



Teachers' mental health and perceptions of school climate across the transition from training to teaching



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers reported their experiences as they transitioned from training to teaching.
- Symptoms of depression and anxiety increased across the transition.
- Poorer perceived school climate was related to more drastic increases in symptoms.
- Results suggest this is may be a particularly vulnerable career stage for teachers.
- Within-school factors may play a particular role in teachers' mental health.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the trajectories of depressive and anxious symptoms among early-career teachers ($N = 133$) as they transitioned from their training programs into their first year of teaching. In addition, perceived school climate was explored as a moderator of these trajectories. Multilevel linear growth modeling revealed that depressive and anxious symptoms increased across the transition, and negative perceived school climate was related to more drastically increasing symptoms. Results suggest that this career stage may be a time when teachers are particularly vulnerable to declines in mental health, and speak to some within-school features that may be related to teachers' experiences.

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Teaching is consistently described as a highly demanding career (Johnson et al., 2005; Travers, 2001), with teachers reporting correlates of negative mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety) such as chronic stress, components of burnout (see Maslach et al., 1981 for a review), and low job satisfaction (Ferguson, Frost, & Hall, 2012; Fernet, Guay, Senecal, & Austin, 2012; Kyriacou, 2001; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). These negative mental health correlates have been associated with increased absenteeism, poor job performance and poor health outcomes among educators (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Katz, Greenberg, Jennings, & Klein, 2016; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Steinhardt, Smith Jaggars, Faulk, & Gloria, 2011). Even preservice teachers (those still in training programs) report marked struggles with negative

mental health correlates (Chaplain, 2008; Goldstein, 2005), which likely contribute to the high rates of attrition from the field observed during the early-career stage: Between 30% and 50% of teachers leave the field within their first 5 years (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Perez, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2016; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014), with U.S. teachers displaying particularly high attrition rates (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003). This is especially worrisome considering that high teacher turnover rates negatively impact students' academic growth (Milanowski & Odden, 2007).

Until recently, studies of teachers' experiences have typically examined negative mental health correlates such as stress and burnout independently of each other. However, these factors often occur concurrently among teachers (Ferguson et al., 2012; Steinhardt et al., 2011), potentially pointing to a larger struggle with mental health. Indeed, recent studies that have utilized formal measures of mental health symptomatology have yielded findings

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establishing connections among teachers' clinical depression and multiple aspects of classroom quality and student performance (McLean & Connor, 2015; Sandilos et al., 2015), as well as linking teachers' anxiety to students' academic outcomes (Beilock, Gunderson, Ramirez, & Levine, 2010). Such studies provide an important foundation of research on teacher's mental health, but significant gaps do still exist. For example, investigations of teachers' mental health have typically only considered a single time-point, have not examined teachers in transition as a unique population, and have not attempted to identify how key external factors relate to negative mental health challenges. Importantly, the field has identified some associations among teachers' negative experiences (studied individually) and within-school factors, in particular the characteristics of the school climate that teachers are regularly exposed to, with findings suggesting that higher quality school climate is related to more positive teacher experiences (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). As such, the primary goal of the present study is to examine the progression of mental health symptomatology among early-career teachers across multiple time points as they transition into formal teaching, and a secondary goal is to explore the role of within-school factors (or school climate) in these trajectories.

The literature surrounding preservice teachers' experiences indicates that struggles with negative mental health correlates likely begin *before* they start their careers, with the entrance into student-teaching practicums a probable starting point. For example, preservice teachers in the first year of their training programs have been found to report predominantly high levels of confidence, self-assurance, and optimism (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992); however stress, and especially perceived occupational stress, has been found to contribute to high levels of psychological distress among preservice teachers later in their program (i.e., in their practicum/student teaching year; Chaplain, 2008), potentially indicating that student-teachers may experience a sense of disillusionment upon entering this stage of training and before they enter their first teaching position (Goldstein, 2005). Thus, it appears that the realities and the demands of the profession set in during student teaching and result in dampened optimism (Veenman, 1984). Even so, and in support of our consideration of school climate, there is evidence to suggest that within-school/program supports such as guidance and mentoring from colleagues and superiors and a cohesive work environment may be related to more positive mental health among beginning teachers. For example, preservice teachers in their student teaching practicum who experienced high-quality guidance from their mentor teachers reported lower levels of burnout (Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2007).

