

## Personal and contextual factors related to teachers' experience with stress and burnout

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### **Abstract:**

Teaching has been characterised as a stressful profession that is prone to burnout. Less is known about the specific ways in which teachers experience and navigate stressors associated with their work. This study aimed to qualitatively understand how teachers who perceive high and low levels of burnout characterise their lived experiences in school environments. Data were collected through interviews with 28 inservice teachers (11 male, 17 female) from the US Midwest who reported high- or low-burnout on a psychometric survey. Data were analysed by two experienced qualitative researchers. Results indicated that (a) low-burnout teachers perceived nurturing teaching environments, (b) high-burnout teachers perceived combative and constraining teaching environments, and (c) all teachers had to manage workplace stress. Building from these findings, we present a model for understanding how the school environment influences teacher burnout. This model highlights the importance of developing optimal working conditions that nurture teacher development.

Abbreviation: MBI-ES = Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey; IEP = Individualized Education Plan

**Keywords:** Identity | social processes/development | sociology | stress management | qualitative research | in-depth interviewing

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

In the US, issues stemming from standardised testing and school- and teacher-level accountability (Valli, Croninger, & Walters, 2007), the public perception of the teaching

profession and ‘teacher bashing’ (Nuñez, 2015), and unstable public policy surrounding education (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Sato, 2014) have changed the landscape of the teaching profession over the last several decades. The stress experienced by teachers has been traced to reduced feelings of job satisfaction (E. M. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007); demoralisation that occurs when their vision of good teaching conflicts with policies, reform mandates, and school practice (Santoro, 2018); and increased burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

Stressors experienced in the workplace can also lead teachers towards early career attrition (Lindqvist, Nordänger, & Carlsson, 2014), and teachers who experience stress, dissatisfaction, and burnout, but remain in the profession may have reduced motivation and teaching effectiveness (Santoro, 2018; Zhang & Sapp, 2008). Less is known, however, about how school contexts influence teacher wellbeing (Johnson et al., 2014). Towards this end, we conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews to understand the experiences of teachers who reported high- and low-levels burnout. We sought to understand how these teachers navigated their work environments, and the characteristics of their contexts that facilitated or inhibited feelings of burnout. We have framed this research using role socialisation theory.

### **Role socialisation theory as a guiding framework**

Role socialisation theory (Richards, 2015; Richards & Hemphill, 2017) combines elements of teacher socialisation theory and role theory to examine the lived experiences of teachers within schools. Borrowing from teacher socialisation theory, role socialisation theory examines the recruitment, training, and ongoing socialisation of teachers. It follows that interactions with others within schools are important for understanding how teacher navigate and derive meaning from their work, and how the role of teacher is socially-constructed and contextually bound to a school environment (Richards, 2015).

More specifically, expectations for role performance are negotiated between the individual teacher and key stakeholders in a particular school (Richards & Hemphill, 2017). Key stakeholders include colleagues, administrators, parents, and students, as well as more distal agencies, such as boards of education that craft policies that impact teachers’ work. These individuals exert pressures that seek to guide the performance of a given teacher’s social role in accordance with their expectation for the performance of that role (Biddle, 1986; Richards, Templin, & Gaudreault, 2013). For example, teachers may expect their work to be mostly about interacting with and educating students, but administrators may expect them to collect and interpret student performance data to comply with testing mandates (Santoro, 2018).

When there is a high degree of congruence in expectations between the teacher and key stakeholders, stress is usually reduced because there is consensus on the standards for role performance (Biddle, 1986). However, total consensus is rare and differing role performance expectations are common in schools (Richards et al., 2013). In these situations, role performance must be socially negotiated between the teacher and key stakeholders. This negotiation is context specific and depends upon the perspectives held by key stakeholders in a given school (Richards,

2015). When negotiation becomes cumbersome, it can create tension in teachers' work-lives and can cause them to feel demoralised (Santoro, 2018). This tension creates role stress, which has been linked to burnout and attrition (Dworkin & Tobe, 2014).

### Role stress in teaching

The three most common forms of role stress studied in education include role overload, role ambiguity, and role conflict (Hindin, 2007). Role overload occurs when the responsibilities associated with a particular social role go beyond the time and resources an individual has to spend (Richards & Hemphill, 2017). Role ambiguity occurs when expectations for performance are too incomplete to accurately guide behaviour, and teachers do not know how they are being evaluated (Conley & You, 2009). This ambiguity becomes particularly challenging when evaluations are connected to occupational stability and pay (Valli et al., 2007).

Role conflict occurs when key stakeholders expectations for role performance are incompatible in the performance of a role or combination of roles (Conley & You, 2009). Intrarole conflict is caused when individuals are unable to manage varying expectations as they relate to the teaching role (Hindin, 2007), whereas interrole conflict arises when individuals experience stress related to the concurrent performance of multiple roles. Family/work conflict, for example, occurs when the work role conflicts with the individual's ability to devote time to family responsibilities (Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). Attention has also been given to teacher/athletic coach role conflict, which ensues when the role of coach interferes with time and resources devoted to teaching (Konukman, Agbuga, Erdogan, Zorba, & Demirhan, 2010).

### Teacher burnout and resilience

When stress becomes an overbearing presence in a teacher's life, it can lead to feelings of burnout (Alarcon, 2011). Burnout is conceptualised as including three interrelated dimensions (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Emotional exhaustion relates to feeling emotionally and physically drained by one's work, and is the archetype of feeling burned out (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). As teachers become emotionally exhausted, they begin experience depersonalisation as they develop negative, unsympathetic attitudes towards others. They also begin to develop critical attitudes towards their own work, or a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Burnout develops gradually, and in reference to the workplace environment, particularly in relation to job demands and available resources (Maslach et al., 2001).

