

Stress contagion possible amongst students and teachers

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Larkmead School. Credit: CC-BY-SA-2.5,2.0,1.0

Teacher burnout and student stress may be linked, according to a University of British Columbia study.

The study is the first of its kind to examine the connection between teacher burnout and students' cortisol levels, which are a biological indicator of [stress](#).

Researchers collected saliva samples from over 400 elementary school children and tested their cortisol levels. They found that in classrooms in which teachers experienced more burnout, or feelings of emotional

exhaustion, students' cortisol levels were elevated. Higher cortisol levels in elementary school children have been linked to learning difficulties as well as mental health problems.

"This suggests that stress contagion might be taking place in the classroom among students and their teachers," said Eva Oberle, the study's lead author and newly appointed assistant professor with the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at UBC's school of population and public health. "It is unknown what came first - elevated cortisol or teacher burnout. We consider the connection between student and teacher stress a cyclical problem in the classroom."

Oberle said a stressful classroom climate could be a result of inadequate support for teachers, which may impact teachers' ability to effectively manage their students. A poorly managed classroom can contribute to students' needs not being met and increasing stress. This could be reflected in elevated [cortisol levels](#) in students.

Alternatively, stress could originate from students, who may be more challenging to teach because of increases in anxiety, behavioural problems, or special needs. In this scenario, teachers could feel overwhelmed and report higher levels of burnout.

"Our study is a reminder of the systemic issues facing teachers and educators as classroom sizes increase and supports for teachers are cut," said Oberle.

"It is clear from a number of recent research studies that teaching is one of the most stressful professions, and that teachers need adequate resources and support in their jobs in order to battle burnout and alleviate stress in the classroom," said UBC education professor Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, the study's co-author and director of HELP. "If we do not support [teachers](#), we risk the collateral damage of [students](#)

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The study, published in *Social Science & Medicine*, was carried out in Grade 4 to 7 classrooms at 17 public schools in B.C.'s Lower Mainland. Teacher burnout was determined through survey results.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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