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Burnout and Role Ambiguity in Mexican Universities: A case study

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Summary

This study describes levels of burnout and role ambiguity perception in 263 teachers from a public state university in the south east of Mexico.

A pen and paper scale measuring these two constructs was administered and analyzed.

Relative low levels of burnout (21%) and role ambiguity perception (23%) were found.

Findings are consistent with previous research in Mexican teachers.

Results suggest that social recognition, honorable payment scales, and task diversity may be protective factors present in these teachers.

Future research must focus on explaining the costs and consequences of teachers´ experiencing burnout and on how these protective factors specifically act.

Burnout and Role Ambiguity in Mexican Universities: A case study

Mexican universities are rapidly changing in response to global demands and societal changes. A new system of credit transfer and mutual recognition is in process (Sánchez & Martínez, 2004) and federal policy mandates the reorganization of higher education activities around 'cuerpos académicos', an experimental form of academic functioning which aims to facilitate transition from the original European university model toward a departmental structure, similar to those sustaining American universities. Central to this transformation is the new profile of the university professor, changing from the professional hired to teach a number of hours, to the full time professor, solely dedicated to the academy.

However, transformation has taken its toll on many scholars. Recent research results have demonstrated that a number of factors have hindered teachers' performance and efficiency in Mexican higher education institutions (Boardman & Bozeman, 2007). Specifically, researchers have focused in understanding possible causes of burnout, such as heavy work load, poor conflict management and the need to perform multiple roles (Magaña & Sánchez, 2008).

The study reported here analyzed the stress associated with demands placed on Mexican professors to perform multiple roles and how the degree of conflict derived from such role ambiguity influences their productivity within the institution and satisfaction with their job.

In Mexican public universities, the incentive for fulfilling multiple roles has been increased in recent years, because of the linkage of significant income to various activities. Stimuli sometimes represent an amount as large as the salary itself, and in the majority of

state universities, professors struggle to be admitted to or to remain in various incentive

programs, either local or federal, such as the national research roster (Sistema Nacional de

Investigadores, SNI), the most visible and prestigious program of performance recognition.

The SNI provides support to approximately 14,000 researchers, one third of the research

force in the country (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia, 2008).

In general, incentive programs in Mexican universities specifically value and foster

the development of multiple roles, such as guidance for the student, publishing, teaching,

scholar participation in different committees and groups and the handling of various

administrative chores.

Although, complaints about the recent demands are common (not against the

economic benefits derived from these programs!), no empirical studies have been

published with regards to the possible cost of such efforts in terms of motivation to work,

endurance, longevity in the institution or their effects in terms of negative psychological or

physical functioning.

Multiple demands

De Arquer, Daza y Nogareda (1995) claim the multiple demands and

responsibilities and the teacher's need to fulfill a variety of roles is a source of conflict and

stress, since time constraints, excessive teaching loads and various administrative demands

lead many to a dilemma: whether to do everything somehow or to select and focus on a

specific task, assuring at least a minimum of quality.

Professors' complaints have triggered some research on the stress of academic

demands on teachers and on the presence of emotional distress or burnout (Aluja, Blanch &

García, 2005; Prieto & Bermejo, 2006; Magaña & Sánchez, 2008). Boardman y Bozeman

(2007) suggested that various responsibilities, excessive institutional burden and role

ambiguity have traditionally stressed researchers and eventually the organization itself. Thus, constant organizational changes demand further research to help in understanding the effects of rapid change in Mexican universities.

Burnout and stress

Burnout is a thoroughly studied syndrome, firstly identified in workers providing services in the health and judiciary systems (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Recent efforts identify this problem in teachers who experience stress and eventually burn out.

The existence of stress as an inherent aspect of teaching was clearly documented by Roth (1993) who argued that many teachers find the demands of being a professor difficult and at times overwhelming. When work stress results in teacher burnout, it can have serious consequences for the health and happiness of teachers, and also the students, professionals, and families they interact with on a daily basis.

