Is Stress in the Classroom Contagious?
BY TIM WALKER      JULY 25, 2016 • 8:16AM

When teachers are feeling overwhelmed, they may not be the only ones paying the price. Students’ stress levels are being elevated as a result of their teacher’s exhaustion, and maybe vice versa. This may not come as a major surprise, but a just-released study from the University of British Columbia (UBC) is the first that has established a strong link – a “stress contagion” – between a teacher’s occupational stress and a student’s physiological strain.

The results, says co-author Eva Oberle, highlight the need to properly address the lack of support in too many schools. “Our study is a reminder of the systemic issues facing teachers and educators as classroom sizes increase and supports for teachers are cut.”

To examine the link between teacher burnout and student stress in the classroom, the researchers collected saliva samples from over 400 elementary school children at 17 public schools in a large school district in Vancouver. They then analyzed the cortisol levels, the hormone used as the biological indicator of stress (previous research identifies increased cortisol levels in students with stressful experiences at school). A separate survey completed by 17 teachers was used to assess their “burnout level.”

What they found was that students’ cortisol levels were much higher in those classrooms led by a teacher who had reported feeling overwhelmed or exhausted.

But what came first – the higher cortisol level or teacher burnout? That’s not clear, according to the study. On one hand, a high-stress classroom climate could certainly result from lack of educator support, which can diminish a teacher’s classroom management skills. This in turn can lead to a chaotic or at least ineffective learning environment that heightens student stress.

On the other hand, stress could originate from students’ misbehavior, causing teachers to feel overwhelmed and report higher levels of burnout. Many educators “have fewer resources to form nurturing and supportive relationships with students, and tend to be less responsive to students’ needs,” the report states.

Whatever the origin may be, says Oberle, “we consider the connection between student and teacher stress a cyclical problem in the classroom.”

The causes and convergence of teacher and student stress has been a growing concern over the past decade. Research has consistently shown that stress levels in newer educators especially is leading many of them to exit the profession within five years. A 2014 Gallup survey revealed 46% of all K-12 teachers report high daily stress. The research into impact on students at all grade levels has also expanded, as academic and social pressures are now widely recognized as a very serious problem.

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“Student and teacher stress feed of each other,” says Denise Pope, an education researcher at Stanford University. “Just look at standardized tests. Teachers and students both feel that pressure.”

Add in larger class sizes and lack of mentorship and professional development and you have an environment that is unhealthy and counterproductive for many teachers. What school leaders and other stakeholders must now recognize, say the authors of the UBC study, is that while teacher burnout is clearly a problem for the profession, it is also harmful to students.

“Teaching is one of the most stressful professions, and that teachers need adequate resources and support in their jobs in order to battle burnout and alleviate stress in the classroom,” said study co-author Kimberly Schonert-Reichl. “If we do not support teachers, we risk the collateral damage of students.”

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