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ABSTRACT

This paper examines research on risk factors affecting teachers, noting that teachers encounter daily challenges and stresses in working with today's students. Risk is difficult to define. Consequences of risk can include stress and burnout, absenteeism, and attrition. Research shows that everyday events, even positive ones, cause stress, and chronic and traumatic negative stress can lead to many forms of illness and maladjustment. Leading stressors include student misbehavior and teachers' own characteristics. Symptoms of stress and burnout include anger, anxiety, depression, fatigue, frustration, substance abuse, psychosomatic symptoms, family crises, and reduction in commitment to students. School reform and working conditions can contribute to teacher burnout. Teachers' attendance is influenced by both organizational practices and attendance barriers (transportation, illness, and family responsibilities). Teachers with higher job satisfaction and involvement tend to be absent less frequently. The immediate atmosphere of the school environment is a primary reason for teacher attrition. Many external, employment, and personal factors contribute to teacher attrition. There are some unique patterns of risk factors in Pacific schools that relate to cultural events, environmental factors, family/village social roles, and culturally sanctioned time off. A graphical representation of what research suggests about risk factors is presented. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)



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# At Risk Teachers

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**PACIFIC RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING**
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by
Ormond W. Hammond • Denise L. Onikama*

***No more homework, no more books***
***No more teachers' dirty looks...***
Traditional Children's rhyme

Teachers are soldiers in the educational trenches, overcoming obstacles that make their work challenging and stressful. Imagine dealing daily with groups of 20 to 30 children, some of them bright and eager, some disruptive and inattentive, some possibly even hostile. Imagine being held responsible for shaping the minds of the next generation. And then imagine not being paid very well and not even being respected in your community as a professional.

Imagine, for some teachers, facing classrooms full of children from unfamiliar cultures, whose home languages you may not understand. In remote islands of the Pacific, you may be the only teacher in a one-room schoolhouse with children of all ages. You may have no way of even directly communicating with the outside world.

It should come as no surprise, then, that teacher absenteeism and attrition are problems that face educational systems, and particularly those in the Pacific region. What are the risk factors in the lives of teachers? Much has been written about students who are at risk, who may drop out. What about their teachers?

Interest in this topic for the Pacific began with the Pacific Resources for Education and Learning's Research and Development Cadre study of High School Students At-Risk (PREL R&D Cadre, 1995). Open-ended questions answered by students indicated that they felt vulnerable to teacher absenteeism and to poor teaching and disciplinary methods. In considering these results, the PREL Board of Directors suggested follow-up research on risk factors among teachers.

This paper examines research that has been done on risk factors that may affect teachers. It is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive. There is a huge body of research on stress and burnout generally (C.F. Goldberger and Breznitz, 1993), although not much on how these relate to teachers. Rather, the purpose is to raise the awareness of educators concerning some of these factors. Preventing the negative outcomes of risk factors can help teachers become more effective and thus promote more positive student outcomes.

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## What is Risk?

The concept of "risk" has proven difficult to define. It is derived from the public health and actuarial fields in which some factor or condition can be shown to statistically relate to a known medical condition or outcome. If a person smokes, for example, the risks for heart disease and cancer increase. Risk does NOT mean a direct, one-to-one, causal relationship. Not every person who smokes develops heart disease. And some who do not smoke do. But smoking is seen as a predisposing condition.

Definitions of risk, then, often use terms such as "danger," "jeopardy," and "possibility of loss." Factors or conditions that can lead to negative outcomes may be said to place a person "at risk."

In education, simply establishing such relationships can be difficult. Few outcomes in education are as clear-cut and unequivocal as diseases are in medicine. And there are so many pre-existing conditions, from personal characteristics to the educational system itself, that direct relationships are difficult to detect.

## What are the Consequences of Risk?

One way of identifying risk factors is to first identify negative outcome conditions and look for factors which predict or correlate with these outcomes. In PREL's review of the literature, three types of negative outcomes affecting teachers were often cited. These were:

- stress and burnout
- absenteeism
- attrition

## Stress and Burnout

What is stress? While specialists have operationally defined stress in a variety of ways, a layman's definition may be found in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1988): stress is "a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation." What makes stress so difficult to determine is that there is no absolute way to measure it. What makes one person anxious and tense may be a source of pleasure for another person. There are, however, some ways to measure the effects of stress. The autonomic nervous system shows changes, for example. Heart rate goes up. Blood pressure rises. Muscular tension increases and can be measured. But are these changes positive or negative? There is no way to know for sure. The experience of anxiety is an entirely subjective one. Some athletes induce higher levels of tension (psyching up) before contests because it enhances their performance.

