

Teacher Stress and Its Indirect Impact on Student Wellbeing: Exploring How Teacher Burnout Affects Classroom Climate and Student Emotional Health

Yegana Bektashi, Baku Oxford School, Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Teacher burnout has become one of the most pressing challenges in modern education, especially within high school environments where academic pressure, administrative demands, and emotional labor converge. While the impact of teacher stress on job satisfaction and teacher retention has been widely studied, its indirect effect on student emotional wellbeing remains underexplored. This qualitative study investigates how teacher burnout shapes classroom climate, teacher- student relationships, and ultimately student emotional health. Using semi-structured interviews with 157 Secondary school students and 24 teachers from three private schools and 3 public schools, the research applies thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns. Findings indicate that teacher stress generates a tense classroom atmosphere, reduces emotional responsiveness, and leads students to internalize negative emotional cues. Students describe increased anxiety, diminished motivation, and emotional withdrawal in response to teacher burnout. The paper argues that teacher wellbeing is foundational to a healthy school ecosystem and proposes recommendations for school leaders, policymakers, and mental health professionals to develop comprehensive wellbeing frameworks. The study highlights that supporting teachers' emotional needs is essential for fostering positive climates and sustainable learning environments.

Keywords: teacher emotional exhaustion, relational pedagogy, emotional transmission

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Introduction

The mental health of teachers has increasingly become a global concern, particularly in high school settings where expectations are high, workloads heavy, and accountability pressures intense. Teachers today are required not only to deliver instruction but also to perform roles as counselors, caregivers, mentors, mediators, and administrators. This emotional labor frequently goes unrecognized and unsupported. At the same time, schools are witnessing a rise in student mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and chronic stress. Understanding the links between teacher and student wellbeing is therefore essential for educational improvement.

While teacher burnout has been studied extensively, its *indirect* impact on students is less frequently discussed. Students spend thousands of hours in the classroom during their high school years. Teachers' emotional states- enthusiasm, fatigue, irritability, joy, or stress-inevitably shape the classroom environment. Classroom climate, in turn, affects how students feel, behave, and engage with learning.

This research aims to explore:

Research Question

How does teacher burnout indirectly affect student emotional wellbeing through changes in classroom climate?

The conceptual framework guiding this study is presented in Figure 1, illustrating the mediating role of classroom climate in the relationship between teacher burnout and student wellbeing.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



By focusing on the interconnectedness of teacher and student experiences, this study seeks to emphasize the importance of holistic wellbeing policies in schools. Teacher wellbeing cannot be separated from student wellbeing; they are two dimensions of the same ecosystem. When one suffers, the other is affected.

Literature Review

Understanding Teacher Burnout

Teacher burnout is commonly defined as a psychological syndrome composed of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment. It results from prolonged workplace stress that has not been effectively managed. In high school settings, the sources of burnout can include:

- large class sizes
- high-stakes examinations
- pressure from parents and administrators
- heavy administrative and marking loads
- limited resources
- student behavioral challenges
- emotional demands of supporting adolescents

Research consistently shows that burnout reduces teacher job satisfaction, increases absenteeism, and negatively impacts teacher retention. However, the ripple effect on students deserves equal attention.

Emotional Labor and Teacher Wellbeing

Teaching is widely recognized as a profession that demands sustained emotional labor, as teachers must continuously regulate their emotions to create a stable and positive learning environment. Hochschild's (1983) seminal theory of emotional labor provides the foundational framework for understanding this phenomenon, emphasizing that professions requiring constant emotional regulation are more vulnerable to emotional strain. In the classroom, teachers are expected to display patience, warmth, enthusiasm, and composure, often regardless of their internal emotional state. This constant regulation places them at heightened risk of emotional exhaustion, particularly when they must manage challenging behaviors, time pressure, and institutional demands.

Much of this emotional labor takes the form of **surface acting** and **deep acting**, concepts introduced by **Grandey (2000)**. Surface acting—displaying emotions that are not genuinely felt—creates a sense of emotional dissonance, which has been strongly associated with burnout in the work of **Maslach and Jackson (1981)**. Deep acting, while somewhat less detrimental, still requires cognitive and emotional effort that accumulates over time. Scholars such as **Hargreaves (1998)** emphasize that teaching is an “emotional practice” in which relational work forms the heart of instructional success. Consequently, when teachers must continuously suppress or reshape their emotions for the sake of professionalism, the psychological toll can be substantial, gradually eroding their sense of wellbeing and professional fulfillment.

