

# **An Exploration of Factors Contributing to Stress and Burnout in Male Hispanic Middle School Teachers**

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IN MALE HISPANIC MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

A Dissertation Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Elias Rodriguez

December, 2006

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December, 2006

AN EXPLORATION OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STRESS AND BURNOUT  
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### Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine, through narrative, contributing factors which lead to burnout in three Hispanic middle school teachers in a school in South Texas that is predominantly Hispanic. Burnout, in this work, was understood to be the experience of excessive stress and anxiety which accompanies teachers' inability to cope with environmental stressors present in their workplaces. While this term served to introduce the study, the participants defined their experiences of burnout in their own words (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Merriam, 1998). While the exact impact of teacher burnout on student achievement is unknown, it is clearly detrimental for the well being of the individual teacher and presumably to those around him or her, including students. Different factors such as teacher's attitudes towards perceived stressors, administrative support, classroom discipline, and physical environment were characterized.

The researcher additionally used personal experiences and reflections in conjunction with existing scholarship on the subject in order to illuminate the stories. Stories were framed within different contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The research in large part followed the narrative thread of the responses that the participants provided, resulting in the themes of the study. Teachers candidly discussed their thoughts and opinions about stressful factors. Although the stories of each of the teachers included

different reasons for burnout, within which the temporal nature of burnout was revealed, as well as the angst of teachers trying to relate their careers to their lives, it was apparent that burnout is an essential problem in this Hispanic teaching community. From this work, scholars and practitioners should be able to gather a sense of what a few bilingual South Texas teachers experience in their workplaces.

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# Chapter 1: Why Burnout?

I once overheard a clerk tell a customer, “Teachers, I don’t know whether to admire them or pity them.” This young man obviously had a sense of the milieu in which disrespected teachers sometimes find themselves. When I was an undergraduate, I overheard a retired teacher tell an aspiring young teacher, “You know, you put up with a lot of bullshit for those three months vacation.” While these comments about teachers might have been uncouth, to say the least, I have to admit they both had an element of truth to them. These males had tapped into part of the ugly side of teaching. They had insights into the reality of teaching, which can often be filled with tremendous stressors brought upon by a variety of factors.

I am a middle school teacher. Middle schools can be strange places. When one takes a moment to think of some of the things which occur there, it is no wonder that teachers come out highly stressed. Sometimes, we become so accustomed to accepting schools as they are, that we sometimes fail to view some of the happenings in them as rather bizarre and stressful. We often, for example, do not give second thoughts to having hundreds of loud students walking down crammed narrow corridors at once. Where else do we see people compacted into such small spaces? Perhaps a crowded nightclub would be an answer. In middle schools we see young children, who would normally be out running and playing, seated throughout most of the morning and afternoon. Yet this does not strike us as strange or unnatural. And it is the teacher’s responsibility to enforce this unnaturalness. Adults also are expected to stay confined in small rooms. If they are lucky, they might have a window in which to look out. Teachers have virtually no freedom of

mobility because they must constantly be supervising students, ensuring that they do not hurt themselves or others. In middle schools, there are a varied group of teachers. In many cases, they know more about the subject matter than the principal. Thus, there are people who know more than the boss about what they are doing. This is also something which is unusual. Teachers are expected to prepare students for exams when their students often do not know the language, have learning disabilities, exhibit behavioral or psychological problems or are simply indifferent to the curriculum which they are presented. In addition, there are individuals who have spent years and thousands of dollars in order to become educated only to receive mediocre salaries. Another suppressing factor is that people often look at teachers and think: they are lucky because they have weekends off and end their days at three o'clock. But they often do not realize that teachers have a tremendous amount of paperwork to contend with and must often spend their personal time contacting parents of students with problems at school. Furthermore, teachers are told about the importance of consistency and high standards, but are often not assisted in implementing either. In middle schools, educated people are often treated with little or no respect. Students sometimes do not comprehend why they are there or what their purpose is other than "it's the law" or "my mom makes me go." What else is rather disconcerting? Arguably, the nation's most valuable assets are its children. But society sometimes seems unwilling to provide funds in support of better teachers, materials, curricula, and products. Children, on the flip side, often do not appreciate the materials they have, which their predecessors or children in other nations only dreamed of having, *i.e.*, air-conditioning, healthy meals, safe buildings, etc.

I decided to examine a small group of participants to study stress and burnout and many of the associated details that shape people's lives. In this study, we will catch a glimpse of some of the problems that three middle school teachers faced on a campus in a South Texas school district.