In addition to studying burnout, scholars have turned to positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) to understand how teachers remain in the profession, including how they develop resilience to thrive rather than merely survive in work contexts (Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009; Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley, & Weatherby-Fell, 2016; Richards, Levesque-Bristol, Templin, & Graber, 2016). While conceptual definitions vary (Kaplan, 1999),

resilience is generally viewed as ‘positive adaptation despite adversity’ (Bottrell, 2009, p. 323) or the ability to bounce back and recover from stressful situations (Day & Gu, 2014). Resilient teachers are those who can manage their own stressors while promoting the social, emotional, and academic learning of students (Fleming, Mackrain, & LeBuffe, 2013). Resilience has been recognised as a social process developed through relationships with others in a supportive work environment (Johnson et al., 2014). Mansfield and colleagues (2016) further note that resilience includes the personal capacity to harness personal and contextual resources to navigate challenge; a process whereby teachers interact with their context over time; and the outcome of professional growth, satisfaction, and wellbeing. This definition highlights the developmental nature of resilience as ‘a dynamic construct that emerges within the interplay between individuals’ strengths and self-efficacy and social environments in which they live and work’ (Yonezawa, Jones, & Singer, 2011, p. 916), and the role of teacher identity in the process through which resilience is developed (Dinham, Chalk, Beltman, Glass, & Nguyen, 2017).

While the existing literature provides impetus for the connection between workplace stress and burnout, as well as the role of resilience in helping teachers work through stressful experiences, less is known about how teachers experience and navigate stress. In particular, there is a need to understand the interplay between personal and contextual factors that lead teachers to develop feelings of burnout, and how resilience can be fostered to help them cope with suboptimal working conditions (Johnson et al., 2014). In the current study, we sought to understand how workplace interactions with key stakeholders led some teachers to feel high levels of burnout while others were able to thrive in their school environments. Our inquiry was guided by the following questions: (a) what factors of high- and low-burnout teachers’ work lives are perceived to promote stress?, (b) what factors of high- and low-burnout teachers’ work lives are perceived to reduce stress?, and (c) what are the consequences of working in an environment that is perceived to be, or not to be, stressful?

## **Method**

### Research procedure and participant selection

The current study used a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) through which qualitative interview participants were purposefully selected from among teachers who completed a quantitative survey. Beginning with a sample of 415 teachers from three adjacent school districts in the US Midwest who had participated in a previous study, we identified those who perceived high or low levels of emotional exhaustion as measured by the MBI-ES (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). Emotional exhaustion was selected as it is considered the archetype of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). The construct was measured on a seven-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 0 to 6. For the 415 teachers who completed the initial survey, one standard deviation ( $SD = 1.32$ ) was added to the mean ( $M = 2.90$ ) of emotional exhaustion to identify the high-burnout group (i.e.  $>4.22$ ) and subtracted from the

mean to identify low-burnout group (i.e.  $<1.58$ ). A total of 30 teachers who fell into either the high- ( $n = 15$ ) or low- ( $n = 15$ ) burnout groups were invited to participate in interviews. We targeted 30 participants because it would provide a dataset large enough to reach saturation without being so large that data collection and analysis become overbearing (Patton, 2015).

### Participants and setting

Of the 30 teachers invited, 28 (93.33%) agreed to participate in the study. They included 11 males and 17 females, the majority (86%) of whom identified as Caucasian, and were split among elementary ( $n = 13$ ), middle ( $n = 10$ ), and high schools ( $n = 5$ ). Teachers' years of experience ranged from 1 to 39 years, with the average teacher having spent 19.98 years in schools ( $SD = 11.19$ ). The teachers taught schools in adjacent rural ( $n = 10$ ; 35.71%), small city ( $n = 16$ ; 57.14%), and college town ( $n = 2$ ; 7.14%) districts in one county in the US Midwest. The teachers taught in 18 schools (1 high school, 5 middle schools, 12 elementary schools) in the three districts, with between one and five teachers at each school ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

Bradleyville School District served a small city of approximately 70,000 residents across 30 square miles. It included two high schools, two middle schools, and eight community-based elementary schools. Fredericksburg School District served a college town of approximately 40,000 residents across 14 square miles. The district included one combined junior/senior high school and two community-based elementary schools. Finally, the county school district, Allen County School District, served residents of the five towns in the county other than the cities of Bradleyville and Fredricksberg. Allen County had approximately 170,000 residents across 500 square miles. The school district included two high schools, six middle schools, and 11 elementary schools. Complete teacher demographic information is included in Table 1, and further details on the three school districts is presented in Table 2.

### Data collection

The first author collected all study data through in-depth, face-to-face interviews. To limit bias, the interviewer was not aware of how the teachers scored on the measure of emotional exhaustion until after interviews had been completed. Interviews focused on participants' perspectives of role stress and burnout, as well as the degree to which they felt as if they were resilient in coping with stressful situations. Each interview followed a semi-structured format that allowed for flexibility to explore topics that deviated from planned questions (Patton, 2015). Example questions included: 'when you go home at the end of your workday, how do you feel?', and 'how do you cope with the stress you experience related to your job?' Interviews were conducted in the teachers' schools at times convenient for them, lasted for 60–75 min, and were audio recorded for subsequent transcription.

**Table 1.** Complete participant demographic information

Pseudonym	Group	Race	Experience	Subject	District	Level	School
Lacey	High	Other	5	Non-Core	Allen County	Elementary	Bentley Elementary School
Anabelle	High	White	2	Core	Bradleyville	Elementary	Bennington Elementary School
John	High	White	35	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Elementary	Bennington Elementary School
Dianne	High	White	30	Core	Bradleyville	High	Bradleyville High School
Kevin	High	White	24	Non-Core	Bradleyville	High	Bradleyville High School
Mindy	High	Multiple	11	Core	Bradleyville	High	Bradleyville High School
Rebecca	High	White	15	Core	Bradleyville	High	Bradleyville High School
Chantal	High	White	27	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Douglas Middle School
Krystle	High	White	35	Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Douglas Middle School
Pamela	High	White	13	Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Douglas Middle School
Sandy	High	White	20	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Douglas Middle School
Chelsea	High	White	22	Non-Core	Fredericksburg	Elementary	Franklin Elementary School
Amber	High	White	5	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Elementary	Northport Elementary School

