

Reducing Teacher Burnout by Increasing Student Engagement

A Children's Rights Approach

KATHERINE COVELL, JUSTIN K. MCNEIL and
R. BRIAN HOWE

*Children's Rights Centre, Cape Breton University,
Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada*

ABSTRACT Teacher burnout has long been understood to have significant negative effects on teaching efficacy. Research has indicated that student misbehaviour, often a result of disengagement, is a major predictor of teacher burnout. In part to address student disengagement, Hampshire County in England has undertaken a whole-school rights-based reform initiative called *Rights, Respect and Responsibility* (RRR). This study was designed to examine the effects of RRR on student engagement and teacher burnout over a three-year period. The sample initially comprised a total of 15 schools (four infant, five primary and six junior) and 127 teachers. At the second time of measure, one year later, the sample was reduced to 69 teachers from 13 of the schools. At both times teachers completed the following measures: the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the perceived effect of RRR on teaching, and student engagement. In the third year of the study we obtained data on the Maslach Burnout Inventory from 100 teachers at 12 of the schools. Findings suggest that RRR can improve student engagement and reduce teacher burnout. Of particular note was the predictive power of student participation in the classroom and school in reducing teacher burnout.

KEY WORDS: children's rights; participation; rights education; student engagement; teacher burnout

There has been growing international interest in programs of children's rights education in schools that aim to educate children about their rights and responsibilities under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Howe and Covell, 2007; Johnny, 2005; Osler and Starkey, 1998). At the same time, there has been increasing international

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attention to the related problems of high levels of teacher burnout and student disengagement (Betoret, 2006; Furlong et al, 2003; Hastings and Bham, 2003; Kokkinos, 2007; Santavirta et al., 2007). The research summarized here describes a three-year study of a children's rights-based whole school reform in which we assessed changes over time in student engagement and teacher burnout.

In the county of Hampshire, England, a district wide initiative was undertaken to make schools consistent with the rights of the child as described in the UN Convention, adopted by the United Nations in 1989. The initiative, known as RRR or *Rights, Respect and Responsibility*, uses the rights of the Convention as the basis for all curricula content, pedagogy, school policies and rules. It aims to create a school climate in which all staff and students are aware of and respect the rights of others. Particular attention is paid to the child's right to participation as described in article 12 of the Convention. In accord with the article, children play a meaningful role in school rules, policies, hiring and expenditures. These school and classroom practices are consistent with the predictors of student engagement.

Among the critical factors underlying student engagement are a school regulatory environment characterized by high expectations for student behaviour, respect for students and disciplinary policies that are fair, clear and enforced consistently (Furlong et al, 2003; Stewart, 2003; Welsh, 2001). The factors also include classroom practices that are inclusive, supportive and participatory (e.g. Covell and Howe, 2001; Furlong et al., 2003; Howe and Covell, 2007; Jennings, 2003; Stewart, 2003).

Not surprisingly, then, earlier assessments of RRR and other children's rights-based schooling have demonstrated that students who receive such education show the behavioural indicators of high levels of engagement – more prosocial and fewer antisocial behaviours, improved learning outcomes and greater respect for the rights of others (Covell and Howe, 1999, 2001; Decoene and De Cock, 1996; Howe and Covell, 2007). In turn, we would expect these positive student behaviours to be associated with low levels of teacher burnout (Betoret, 2006; Hastings and Bahm, 2003; Kokkinos, 2007; Xiaofeng and Meyer, 2005).

Our focus was on the pattern of teacher burnout over the course of the three-year study. Since schools were able to introduce the RRR at their own pace, we were able to assess the relations among the level of implementation, the level of student engagement and the level of teacher burnout over the first three years of the RRR's implementation.