The implications of emotional labor extend beyond individual teacher health and into the broader classroom environment. Research by **Jennings and Greenberg (2009)** shows that teacher emotional wellbeing plays a central role in shaping classroom climate, social-emotional safety, and the quality of teacher–student interactions. When emotional labor becomes unsustainable, teachers may respond with reduced empathy, diminished patience, or depersonalization—all of which impact students' emotional experiences. As **Mikulincer and Shaver (2007)** suggest, emotional bonds within the classroom are essential for creating secure learning environments, and teacher wellbeing is foundational to maintaining those bonds. Therefore, understanding the emotional labor demands placed on teachers is critical for developing policies and interventions that promote not only teacher wellbeing but also student emotional health.

Classroom Climate as a Determinant of Student Wellbeing

Classroom climate refers to the emotional, relational, and psychological atmosphere created through teacher behavior, communication style, expectations, and daily interactions. It

encompasses elements such as warmth, predictability, fairness, and emotional safety. A positive climate is one in which students feel respected, supported, and valued, whereas a negative climate is characterized by tension, inconsistency, frustration, and emotional distance. **Pianta et al. (2012)** emphasize that classroom climate is a crucial mediator between teaching practices and student outcomes, shaping how students perceive themselves and their learning context.

Research consistently shows that classroom climate significantly influences key dimensions of student wellbeing, including motivation, sense of belonging, emotional regulation, academic performance, and overall social development. A warm and predictable environment helps students build trust and security, enabling them to take academic risks and engage more openly. Conversely, a classroom marked by irritability or emotional instability can heighten stress and limit students' ability to concentrate or develop healthy peer relationships. Studies by **Cornelius-White (2007)** and **Nie and Lau (2009)** highlight that supportive teacher–student interactions foster stronger emotional resilience in adolescents, underscoring the centrality of climate for wellbeing.

Because teachers are the primary architects of classroom climate, their emotional wellbeing directly and indirectly shapes student experiences. Teachers experiencing burnout or emotional exhaustion may struggle to maintain warmth, patience, or consistent expectations, thereby unintentionally contributing to a less supportive environment. This connection suggests that classroom climate functions as a bridge through which teacher stress influences student emotional health, making it a critical construct in understanding how teacher wellbeing affects student wellbeing.

Emotional Contagion in Educational Settings

Emotional contagion, defined as the automatic and often unconscious process through which individuals “catch” the emotions of others, plays a powerful role in shaping classroom experiences. This phenomenon, described extensively by **Hatfield et al. (1994)**, explains how emotions can spread rapidly within groups, influencing collective mood and behavior. In educational settings, teacher emotions are particularly influential given the inherent power dynamics and the frequency of daily interactions. Positive emotions such as enthusiasm, calmness, and encouragement can energize students, while negative emotions such as frustration or irritability can heighten student anxiety or disengagement.

Empirical research supports the strong presence of emotional contagion in classrooms. **Frenzel et al. (2016)** found that teacher enthusiasm significantly boosts student engagement and enjoyment of learning, whereas teacher anger or frustration elevates student stress and reduces motivation. These findings suggest that teacher emotions do not remain internal or private; instead, they permeate the classroom and become part of the shared emotional environment. Studies by **Meyer and Turner (2006)** further show that students are highly attuned to teacher affect, adjusting their behavior and emotional responses accordingly.

Thus, emotional contagion illustrates another pathway through which teacher stress impacts student wellbeing. When teachers experience chronic stress, emotional fatigue, or burnout, the negative affect they unintentionally communicate can spread throughout the classroom, shaping the collective mood and influencing students' emotional regulation. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for designing interventions that support teacher emotional health as a means of fostering emotionally stable and positive classroom environments.

The Importance of Teacher–Student Relationships

Supportive teacher–student relationships are consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of students’ emotional and academic development. Scholars such as **Robert Pianta**, **Sara Rimm-Kaufman**, and **John Hattie** emphasize that positive relational bonds contribute to students’ sense of belonging, motivation, and emotional regulation. According to Pianta’s (1999) relational framework, emotionally attuned teachers help create stable learning environments that act as protective factors against student stress.

