

RESEARCH REPORT

A Study of Self-Regulation in Classroom Teachers

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Self-regulation is the ability to adjust one's level of energy to match the situation; monitor, evaluate and modify one's emotion; shift attention or ignore various stimuli; engage in social interactions in a sustained way; and connect and empathize with other people. This research explored self-regulation among teachers as a factor in student learning and co-regulation in the classroom environment. A quantitative survey and qualitative interviews answered the following research question: Overall, what are the impacts of the education system on teacher self-regulation? Exploring teacher perspectives opens the door to including their opinions on all aspects of the educational system and its impact on their wellness on a personal and professional level. The research aimed to promote a better awareness of teacher needs and of ways to support them, and to motivate the development of better student supports as a result.

The study revealed that negative and positive factors act either to exacerbate or to alleviate stressors upon teachers and impact their overall sense of well-being and effectiveness as educators. What is not known is what degree of imbalance between negatives and positives will result in measurable impacts on teacher wellness and student learning. Because people are all different and have different levels of resilience, this threshold will vary. What is known is that student self-regulation, and therefore performance, is impacted in multiple ways by teacher self-regulation; therefore, providing supports only to the students is not enough. Teachers also need to be supported mentally, emotionally, physically, and environmentally in order for the students to benefit. The teacher responses in this study indicated that the educational system is not yet organized or provisioned in a realistic way that will provide the supports required by teachers for the work and the level of performance that is expected of them over the course of the school year. The conditions under which teachers work do not assist or support them adequately in efficiently and effectively meeting the goals of the school system.

Almost all of the teacher respondents felt that changes are needed to improve teacher ability to self-regulate and achieve overall well-being in their workplace. As teacher needs are being recognized, shifts are slowly beginning to happen. However, the educational system is not yet supportive enough on a cultural level in terms of its traditional and current mindsets regarding implementing healthy boundaries and recognizing realistic adult self-regulation needs. This climate in which teacher needs are not being met satisfactorily can make the difference between stressors that can be dealt with effectively and are therefore temporary, and stressors that become cumulative and chronic, with consequent impacts on the students. The study revealed that there is an urgent need to support teachers across multiple domains in order to improve their chances at overall wellness and fitness for the task. There is no set formula on how to do this, except to break it into attainable and measurable next steps.

Based upon the voices of teachers in this study, and knowing the impact that a deficit of teacher supports has on their self-regulation and overall wellness, next steps need to be considered. The educational system cannot impact the personal lives of teachers directly in terms of what they choose to do with their personal lives to regulate themselves and attain wellness, but what it can do is begin to make changes in the areas that teachers have highlighted as sources of stress or support, especially the ones that overflow into their personal lives. There needs to be a re-evaluation of –

- The non-instructional roles that teachers are expected to play: The educational system needs to ensure that it is possible and practical to meet the goals placed on the teachers

in the settings in which they currently work. Teachers identified that there is often more than teaching involved because they are also dealing with trauma, poverty, and emotional, behavioural, and cognitive challenges. These needs of the students must be met first, which puts strains upon the time that teachers have, unless there are sufficient supports put in place, such as improved student breakfast or nutrition programs and better access to counselling and social work services for students. These types of supports would allow teachers to focus more on the instructional responsibilities of their positions.

- The work expected in the timeframes given: In the realm of instruction, regulating this area would alleviate a number of stressors by ensuring that there is sufficient school-based time to prepare lessons, mark work, complete reports, and make calls to parents. The culture of expecting teachers to do extensive work at school after hours or to bring things home needs to be re-evaluated.
- The tools and resources with which teachers are supplied: When a division or school is short on funding for resources and other supports to meet student demands, it is not sufficient to offload the responsibility onto the classroom teacher. That is not sustainable in either the short or long term. It is not reasonable to expect the teachers to “get creative” with what little they may have. In other professions, if supplies are missing, the work does not get done until the supplies or supports are made available; otherwise, the company fails. Fire trucks do not go out on calls without hoses and water, and hospitals do not go without X-ray machines and bandages. Education is no different.
- The understanding of how Maslow’s hierarchy, as well as the modern model of self-regulation, applies not only to students, but to teachers and administrators as well: We understand without question how these things apply to students, that is, how students at risk or students with special needs must have adaptations or accommodations in order to thrive. Let us recognize and reaffirm that a school is an ecosystem that is comprised of more than just students. Teachers, educational assistants, administrators, support staff, and even caretakers are all a part of this ecosystem and, as in any ecosystem, the health of one member or group affects the health of others and the health of the entire system itself. Let us apply this understanding to supporting teachers and other members of the system. We know what teachers are saying they need on their end. Schools and divisions can take the known stressors that teachers have identified, put them into the mental, emotional, physical and environmental domains, and explore how the system can feasibly provide supports in each of these areas.

We know what teachers need because they are telling us. Teachers are capable of making changes themselves to improve self-regulation and co-regulation, but their power to effect change is limited. Teachers are telling us that they are not able to make some of the changes on their own. This puts the onus on leaders in the education system, both within school divisions and in schools, to take a more holistic view of schooling and acknowledge that they need to make systemic and structural changes to support teachers in making changes both within themselves and for those around them. The focus needs to shift to the teachers now, so that they can support themselves and the students to the best of their ability.

About the Researcher

Natasha Herring has been teaching for ten years, and is currently working in Student Services. Her thesis for an M.Ed. in counselling was on the self-regulation of classroom teachers and the impact inside and outside of the learning environment. She explores many wellness activities that bring her balance, including spending time with her family.