue is primarily used for research involving nurses, physicians, counsellors and can be considered an occupational hazard for human-services.
professionals. Teaching as a profession is focused on providing care to students, which places educators in a human services role. The introduction of compassion fatigue as a construct of poor professional well-being is relatively new, and a clear operationalized definition in teacher populations does not yet exist. Across research, inconsistency can be seen in the conceptual and operational definition of compassion fatigue. The standard definition of the construct is typically limited to the field of study, with a different conceptualization and operationalization of compassion fatigue being seen in nursing, social work, and other human service professions.

Teaching is a laborious occupation and those working with exceptional learners are subject to a range of social and emotional challenges comparable to other human-service professions (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015; Putnik et al., 2011). Typically reported in nurses and social workers, compassion fatigue can be characterized by feelings of depression, anxiety, and reduced empathy resulting from repeated exposure to the distress of vulnerable populations (Figley, 2002; Najjar et al., 2009). With a significant reduction in their compassion and empathy, individuals experiencing compassion fatigue no longer feel psychologically capable of providing care to their clients. While burnout is the result of workload conditions, compassion fatigue develops from the impulse to help others and is rooted in the social-emotional relationship between professionals and their clients. In the same way that social workers and nurses care a great deal for their clients, teachers care for the students they support (Radey & Figley, 2007). The experience of compassion fatigue has been found to negatively affect both the well-being of professionals as well as their ability to help their clients (Bride et al., 2007). Applying the theoretical framework of compassion fatigue may provide insight on the nuanced experience of educational professionals beyond what is known through the construct of burnout (Hoffman et al., 2007). Radey and Figley (2007) conceptually defined compassion fatigue as resulting from direct exposure to the suffering of clients without adequate support in the workplace or home. Consequently, professionals with compassion fatigue experienced a disconnection with others, hopelessness, and emotional and physical exhaustion (Radey & Figley, 2007). Bride and colleagues (2007) defined compassion fatigue as the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive changes experienced by mental health professionals through indirect exposure to the trauma of their clients. In existing literature, this construct is sometimes referred to as vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatic stress (Bride et al., 2007).

Applying an operationalized construct typically used with specific populations to a different group can be challenging. It creates confusion in research when a specific
label is used to describe a construct that is conceptualized and operationalized differently in different contexts. Using a specific label such as compassion fatigue imposes conceptual and operational assumptions for the reader regarding what the researcher is discussing. These assumptions include the specific profile of experience for the participants and the symptoms that accompany it. The occupational role of nurses, social workers, and teachers all vary in their daily experience despite sharing the underlying core of being a human services profession. To use the constructs of burnout or compassion fatigue in discussing the social and emotional experience of teachers, we must first question whether the labels are appropriate for that population. There must also be consensus in research regarding the conceptual and operational perspectives that accompany the use of a specific label to describe the experience of a specific population, such as teachers. There needs to be a more exploratory approach to understanding the social-emotional experience of teachers so that consensus on the appropriate terminology can be achieved, without being limited by or misinterpreted as existing constructs.

**Compassion Fatigue in Teachers**

In recent years there has been an increased attention on researching compassion fatigue in teachers, yet the amount of literature on the experience of this construct in teachers is still limited. Burnout has been an important concept in research on teacher well-being, yet, no study has examined compassion fatigue in teachers separate from burnout. This discussion on compassion fatigue experienced by teachers in extant literature is limited to one published article and several academic dissertations. Tepper and Palladino (2007) suggested that there is an overlap of symptoms that can be found between burnout and compassion fatigue, and that compassion fatigue is comprised of both burnout and secondary traumatization. An important distinction suggested by the authors is that burnout and compassion fatigue result from separate human needs. While burnout results from the drive to achieve a specific goal, compassion fatigue is the result of the human impulse to help others (Tepper & Palladino, 2007; Figley, 2002). This important distinction is greatly beneficial in pursuing research on compassion fatigue in educators, and can guide a discussion on the value of applying different constructs when attempting to understand the social-emotional experience of teachers. Assuming that the motivational goal of the individual impacts social and emotional experiences, teachers may be able to experience both burnout and compassion fatigue depending on what is driving their actions. For example, a teacher with the goal of improving their
classroom management may become burned out from the repeated challenges of helping a student with behavioural issues learn that it is not appropriate to get in altercations with their peers. In contrast, a teacher who wants to help a student with a physical disability feel included by their peers so that they can feel accepted in the classroom may experience compassion fatigue as a result of repeated challenges.

**Working with Exceptional Learners**

In Ontario, there is an average ratio of 37 students with special education needs for every teacher with special education qualifications (People for Education, 2015). The number of students with identified exceptionalities (e.g., learning disabilities, Attention Deficits Hyperactivity Disorder, autism spectrum disorder) is growing. General classroom teachers, who often report that they lack adequate training and resources, increasingly find themselves supporting students with special education needs (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Teachers working in special education settings often have negative social experiences in their early career leading them to consider leaving the profession despite the potentially rewarding nature of their relationship with students (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005).