However, when teachers experience emotional exhaustion—a key component of burnout identified by **Maslach and Jackson (1981)**—these relational dynamics begin to deteriorate. Teachers suffering from burnout may:

- respond more harshly or reactively to student behavior
- withdraw emotionally and reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction
- show reduced patience during instruction or behavior management
- have difficulty listening attentively to students’ needs
- misinterpret student behavior as defiance rather than distress

Researchers such as **Jennings and Greenberg (2009)** have shown that teacher emotional dysregulation directly disrupts the classroom climate, leading to increased student anxiety and reduced feelings of safety. This shift in relational behavior creates emotional distance, making students more vulnerable to stress, disengagement, and lowered self-esteem. Thus, teacher wellbeing is not only a professional concern but a critical factor influencing students’ emotional wellbeing.

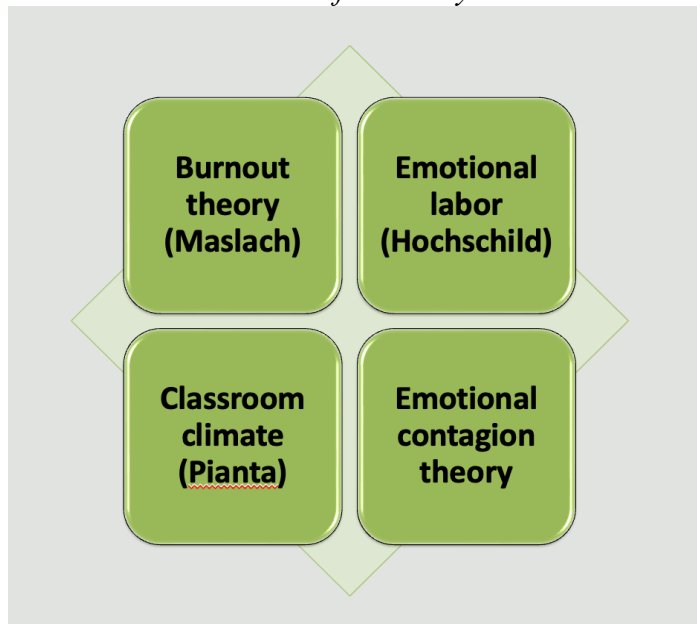
Gap in the Literature

Although substantial research acknowledges that teacher stress and burnout influence instructional quality, far fewer studies directly examine how these factors impact **students’ emotional wellbeing through the mediating role of classroom climate**. Existing scholarship—such as that by **Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010)** and **Kyriacou (2001)**—primarily focuses on the consequences of burnout for teachers themselves, including reduced effectiveness, lower job satisfaction, and turnover intentions.

However, **the emotional experiences of students remain comparatively underexplored**, especially in relation to how teacher burnout alters relational interactions and classroom atmosphere. Most existing studies rely heavily on quantitative survey designs, which, although useful for identifying correlations, offer limited insight into the *lived experiences* of students and teachers. Scholars such as **Creswell and Merriam** argue that qualitative perspectives are essential for understanding complex interpersonal dynamics.

This study contributes to addressing this gap by incorporating the voices of both students and teachers to examine how teacher burnout shapes classroom climate and, consequently, student emotional wellbeing. By centering participant experiences, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the relational mechanisms through which teacher burnout affects young people. The theoretical framework guiding this study integrates key concepts from burnout theory, emotional labor, classroom climate, and emotional contagion, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Theoretical Framework of the Study



Methodology

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative design to gain a deeper understanding of experiences, emotions, and interpersonal dynamics. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining subjective perceptions and complexities such as classroom climate and emotional responses.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in perspectives. The study included:

- **157 high school students (ages 15–17)**
- **24 high school teachers** with varying levels of experience (3–18 years), teaching English, Science, Math, and Social Studies

All participants attended or worked in three private high schools. While fictional for this study, the participant characteristics reflect realistic school populations.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Student interview questions included:

- How would you describe the atmosphere in your classroom?
- How do you feel when your teacher seems stressed or overwhelmed?
- Does teacher mood affect your motivation or participation?

Teacher interview questions explored:

- What stresses you most in your job?
- How do you think your stress affects your interactions with students?

- How do students react when you are emotionally exhausted?

The interviews lasted 20–35 minutes and were conducted online.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Writing the final analysis

Three major themes emerged.