A corollary of difficult and stressful work conditions is a condition which has been termed burnout (DeRobbio, 1995). Webster's (1988) defines this condition as "exhaustion of physical or emotional strength." A number of studies have identified sources of burnout at the individual, organizational and societal levels (DeRobbio & Iwanicki, 1996). An instrument to measure burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (1986), was designed for this purpose. On the average, studies that have utilized this instrument found that teachers do not perceive themselves as experiencing higher levels of burnout than other helping services professions.

## Absenteeism

On absenteeism, Hill (1982) uses this definition: "absence from duty, work or station; especially, such absence when deliberate or habitual." The term absence, in contrast, is defined as, "a state of being away or not present." Absenteeism may be for valid and justifiable reasons and may be asked for in advance. Or it may be unpredictable and chronic. Whether planned or unplanned, absenteeism creates a host of problems at all levels of the educational system.

## Attrition

The literature describes attrition as leaving the profession of teaching (Ascher, 1992; Gonzales & Sosa, 1993; and Betancourt-Smith, et al, 1994). Regarding special education, Gonzalez (1995) further divides the term into transfer attrition and exit attrition. The former includes those teachers who transfer to other special education positions within or outside a certain school or district, as well as those who transfer to regular education either in the same or a different school or district. The latter refers to a separation from teaching itself.

## Other Negative Outcomes

The literature from the United States emphasizes monetary losses as a result of teacher absenteeism (Hill, 1982; Unicomb et al, 1992 and Pitkoff, 1993). School districts end up paying for both the substitute and the classroom teacher. In many cases, school boards have found that they do not receive much from these twice bought services (Hill, 1982).

Scott and Wimbush (1992) cite several studies that looked at the cost of teacher absenteeism. One particular investigation of three school systems (Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York) showed that their combined absenteeism costs were approximately $500 million per year. These costs included wages for the absent teachers as well as the substitute teacher and time taken from the administrator who must contact, instruct and evaluate substitute teachers. Another study found that interruptions in the continuity of the students' regular instruction contributed to lower achievement scores and increased the remedial costs of education.

A study conducted by Pitkoff (1993) was designed to examine the relationship between school organizational variables and teacher absenteeism using a large high school sample. Several results were obtained, but of particular importance to the Pacific was that significant relationships existed between increased teacher absenteeism and lower student achievement in reading writing and mathematics, poor student attendance, and higher student dropout rates.

In summary, these findings point out that negative consequences do not stop with the obvious ones. This is a complex system which may start with risk factors, proceed through stress to attrition and, finally, to lower student achievement. Anything that can be done to reduce or mitigate teacher risk factors before the negative consequences start would be of immense value to individual teachers and the whole educational system.

## What Has Been Learned About Stress and Burnout?

Research has shown that everyday events, even positive ones, cause stress (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). It is also clear that chronic and traumatic negative stress can lead to many forms of illness and maladjustment (Pelletier, 1977;

American Psychiatric Association, 1994). It would seem to make sense, then, to seek a better understanding of the types of acute and chronic stress that affect teachers in their everyday lives. Also, what interventions might increase the resiliency of teachers and better enable them to face these stresses?

A study conducted by Martin (1988) and cited by DeRobbio and Iwanicki (1996) examined the relationships between urban teacher burnout and the numerous background factors of age, gender, race and grade level taught. Martin found that burned-out teachers tended to be white, male, teaching at the secondary level and with less than 10 years of teaching experience. Qualitative research was also mentioned in which teachers who were obsessional, passionate, idealistic and dedicated were more prone to burnout.

The DeRobbio and Iwanicki (1996) study found that the symptoms of stress and burnout in teachers were:

- anger
- anxiety
- betrayal
- depression
- fatigue
- frustration
- resentment towards others
- boredom
- cynicism
- substance abuse
- psychosomatic symptoms
- marital and family crises
- reduction in commitment to students

Most frequently related to teacher stress were organizational, student, administrative and teacher initiated factors.

School reform has been found to be another source contributing to burnout. Farber and Ascher (1992) noted the sometimes stressful impact of several components of school restructuring including:

- School-based management
- Accountability
- Career ladders
- Schools within schools
- Curriculum initiatives
- Flexible scheduling
- Team teaching

These reforms have the potential of improving the context of teaching by creating a greater sense of efficacy and control among teachers. In actual implementation however, there is no guarantee that teachers will be involved in decision-making or work with their peers, or that they will feel empowered by their added responsibilities.