The present study focuses on U.S. teachers. Interestingly, teacher attrition rates show great variability across countries, with the U.S. and United Kingdom displaying markedly high teacher attrition (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Ingersoll, 2003) whereas other countries such as Germany, France, Hong Kong, and Sweden show greater success in retaining teachers (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; McKenzie, Santiago, Sliwka, & Hiroiyuki, 2005). These trends suggest that there might be structural aspects of the U.S. education system that leave its practitioners comparably more vulnerable to early struggles, perhaps due to systemic differences between countries in national educational and ideological policies and practices. For example, average teacher salaries in Germany are higher compared with the U.S. and have risen in the past 15 years while teacher salaries in the U.S. are lower and have remained stagnant (McKenzie et al., 2005). Additionally, countries differ drastically in their approaches to hiring and retaining teachers: Some place stringent demands on beginning teachers in terms of qualifications for career entry (e.g., in France and Japan entry is

based on widely accepted standards of academic credentials and/or performance on entry examinations), while others have more relaxed requirements for incoming teachers (e.g., in the U.K. U.S. and Canada entry qualifications are largely determined by the hiring school/entity and are thus much less consistent; McKenzie et al., 2005). It stands to reason that differences among countries in policies, practices, and ideologies correlate with differences in teachers' experiences in their daily work environments (e.g., school climate). As such, the present study offers insight into the unique experiences of U.S. teachers that could be useful in informing future investigations that compare teacher experiences across countries.

1. Teachers' mental health

The primary goal of the present study is to examine the progressions of depressive and anxious symptoms among early-career teachers as they transition into their first teaching positions. Symptoms associated with depression include a loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities as well as prolonged feelings of fatigue, worthlessness, irritability, and diminished capacities for concentration and engagement (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Alternately, whereas depression is generally considered to be a dampening of positive affect, anxiety is described as an over-activation of negative thought processes, particularly involving excessive worry and/or fear (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Teachers report higher rates of mental health challenges compared to the general population. For example, Punch and Tuettemann, 1990 found that levels of psychological distress among teachers were twice that of the general population, and Johnson et al. (2005) found that, compared to 25 other common professions, teaching ranked among the top six most stressful professions. More recently, Whitaker, Becker, Herman and Gooze, (2013) found that reports of poor mental health were more prevalent within a sample of 2122 U.S. Head Start preschool teachers than in two comparable national samples of the general population. Considered together, these findings highlight the importance of mental health research within the teaching profession.

A question remains regarding the reasons for teachers' reported mental health struggles. Teachers must simultaneously balance instructional support, classroom management, planning and organization, and the facilitation of high-quality classroom relationships (Feldon, 2007; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Additionally, teachers have many taxing obligations outside of the classroom such as working with parents and school officials, preparing class materials, and keeping up with often-changing curricular and professional development demands. Finally, teachers are increasingly subject to rigorous systems of evaluation that carry consequences for their compensation and job security. This unique constellation of demands and pressures coupled with perceptions expressed by U.S. teachers that they are generally not sufficiently paid, rewarded for, or supported in their work (McKenzie et al., 2005) likely contributes to the higher rates of reported mental health struggles. As such, researchers have recommended that investigating environmental aspects of teaching (framed in this study as school climate) as they relate to teachers' well-being is important as working environments play a role in practitioners' long-term health and success in the field (Punch and Tuettemann, 1990).

Understanding teachers' mental health is important not only for the objective of supporting teachers, but also because these symptoms have implications for students. The repercussions of teachers' mental health struggles for students range from lower-quality teacher-student relationships and instructional interactions (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Li Grining et al., 2010) to lower overall classroom quality (McLean & Connor, 2015; Sandilos et al.,

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