The onset of the 2005-2006 school calendar year was an exciting time. I had begun my thirteenth year of teaching filled with great energy and enthusiasm. I remember having had high expectations and was expecting a joyous, fun-filled year. The year started out well enough. I had developed a good rapport with my colleagues at work and this was a positive aspect of my job. This element added to the tone of my overall teaching experience. I knew, however, that the year might be somewhat more difficult in comparison to other years because I had received a schedule in which I taught only one class in the morning, and had all the rest of the classes in the afternoon. Anyone who has ever taught in the public middle school environment knows that this can be quite a challenge, as students often are more rambunctious in the afternoons, sometimes making it more difficult for teachers to get their points across. I must say, I was quite unaccustomed to this type of schedule, as I had always had at least one class off in the afternoon and sometimes two. This would offer me somewhat of a "break" from the noise and stress of the normal afternoon classes. Slowly, my feelings of excitement turned to feelings of utter exhaustion and dread.

The year before I embarked upon this study, I had been working in a classroom, at the same school as the participants. Over the course of this year, I myself began feeling that I was "burned-out." I thought that I was doing more and working harder than I ever had before, but yet seemed to be receiving less and less recognition and absorbing more

criticism and paperwork. I felt that I was losing the autonomy I had once relished and was succumbing more to an encompassing, suffocating educational system. I would sometimes ask myself, “Is it me? Am I the problem? Are these problems merely within my head or is the environment causing me to change?” Hence, this study was beginning to evolve long before I had the topic for this particular investigation. In a sense, I did not simply pick this topic “out of a hat,” thinking that well, this topic is just as good as any other; this problem is just as weighty as any other in Education. It is rather, something that I have known first-hand. It is something which is of interest to me and those whom I care about, mainly, my teacher colleagues. Also, one can say that this study is not something which is detached from me as the researcher, but a facet of my personal experience.

The following year, I left that environment and began working at a different middle school within the same district. For me, this change was a life saver. I felt reinvigorated. This was my personal experience and I do not mean to imply that a change in schools will automatically solve the problem of stress and burnout. Obviously, it will not. But the environments we find ourselves in do shape us. They stir our thinking and affect our mindsets.

It is very disheartening to see that, with all of the research done on teacher stress and burnout, the system seemingly has done little to address this problem. Novice teachers continue to leave the profession in droves, lasting only a few years in the classroom before making their exodus. The intent of this paper, thus, is to draw attention to the problem. It is to make known the stories of everyday teachers in South Texas, the area that I am from, and to address how burnout has played out in their particular lives. I

know of many teachers who feel that they have no genuine advocates. They have sensed that they are isolated and enveloped in a massive bureaucracy, which rather than empowering them, stifles and belittles them (Sarason, 1986; DeLima, 2003; Eisner, 1998). Certainly, there are persons who care about the conditions in which teachers work, whether they be state representatives, parents, superintendents, academics, legislators, or teachers themselves. Certainly there have been voices that have spoken out for the well-being of teachers and not solely of students or administrators, but at times, it seems their voices have been drowned out. While teachers who suffer from burnout may seem outwardly to be normal, oftentimes their verbal responses and passing comments reveal a great amount of anger, resentment, and anxiety. When I walked through the halls of the middle school in the study, I could not automatically tell who was overly stressed, and who was not. But by taking some moments to talk to teachers, I found an underlying sense of anxiety apparent in some.

Teachers often gripe about their negative experiences at work, which caused me to think, “are the majority of teachers whiners or complainers by nature?” Or is it perhaps that they do encounter serious problems in their daily dealings at school? I remember as I was first starting out as a teacher the feelings of extreme pressure and confusion. At that time I felt very alone, as if I were the only one who experienced those feelings and problems. As the years passed, though, and as I talked to more and more teachers, I came to find through personal experience that I was certainly not alone. Many of my colleagues reported themselves in similar circumstances. I remember various female teachers telling me throughout the years, “I would go home crying everyday after school,” because of the tremendous problems they encountered with students, parents, administrators, or even

other teachers. (No male teacher ever admitted having cried to me, but I know that many of them too went home severely stressed). I have known many teachers who have missed work, *i.e.*, taken days off consistently for no other reason other than to avoid some of the stress they were experiencing at work. When communicating with each other, teachers refer to such days as “mental health days.”

One of the main problems, though, is that no one really seemed to care about the sufferings of these teachers, not students, not administrators, not parents, and most unfortunate of all, not fellow teachers. For me, this has been one of the most difficult parts of the job, having to witness friends and acquaintances struggle because they feel disrespected, underappreciated, scorned, and ignored. Most of the teachers whom I have known over the years also have felt very little or no support from the school district. The district, it seems, is often more engrossed in saving money than in granting the students a quality education.

