Special education teachers' relationships with students and self-efficacy moderate associations between classroom-level disruptive behaviors and emotional exhaustion

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Data were collected from 141 teachers in 14 schools for special secondary education.
- We tested under which conditions teachers felt emotionally drained.
- Student closeness moderated classroom disruptions' impact on emotional exhaustion.
- Teacher self-efficacy also moderated the impact of classroom disruptions.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examined the moderating role of teachers' relationship with students and their self-efficacy in the association between classroom-level disruptive behaviors and emotional exhaustion. Two measurement occasions were completed by 98 teachers from fourteen Dutch special education schools for adolescent students with psychiatric disabilities. Results show that by the end of the school year, teachers with high levels of closeness and self-efficacy reported increases in emotional exhaustion as a function of classroom-level disruptive behaviors, which is in line with research conducted in general education studies. Unexpectedly, emotional exhaustion decreased in low-involved teachers experiencing more classroom disruption.

1. Introduction

Dealing with disruptive behaviors in the classroom is one of the most salient sources of stress experienced by teachers (Evers, Tomic, & Brouwers, 2004; Klassen & Anderson, 2009). Indeed, attrition rates are alarmingly high in teachers working with students who show high levels of challenging behaviors (e.g., Billingsley, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). Also, they are at

high risk of developing dysfunctional cognitions about dealing with stress (Kiel, Heimlich, Markowetz, Braun, & Weiss, 2016). This makes teachers working with students who show chronically challenging behaviors due to psychiatric disabilities vulnerable for developing symptoms of stress (e.g., Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014).

One of the reasons for this susceptibility may be that these teachers are not only exposed to population specific stressors, such as the daily exposure to high levels of disruptive behaviors that are displayed by these students, but also encounter stressors that are generally known to put strain on all teachers, including high demands and lack of resources (e.g., Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli,

2006). The extent to which teachers experience stress as a result of working with students with special educational needs varies between teachers (Greene, Beszterczey, Katzenstein, Park, & Goring, 2002). This variation may be impacted by the interaction between being exposed to high levels of disruptive behaviors and certain teachers' characteristics, that may cause teachers to experience sources of strain quite differently from one teacher to another (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011). These characteristics may stem from their work environment (Fernet, Guay, Senécal, & Austin, 2012), such as the classroom context that is shaped to a substantial extent by the interpersonal relationships teachers build with their students, or more robust characteristics (Kokkinos, 2007), including teachers' sense of their own effectiveness in teaching. To explore the conditions created by teachers' relationships with students and sense of self-efficacy that may cause variation in the experience of symptoms of stress, this study examined these variables among 141 Dutch teachers of adolescent students who are placed in separated settings of special secondary education due to psychiatric disabilities over the course of one school year.

2. Literature overview

2.1. Teacher emotional exhaustion in mainstream education

Teachers confronted with many classroom-level disruptive behaviors on a daily basis are likely to experience stress symptoms (e.g., Evers et al., 2004; Frank & McKenzie, 1993). These symptoms are best described in terms of emotional exhaustion, lack of personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Given that previous studies showed that of these three components, emotional exhaustion is most strongly related to being exposed to disruptive behaviors (Aloe, Shisler, Norris, Nickerson, & Rinker, 2014), we focus on symptoms of emotional exhaustion. However, not all teachers are equally impacted by disruptive behaviors. Teachers' relationships with students (e.g., van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014) and their sense of self-efficacy (e.g., Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2002) have been identified as possible factors that may buffer teachers against the onset of feeling emotionally exhausted, or serve as exacerbators of the impact of disruptive behaviors on their levels of emotional exhaustion.

Several theories are proposed to explain why individuals differ in their response to stressors. Important work in this area has been conducted by Lazarus and colleagues. According to the transactional model of stress and coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), stressors are first evaluated by us, leading to emotions, which are regulated depending on our interpersonal context and resources that are available to us. It is claimed that positive, meaningful interpersonal relationships may enable us to regulate potential adverse emotions that are elicited by potential stressors (e.g., Lazarus, 2006). Following these theories, supportive interactions with students may also help teachers in dealing emotionally with classroom-level disruptive behaviors, and protect them from feeling emotionally exhausted. Indeed, teachers who are able to regulate their emotions experience less strain (Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010). While not specifically conducted in the context of identifying buffers against developing emotional exhaustion, empirical studies partially underscore this supposed protection by showing that teachers who interact positively with their students are more satisfied with their jobs (Shann, 1998), and experience less stress (van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). In contrast, negative interactions with students can put great emotional demands on teachers' ability to teach and guide their students (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). This may be especially the case

when students display severe disruptive behaviors (Greene et al., 2002) or when teachers are in relational conflict with their students (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011).

In addition to teachers' relationships with students, teaching self-efficacy has been described as critical in understanding the onset of teachers' emotional exhaustion under the influence of students' disruptive behaviors. Originally, self-efficacy was introduced by Bandura (1977) to explain behavioral change; it refers to a cognitive process in which your expectations about the extent to which you master a specific task influence your behavior. High expectations about your effectiveness will lead to the belief that you can cope with this task and result in high persistence when fulfilling the task, while low expectations will lead to avoidance of the task.

In recent years, *teaching self-efficacy* has been explored to identify important educational outcomes, such as teachers' levels of persistence and resilience. Teaching self-efficacy refers to teachers' perception that they are able to impact on student outcomes (e.g., Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teachers with high teaching self-efficacy feel they can be effective even with challenging students, while teachers with low teaching self-efficacy feel less able to influence students' behavior and may experience more discipline problems. Results of previous studies showed that teaching self-efficacy is related to teachers' job satisfaction (e.g., Klassen & Chiu, 2010). Maintaining a high sense of teaching self-efficacy may thus prevent teachers from developing symptoms of emotional exhaustion when being challenged by difficult classroom disruptions (Egyed & Short, 2006).

2.2. Teacher emotional exhaustion in special education

The above synopsis may lead to the expectation that special education teachers can benefit from strong beliefs in their ability to teach their students and experience close relationships with their students, such that it prevents them from feeling emotionally exhausted. However, until now, most studies examining the impact of such factors on stress symptoms in teachers were conducted in general education (e.g., Dicke et al., 2014; Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Morris, & Jones, 2014). Little is known about these processes in school settings specializing in educating students with psychiatric disabilities. This type of special education differs from general and inclusive education in that those teachers educate students who all have severe psychiatric disabilities (Meijer, 2003). In fact, with higher symptom severity chances are higher that students are placed in specialized schools relative to receiving special education services in general and inclusive education (Stoutjesdijk, Scholte, & Swaab, 2012).

In the Netherlands, teachers working at these specialized schools teach students who 1) meet criteria of one or more DSM IV diagnoses (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), or received mental health care for at least six months without their maladjusted behaviors showing any progress, 2) display social, emotional and/or behavioral problems both at school, and at home and/or during recreational activities, 3) were involved in the care of mental health care organizations, 4) were obstructed in attending general education because of their psychiatric disabilities, and 5) attended a mainstream school that provided adequate care of the students' needs, but ceased care because of lack of impact (Meijer, 2003). Core problems in these students may vary from intellectual disabilities to social impairments, from internalizing disorders to externalizing disorders, and combinations of these problems. However, externalizing problems are the most prevalent (Drost & Bijstra, 2008).

It may therefore not be surprising that teachers of students with such problems report more stress symptoms than their colleagues