Some attention has been given to stress and burnout of beginning teachers, since they are extremely susceptible to these factors, but little attention has been placed on changes and transformation of roles in Mexican universities as a generator of stress. Furthermore, meeting the more basic needs of teachers is an important issue to be considered by school administrators. Thus, preventing stress levels needs to be better recognized in professional development within universities.

Matheny, Gfroerer, and Harris (2000) described burnout as a loss of idealism and enthusiasm for work while Maslach and Jackson (1981) identified 3 dimensions in defining the construct of burnout: depersonalization, in which one distances oneself from others and views others impersonally; reduced personal accomplishment, in which one devalues one's work with others; and emotional exhaustion, in which one feels emptied of personal emotional resources and becomes highly vulnerable to stressors. In particular,

depersonalization may be expressed through poor attitudes towards students and the work environment.

According to Wood & McCarthy (2002), teachers may be at greater risk for depersonalization because their daily work life often includes large doses of isolation from their professional peers. Factors such as the physical layout of most campuses, with teachers working alone in their classrooms, and scheduling constraints that make finding time to meet with peers virtually impossible, can cause teachers to feel disconnected (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990).

Bullough & Baughman (1997) asserted that teachers at risk for burnout came to see their work as futile and inconsistent with the ideals or goals they had set as beginning teachers.

In sum, burnout results from the chronic perception that one is unable to cope with daily life demands. Given that teachers must face potentially stressful interactions with students, parents, administrators, counselors, and other teachers, and contend with relatively high demands from incentive programs, many experience a form of burnout at some point in their careers.

Role Ambiguity

A role consists of a cluster of expectations or a pattern of behaviors that are expected within a given context (Khan, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964). Role ambiguity emerges when ill defined patterns of behavior are associated with specific positions. This is rather different than the concept of role deformity, in which different circumstances demand conflicting behaviors in a given role (Boardman & Bozeman, 2007).

Role ambiguity is produced when the individual has an unclear picture of the set of behaviors and responsibilities associated with a given position or the pattern of behaviors

expected from him/her are either diffuse or poorly delimited. Schulz & Auld (2006) suggest that role ambiguity is associated with negative states such as stress, low satisfaction or poor performance.

Role ambiguity is related to but still differs from the concept of role conflict, which occurs when a teacher is faced with conflicting expectations of the job. For example, role conflict may arise when two different tasks are presented simultaneously, whereas role ambiguity emerges from discrepancies between differing ideals of what it means to be a good teacher. Role ambiguity relates more to a sense of confusion about one's goals as a teacher including a sense of uncertainty about the responsibilities related to teaching.

Dworkin (1986) reported that role conflict and role ambiguity were significantly related to burnout, whereas Le Compte and Dworkin (1991) analyzed burnout in terms of role-specific alienation with a focus on feelings of meaninglessness and powerlessness.

When role ambiguity becomes overwhelming, teachers must make a decision as to whether they are willing to continue their work. In this regard, Troman and Woods (2001) claim that stress may lead teachers to make what they term 'pivotal decisions'. Although teachers go through many such events over the course of a career, stress derived from role ambiguity maybe more harmful than earlier predicted, requiring empirical examination. They suggest that many teachers seek relief by taking a less prestigious or demanding role (usually better defined), reducing their roles as a part time instructors, or by having previously assigned duties transferred to other teachers

Prevention of burnout

Albee (2000) argues that "It is far better if the roots of teacher burnout are identified and eliminated before the syndrome develops, rather than treating it after it has already occurred" (p. 847).

Organizational practices that prevent teacher burnout are generally those that allow teachers some control over their daily challenges. At the individual level, self-efficacy and the ability to maintain perspective with regard to daily events have been described as "anxiety-buffers" (Greenberg, 1999). However, little attention has been paid to better defining and delimiting roles, thus reducing role ambiguity.