Again, I am a teacher. People have sometimes asked me rather insultingly, “You’ve been working for fourteen years, and you’re still in the classroom?” They often ask me why I have not “gone into” counseling or administration. I do not want to disparage or diminish the importance of these parts of my profession; my own father was a guidance counselor for many years. I also realize that most people already view counselors and principals as having more prestige than classroom teachers. But to me, administration and counseling is not “where it’s at,” so to speak. That is, from my perspective, these jobs do not reflect the true meaning and purpose of education; they do not signal what education is all about. As far as I’m concerned, education is about teaching persons who are lacking knowledge of certain skills, data, information, training,

theories, *etc.* and imparting these things to them in attempt to help them live better lives. In my view, all teachers are important. Whether they might teach biogenetic engineering at Harvard to an elite group of students, auto-body repair at the local community college to working class seventeen year-olds, or the alphabet to a group of kindergarten children, I consider teachers to be at the heart of the educational process.

I have always been somewhat suspect of people who claim to have the best interests of children at heart, who claim to endorse the best teaching practices for kids, but who spend most of their days in offices, having very limited contact with actual “real-life” students. I wish I could say that I did not have this bias, that I could see things equally from the points of view of both teachers and administrators, let us say, but my considerable experience as a teacher makes me tend to side with my fellow teachers.

This background I have shared then, led me to this particular study, to this dissertation. I had always been interested in studying the role of conflict in the lives of teachers. My candidacy paper study at the University of Houston dealt with a teacher experiencing tremendous problems with discipline after nearly twenty years in the classroom. As I interviewed and observed him, as part of my narrative inquiry, I noticed that not only did he have many problems with students but that he was also suffering from considerable stress. At the onset of that particular study, I was considering examining another male teacher who I knew, who also had serious problems with classroom management. This other individual, however, never seemed to verbally or outwardly reveal signs of stress. He seemed be very care-free, unperturbed, and *laissez-faire* in his attitude. I then began wondering more about the role of stress at work. As I thought about the topic, I began paying closer attention to my colleagues whenever they

complained about feelings of stress or anxiety, or about circumstances which left them feeling burned out. I began listening to the teachers who felt drained or at their “wits end.” Most of the teachers were the older, more experienced veterans. Many of these teachers whom I know had, at one point, thought that teaching was fun (or at least tolerable). Thus, this would be something worth looking into in a more disciplined, scholarly way. From experience, I knew there were many things which contributed to stress, but I did not want to focus on one single element as part of the study, because I knew this one factor would not really paint the comprehensive picture of teacher burnout. At this point, I wish to briefly introduce the three participants, without whose cooperation, there would be no study. All were middle-aged males. All had considerable teaching experience. These individuals had worked within the same context, but their unique personalities would reveal striking differences in their perceptions of their stressful environments at times. At other times, however, the similarities of their experiences would show through.

### ***The Protagonists of the Study: Different Backgrounds, Different Styles***

I had not known Julian Alonso very well before the research began. He was the youngest of my participants, in his early forties, and was the only one to have been born in Mexico. I had encountered him in the halls from time to time when I had previously taught at Lloyd. Throughout the course of the study, he struck me as someone who was extremely easy-going and polite. He had always come across as having, in my opinion, a high degree of professionalism in the way he conducted himself. Consequently, I was somewhat taken aback when he volunteered to be a part of this study. Although I had

clearly stated in the initial ads that I was seeking participants and that it would be a study related to stress and burnout, I thought that perhaps Julian had misunderstood, perhaps thinking he was only to give his opinion on the topic. Nonetheless, I soon came to discover out that he was experiencing a great deal of stress. This probably should not have been surprising, though. Lloyd Middle School was a difficult environment in which to work. During my time as a teacher there, I had seen the school transform from a fun, vibrant place, the envy of other middle schools in the district, to a solemn, somber place. This was not simply my perception but that of many with whom I worked. Some teachers described the environment in recent years as being like a morgue. It was quiet and stifled. People did not express their views with confidence and when they did, it often ended in conflict which was not resolved amicably. Furthermore, many of the students came from homes which were not part of the traditional nuclear family. The language and demeanor of the students indicated that they were from a working class environment.