Methods

Participants

A total of 15 schools and 127 teachers agreed to participate in the study and provided data at Time 1. The schools represented a range of socio-economic and geographic areas as well as school type (four infant, children aged 4–7 years; five primary, children aged 4–11 years and six junior, children aged 7–11 years). Seventy percent of the teachers were female. A third of participants (33.7 percent) had been teaching for five years or less, 36.6 percent had been teaching for 5–15 years and the remaining 29.7 percent had been teaching for over 15 years. At Time 2, 69 teachers from 13 schools (five infant, three primary and five junior) completed the measures, a 54.8 percent response rate. Data from one junior school comprising 13 teachers were lost in the mail. At the Time 3 follow-up, the response rate increased, with 100 teachers from 12 schools (three infant, four primary and five junior) responding.

Measures

At Times 1 and 2, teachers were asked to complete a survey that included subscales of student engagement, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the MBI (Evers et al., 2002) to assess their level of burnout. The subscales of engagement were the following. Thirty-one items assessed the teacher's perception of the extent to which students showed respect for the rights of others, respect for property, and participated in the various aspects of the school and classroom. Twenty-two items assessed the extent of behavioural and cognitive changes teachers had noted since the RRR was introduced. In addition to these scales, teachers were asked to indicate, on an eight-point scale, the extent to which the RRR was implemented at their school. At the Time 3 follow-up, the teacher survey was significantly shortened to deal with the problem of attrition while retaining our focus on the RRR and teacher burnout. We included the Maslach Burnout Inventory in order to determine if the pattern of findings from Times 1 and 2 held, and we asked teachers whether the extent of RRR implementation had increased or decreased in the past year on a five-point Likert scale.

Results

To assess the effects of RRR, as reported elsewhere (Covell et al., 2008) schools were dichotomized into 'Fully Implemented' (FI) schools or 'Partially Implemented' (PI) schools, thus creating two levels of implementation for analyses. At Times 1 and 2 four schools met the criterion of FI (two infant, one primary and one junior). At Time 3, although

most reported increases in implementation level, only one additional school met this criterion (a junior school).

Engagement and burnout

To assess this relation between perceived student engagement and teacher burnout multiple regressions were performed using the subscales of student engagement as the predictor variables. Three separate tests were performed with the subscales of the MBI – emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal achievement as criterion variables. Since the purpose of these analyses was to investigate a link between student misbehaviour and teacher burnout, data from Times 1 and 2 were included.

The analyses revealed the following significant relations. Students' respect for property predicted emotional exhaustion ($-0.317, p < 0.001$). Teachers reported less emotional exhaustion when students were careful and conscientious with school property. Students' respect for the rights of others predicted higher levels of teacher sense of achievement ($0.245, p < 0.01$). Student participation was the strongest predictor. Participation predicted both personal achievement ($-0.263, p < 0.01$) and depersonalization ($-0.355, p < 0.001$). The more students participated, the greater the teachers' sense of empathy with the students, and sense of accomplishment from teaching.

Engagement over time

To examine the effect of the RRR over time, we first examined the subscales of student engagement and teachers' assessments of improved behaviour, using both time and level of implementation as the fixed factors. Teachers' perceptions of student behaviours were assessed in a 2 (Implementation) \times 2 (Time) MANOVA. Students' rights-respecting behaviours, respect for property and participation and teachers' ratings of overall improvement in student behaviours attributable to RRR served as the dependent variables.

A significant main effect for Implementation (Pillai's = 0.181, $F(4, 150) = 8.31, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.181$) was found and a significant interaction between Implementation and Time (Pillai's = 0.084, $F(4, 150) = 3.46, p = 0.010$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.084$). Between-subjects analyses revealed significant interactions for student participation ($F(1, 153) = 11.84, p = 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.072$), student respect for rights ($F(1, 153) = 4.51, p = 0.035$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.029$), and positive change in student behaviours ($F(1, 153) = 11.84, p = 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.072$). Student respect for property showed only a significant effect for Implementation ($F(1, 153) = 14.53, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.087$). While teachers in FI schools felt that their students were more respectful of property than did teachers in PI schools, students'

Table 1 Mean teacher MBI scores over time by school type

	<i>Time 1</i>	<i>Time 2</i>	<i>Time 3</i>
<i>FI Schools</i>			
Emotional Exhaustion	20.67	17.17	13.67
Depersonalization	6.06	2.92	3.50
Personal Achievement	34.00	36.96	36.02
<i>PI Schools</i>			
Emotional Exhaustion	24.38	24.26	19.57
Depersonalization	5.00	5.23	3.90
Personal Achievement	33.46	31.93	35.93

respect for property did not change over time in either FI or PI schools.