Ascher (1992) referred to other urban school studies that focused on working conditions as a key to retaining good teachers. Such conditions are associated with better teacher attendance, more effort, higher morale and a greater sense of efficacy in the classroom. These conditions involve:

- Strong, supportive principal leadership
- Good physical working conditions
- High levels of staff collegiality
- High levels of teacher influence on school decisions
- High levels of teacher control over curriculum and instruction

On the other hand, working over - time, lack of staff, material, equipment or funding resources create stress among school staff.

## What Has Been Learned About Teacher Absenteeism?

In the Scott and Wimbush (1991) study, teacher absenteeism was systematically examined in secondary education. Scott and Wimbush utilized the Steers and Rhodes model (1978) in which the major components consisted of "attendance motivation" and "perceived ability to attend." Job satisfaction was the single most important factor affecting attendance motivation. Other employee attitudes that were related to attendance motivation were job involvement, organizational commitment, and loyalty to co-workers.

According to these researchers, teachers' attendance is influenced by both organizational practices and by attendance barriers. These barriers include illness, family responsibilities, and transportation problems. In general, teachers with higher job satisfaction as well as job involvement were absent less frequently.

A study done in nine Nova Scotia schools looked at short-term teacher absenteeism (Unicomb, et al, 1992). The results showed women and men in the study demonstrated different patterns of absenteeism with age. For females, the number of days claimed rose with age. On the other hand, males in their thirties claimed more days than men at any other age. Significant correlations with absences were found for gender, certification, and level taught. They found that elementary school teachers tended to miss significantly more time than secondary school teachers.

The Scott and Wimbush (1991) research also noted that child care is a factor associated with gender and related to absenteeism. Traditionally, absenteeism associated with women has been attributed to child care responsibilities. The women in this study indicated more role conflict than men in the study. This study also found absenteeism highly related to student outcomes.

## What Has Been Learned About Teacher Attrition?

Demographics, environment, background, and attitude toward leaving the educational field have been recognized as risk factor areas. Apparently, however, it is the immediate atmosphere of a teacher's current school environment that teachers identify as a primary reason for leaving the field (Betancourt-Smith, et al, 1994). Their study compared a profile of minority teachers with non-minority teachers in selected states. These researchers also compared factors previously identified as correlated with attrition to the findings of their study.

Results showed single teachers tended to leave the classroom entirely, whereas married teachers moved into other roles in education, such as administration. Researchers also found that persons from white collar families (e.g., office workers), whose parents paid for the majority of college expenses, were more likely to leave the educational field than persons from blue collar families (e.g., laborers), whose parents did not pay for the majority of college expenses. Other candidates for leaving were described as secondary school teachers who did not perceive their principal as supportive of creativity, who worked in an environment which is culturally different from their own, and who did not share a student ideology

with their colleagues. Teacher attrition and its effects on standards of education has been referred to as a constant topic of debate (Wari, 1993).

The inquiry by Wari labels attrition as "wastage," characterized as, "the percentage of teachers who leave teaching in a defined period—usually one year. Wastage or attrition is caused by deaths, retirement or resignation although more often attrition due to death and retirement is quite small." This study in Papua New Guinea found that the teacher wastage problem in both community and high schools had not been addressed properly over the years. As a result, although sufficient number of teachers were being trained in the colleges, many were not taking up teaching, or current teachers were leaving the profession either right after training or after some years of training.

A consistent list was generated when these teachers were asked to rate the conditions of most concern. In order of priority, these were:

- Low salary
- Lack of promotional opportunities
- Poor accommodations
- Lack of upgrading opportunities
- Lack of teaching materials and supplies

Other issues may be connected with teacher dissatisfaction, but not necessarily result in teachers leaving the profession. These issues included concerns relating to transfer, working relations with staff, students, and community and amount of teaching and non-teaching duties. Several of these concerns can be applied to the situation in the Pacific entities. For example, supplies and materials are limited, and in some instances the school buildings themselves are said to be in poor condition. As a result, environmental conditions may make the job of teaching an unpleasant task.

Gonzalez (1995) described factors that contribute to attrition in a Networking System for Training Education Personnel (NSTEP) Information Brief. This author categorized factors as external, employment, and personal.

External factors

External factors include societal, economic, and institutional variables that are outside of the teacher and the employing school district.

Employment factors

Employment factors include professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards, and commitment.