Jeffrey	High	White	21	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Somers Middle School
Linda	Low	White	12	Core	Allen County	Middle	Clarksville Middle School
James	Low	White	8	Non-Core	Allen County	Middle	Clarksville Middle School
Tracy	Low	White	12	Core	Allen County	Elementary	Cumberland Elementary School
Sal	Low	White	6	Core	Allen County	Elementary	Helena Elementary School
Cindy	Low	White	39	Core	Allen County	Elementary	Jefferson Elementary School
Samuel	Low	White	35	Non-Core	Allen County	Elementary	Monterey Elementary School
Jessica	Low	White	14	Non-Core	Allen County	Elementary	Staatsburg Elementary School
Alicia	Low	White	33	Non-Core	Allen County	Elementary	Sycamore Elementary School
Randy	Low	White	3	Core	Allen County	Elementary	Unionville Elementary School
Tristan	Low	White	1	Core	Bradleyville	High	Bradleyville High School
Suzan	Low	White	19	Non-Core	Fredericksburg	Middle	Fredericksburg Jr. High School
Fred	Low	White	25	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Elementary	Harrisburg Elementary School
Frank	Low	Hispanic	32	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Lucroy Middle

							School
Anthony	Low	Black	25	Non-Core	Bradleyville	Middle	Lucroy Middle School

N = 28 teachers, pseudonyms are gender specific, Burnout Level = Level of Perceived Burnout (high or low), Subject = Subject Affiliation (Core or Non-Core Subject), Level = Teaching Level, Exp = Years of Teaching Experience

**Table 2.** School information

District	School	High	Low	Grades	Enroll	Female	Minor	ELL	SWD	FRL	STR	3+
Allen County	Bentley Elementary	1	0	K to 4	457	52%	57%	26%	15%	72%	22:01	75%
Allen County	Clarksville Middle	0	2	6 to 8	448	54%	18%	1%	16%	34%	17:01	83%
Allen County	Cumberland Elementary	0	1	K to 5	701	49%	30%	2%	5%	32%	20:01	91%
Allen County	Helena Elementary	0	1	K to 5	390	49%	28%	13%	16%	47%	16:01	96%
Allen County	Jefferson Elementary	0	1	K to 5	951	51%	37%	17%	14%	48%	19:01	82%
Allen County	Monterey Elementary	0	1	K to 5	543	45%	31%	4%	14%	49%	18:01	93%
Allen County	Staatsburg Elementary	0	1	K to 5	650	50%	28%	6%	17%	39%	18:01	86%
Allen County	Sycamore Elementary	0	1	K to 5	543	50%	12%	0%	16%	26%	21:01	100%
Allen County	Unionville Elementary	0	1	K to 5	451	49%	9%	1%	12%	28%	22:01	95%
Bradleyville	Bennington Elementary	2	0	K to 4	564	45%	58%	21%	16%	83%	22:01	83%
Bradleyville	Bradleyville High	4	1	9 to 12	1,935	50%	43%	11%	13%	61%	14:01	71%
Bradleyville	Douglas Middle	4	0	5 to 6	1,060	47%	50%	14%	19%	75%	18:01	83%
Bradleyville	Harrisburg Elementary	0	1	K to 4	501	49%	49%	14%	18%	68%	17:01	77%
Bradleyville	Lucroy Middle	0	2	7 to 8	1,067	51%	46%	10%	22%	71%	15:01	74%
Bradleyville	Northport	1	0	K to 5	426	47%	20%	9%	12%	24%	18:01	85%



	Elementary											
Bradleyville	Somers Middle	1	0	6 to 8	455	47%	37%	12%	16%	40%	16:01	84%
Fredericksburg	Franklin Elementary	1	0	4 to 6	509	50%	49%	7%	12%	15%	14:01	97%
Fredericksburg	Fredericksburg Jr. High	0	1	7 to 12	1,081	48%	44%	3%	12%	12%	16:01	96%

High = Number of high-burnout teachers from the study at each school, Low = number of low-burnout teachers from the study at each school, Enroll = Student Enrolment, Minor = Percentage of Non-White Students, ELL = Percentage of Student who are English Language Learners, FRL = Percentage of Students Eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, STR = Student-Teacher Ratio, 3+ = Percentage of Teachers with Three or More Years of Experience. Sources include US Department of Education (2014) and the National Center for Education Statistics (2015).

### Data analysis and trustworthiness

Two members of the research team analysed the interview data using standard qualitative methods grounded in inductive analysis and the constant comparative method (Patton, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 2015). We adopted several strategies to promote the trustworthiness in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researcher triangulation was facilitated through the use of multiple coders in the analysis process. A third member of the research team, who was an expert in qualitative research and not involved in the coding of the data, served as a peer debriefer by examining initial themes and commenting on the extent to which they could be logically derived from the data. Through negative case analysis, we searched for and commented upon quotations that contradicted the themes, and we maintained an audit trail to develop transparency in the data collection and analysis processes.

## Results

The data analysis led to the development of three first-order themes and associated second-order themes related to the ways in which the participants experienced stress, managed that stress, and perceived positive and negative consequences in their work. Notably, a disproportionate number of high-burnout teachers were from Bradleyville School District, which served the small city, whereas more of the low-burnout teachers came from Allen County School District elementary schools (see Table 1). When presenting participant quotations, the speaker is identified using the assigned pseudonym, and the perceived level of burnout is noted as either being high or low in parentheses.

### Low-burnout teachers perceived nurturing environments

Teachers who perceived a nurturing environment developed positive relationships with colleagues, felt trusted and supported, and recognised the difference they made in the lives of children. While quotations from all teachers were used to construct this theme, the low-burnout teachers were far more likely to discuss positive elements of their school's culture. Nearly two-thirds of low-burnout teachers (n = 9; 64.29%) came from the Allen County School District, and most were in elementary schools (n = 8; 57%) than in middle schools (n = 5; 35.71%) and high school (n = 1; 7.14%).