Analyses of the interactions showed that teachers in FI schools reported a significant increase in student participation ($Q(2, 153) = 4.53, p < 0.05$) and in positive changes in student behaviour ($Q(2, 153) = 4.18, p < 0.05$) over time.

Burnout over time

We expected that the implementation of RRR would be accompanied by a reduction in teacher burnout. This was measured over the course of three years using a 2 (Implementation) x 3 (Time) MANOVA, with the three MBI subscales representing the dependant variables. This analysis produced a significant main effect for Implementation (Pillai's = 0.104, $F(3, 270) = 10.49, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.104$) and for Time (Pillai's = 0.103, $F(6, 542) = 4.93, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.052$), but no significant interaction. The between-subject results showed that Depersonalization ($F(2, 272) = 4.82, p = 0.009$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.034$), Emotional Exhaustion ($F(2, 272) = 10.78, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.073$), and Personal Achievement ($F(2, 272) = 6.45, p = 0.002$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.045$) changed significantly over time. RRR implementation level showed significant effects for Emotional Exhaustion ($F(1, 272) = 24.37, p < 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.082$), and Personal Achievement ($F(1, 272) = 10.43, p = 0.001$, partial- $\eta^2 = 0.037$), while Depersonalization did not significantly differ between groups of schools ($F(1, 272) = 1.03, p = \text{n.s.}$). To illustrate the trends over time means are presented in Table 1.

The three-year trend in teachers' personal achievement scores was interesting. While initially very similar, the scores begin to diverge substantially at Time 2. Teachers from FI schools experienced considerable gains in personal achievement between Time 1 and Time 2, and these gains remain consistent. Teachers from PI schools actually declined in personal achievement at Time 2, before finally reaching a

score that was somewhat higher than their initial Time 1 score. By the end of the project, teachers from FI schools had consistently experienced greater gains in Personal Achievement than teachers from PI schools. However, by Time 3 teachers from PI schools had bridged much of the gap apparent at Time 2.

A similar trend occurred with the teachers' depersonalization scores. While teachers from FI schools initially rated as slightly higher in Depersonalization compared to teachers from PI schools, FI teachers reported considerable improvements in Time 2, with scores lower than those of PI teachers. However, as with Personal Achievement, PI teachers experienced greater gains during Time 3, with scores virtually identical to teachers from FI schools. Again, teachers from FI schools experienced greater short-term gains, but over the course of the study PI teachers experienced many of the same gains. In both cases, however, the scores at the end of Time 3 were lower than those scores from the initial round of tests.

Emotional Exhaustion trends were different from the other scores. Again, teachers from PI schools experienced few improvements relative to Time 1, and again they experienced substantial improvements by the time the third round of testing was complete. At no point, however, did the level of emotional exhaustion reported by PI teachers begin to equal the scores of teachers from FI schools. With the previous two measures the teachers from both groups began relatively equal, diverged at Time 2, and were again similar in Time 3. With Emotional Exhaustion, teachers from FI schools were considerably less emotionally exhausted than were teachers from PI schools even on the last testing period. While teachers from FI schools were initially less emotionally exhausted, they seemed to encounter no ceiling effect with regard to improvement in their scores; their level of exhaustion decreased during all three periods, while teachers from PI schools reported little change between Time 1 and Time 2 before experiencing a decline during Time 3.