At the institutional level, Kyriacou (2001) suggests that by consulting with teachers on matters such as curriculum development or instructional planning, which directly impact their classrooms, stress is reduced and the working atmosphere is improved significantly.

In staff development, an explicit definition of different roles may help teachers to cope with demands and may provide additional time to focus on areas such as curriculum and instruction, classroom management and discipline, and other instructional-related chores. Reducing role ambiguity may prove helpful to prevent stress and eventually burnout.

Method

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between role ambiguity and burnout in Mexican university teachers. A case study was the selected method of investigation and the research was carried out in a typical public state university from the southeast of Mexico.

This institution has approximately 32,271 students, nearly 2000 teachers and offers 36 college degrees and 44 graduate programs. Participants for this study were selected form established "cuerpos academicos." As noted above, these are organizational structures that cluster professors around a field of interest, research area or sub discipline. This university has 66 'cuerpos academicos' from the 9 of the 10 major colleges. A

conventional sample that included 50% of teachers was drawn. Participants were 234

teachers, 63% of them men.

Instrument

A paper and pencil questionnaire containing two major sections was developed ad

hoc. The first section was an adapted version of the burnout questionnaire originally

designed by Maslach y Jackson (1981), with 15 items measuring depersonalization,

reduced personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion. This scale has been

previously used in similar projects in Mexico, with a reported alpha reliability coefficient of

.883 (Magaña & Sánchez, 2008). The second section was inspired by the scale proposed in

the early 70's by Rizzo, House y Lirtzman to measure role ambiguity. Ten items were

carefully written with a positive orientation, according to their relevance in the Mexican

context. This first administration of the scale yielded an alpha coefficient of .694

The overall instrument then contained 2 dimensions, burnout and role ambiguity,

with 25 items in a 5 point Lickert scale yielding a global alpha coefficient .888.

Procedures

Researchers and their assistants handed each questionnaire in an envelope to each

participant. They were asked to answer the instrument in private and return the sheet to the

envelope to be collected the next day. Every questionnaire handled was retrieved the next

day.

Results

In general, burnout levels are low. In a scale from 15 to 75; a mean of 28.61 was

obtained, with Standard Deviation of 8.78. Only 21% of participants had scores suggestive

of this syndrome.   No significant differences were found in burnout levels in any of the

factors of comparison, but younger faculty tended to show higher levels of burnout than older faculty ($F = 4.85$, $p = .001$).

Regarding role ambiguity, in a scale of 10 to 50, the mean was 21.01 with a Standard Deviation of 4.97. Only 23% of participants had scores indicative of high role ambiguity perception. Although no gender or age differences were found , single participants tended to show higher scores in role ambiguity perception than married ones ($t = 2.45$, $p = .015$) . Faculty tended to indicate a lack of normative clarity as a source of role ambiguity. Curiously, the faculty of Socio-economic Studies tended to have higher scores whereas Computer Sciences tended to have the lower scores.

Lastly, the Pearsons coefficient correlation between burnout and role ambiguity was $r = .451$, indicating a logical association between these two related variables.

Discussion

As in previous studies, despite constant complaints about pressures and hardships from very competitive incentive programs, Mexican academics show relatively low levels of burnout and organizational stress as evidenced by obtained results.

 Mexican schools report a consistent burnout level of 20%. Results are also consistent with levels of burnout in prestigious researchers in Mexico (Magaña & Sánchez, 2008) and with reported burnout in basic education Mexican teachers (Villa 2004).

Perhaps social recognition, adequate pay scales in the higher education system and the variety of tasks that avoid monotony are some of the factors associated to these relative low levels of burnout and stress.

Is further research on the effects of burnout in Mexican teachers needed? What remains to be determined by future research are the factors affecting already burned out

teachers, their history and expectations and their meaning and cost for the institution. For

while 20% of the workforce exhibits characteristics that may be expected to affect their

performance, a significant loss in the institution´s potential is also to be expected.

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