

Supporting Professionals-at-Risk: Evaluating Interventions to Reduce Burnout and Improve Retention of Special Educators

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Two interventions were designed to equip participants with specific problem-solving and coping strategies for dealing more effectively with the stressors they encounter on the job. The interventions targeted *self-preservation skill* for educators - those skills and strategies most likely to help an individual remain relatively “sane,” even in relatively “insane” places. On first glance, one might construe our approach to be a quick fix, because its duration was only 10 weeks at 2 hr/week. And naturally, given the complexity and scope of the systemic issues that contribute to teachers' burnout and attrition, a 10-week program might seem inadequate. Nevertheless, even as more large-scale organizational or political interventions are developed and implemented toward redress of the larger problems, we believed it would be worth while to assist practicing professionals in managing the immediate situations before them - that is, to do the best they can with what they've got. Specifically, the program consisted of two interventions.

Intervention 1: Stress Management-Burnout Prevention Workshops

As mentioned, many of the stressful aspects of the special education teaching profession are either inherent to the situation or difficult to change. Moreover, the burnout that often results from demanding and stressful working conditions can itself exacerbate difficulties because of its accompanying negative, self-defeating coping behaviors.

Coping takes many forms. Approaches to handling stress may be either *direct* (e.g., changing the source of stress) or *indirect* (e.g., changing the way one thinks about or physically responds to the stress to reduce its impact). In addition, coping strategies may be *active* (e.g., taking some action to change oneself or the situation) or *inactive* (e.g., avoiding or denying the source of stress). In general, active strategies are more effective than inactive ones, while both direct and indirect strategies can be constructive (Pines & Aronson, 1988).

The program consisted of five weekly 2-hr workshops that were informal and supportive, and that followed a format of interactive presentation, small/large-group discussion, applications during sessions, and practice between sessions. The content for these sessions targeted three types of coping skills:

1. Skills for changing the situation itself: Situational coping skills.

Drawing on management and problem-solving literature, these sessions offered two frameworks for looking at and changing stressful situations by first identifying the changeable aspects and then using a problem-solving approach to develop and carry out an action plan for creating solutions. Participants were also provided specific assertive communication tools for enlisting the cooperation of others in seeking and implementing positive change, and for setting and keeping appropriate limits.

2. Skills for changing one's physical response to the situation: Physiological coping skills.

Stress is fundamentally a form of wear and tear on the body. Thus, we drew on a variety of literature on physiological stress-coping strategies for these sessions. Participants learned both long (30-min) and very short (30-s) forms of muscle relaxation that can be used for self-renewal in everyday work situations (Woolfolk & Lehrer, 1984). As well, we touched on other physiological approaches for coping with stress (e.g., nutrition and stretching).

3. Skills for changing how one thinks about the situation:

Cognitive coping skills.

Simply put, much stress happens "between the ears" as a result of our thoughts and beliefs, or cognitions. These sessions drew on cognitive therapy literature and targeted ways to replace self-defeating, self-limiting beliefs with beliefs that are more constructive, realistic, and empowering. Participants learned first to recognize distorted or self-defeating beliefs and then to coach themselves and one another to think differently about themselves or about the situation. Specifically, they coached one another in ways to let go of unrealistic, even tyrannical expectations they held of themselves given the limitations and realities of the situations they faced and to give themselves permission to view their best efforts as good enough.

All sessions followed a format of interactive lecture, small-group discussions and role plays, with homework assignments that provided participants the opportunity to try out the skills and new behaviors in their work environments. Each session began with small- and large-group discussion of the experiences gained via the homework assignments, and assignments were turned in for the instructors' review and feedback.

Intervention 2: The Peer Collaboration Program

Because of the apparent value of collegial support in preventing or alleviating job stress and burnout, researchers have advocated creating more regular opportunities for peer support for special education teachers and others in stressful job roles.

Due to its emphasis on supportive, constructive dialogue between professional peers, this intervention seems to have potential for addressing issues of collegial isolation and lack of administrative support among special educators.

The Peer Collaboration Program, as originally developed, consisted of training pairs of teachers to use a four-step collegial dialogue to assist each other in identifying and solving student related problems. For this study, it was modified to apply other work-related problems as well. Via this process, each member of the pair takes a turn as - "initiator" (the one presenting a problem) and a "facilitator" (the one providing assistance in problem-solving). The four steps were as follows:

- 1. Clarifying.** The initiating teacher brings a brief, written description of the problem and responds to clarifying questions asked by the facilitator. This step is the longest of the four designed to assist the initiating teacher to think of the problem in different or expanded ways. This step continues until the initiating teacher feels that all of the relevant issues have been covered and is ready to move on to summarizing.
- 2. Summarizing.** In this step, the initiating teacher summarizes three facets of the problem being discussed: the specific patterns of behavior that are problematic, the teacher's typical response to them, and the particular aspects of the problem that fall under the teacher's control.
- 3. Intervention and Prediction.** The teachers together generate three possible action plans, and the initiator predicts possible positive and negative outcomes for each one. The initiator then chooses one of the solutions for implementation.
- 4. Evaluation.** The initiator develops a two part plan to evaluate the solution's effectiveness. The first part consists of a plan to answer the question "Did I do it?" (i.e., implementation of the solution), and the second part consists of ways to answer the question "Did it work?" (i.e., impact on targeted outcomes).

Participants attended one 3-hr training sessions in which the process was described, modeled, and practiced with feedback from other participants and from the instructors.

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