### Affirmative school culture

Teachers perceived a sense of community when they had positive relationship with colleagues, principals who were engaged, and structures in place to promote collaboration. For many teachers, a common philosophy was a facilitator of a positive sense of community. According to Tracy (low), in her school ‘everybody uses the same language. . .they are talking about the same things. . .its a shared vision and we all walk the walk.’ Cindy (low) was in her fourth teaching position and explained, ‘if I were to compare my experience here to that [at a previous job]. . .there is no doubt that the staff in this [district] works harder.’ ‘This is the best school I’ve ever been in,’ explained Lacey (high), ‘the teachers are so tight-knit and there is a real sense of community. I feel like everybody cares about the well-being of these kids and their families.’ Several teachers, such as Rebecca (high) who taught at Bradleyville High School, explained that classroom structures can ‘prevent collaboration’ and ‘teaching can be isolating.’ However, the school provides a shared classroom that serves as a ‘nucleus office,’ which ‘can help teachers get together and collaborate more.’

In addition to relationships with colleagues, teachers perceived an affirmative school culture when administrators were engaged and attentive. For many teachers, ‘the person who has the most impact on the culture of the school is the principal’ (Anthony, low). Tracy (low) explained that she has ‘been in schools where [students] never see the principal unless they are in trouble.’ At Cumberland Elementary School, however, ‘[the principal] is out in front every morning shaking their hands and giving complements.’ In a similar vein, teachers seemed to appreciate principals who were willing to ‘just poke their head in’ (Sal, low) in ways that are less intimidating and ‘fosters a sense of community and school spirit.’ Randy (low) was very excited about his principal, who ‘is in the classroom a lot. . .He wants to know what’s going on and he is involved. His relationship with the children is amazing. . . He sets the tone for the entire building.’

### Empowerment and support

The school culture was more likely to be viewed as nurturing when teachers felt as if they were supported and had access to adequate resources. For some, classroom technology was a lacking. Sandy (high), a Spanish teacher at Douglas Middle School, complained that ‘I don’t have any technology to connect with those kids. . .I have YouTube songs in Spanish but you can’t access them because they are blocked.’ Tracey (low), on the other hand, described excellent support as she had ‘one or two volunteers in my room everyday’ as part of a work-study program. She explained, ‘they cut down on a lot of stress in that they get all of the copies and those things done for us.’ Samuel (low) noted that the administration gave him “enough money to buy the resources I need to teach [physical education]. . .I feel supported.’ Randy (low) explained that his principal was very supportive in ‘listening to us and taking our feedback.’

A significant source of empowerment and support was through informal networks of teachers who offered professional development and social opportunities. Chelsea (high) described feeling insecure about teaching students with IEPs because ‘there is no textbook for this.’ To address her feelings, she ‘talked to other teachers in the school district who had been doing this job for a while.’ Other teachers had a social network within their school building. Cindy (low) has ‘colleagues who get together for coffee and talk about “what would you do in this situation?”’ Others described opportunities to connect with and rely on one another provided the support they needed. Randy, for example, explained, ‘collaboration gets me through the day’ (Randy, low). In addition to resources and support, teachers discussed wanting to feel trusted. Frank (low) explained how: ‘the good [principals] understand what you are doing and let you do it. They don’t meddle, they don’t interfere, they don’t micromanage. Instead, they turn the responsibility

over to [the teacher].’ Linda (low) added that, at Clarksville Middle School, teachers are definitely trusted. At my old school, it was a lot more like you were going to do something wrong and we’re going to put you against each other to try to encourage you to do better, but that won’t make you want to go to work.

#### Working with students and making a difference

A significant source of empowerment and support was through informal networks of teachers who offered professional development and social opportunities. Chelsea (high) described feeling insecure about teaching students with IEPs because ‘there is no textbook for this.’ To address her feelings, she ‘talked to other teachers in the school district who had been doing this job for a while.’ Other teachers had a social network within their school building. Cindy (low) has ‘colleagues who get together for coffee and talk about “what would you do in this situation?”’ Others described opportunities to connect with and rely on one another provided the support they needed. Randy, for example, explained, ‘collaboration gets me through the day’ (Randy, low). In addition to resources and support, teachers discussed wanting to feel trusted. Frank (low) explained how: ‘the good [principals] understand what you are doing and let you do it. They don’t meddle, they don’t interfere, they don’t micromanage. Instead, they turn the responsibility over to [the teacher].’ Linda (low) added that, at Clarksville Middle School, teachers are definitely trusted. At my old school, it was a lot more like you were going to do something wrong and we’re going to put you against each other to try to encourage you to do better, but that won’t make you want to go to work.

Teachers were most satisfied with their student-teacher relationships when they felt as if they were making a difference in the students’ lives. For Linda (low), making a difference required her to provide ‘a safe and positive environment’ for children in her classes at Clarksville Middle School ‘because they can’t be successful if they don’t feel protected, loved, and encouraged.’ Alicia (low) looked forward to retiring, but ‘I told the principal I will come in and work with the kids.’ Some of the teachers got excited when they helped students learn a difficult concept. Fred (low) liked to see ‘that light click on in the kids’ face,’ and Lacey (high) enjoyed ‘seeing them smiling because they learned something in a really hard lesson.’

Teachers’ feelings of making a difference were sometimes linked to helping children in a way that someone had helped them. Jeffrey (high) explained, ‘I want to do for kids what teachers did for me.’ For other teachers, such as Suzan (low), satisfaction came long after students leave their classroom: ‘Years later, I’ve had kids that have come back to me and have said things to me like “thank you” or “I’m so glad you made me do that.”’ Similarly, Frank (low) explained that, ‘sometimes you don’t know how much of an impact you are having on kids. . . I love that five or ten years down the road when they come back and talk to you, that is one of my favorite parts.’ Linda’s communication with former students has been facilitated through social media: ‘I have a Facebook page set up and they friend me. . . I posted on there the other day about [a lesson] and got like 58 likes! Some [former students] wrote “that was a great lesson, I still remember it.”’

#### High-burnout teachers perceived combative and contracting environments

In contrast to the conditions that led teachers to view their environment as nurturing, teachers perceived their environment as combative and constraining when they felt demoralised and marginalised, a lack of community, student and family apathy, and constraining public policy. The high-burnout teachers’ voices

are strongest in this theme, although some low-burnout teachers contributed as well. Nearly all of the high-burnout teachers came from Bradleyville School District (n = 12; 85.71%), with four of those teaching in each of Bradleyville High School and Douglas Middle School.

