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Study finds 'excessive demands' on beginning teachers produce negative, long-lasting impacts on classroom management

By: Wade Zaglas in In The Classroom, News, Top Stories October 20, 2020 0

A world-first longitudinal study tracking teachers' classroom management skills from the time they graduate until up to 15 years in the teaching profession has found that excessive demands must be reduced at the beginning of their careers.

Titled 'Teachers' classroom management self-efficacy, perceived classroom management and teaching contexts from beginning until mid-career', the study has been published in the journal Learning and Instruction. It is based on the ongoing Australian "FIT-Choice" program of research (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice; www.fitchoice.org) undertaken by Professor Watt and by Professor Paul Richardson of Monash University.

Dr Rebecca Lazarides at the University of Potsdam also collaborated on the study, which is being funded by several Australian Research Grants.

Throughout the study 395 teachers were surveyed about "how their workload, school resources, and confidence to manage student misbehaviour affected their teaching methods".

It found that teachers who were confident in their ability to manage classroom behaviour, and felt well-prepared, were more likely to provide their students with clear expectations about behaviour in the classroom. These teachers were also less likely to yell, lose their temper, or use sarcasm – all considered negative approaches to managing classroom behaviour.

But the research also found that teachers who "experienced excessive demands" during their beginning years of their careers were less likely to utilise positive management approaches, and instead adopt less successful and more negative behaviour management approaches with their students.

The implications of the study are significant, as it found that "these patterns persisted into teachers' mid-career: classroom management methods and professional confidence at the beginning of their careers to some extent became locked in behaviours".

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"The way teachers start out sets up long-term professional behaviours," Professor Helen Watt of The University of Sydney, one of the study's three authors, said.

"The key message from our findings is that the excessive demands experienced by beginning teachers have long-term, damaging consequences for their teaching behaviour."

The study's findings also demonstrate that a teacher's level of self-efficacy – "their confidence and sense of professional preparedness" – is established early and remains largely consistent, even after up to 15 years of teaching.

"This shows that teacher education isn't just important to equipping future teachers with effective classroom management skills. It's also important to developing their confidence to manage student misbehaviour through positive structures rather than negative reactions," Watts added.

"But this gets derailed when teachers who are just becoming established are overwhelmed by paperwork and suffer extreme time pressure."

The survey respondents reported there were more excessive demands in secondary school than primary school.

"Demands can include time pressure, performance pressure, poor student motivation, challenging professional and parent-teacher relationships, and decreasing autonomy in the workplace," co-author Professor Paul Richardson said.

The benefits of early career mentoring were highlighted in the study, suggesting a positive effect on beginning teachers' self-efficacy and fewer excessive demands, "which may suggest it helped the teachers cope better".

"A reduced allocation of workload, assistance with meeting the initial professional registration requirements that teachers face in their early careers, and quality mentoring programs would likely help beginning teachers cope with the initial overload of demands they experience," Richardson contended.

The researchers also found that educators who were employed in more advantaged schools reported more confidence in their ability to manage behaviour in their classrooms.

"This may be explained by the better conditions teachers experience in advantaged schools, including higher student achievement, and better school resources and facilities," the researchers wrote.

"Teachers who work in such settings may be confronted with fewer disruptions and less problematic student behaviours, producing lower levels of stress – and a higher sense of self-efficacy."

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