I also soon came to discover that Julian was going through a divorce at the time I had asked him if he would be willing to participate. I did not wish to focus principally on the outside lives of my participants, but certainly, I thought this was worth noting. If a traumatic, life-altering event such as a divorce is occurring in one's personal life, it is only natural that it is going to add to the overall stress and burnout which one is facing at work. Although Julian was going through this harrowing time, he also admitted that he was glad that his marriage, which had apparently been a source of much stress during the previous years, was coming to an end. I also came to discover that one of the other participants, Samuel, reportedly also had a strained relationship with his spouse. He stated that he stayed with her because of their daughter, who attended a private middle

school, but that there was not much communication between them. At one point, he stated that he felt more support for coping with his professional problems from his friends than from his wife. Again, I do not wish to dwell on these facts although I do believe that it is reasonable to assume that these facts would be affecting the participants' overall state of mind and that these elements certainly would be detrimental for the participants in dealing with their stress. Lorenzo, on the other hand, claimed that for the most part, he did not let his personal life affect his work life. He did shortly thereafter admit, though, that on a few occasions he had missed work due to arguments with his spouse, but he emphasized that this had happened seldom.

Julian Alonso was born and raised in Mexico, but he was not from the frontier or border towns. Mexico does not have a culture which is quite as coalesced as that found here in the United States. In the United States, the culture is tightly consolidated by the economy, the schools, the media and so forth. One can travel to various parts of the country and feel at home at Wal-Marts, McDonalds, Starbucks, Sears and so forth. In Mexico, there are many more regional differences, and often the people from different states think of their own regional cultures as being superior to those of others. Many people who are from the more prosperous parts of Mexico tend to look down upon the people from the bordering states to the United States or "los Norteños" as they are often referred to, thinking them to be more ignorant and less cultured. I have heard them referred to as "gente mensa, gente ignorante, or salvages" (stupid people, ignorant people, or savages), by Mexican people from the interior who have come from more prosperous and more educated backgrounds. Whereas one of the most prevalent scourges of the United States has been its racism, for Mexico, it has certainly been its class distinctions.

Certainly, the United States is not a classless society, but there is more of a sense that Americans are fundamentally equal in terms of rights, despite their circumstances. Equality is an ideal which has been embedded in the American mind, and though not yet completely attained, it has nonetheless been continually strived for (De Tocqueville, 1835). In Mexico, class creates a great chasm, which often causes different groups to have little or no understanding of one another.

Clearly, these elements seemingly played a role with Julian. Throughout the interviews, he often referred to the fact that he felt that the students from the area (mainly Hispanic students) were completely lacking in culture. By this, of course, he meant “high culture.” He felt frustrated by the fact that the students were never exposed to things such as classical music or symphony concerts. He was of the opinion that the students were not trained in recognizing the subtleties of good music. He stated that the students were used to listening to too much “noise.” By this he was referring to the rap and rock music that the students listened to at home, often while they watched television or other things. “The student needs to be more sensible,” he stated at one point. When Julian said this, I sensed that he was using a false cognate for the word, “sensible.” In Spanish, “sensible” means sensitive, or aware, whereas in English it denotes someone who is logical or rational. When I asked him to clarify his meaning, he indeed did mean that students needed to be more in tune with the finer forms of art, music, culture, and literature. On occasion he told me that Albert Einstein and Jean-Paul Sartre had been students of music, thereby implying that music was a tremendous intellectual catalyst. Simultaneously, he would demonstrate his knowledge of culture and history, at times discussing foreign films with high degrees of symbolism such as Fellini’s famously acclaimed “8 ½” or other French

films such as the “Trois Couleurs” Trilogy representing more obscure works.

I could tell by Julian’s speech in Spanish and by his accent that he was from a more refined background than the average Lloyd student. I say this in the same way that one might look upon someone who speaks English with sustained incorrect grammar as being less educated. Or, when English speakers talk with a very pronounced southern accent, they may be viewed as having a bit of a handicap. They may be ridiculed or looked upon as coming from a lower social class. It appears the same holds true for Mexican Spanish. One can typically tell immediately from the tone, modulation, and vocabulary of the speaker who is more “refined” and who is from the lower classes.

Of the three participants, Julian struck me as being the most “intellectual” or “cultured” in the traditional sense, but Lorenzo and Samuel also acted as intellectuals in the sense that they reflected on their own state of affairs and did not simply give answers such as: “this is the way things are, that’s just the way it is and that’s the way they’ll always be.” In their own ways, they were attempting to make sense of their own set of circumstances. Viewing teachers as intellectuals is important. Sadly, it has been my experience that teachers are sometimes thought of as merely being “some clown” with a Bachelor’s degree. They need to be seen as more than simply a technician who performs in a rote manner a service day in and day out (Giroux, 1988). However, they all did seem to suggest a state of powerlessness, whether related to curricula or otherwise, thus portraying them as somewhat anti-intellectual. The problem with this “that’s the way things are” mindset is that this thought process becomes linked with objective reality. Thus, if this is reality, it becomes very difficult to even begin thinking about changing any of the processes or circumstances associated with the problem (Berger & Luckmann,