#### Demoralised and marginalised

One way in which the teachers felt devalued was related to their perceived importance in the educational process. For several, this led to feeling demoralised wherein they believed that they did not have choice in the conduct of their work. This included administrators who ‘micromanaged’ (Chelsea, high) and did not provide their teachers autonomy to teach how they felt was best for students. Jeffrey (high) elaborated by saying that teachers ‘are not a profession anymore. We have no voice. . . we were trained at universities to do this job, but when it comes time for decisions to be made, [administrators] cut us out of the process.’ Krystle (high) felt as if she was losing control of her classes at Douglas Middle School: ‘all of the teachers in each grade level have to be teaching the same content every day. We just don’t have any flexibility in what we teach anymore.’ While feelings of demoralisation were more prevalent among high-burnout teachers, some who perceived low burnout, such as Suzan (low) from Fredericksburg Junior High School, agreed, ‘there are many teachers who are not being treated like professionals.’

Beyond feeling demoralised, interviewees who taught non-core subjects (e.g. art, music, physical education) discussed marginalisation, which stems from feeling as one’s if the discipline is comparatively less important to the mission the school (Lux & McCullick, 2011). These teachers worked in environments where ‘there’s no appreciation for the subject’ they teach (Anthony, low), or where it was viewed as ‘the ugly step-child’ of the school and ‘the first [program] cut’ during a budget crunch (John, high). Suzan (high) lamented that being treated ‘like a second-class subject just kind of beats you down.’ Although Amber (high) believed that her administrators at Northport Elementary School appreciated art, ‘they can’t show it because they have to think about reading, writing, and math, which are the subjects that are stressed.’ While many non-core subject teachers experienced marginalisation, some low-burnout teachers, such as Samuel (low), reinforced that subject status is context specific (Richards & Hemphill, 2017): ‘usually classroom teachers treat “specials” as if they are only prep time, but not at [my school]. Here they are viewed as an important part of a student’s development.’

#### Lacked of community

In contrast to many of the low-burnout teachers, several of those reporting high burnout lacked a sense of community within their schools. This was particularly true of itinerant teachers and those who perceived hostility and divisiveness among administrators and colleagues. Pamela (high) did not feel connected to her colleagues at Douglas Middle School because ‘we’re always stuck in our room. We don’t have a lot of time to socialize.’ Frank (low) was happy at Lurcroy Middle School, but noted challenges in a previous environment: ‘I was miserable at [my last school] and I wanted to leave. There was hostility among the teachers because the principal made everything competitive. She would call out teacher who did good work and criticize those who didn’t.’ Anabelle (high) believed that administrators at Bennington Elementary School created a divisive culture: ‘some teachers are very close the administration and they get perks. . .that creates even more separation. . .more anxiety and frustration.’

From Chantal’s (high) perspective, sometimes teachers fundamentally disagreed on key issues, which made it difficult to build community. Her relationships with colleagues were ‘challenging, and it’s because we didn’t have the same views. . . I don’t agree with how they do things, but it’s hard to come in and change a culture.’ Dianne (high) had been teaching for 30 years and perceived tension with newer

teachers at Bradleyville High School who ‘go home without work to do at night. It is frustrating because they come to me and ask for help. I had to dig and claw to put [lessons] together, but they just want me to give it to them.’ Amber (high), an itinerant art teacher, explained that she had a difficult time building relationships: ‘it’s hard for [my colleagues] to remember who I am. . .the art teacher they see once a week. . .I just feel like I don’t really get to know anybody. It’s kind of sad.’ Sandy (high) shared a room with other teachers at Douglas Middle School, and ‘it creates hostility. The [other teachers] don’t like it when I leave things in the room, but it is my room too. There is no good way to share.

### Student and family apathy

While the teachers indicated that relationships with students were what made teaching worthwhile, several high-burnout teachers became frustrated when students and parents did not seem to care about education. Chantal (high) described ‘a constant battle between how much I am helping the students and how much they are helping themselves. . .sometimes the effort just is not there.’ Tristan (high) believed that it was difficult to get students at Bradleyville High School to do homework: ‘Instead of really teaching physics, I teach a lot more about how you learn, how you study.’ Pamela (high) explained her biggest challenge when it came to teaching students at Douglas Middle School ‘is dealing with kids that don’t have motivation. I wish there was something motivate them, but many of them just don’t care about school.’

While several teachers highlighted issues working with the children, some also felt the apathy was imbedded in the family. Chelsea (high) believed that parents were uninterested in their children’s education: ‘I met a parent last night. . .he said that he had never met a single one of [the student’s] teachers. It was like he didn’t care to meet them.’ Lacey (high) feared for some of her students at Bentley Elementary School because of their home lives: ‘seeing kids that aren’t taken care of is probably one of my biggest frustrations. . .I have to let them go home every day and that is really hard.’ Suzan (low) presented a different perspective. She believed that ‘parents are very involved, but they have unrealistic expectations. . .they call and email me almost every day and want immediate responses.’

### Accountability and education policy

The Midwestern US state in which the teachers worked had recently undergone a largescale, politically charged reformation to school and teacher accountability. These changes were initiated at the state level, and many high-burnout teachers were frustrated with the process. Dianne (high) felt the new evaluations may take the focus away from student learning: ‘when you’re getting evaluated by somebody else and they have a checklist, and if you’re trying to think about what they have to check off, that’s what puts stress on you instead of just trying to do your job.’ Jeffrey (high) discussed how the changes introduced new stress. His ‘biggest stress used to be the kids and parents [at Somers Middle School], but now it’s the administrators and the people in [the state capitol] who dictate the evaluations.’ This stress got to be so much for some teachers that they thought about retirement. Sandy (high) explained that ‘retirement was something that would have never crossed my mind, but the added stress of the evaluations is too much. . .I have a friend. . . she retired because [teaching] was just not enjoyable anymore.’