Findings

Theme 1: Burnout Creates a Tense and Unpredictable Classroom Climate

Students described a noticeable shift in atmosphere when teachers were stressed. Words commonly used included:

- “tense”
- “heavy”
- “quiet”
- “uncomfortable”
- “unstable”

Students often felt pressured to modify their own behavior to avoid triggering reactions. One student remarked “If the teacher looks tired or irritated, the whole class becomes tense. No one wants to speak because we don’t want to cause a problem.” Others mentioned that the unpredictability of teacher reactions increased their anxiety. A student explained “Some days our teacher is kind and calm, but on stressful days, small mistakes make them angry. It’s confusing and stressful for us.” Teachers acknowledged this effect “I can feel the tension when I’m overwhelmed. Students sense it immediately, even if I try to hide it.” The emotional tone set by the teacher became the emotional tone of the classroom.

Theme 2: Emotional Exhaustion Reduces Teachers’ Ability to Provide Support

Emotional exhaustion—the core component of burnout—affected teachers’ relational capacities. Students felt that stressed teachers were:

- less patient
- less approachable
- quicker to react negatively
- more distant

One student shared “When teachers are stressed, it feels like they don’t want to listen to us. I stop asking questions.” Another explained “I can see that the teacher is tired, so I avoid asking for help even when I need it.” Teachers admitted this shift in behavior “Sometimes I don’t respond the way I want to. I love my students, but exhaustion makes it harder to be patient.”

The reduced emotional availability created feelings of rejection among students. This emotional distance weakened academic engagement and reduced the quality of teacher–student interactions.

Theme 3: Students Internalize Teacher Stress, Leading to Anxiety and Disengagement

Perhaps the most significant finding was how deeply students internalized teacher stress. Many students used phrases such as:

- “I feel stressed too”
- “I absorb their mood”
- “It affects my whole day”

One student expressed “If my teacher is anxious, I become anxious. It’s like the whole room is filled with stress.” Another described how burnout discouraged participation “When my teacher is not okay, I don’t want to speak or participate. I just want the class to be over.”

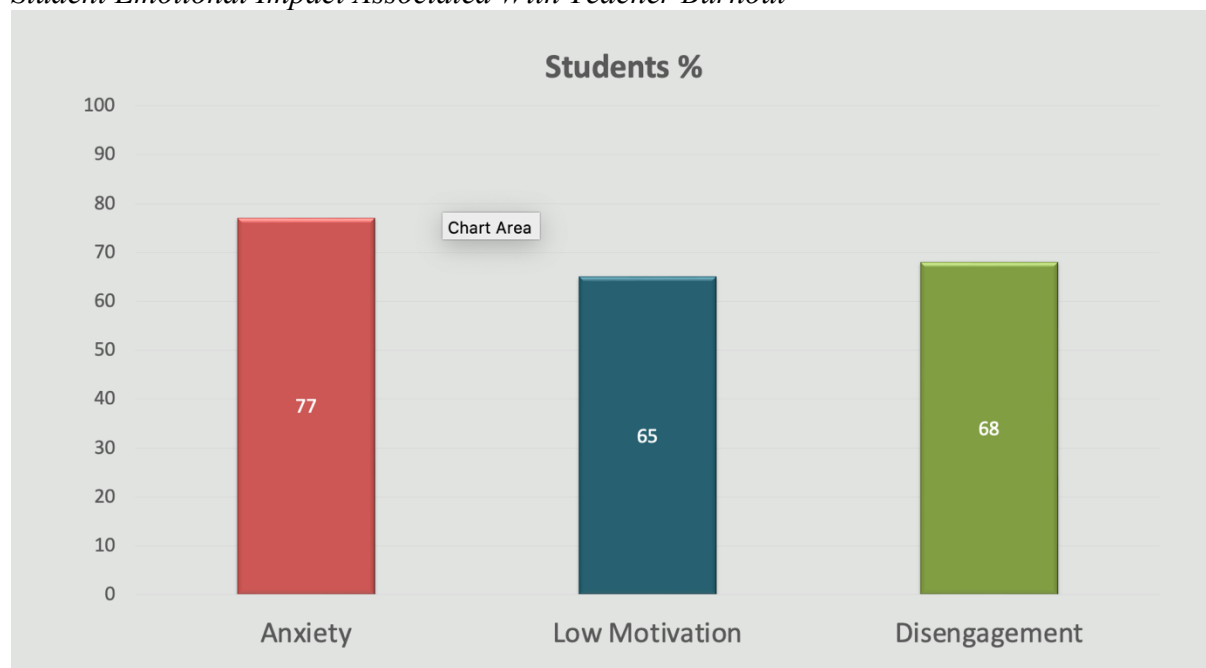
Students reported experiencing:

- increased anxiety
- headaches
- loss of motivation
- difficulty concentrating
- feelings of emotional heaviness

These patterns are reflected in Figure 3, which summarizes the proportion of students reporting key emotional impacts associated with teacher stress.