1966). A rock is a rock. It will always just be a rock. This may constitute reality. If that is my only thought process about it however, I am confining myself tremendously in terms of my relation to that object. If I do not think that, perhaps the rock could be transformed into another object, or if I do not contemplate that the rock is composed of special chemicals and atoms which give it special characteristics, again, I limit myself. The same holds true with the problem of teacher stress. If we say, “Well there’s really not much we can do; teachers aren’t really intellectuals; the problem won’t go away,” *etc.*, then certainly the problems will never subside.

Julian differed from the other two participants not only in the fact that he was born and raised in Mexico, but also in that he had spent only four years working in the public school system in the United States. Samuel and Lorenzo, on the other hand, each had close to twenty years of service in the public schools. One of the clear stressors for Julian at the beginning of his teaching career in the United States was his difficulty with the language. Not only did he not understand many American phrases and slang words, but he also was not accustomed to the school jargon which is used freely in South Texas schools. “The kids knew [more] about these things than me: tardy slips, re-entries, referrals, I.S.S.- those types of things. What was that?!” he would ask himself. By “I.S.S.” he was referring to the schools in-school suspension program, in which students who are disruptive in the classroom are removed to a different classroom where they are supposed to work silently on their assignments.

Samuel Jimenez had a very different background than Julian. Samuel was raised in California and had moved as a teen to Texas. According to Samuel, he and his family had moved to escape the gang culture which existed in southern California at the time,

but apparently he had moved to encounter a different gang culture in South Texas. He did not explicitly state that he had been in a gang, but I gathered that he at least navigated on the fringes of that culture. By his own admission, Samuel engaged in fights with other students when he was in high school. He did not seem ashamed of this fact, but rather seemed to be speaking of his “glory days” by the way he spoke about his past. Being somewhat short in stature, Samuel was proud of the fact that he could “hold his own” against some of the high school adolescents who would taunt him or pick fights with him. By his own admission, Samuel was a rather confrontational person, as both an adolescent and as an adult. Unlike Julian, Samuel was seemingly not as concerned about the students’ lack of high culture, but did complain about both the students and their parents, in particular. He reported that the parents of his students did, in his view, an inadequate job of raising their children. Details of this will perception will be covered in a later chapter.

Samuel Jimenez was someone who came to teaching from the world of sales and retail. In other words, teaching was not his first choice of careers as a young man. But Samuel recognized that his jobs at Montgomery Ward and Sears were simply not going to offer him the benefits and security he desired. Teaching would. While the profession would not make him a millionaire, at least it would offer him and his family a better sense of security than in the retail sector.

The third participant, Lorenzo Elizondo, had a similar story. When I asked Lorenzo what had prompted him to go into teaching, he replied without hesitation, “because I failed in the produce business.” I could not help but smile at his frankness, serious demeanor, and quick reply, to which he responded, “Well, you want the truth

don't you?" to which I answered, "Yes." I was glad that Lorenzo was telling me the truth. One of my fears at the beginning of the study was that the participants would attempt to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, so to speak. I did not want to hear "I do this for the love of children" if it was not true. This search for financial security that Lorenzo spoke of is a common reason that many teachers give for entering the profession (Lortie, 1975; Giovannelli, 2003). For Lorenzo, the stress came about not because of lack of stability, as surely, he had received a paycheck every month from the school district for his teaching service. It came, rather, from the amounts which were put into each paycheck, which he deemed insufficient. Lorenzo Elizondo was born and raised in Jacobstown. Like Samuel, he was in his early 50s. Also like Samuel, his father had held a relatively good job in comparison to many of his peers. Lorenzo's father had been a federal customs officer and Samuel's father had worked as a factory supervisor for General Motors. Thus, they had come from more of a middle class experience than many of their Hispanic counterparts. Lorenzo had even attended Jacobstown's only private high school for several years.

Lorenzo had begun his teaching career as a high school teacher and had actually had a brief stint (one year) as an assistant principal. After discovering that he did not like the hours and the extra duties required of him, he decided to return to the classroom. He also did not enjoy working closely with the principal, with whom he apparently did not have a good working relationship.

When he was in his mid or late twenties, Samuel had seriously contemplated going to law school in Houston. His spouse, however, was not in agreement. Wishing to take his wife's feelings into consideration, Samuel remained in Jacobstown and enrolled