Several participants discussed how the state accountability system took control out of the hands of teachers, which led them to feel even more demoralised. Jeffrey (high) discussed how the policies created a ‘culture of mistrust. . .it’s like teachers are not professionals, like I need somebody watching over me every second to make sure that I am educating students.’ Samuel (high) felt ‘teachers have been vilified. . .this is fed by the media who make it sound like teachers are at fault for all the problems in

education.’ Chelsea (high) talked about how the policies reduced freedom: ‘My perception of it is that [the state superintendent of education] is cracking the whip because teachers are shaking in their boots. No one wants to do anything creative because we are worried about getting dinged by the state.’

#### All teachers had to manage workplace stress

Both high- and low-burnout teachers discussed how they attempted managed stress associated with their work both in and outside of school. Subthemes included: role stress, avoiding stress in the workplace, role balance and resilience, and the impact on personal and emotional health. High-burnout teachers noted role stress and a negative impact on personal and emotional health, and low-burnout teachers seemed to be more adept at managing stress.

#### Coping with role stress

All teachers confirmed that elements of their work could be stressful; however, the highburnout teachers talked more often about their job stressors. Role overload and role conflict were common topics of discussion. During interviews teachers were asked if they had enough time to get everything done. Jeffrey (high) responded: ‘not even close! You don’t sleep much. . . they only give us a half hour to prep each day, so we end up doing a lot on our own time.’ Anthony (low) ‘managed to get by,’ but when asked if he was able to keep up with responsibilities at Lucroy Middle School, he explained, ‘there is not enough time. If you added an hour to the day there still wouldn’t be enough time.’ Other teachers cited ‘all the paperwork’ (Alicia, low), ‘not enough prep time during the day’ (Mindy, high), and ‘grading that comes home’ (Anabelle, high) as stressors in their work environment.

In addition to feeling overloaded, participants discussed feelings of role conflict. For many, this involved conflict between the roles of teacher and family member. Rebecca (high), who taught at Bradleyville High School, said, ‘I am a single mom and it can be difficult to be there for my daughter when I have so much work that I need to bring home. . . I wish we had more time to do family stuff.’ Lacey (high) explained, ‘my husband and I weren’t doing well. We went to marriage counseling. . . everything just revolved around what I was doing in school.’ Other teachers experienced the conflict between teaching and coaching extracurricular sports. Frank (low), who taught physical education at Lucroy Middle School, said ‘I’m not going to lie, coaching is a huge passion of mine. . . It’s a huge chunk of the daily things that I do.’ Kevin (high) explained that ‘I do not feel any pressure [to win] from the administration, but I definitely feel it from the community. . . I also put a lot of pressure on myself. . . it takes its toll on my teaching. . . on my family life.’ Chantal (high) wanted to be a physical education teacher ‘because I wanted to coach. . . I taught elementary physical education and coached at the high school, which was stressful because of the commitment. . . I would be lying if I said that my teaching did not suffer.

#### Role balance and resilience

While several of the teachers discussed the stress they experienced during their daily work, others—primarily those who perceived low burnout—found ways to manage this stress by finding role balance and developing resilience. Susan (low) prioritised responsibilities in her work at Fredericksburg Junior High School: ‘as I have gotten older I have found more effective ways to plan, like over the summer and in larger chunks of time.’ Dianne (high) explained that, while she still felt stress, things have improved over the years: ‘I’ve been a teacher now for a long time and I have had a lot of years to practice

and find out what works and what doesn't work.' James (low) added that he used to spend time at home preparing for classes he taught at Clarksville Middle School, but 'now that I have experience under my belt, I find myself more relaxed at home.' For Alicia (low), time management was key to avoiding stress. She tried to 'stay on top of things and get everything organized, then I am more comfortable.

Several teachers sought to manage stress by balancing their home and work lives. Cindy (low) and her husband 'have become very good at scheduling things. We want to make sure that we always have time for each other. Your life needs to be more than just work.' Alicia (low) explained that role balance meant taking time to decompress and refocus: 'you have to relax. If you try to go 24/7 you are going to burnout and end up leaving [the profession].' In addition to role balance, several teachers described themselves as resilient and explained that being resilient helped them to work through stress. Linda (low) explained, 'there's just so many fun things about [teaching] that it sort of bolsters you back up. There are times when I get stressed, but I love my job so much that I am able to work through it.' Anthony's (low) work at Lucroy Middle School was 'time consuming, but I really enjoy what I do and look forward to coming in every day. . . when there is stress, I just work through it because I know that my job is worth it.

#### Impact on emotional and personal health

Several teachers noted that the stress of their work had an impact on their personal and emotional health. It was mostly the high-burnout teachers who described their work as 'physically and emotionally exhausting' (Mindy, high). Lacey (high) elaborated on this and explained that 'I love [my students at Bentley Elementary School], but I give them everything. Sometimes I feel like I have nothing more to give.' Some teachers described the tangible impact of this stress. Pamela (high) explained that last year she had 'a really rough group of students [at Douglas Middle School]. . . my blood pressure was up and I constantly got headaches.' Krystle (high) had 'a heart attack two summers ago. A lot of the stress was caused by me wanting to get everything perfect.' Chelsea (high) 'was developing an anxiety disorder because of my stress level. The people I work with [at Franklin Elementary School] stress me out.

While some low-burnout teachers discussed the health implications of their work, most had worked through it so that they were no longer suffering. Suzan (low) really enjoyed her job at Fredericksburg Junior High School where she felt 'valued and appreciated.' Her last job was very stressful and caused 'depression. I felt like I couldn't do it anymore. I would be walking down the street and start crying when I thought about school.' Tracey (low) 'had to refocus on my personal health because I was headed down a dangerous path. I am lucky that my husband is so supportive and helped me to see what I was doing to myself.' Samuel (low) really loves 'the people and kids [at Monterey Elementary School]. They are so much better this year than they were last year and I can feel the difference. I am not as stress or tired. I feel rejuvenated!'