Schlichte and colleagues (2005) identified risk factors associated with burnout and examined the experience of special education teachers during their first year in the classroom. Several themes emerged from participants’ dialogue including the need for a true mentor (an individual who cares about them and is present to provide guidance), supportive relationships with administrators and other staff, a positive relationship to students, and feelings of support (Schlichte et al., 2005). This study was an example of the implications of negative social and emotional experiences in novice teachers working with exceptional learners and the duty schools have in creating a supportive environment for staff. In line with the findings of Brackenreed and Barnett (2006), teacher candidates who know more about self-care and effective coping may have an easier time working with exceptional learners.

In the context of teachers that work with exceptional learners, the emotionally demanding nature of the job may result in negative social-emotional experience that may be better encompassed by the construct of compassion fatigue. Teachers working with exceptional learners in both inclusive and special education classrooms have a unique role as both a teacher and a frontline mental health worker. These teachers must balance the different needs of their students with the demands of the school curriculum. In many cases, the students that these teachers work with have experienced significant...
challenges and possible traumas throughout their life. The teachers’ exposure to the
distress of students as well as their role as a care provider puts teachers working with
exceptional learners at risk of compassion fatigue.

Specific to teachers who work with students with special needs, themes
consistent with both compassion fatigue and burnout have been reported. Hoffman,
Palladino, and Barnett (2007) applied compassion fatigue theory as a framework for a
qualitative investigation of the early exodus of teachers, in particular those working in a
special education context. Compassion fatigue was conceptualized as secondary
traumatization (experiencing trauma from the trauma of others) through the act of
compassion (Hoffman et al., 2007). The authors suggested that the three themes found in
the dialogue with participants were consistent with the conceptual definition of
compassion fatigue (Hoffman et al., 2007). The research by Hoffman and colleagues
(2007) was the only published study on the topic of compassion fatigue in educators.
The authors contrasted burnout and compassion fatigue and outlined the distinctive
role the constructs have in understanding the emotional experiences of teachers working
in special education. This study acted as an introduction for researchers to start
examining both the presence and severity of compassion fatigue experienced by
teachers working with exceptional learners. That said, the definition of compassion
fatigue introduced in this study is not consistent with that of other research on the topic.

The academic dissertation by Tepper and Palladino (2007) is another example of a
qualitative study that has looked at the experience of compassion fatigue in special
education teachers. The purpose of this study was to determine if novice special
educators experience the symptoms of burnout, and to examine the presence and
relationship of compassion fatigue to the emotional experience of teachers. The authors
conceptually and operationally approached burnout and compassion fatigue as separate
but related constructs, with the analysis process identifying the language of compassion
fatigue and burnout in participant dialogues. The conceptual and operational definition
of compassion fatigue in teachers’ lacks consistency, potentially due to the limited
understanding of this construct in the context of this specific population. It is important
for there to be a standard conceptual definition of compassion fatigue in teachers so that
researchers can gain better understanding of the experience of teachers, and ensure that
the construct being applied is appropriately measured.
Synthesizing Teacher’s Burnout

The measurement tools for burnout are generally consistent across research in the area, but may be limited as they reduce the social-emotional experience of teachers in to three symptom categories: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced feelings of personal accomplishment (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Van den Berghe et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2015). Our understanding of the emotional experiences of professionals in human services roles has developed since the construct of burnout was first introduced. Although the experience of some teachers may be explained using the three symptoms of burnout, relying exclusively on this construct may limit the findings of research on teacher well-being. It may benefit researchers to apply a construct such as compassion fatigue to better understand the negative emotional experience of teachers. As well, it might help to progress our knowledge and provide appropriate care to those with reduced well-being as a result of occupational stress. Researchers typically do not define burnout in their study and instead rely on the standard definition in existing literature. The theoretical framework in literature on teacher burnout often lacks an explanation for why the standard construct definition is best suited for understanding the emotional experience of teachers. Exploring the well-being of teachers through different constructs can better our understanding of their experience. Researchers need to ensure that the constructs implemented in research are the most appropriate for measuring what they are looking to measure.

The introduction of compassion fatigue in understanding the negative experience of teacher population is relatively recent in comparison to burnout. A limited number of researchers have applied the construct of compassion fatigue in their work with teacher well-being, but there is some inconsistency in what is intended to be measured and what actually is measured resulting in issues of validity. It is a challenge to apply a construct that has been operationalized in different populations. It cannot be a carbon-copy scenario where the working definition of compassion fatigue in nurses and social workers is used directly with teachers. The main element that is similar in the professions is that of a human services role, but the nature and specific challenges of these professions differ.

It may be that burnout and compassion fatigue are both appropriate terms to be used in teacher populations, and applying the umbrella of well-being may be the best way to proceed in understanding the psychological experience of these professionals. It could also be theorized that compassion fatigue and burnout are not ideal in
understanding the experience of teachers, and the field would benefit from introducing a construct unique to the experience of educational professionals. It is necessary to conduct qualitative research on the social-emotional experience of teacher without the bias and limitations of previous operationalized constructs to ensure that we develop a more accurate understanding of teacher well-being.
References