Discussion

The findings provide evidence of the power of children's rights education to increase student engagement and decrease teacher burnout. Where schools had fully implemented the RRR initiative into the school ethos and into the classroom and school policies and practices, there was an increase in levels of student engagement and a decrease in teacher burnout. Compared with their peers in the PI schools, students in the FI schools showed greater respect for property, greater respect for the rights of others, increased participation and improved behaviours, and over time they showed increasingly higher levels of

participation and improved positive behaviours. Their teachers reported significantly lower levels of burnout.

Two findings with regard to burnout are particularly interesting. One is the pattern over three years. Generally, reduced burnout appeared to be effected most during the time period in which the efforts at implementing the RRR were greater. Schools that had fully implemented the initiative at the first time of measure showed the greatest reduction in burnout between Times 1 and 2. Schools that increased their level of implementation between the second and third times of measure, showed reduced burnout during that time. Generally, however, the greatest gains overall seem to occur in schools which fully implemented the RRR at the outset and whose level of implementation stayed high. In these cases, the decreases in burnout levels were generally maintained or even increased (in the case of emotional exhaustion) over the three years of the study.

The second finding of particular interest is the apparent role played by student participation in teacher burnout. Our data suggest that level of participation was a very strong predictor of teacher depersonalization, and of a teacher's sense of personal achievement. When children are behaving in a socially responsible, rights-respecting way in the classroom, and particularly when they are actively involved in their classroom and school activities, teachers have improved relationships with the students and a greater sense that their teaching is effective. In the words of one teacher, 'Teaching RRR has reminded me why I went into teaching – to make a difference'. Seeing the children's behaviour and learning improve, seeing children become more engaged in school clearly is rewarding for teachers. In fact, many teachers noted how pleased they were with the improvements they noted in their students. As one commented, 'the more you respect the kids and the more you let them participate in the classroom, the more they respect you'.

The value of participation in increasing student engagement was strongly argued by John Dewey almost a century ago (Dewey, 1916). However, it has not always been easy for teachers to effect. It may well be that meaningful participation is most likely when there is a values framework in the school involving knowledge, understanding and support for the rights of the child (Howe and Covell, 2007; Johnny, 2005; Wyse, 2001). Using the rights of the child as the context within which participation occurs may provide the students with an overarching values base upon which to base their decisions and behaviours. Moreover, children's rights are the values base and guiding principle shared by teachers and school administrators. This too is expected to reduce burnout by engendering a sense of community at the school (c.f. Xiaofeng and Meyer, 2006).

The three-year assessment of the RRR indicates the importance of

signatories of the Convention taking seriously their obligations to effect schooling that is consistent with their obligations to ensure children know they have rights. When children learn about their Convention rights in a rights-respecting environment, they are more engaged in school and their teachers demonstrate a greater sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with their teaching.

Notes

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1 The survey is available on request from the first author.

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Katherine Covell is Professor of Psychology and the Executive Director of the Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada. Her research interests centre on the developmental implications of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular for children's rights education, and violence against children. She has published in *International Journal of Children's Rights*, *Journal of Educational Thought* and *Cambridge Journal of Education*. She has also co-authored a book with Brian Howe, *Children, Families and Violence: Challenges for Children's Rights* (Jessica Kingsley, 2009). **Address:** Department of Psychology, Cape Breton University, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, B1P 6L2. Email: katherine_covell@cbu.ca

Justin K. McNeil, a former student and research assistant with Drs Covell and Howe, is currently a graduate student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto, Canada. His dissertation research focuses on examining student participation in schools with a particular focus on youth perceptions of mandatory volunteer programs. He has published in the *Cambridge Journal of Education*. Email: mneil.justin@gmail.com

R. Brian Howe is a Professor of Political Science and Director of the Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada. His primary research interests are children's rights, children's rights education, citizenship education and family policy. He has published in *International Journal of Children's Rights*, *Journal of Educational Thought* and *Cambridge Journal of Education*. He has also co-authored a book with Katherine Covell, *Children, Families and Violence: Challenges for Children's Rights* (Jessica Kingsley, 2009). **Address:** Department of Political Science, Cape Breton University, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, B1P 6L2. Email: brian_howe@cbu.ca