#### Discussion

In response to calls in the literature to provide greater insight into the interplay between personal and contextual factors that influence teacher stress, burnout, and resilience (Johnson et al., 2014), the purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the ways in which teachers who perceived high- and low-levels burnout experienced their work. Qualitative data analyses indicated that low-burnout teachers perceived their teaching environments as nurturing and supportive, whereas their high-burnout teachers felt as if their workplaces were combative and constraining. These different environments led

high-burnout teachers to express feelings of role stress, which have in prior research been linked to burnout (Alarcon, 2011; Byrne, 1991), and led to negative health consequences. In contrast, low-burnout teachers found ways to balance their multiple roles and develop a sense of resilience; a connection that is similarly supported in the literature (Day & Gu, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2016).

All teachers invited to participate in the study were randomly selected based on perceived emotional exhaustion, and it is notable that most high-burnout teachers were from the small city school district (i.e. Bradleyville), whereas most of the low-burnout teachers came from the Allen County School District, which was more rural. This finding aligns with previous research documenting that urban teachers experience greater stress than those working in rural environments, particularly in relation to workload, school disorganisation, accountability, and poor staff relations (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011).

The results of this study have implications for role socialisation theory (Richards, 2015). The social construction of the teacher role is managed, at least in part, at the school level. Within these environments, role stress occurs when there is a disconnect between the ways in which the individual teacher views their role and the how it is viewed by key stakeholders in their workplace (Conley & You, 2009). Interactions with key stakeholders are important for understanding the ways in which teachers experience their work (Richards et al., 2013). Across the themes, the influence of others in the social environment of schools is unmistakable. The teachers become frustrated with children and their parents when they feel a sense of apathy, but at the same time note that the opportunity to teach and work with children is paramount to their sense of satisfaction. Teachers recognise that relationships with their colleagues are indicative of whether or not they feel a sense of community in their school, but also note that it is the school administration that helps to set the tone. Administrators can lead teachers to feel empowered, or demoralise them by taking away control of their teaching (Santoro, 2018).

While these micro-level interactions are important for how teachers appraise their work, this study also illuminates the strong role played by government agencies. Policy arenas are fluid, densely-packed spaces that can be difficult for teachers to navigate (Sato, 2014). The uncertainty that accompanies major policy changes can be a source of stress. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding the controversial issue of teacher evaluation in the US (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Valli et al., 2007). When teachers feel as if they do not have a voice in change, they are likely to resist and criticise the process (Santoro, 2018). The challenge then becomes finding a way to bring policy change to scale while also giving teachers authentic feelings of control over the process.

Without question, the teachers felt overloaded and as if their responsibilities were too numerous to account for during the school day. There was evidence of both family/ work role conflict (Netemeyer et al., 1996) and teacher/coach role conflict (Konukman et al., 2010). While role overload and role conflict were common topics of discussion, the teachers did not speak extensively about role ambiguity. Rather, they seemed more frustrated when policymakers and administrators usurped control of their classrooms and left them feeling demoralised.

Similar to feelings of demoralisation, marginality led some of the non-core subject teachers to feel as if they were less important to the mission of their schools. Literature from non-core subject fields such as physical education (Lux & McCullick, 2011) and music education (Regelski, 2005) highlight the negative consequences of marginality in terms of teacher morale and effectiveness. Nevertheless, marginality is determined largely by the social construction of a subject within a particular school



(Richards, 2015). Thus, some subjects are constructed as marginal in particular settings, but not in others. This helps to explain why not all of the non-core subject teachers articulated feelings of marginalisation.

While both high- and low-burnout teachers discussed role stressors, those who felt less burnout seemed to do a better job of balance multiple roles (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Some of the teachers who had found balance had done so only after having worked through initial challenges and learning to find ways to relax outside of school. Similarly, teachers who felt as if they had developed a capacity for resilience (Day & Gu, 2010) were less likely to espouse high levels of burnout. These teachers had a natural or learned capacity to both survive and thrive in their work roles while avoiding prolonged stress (Bottrell, 2009; Fleming et al., 2013). For many, resilience was framed as a social process and fostered through positive relationships with key stakeholders in the school (Johnson et al., 2014). Teachers who experienced high levels of burnout articulated some of the negative impacts upon their personal health. These experiences highlight the emotional and physiological toll burnout has on teachers' lives (Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002), and reinforces the need to develop nurturing environments that promote resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016).

### Implications for practice

This study presents implications for practice related to the way in which school environments impact teachers' development and their ability to survive and thrive. Figure 1 presents a visual representation to summarise the lessons learned related to teacher stress and coping. This figure begins with the assumption that teaching, as an occupation, has and will continue to present numbers stressors that must be navigated regularly (Santoro, 2018; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Zhang & Sapp, 2008). Teachers working in nurturing environments characterised by a positive school culture, empowerment and support, and positive relationships with key stakeholders develop role balance and resilience to cope with stressors (Dinham et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2014). Teachers who work in combative and constraining environments may experience decreased job satisfaction and possible health effects that may cause them to burn out or leave the teaching profession (Metzler, 2016).

Based on the relationships hypothesised in this figure, social interactions that take place in the context of schools appear particularly important to teacher development and wellbeing. It is, therefore, integral that school administrators create environments where teachers feel valued and have the autonomy to make meaningful decisions (Santoro, 2018). Developing a positive culture among colleagues, which can be promoted by administrators, is likewise important. School administrators and professional development providers should focus on fostering positive school cultures that lend themselves to teacher resilience alongside the typical focus on knowledge development (Johnson et al., 2014). While scaffolding teacher knowledge is an important goal of professional development (Parsons, Ankrum, & Morewood, 2016), these activities are unlikely to influence teacher practice in suboptimal working environments that do not lend themselves to collaboration and community.

Teacher education faculty should focus on preparing preservice teachers for the social realities of life in school (Mansfield et al., 2016; Richards et al., 2013). This preparation should focus on skills and strategies for navigating the social realities of schools (Lacey, 1977), as well as the importance of building a positive culture within the workplace. The focus should also be placed on building the capacity for resilience prior to entry into the workforce (Dinham et al., 2017). The BRiTE framework developed by Mansfield and colleagues (2016) has much to offer in this respect by helping preservice teachers understand the importance of building resilience, fostering positive relationships, developing wellbeing,

taking initiative, and developing emotional awareness. Notably, teachers who are well trained and prepared for the technical aspects of instruction, but are not prepared to manage relationships with key stakeholders, are unlikely to flourish and be able to apply what they have learned on the job.

