



Stress contagion in the classroom? The link between classroom teacher burnout and morning cortisol in elementary school students

Eva Oberle ^a  , Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl ^b

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Highlights

- Elementary school children's morning cortisol levels varied among classrooms.
- Classroom teacher burnout predicted higher morning cortisol in children.
- Burnout explained more than half of the classroom variability in morning cortisol.

Abstract

Objective

The purpose of this study was to explore the link between classroom teachers' burnout levels and students' physiological stress response. Drawing from a stress-contagion framework, we expected higher levels of teacher burnout to be related to elevated cortisol levels in elementary school students ($N = 406$, 50% female, $Mean$ age = 11.26, $SD = .89$).

Method

Classroom teacher burnout was assessed with the Maslach Burnout Inventory modified for teachers. Salivary cortisol was collected as an indicator of students' hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) functioning. We collected salivary cortisol in children at 9 a.m., 11:30 a.m., and 2 p.m. in the classroom setting.

Results

Using Multilevel Modeling, we found that children's morning cortisol levels significantly varied between classrooms (10% variability). Higher levels of classroom teacher burnout significantly predicted the variability in morning cortisol. Teacher burnout reduced the unexplained variability in cortisol at the classroom level to 4.6%.

Conclusion

This is the first study to show that teachers' occupational stress is linked to students' physiological stress regulation. We discuss the present findings in the context of potential stress contagion in the classroom, considering empirical and practical relevance.

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Keywords

Middle childhood; Stress; Well-being; Teacher–student relationships; Teacher burnout

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