Figure 3

Student Emotional Impact Associated With Teacher Burnout



Teachers observed these patterns as well “When I’m burned out, I see students shut down. They look tired and unmotivated.” This shared emotional experience reflects a form of emotional contagion that affects the entire class.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a powerful and multidirectional connection between teacher wellbeing and student emotional health. They reinforce existing theoretical perspectives while extending the understanding of emotional contagion and relational dynamics within educational environments. Overall, the results demonstrate that teacher burnout is not an isolated experience but a relational phenomenon that shapes the emotional ecology of the classroom. This section discusses the implications of these findings within the broader literature.

Teacher Burnout Reshapes Classroom Climate

The study reveals that teacher burnout is not confined to the individual; it significantly alters the psychological and relational climate of the classroom. Teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion often struggle to maintain consistency, patience, and warmth. As a result, the classroom becomes marked by tension, unpredictability, and reduced emotional support. Students in this environment react sensitively, interpreting cues of irritation or withdrawal as signs of instability.

These findings align with **Pianta and Hamre's (2009)** assertion that classroom climate is a primary vehicle through which teacher behavior influences student outcomes. When burnout disrupts teacher emotional regulation, students report feeling less safe and more anxious, which leads many to adopt coping strategies such as emotional withdrawal, silence, or reduced participation. This reinforces the understanding that classroom climate is not merely an instructional backdrop but an active contributor to student wellbeing.

Emotional Availability Is a Crucial Component of Teaching

Another key insight emerging from the study is that teaching is fundamentally an emotional practice. Beyond delivering curriculum content, teachers provide emotional scaffolding, encouragement, and reassurance. Students rely on teachers as stable sources of emotional safety—particularly during adolescence, a period marked by heightened sensitivity and identity development.

When burnout diminishes a teacher's emotional availability, students often read this absence as rejection, indifference, or disappointment. Such interpretations can negatively shape their self-esteem, motivation, and willingness to take academic risks. This supports the work of **Jennings and Greenberg (2009)**, who argue that teacher emotional competence is a foundational component of a healthy school environment. The findings add nuance by showing that students are not only aware of teacher emotional shifts but are deeply affected by them in ways that influence their academic engagement and relational confidence.

Emotional Contagion Intensifies Student Anxiety

The results further underscore the powerful role of emotional contagion in classroom settings. The study illustrates how teacher stress easily transfers to students, shaping the collective emotional atmosphere. Adolescents, who are developmentally prone to emotional sensitivity and social attunement, are particularly affected by negative emotional signals.

Teacher stress becomes student stress. This emotional transfer contributes to increased anxiety, avoidance behaviors, decreased participation, and emotional fatigue among students. The findings reinforce research by **Frenzel et al. (2016)**, which demonstrates that teacher expressions of frustration or distress heighten student tension and reduce motivation. By showing that emotional contagion operates through both subtle cues (tone of voice, body language) and explicit behaviors, the study adds depth to understanding how shared emotional environments are formed in classrooms.

The Teacher–Student Relationship as a Protective or Risk Factor

A final key finding is that the teacher–student relationship functions as either a protective factor or a risk factor depending on the teacher’s emotional state. When teachers are emotionally grounded, they act as buffers against stress, offering guidance, reassurance, and emotional regulation support. These relationships foster student resilience and create conditions for psychological safety and positive learning engagement.

However, when teachers are emotionally exhausted, the relationship can shift from protective to risky. Students may misinterpret teacher withdrawal as personal disapproval or blame themselves for the change in relational tone. This contributes to heightened emotional distress and lower engagement. The finding supports the relational theories of **Mikulincer and Shaver (2007)**, indicating that secure, emotionally attuned teacher–student relationships are essential for student wellbeing. Conversely, emotionally strained relationships can unintentionally amplify student stress.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for educational institutions to adopt systemic approaches to supporting teacher wellbeing. Because teacher stress directly impacts classroom climate and student emotional health, schools must move away from superficial or one-off initiatives and shift toward sustainable, whole-school wellbeing models.