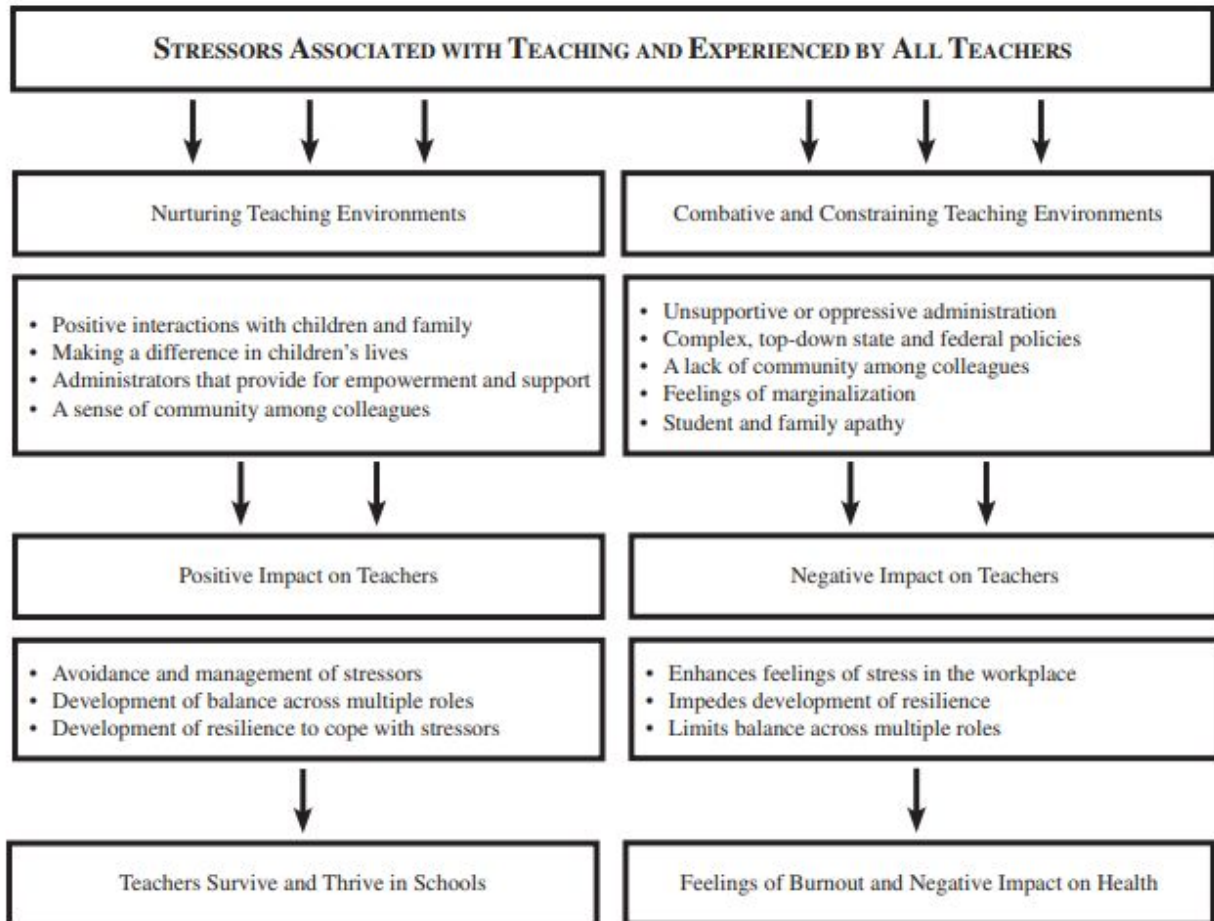


Figure 1. Graphical representation of the way in which nurturing and non-nurturing teaching environments have positive and negative impacts on teachers, respectively. The positive impact of nurturing environments helps teachers to survive and thrive in schools, whereas the negative impact of non-supportive environments leads to burnout and a negative impact on teachers' personal and emotional health.

#### Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that should be born in mind. First, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to understand how teachers' experiences change over time. It is likely, for example, that teachers' perspectives on stress may vary depending on the time of year, such as during the beginning or end of the school year. Further, while the approach taken in this study provides breadth by interviewing a relatively large number of teachers from different schools, we acknowledge that it sacrifices the depth provided by other qualitative research designs, such as case studies (Patton, 2015). In particular, the sequential explanatory design did not address potential differences between elementary and

secondary teachers that have been examined in prior literature (e.g. Byrne, 1994; Klassen, 2010; Richards et al., 2016). Accounting for differences across grade levels may have resulted in a more nuanced study with more robust findings. Longitudinal case studies of teachers within a small number of schools over the course of an academic year would help develop a better understanding how stress develops over time, and provide an in depth understanding of how factors operating within school contexts lead to stress. This research may consider factors such as teacher experience, school sector (i.e. public or private), and school effectiveness among other variables that may influence teachers' perceived stress and burnout.

## Conclusions

By contrasting the experiences of high- and low-burnout teachers, the primary contribution of the current study is that, while all teachers may encounter stress, those who work in schools that have nurturing, supportive cultures appear better able to manage that stress and balance work and non-work roles through the development of resilience. Given that teachers who are more stressed are less effective in the classroom (Zhang & Sapp, 2008), the development of nurturing environments appears paramount. Only by working together can key stakeholders in the educational process develop environments that support teacher development and continued learning. Thus, in place of the blaming and 'teacher bashing' that appear common in popular educational discourse (Nuñez, 2015), we recommend a developmental discourse that focuses on supporting and nurturing teacher growth and development (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007). Policies that limit stressors are an important element of this process, as is the development of environments that help teachers to more effectively cope with stress and do their work more effectively.

## Note

1. Pseudonym have been assigned to all teachers, schools, and school districts referenced in the study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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