July 14, 2014

Under Pressure

The stress felt by many urban teachers may be based on whether they have a calling to teach in inner cities

By Frederick M. Hampton

Since the beginning of a public system of education in the U.S., teachers have voiced their concerns about job-related stress. This topic remains among the most discussed in schools and in education literature. Many studies have explored the origins of teacher stress, strategies for managing that stress, and administrative policies and practices for reducing it.

In nearly all school districts, job stress is a common topic among teachers. However, urban school teachers are confronted with circumstances that sometimes make it difficult to explore this subject. In many urban districts, a majority of teachers are white, while the majority of students are of color, typically black or Hispanic. The difficulty stems from the question of whether racial differences among teachers and students play a significant role in the amount of stress experienced by teachers.

I teach educational leadership at Ohio’s Cleveland State University. My classes are generally made up of African-Americans and Caucasians. Many of the educational leadership graduate students teach in the Cleveland area. Others teach in neighboring districts that share demographic characteristics with Cleveland. According to information from the Ohio Department of Education, the Cleveland schools' teacher population is approximately 65 percent white, 30 percent black, and 5 percent other. Conversely, the student population is approximately 70 percent black, 12 percent Hispanic, 15 percent white, and 3 percent other.

In one of my classes, the topics of teacher stress origins, strategies for management, and administrative policies and practices for stress reduction are a component of the course syllabus. However, discussions and questions regarding the relationship between teacher stress and student race in urban schools recently began to emerge. During these discussions, students express a variety of experiences and opinions. Some students understandably withdraw from these conversations. In unfamiliar company and mixed racial groups, discussion of race can be charged. Regardless of their race, some teachers are reluctant to publicly share their feelings, opinions, and experiences for fear that they may be interpreted as insensitive at best and racist at worst.

Finding answers to the race related questions can be both risky and challenging. In open discussion, few teachers if any are willing to admit their discomfort in working with students of different races. Equally limiting in open discussion is the belief that some teachers will infer negative feelings and motives of others regarding their comments. However, given our location and access to large numbers of urban teachers and students, we wanted to gain more insights into our questions even if there were no absolute answers to be found.

Our exploration

Although the class discussions were enlightening, I felt restricted as to the thoroughness of what my graduate students/urban teachers were willing to reveal about themselves. In racially mixed
groups, most people filter and sanitize their comments regarding race. After all, graduate students usually want their professors to view them in the most favorable light, and they prefer to contribute to an amicable class environment. Another important limitation was the relatively small number of discussion participants. Our graduate classes usually range from 15 to 25 students, which would be far too small to reach any meaningful conclusions on this topic. Therefore over the span of two semesters, I enlisted the assistance of two classes in exploring our questions with a larger number of urban teachers.

Assuming that many teachers would be hesitant to share their honest feelings regarding teacher stress as it relates to student race, our goal was to indirectly and informally collect qualitative and anecdotal responses regarding our questions.

In order to establish a framework for this exploration, we decided to pose two simple questions to as many urban teachers as possible: 1) Do you frequently or rarely experience stress as a teacher, and; 2) Would you prefer to teach in an urban or non-urban district? Although no mention of student or teacher race was made during the questioning, in Cleveland and surrounding areas, the term "non-urban" is often a euphemism for "few, if any black or Hispanic students."

This exploration was not intended to be of a strict scientific design in which elements were systematically varied, and teachers randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. But rather, the purpose was to identify any trends that emerged as they related to teacher stress and student race. Under these circumstances, rival interpretations of any conclusions are open to debate.

What we learned

Over the two semesters, 202 white and 110 black K-12 teachers answered our questions. Although no notes were taken during the conversations, each teacher's race, self-reported stress (frequently or rarely), and preference of teaching location (urban vs. non-urban) was recorded. We hypothesized that two clear trends would emerge from the self reports. First, there would be a pattern illustrating a higher percentage of stress among white teachers than black. Secondly, there would be a higher percentage of white teachers who preferred non-urban schools than black.

Although supporting evidence of the hypotheses would not confirm student race as a primary factor in teacher stress, they would be considered as indicators since students of color predominate the teachers' work environment. Neither of the hypotheses was confirmed in this brief exploration. We found that by percentage, both black and white teachers experienced stress in urban schools at almost an identical rate. Additionally by percentage, their preference of teaching in urban vs. non-urban schools was virtually the same for both groups.

Ultimately, the two primary indicators revealed no discernible patterns that could be specifically applied regarding urban teacher stress as related to student race. However, this study did reveal some other interesting insights. Overwhelmingly, whether teachers were black or white, those who reported low incidences of stress also reported the highest preference to teach in urban schools. Conversely, those who reported higher incidences of stress also reported a greater preference to teach in non-urban schools. These correlations may have significant implications for both teacher stress and job satisfaction in urban schools.
One interpretation is that beyond a basic desire for employment, teaching in an urban school should also be a professional priority. When teaching in an urban school is done as a last gasp hope of employment, it also may be more indicative of a teacher's susceptibility to stress. As one principal stated, "When a teacher gets out of bed in the morning, then drives through three suburban districts that she'd like to teach in just to get to one urban district that she doesn't want to teach in, she's already headed for a stressful day."

Our exploration of this subject opens many questions and interpretations for continued discussion. Also, other conclusions could be drawn with differently worded questions, a different sample of urban teachers, and more in-depth teacher interviews. However for the time being, when the question of teacher stress and student race is proposed, I will be comfortable in making the following two observations: 1) Teachers who choose to work in urban schools most likely will experience much less stress than teachers who work there only out of financial necessity, and; 2) Urban teachers who frequently experience stress should examine their own attitudes and behaviors to see how they might contribute to, or perhaps even perpetuate their own stress.

Frederick Hampton (Fhampton@csuohio.edu) is a professor at the College of Education and Human Services at Ohio's Cleveland State University.