

How secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are impacting teachers

April 19 2023, by Glenys Oberg



Glenys Oberg. Credit: Frontiers

Glenys Oberg is a Ph.D. student and research assistant at the School of

Education of the University of Queensland. A former teacher, she focuses in her research on trauma-informed pedagogy and practice.

Recently, Oberg and her colleagues Annemaree Carroll and Stephanie Macmahon published a review article in *Frontiers in Education* that investigated the impact on teachers of working with students who experienced [trauma](#)—an increasing problem in an age where COVID-19 and "climate anxiety" threaten the mental health and well-being of children.

In the review, Oberg and colleagues showed how this challenge increasingly leads to burnout in teachers, often prompting them to abandon a profession they love.

Oberg: As a former [teacher](#), I can attest to the challenges that come with being an educator. The long hours, heavy workload, and responsibility of shaping young minds can take a toll on your mental and [physical health](#). While teaching is undoubtedly a rewarding profession, it's also a profession that requires resilience and self-care. Unfortunately, teacher burnout is becoming increasingly common globally and is a concern that needs to be addressed.

Burnout is a psychological condition that can occur when chronic stressors on the job take their toll. In the case of teachers, this slow build-up of negative emotions, which manifests as a lack of accomplishment, exhaustion, and detachment from one's job can lead to absenteeism, early retirement, and teacher attrition.

Secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue are two conditions that are also increasingly being recognized as issues for teachers. Secondary traumatic stress occurs when an individual experiences stress, because of a strong empathetic response to traumatic event experienced by someone else. Meanwhile, compassion fatigue is characterized by

reduced empathic capacity and interest in those who have experienced trauma and is often seen in people who work in psychologically challenging environments.

Both secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue have been repeatedly identified in the healthcare and mental health fields but have only recently been explored in the context of teaching. We are currently undertaking a follow-on study exploring these concepts in Australian teachers in the context of how they are impacting those teachers' well-being.

More and more students show trauma

This is especially relevant in Australia, where the number of children experiencing trauma has been increasing for over a decade, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has only compounded the issue, with more and more students showing symptoms each year. Students who have experienced trauma may have difficulty regulating their emotions, may act out, and may struggle academically. Teachers who work with these students need to have a deep understanding of trauma and how it affects emotional and cognitive development. They also need to be equipped with the appropriate tools and strategies to support these children effectively.

When teachers are stressed or burnt out, they tend to have lower job satisfaction and report greater physical and mental health issues. While this is detrimental to teachers, it can also have negative impacts on students. In fact, [studies have shown](#) that students taught by teachers who report high levels of stress and low coping skills tend to display lower adaptive behaviors, lower math achievement, and higher levels of disruptive behavior.

Trauma-informed practices can help teachers

So what can be done to support teachers and students in this challenging environment? Research has shown that a two-pronged approach which involves providing [training](#) and education in 'trauma informed practices' (TIP) and establishing a clear system of collaboration with mental health specialists to support students in need of interventions can help reduce levels of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress in teachers.

TIP training is based on the principle of creating a safe and supportive environment for students. It involves understanding the impact of trauma on students and providing them with the appropriate support and resources to help them heal and grow. It also involves creating a culture of safety and respect in the classroom, where students feel heard and valued.

An important aspect of TIP training is building positive relationships with students. This involves creating a safe space where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings, and where teachers listen and respond with empathy and understanding.

Supporting traumatized students

TIP training can also help teachers recognize the signs of trauma in their students and develop strategies to support them. For example, teachers can create a calming environment in the classroom, with soft lighting and comfortable seating. They can also use mindfulness and breathing exercises to help students regulate their emotions and feel more in control.

[Recent studies](#) have suggested that teachers who lack trauma-aware training are more likely to experience [compassion fatigue](#), secondary

traumatic stress, and burnout. Unfortunately, teachers often report feeling that their preparation leaves them ill-equipped to support students who have experienced trauma, both in their pre-service training and in ongoing professional development. This has led to a growing call for training in the effects of trauma to be a mandatory part of teacher training both as part of their initial training as well as ongoing professional development.

Over the decades that I have been in education, I have known many highly skilled teachers who chose to leave the profession for their own well-being. I have known teachers to take on work driving rideshares, in oil refineries, and in garden centers all to help alleviate those feelings of overwhelm. A quick search of social media highlights the issue, with a growing number of groups dedicated to helping members find work outside of teaching.

Implementing TIP training in schools can be an effective way to support these teachers and mitigate the negative effects of working in a psychologically challenging environment. Additionally, teacher-support programs that offer strategies for [self-care](#) and resilience building can help teachers avoid burnout and secondary trauma. Such programs could include regular peer-support groups, stress-management workshops, and access to counseling services. By taking steps to better support teachers and build trauma-aware policies and practices, we can help ensure that students who have experienced trauma receive the care and support they need to thrive in school and beyond while safeguarding the well-being of our teachers.

More information: Glenys Oberg et al, Compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress in teachers: How they contribute to burnout and how they are related to trauma-awareness, *Frontiers in Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/educ.2023.1128618](https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1128618)

Provided by Frontiers

Citation: How secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are impacting teachers (2023, April 19) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-secondary-traumatic-stress-compassion-fatigue.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.