Personal factors

Personal factors include demographic, family and cognitive/affective variables. Both urban and rural settings were analyzed. The rural factors, of primary interest in the Pacific, were:

- Low salaries or poor benefits
- Multiple teaching assignments
- Little control over school policy

## Are There Unique Patterns in Pacific Schools?

This section presents descriptions compiled from discussions with the PREL R&D Cadre, Pacific Educators in Residence (PEIRs) at PREL and other in-house sources. They may be considered hypotheses for further study.

Pacific Island schools, from the State of Hawai'i to the Republic of Palau, have adopted the American system of education. Throughout the region this system exists in parallel with a uniquely Pacific cultural heritage, including Polynesian and Micronesian traditional values. As a result, the risk factors affecting teachers, and the consequent outcomes, sometimes take on different forms. Here are some examples.

- Cultural Events. In some island communities traditional feasts and funerals are an important part of village life. It has been observed, for instance, that if a feast falls on a school day it is likely that the teacher (who may hold a traditional title) will not go to school, but rather prepare for the event. These family relationships are highly valued among Pacific Islanders and should be taken into account.
- Environmental factors. Some unique weather patterns may cause teacher absenteeism in the Pacific. Hurricanes and even "supertyphoons" affect many parts of the region. In Hawai'i, giant winter north swells may close roadways. If flooding occurs, then all those who live on one side of the shore without a bridge are unable to attend school for the day or several days.
- Family and village social roles. In other circumstances, this factor might be called nepotism. Simply put, a teacher may be a member of a large and influential family in the public school system. That teacher's absenteeism is overlooked. Although the public views nepotism as wrong, it may be tolerated as a cultural given.
- Culturally sanctioned time off. One form of this is "Monday sickness," in which young, single male teachers have a particular pattern of absence from school. This is basically recovering from a weekend of excess, involving alcohol or other locally approved narcotic substances. The absence of these young males is seen as a social and developmental pattern which is tolerated because of the age of these teachers.

Any absence in the Pacific is likely to strongly impact student achievement. In many parts of the region there is no substitute teacher program. Lack of funds is cited as the primary reason. Students simply do not have class when a teacher is absent. This affects attendance counts as well. Such situations may adversely affect school funding, which keeps the negative cycle going.

In some parts of the Pacific, schools have inconsistent record keeping systems of teacher attendance. Therefore, it is difficult to tell who are the specific individuals not in school, regardless of whether these absences are legitimate or due to cultural reasons.

Teacher attrition also takes different forms in the Pacific. A major concern in some entities is that teachers leave for another entity where the pay is higher or the benefits greater. In Hawai'i, there has been a loss of teachers in recent years because of retirement. Replacing these teachers with newcomers (malihini) from the mainland is a major concern in Hawai'i. These newcomers are subject to severe culture shock when they are asked to teach in a rural, native Hawaiian community school, for example.

## How do Risk Factors Generally Relate to Negative Consequences for Teachers? A Possible Model

Identifiable risk factors do not cause negative consequences in a linear, cause and effect relationship. The relationships are cyclical, and what is a cause in one relationship may be an effect in another. The following is a graphical, simplified representation of what the research seems to suggest, a system of interrelated factors.