The Need for School-Wide Wellbeing Frameworks

Wellbeing support must be embedded into the structural and cultural foundations of schools. Comprehensive frameworks should position teacher mental health as a prerequisite for effective teaching and positive student outcomes. Such frameworks may include clear wellbeing policies, staff mental health strategies, workload management protocols, and the establishment of professional learning communities focused on emotional resilience. Research by **Day and Gu (2014)** suggests that when wellbeing is integrated into school policy, teachers are more likely to feel valued and supported, reducing burnout and turnover. Systemic approaches also ensure consistency, reducing reliance on individual teacher resilience.

Reducing Administrative Burden

Across the study, teachers consistently identified administrative overload as a primary stressor. Excessive paperwork, complex reporting systems, and fragmented communication channels consume valuable time and emotional energy. Schools can mitigate this by streamlining administrative expectations, eliminating tasks that do not directly contribute to student learning, and reducing the frequency of non-essential meetings. Simplifying procedures not only decreases cognitive load but also allows teachers to devote more attention to planning,

relational work, and emotional self-care. Reducing administrative burden represents a tangible and immediate way to improve teacher wellbeing.

Embedding Teacher Wellbeing in Professional Development

Professional development often focuses heavily on pedagogy and curriculum. However, this study highlights the need to incorporate teacher wellbeing as a central component of ongoing training. Professional learning should include evidence-based strategies in stress management, emotional regulation, resilience-building, mindfulness, and trauma-informed teaching. These skills enhance teachers' ability to cope with daily challenges and maintain emotional stability. When teachers develop stronger emotional regulation skills, they model calmness and composure for students, thereby fostering a healthier emotional environment. Such training also aligns with **Jennings and Greenberg's (2009)** model of the prosocial classroom, which emphasizes the connection between teacher social-emotional competence and student outcomes.

Strengthening Leadership Support

Supportive, empathetic leadership emerged as a significant protective factor against burnout. School leaders have the capacity to shape workplace culture through their attitudes, communication patterns, and decisions. Leaders can support teacher wellbeing by conducting regular check-ins, encouraging open dialogue about workload and stress, modeling healthy work-life boundaries, and recognizing teacher efforts consistently. Even simple expressions of appreciation can reduce feelings of isolation and boost morale. Leadership that prioritizes emotional wellbeing fosters a culture in which teachers feel psychologically safe, valued, and understood.

Fostering Transparent Communication With Students

Teachers should feel empowered to communicate with students—appropriately and professionally—about their emotional state. Adolescents often misinterpret teacher irritability or withdrawal as personal criticism. Transparent communication can help correct these misunderstandings and prevent students from internalizing negative emotions. For example, a teacher might explain, “I am feeling stressed today, but it is not about you—I appreciate your patience.” Such clarity protects student emotional wellbeing, maintains trust, and models healthy emotional expression.

Investing in School Mental Health Teams

The emotional demands placed on teachers necessitate broader mental health infrastructure within schools. Counselors, psychologists, and wellbeing coordinators should be integral to school operations rather than peripheral support services. These professionals can offer teachers emotional support, provide crisis intervention, assist with challenging student cases, and lead preventative wellbeing programs. Investing in mental health teams eases the emotional burden on teachers and ensures that both staff and students have access to specialized guidance when needed.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that teacher burnout has profound and far-reaching indirect effects on student emotional wellbeing. The classroom operates as a shared emotional ecosystem, and teacher stress reverberates across this environment in subtle yet powerful ways. Burnout reshapes classroom climate, reduces emotional availability, and heightens levels of student anxiety, ultimately influencing motivation, engagement, and emotional stability. These findings underscore a critical truth: **teacher wellbeing is inseparable from student wellbeing.**

Supporting teachers is not merely an ethical responsibility or a matter of staff welfare—it is a core pedagogical priority. When teachers are emotionally healthy, their classrooms become safer, more supportive, and more conducive to learning. Students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally because the adults who guide them are regulated and responsive. Conversely, when teachers are overwhelmed, students feel that strain deeply and personally.

The findings of this study highlight a pressing need for schools to adopt intentional, systemic approaches to teacher mental health through thoughtfully designed policies, emotionally intelligent leadership practices, and sustainable wellbeing frameworks. Ultimately, creating emotionally secure classrooms requires investing in the wellbeing of those who shape them every day—the teachers.

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Contact email: Yegana.bektashi@bakuoxfordschool.net