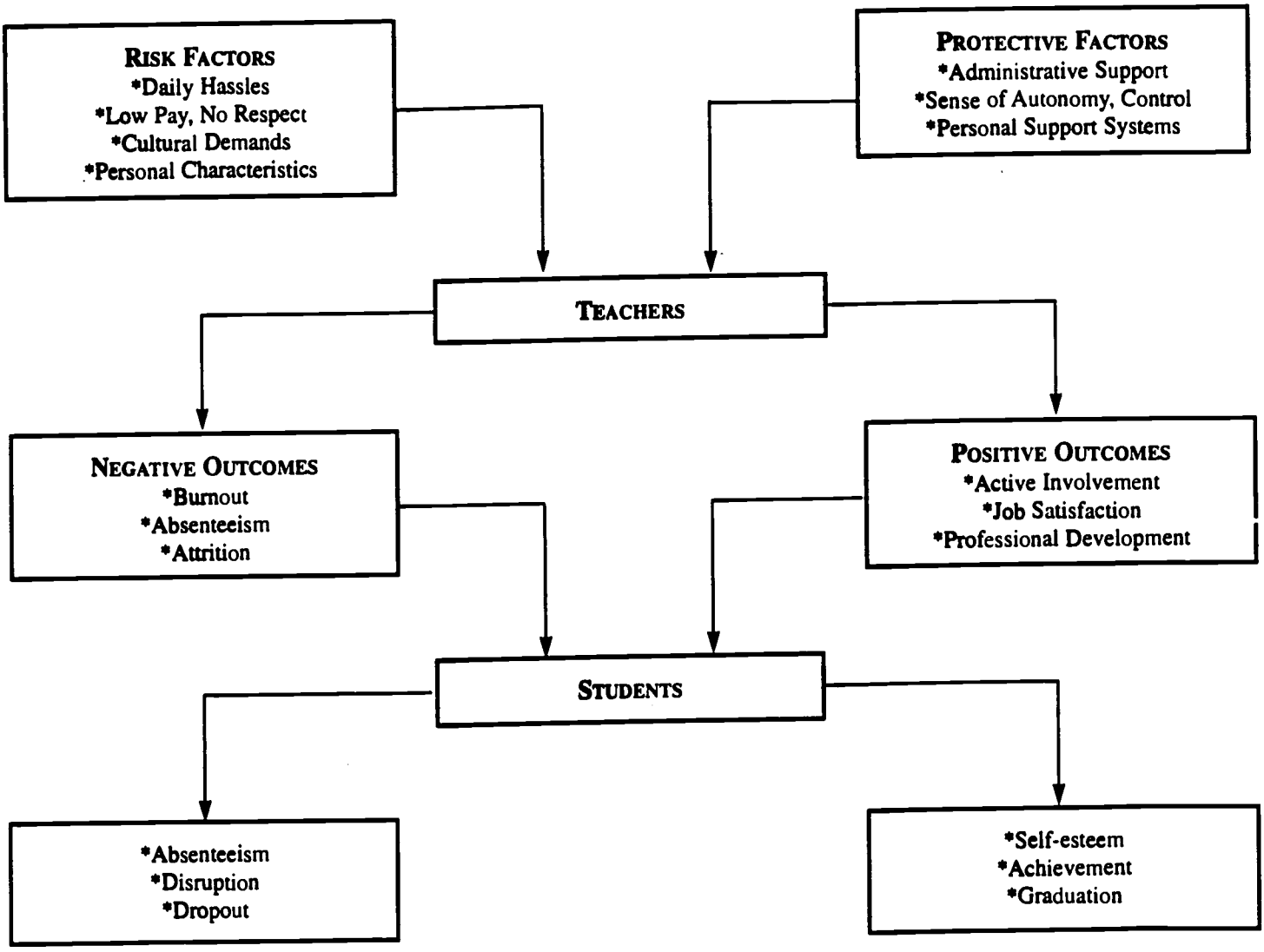
## Risk and Outcomes: A Model

In this model, certain factors are hypothesized to protect against risk factors and lead away from the negative outcomes and towards positive outcomes. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the possible protective factors, it is clear that they run the gamut from personal resiliency to educational system support for teachers.

There are thus many potential interventions and actions which an educational system might make to foster these protective factors. To name just a few:

- Offer professional development activities. These might include stress management workshops, relaxation training, and time management. The more holistic approach includes nutrition, exercise and coping skills training.
- Improve working conditions. Work with teacher groups to identify and address areas of concern from classroom environment to salary issues.
- Cultural accommodation. Look for creative ways to overcome some of the unique cultural risk factors affecting the region. If feast days mean teachers will be absent, add feast-make-up days to the school calendar as one very tentative example.

How can an educational system foster resiliency factors? This in itself is a worthy topic for a future research synthesis.

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## Conclusions

Review of the research for this paper permits the following general conclusions:

1. Risk factors abound in the daily lives of teachers. Three common outcomes of these risk factors are
   - stress and burnout
   - absenteeism
   - attrition

2. Among the factors identified as leading to stress and burnout are daily hassles such as student misbehavior and teacher characteristics such as anger, anxiety or depression.

3. Risk factors specifically relating to absenteeism include more immediate concerns such as child care, transportation difficulties, illness, or cultural demands.

4. Risk factors relating to attrition are the more chronic concerns—salary, benefits, and work overload.

5. Studies that have identified risk factors have also pointed out factors that protect teachers against risk. These include:
   - Personal support systems and stress management skills
   - Strong administrative support
   - Job involvement

Teachers play a primary role in education. Teachers who are at risk place children at risk. It is crucial for the educational system to understand factors that place teachers at risk. It is strongly recommended that educational systems seek ways to foster resiliency factors that may protect teachers and the educational system. Particularly in the Pacific, where self reliance is a stated goal for the future (Hezel, 1994), a solid and resilient educational system is essential.

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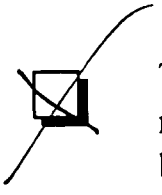

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