Well teachers, well classrooms: Reframing teacher burnout through teacher noticing and self-awareness

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Abstract

Teacher burnout remains a persistent challenge in K–12 education, negatively affecting educator well-being, instructional quality, and student outcomes. Although burnout has been extensively examined, considerably less attention has been given to how teachers recognize and respond to early indicators of strain before burnout develops. This gap represents an important opportunity for teacher education and professional learning. This literature-informed conceptual article synthesizes research on teacher noticing, Attention Restoration Theory, self-regulation, and teacher well-being to position self-awareness as a foundational professional competency. We propose a conceptual framework that supports early recognition of burnout, intentional in-the-moment responses, and reflective practices that promote sustainable teaching. By reframing burnout prevention through the lens of teacher noticing and self-awareness, this article offers practical implications for teacher education, professional learning, and future research.

Keywords: teacher burnout, teacher noticing, self-awareness, attention restoration, teacher well-being

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Teacher burnout remains a persistent challenge in K–12 education, affecting educator well-being, instructional qualities, and student outcomes. Although burnout is commonly attributed to excessive workload, emotional labor, and systemic demands, these explanations focus primarily on external pressures while giving less attention to teachers' capacity to recognize and respond to early indicators of strain. Burnout is not only a problem of overload; it can also be a problem of unnoticed overload.

Building on Walker's (2019) discussion of distraction and digital overload, we use the term *unnoticed overload* to describe the gradual accumulation of cognitive, emotional, and instructional demands that teachers may experience before fully recognizing their effects. Throughout the school day, educators continuously shift attention among instruction, classroom management, assessment, communication, and decision-making, often with little opportunity for cognitive recovery. Over time, these sustained attentional demands may contribute to cognitive fatigue, reducing teachers' capacity for self-regulation and intentional decision-making (Kaplan, 1995; Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Teacher burnout has been associated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment, diminished instructional quality, weakened teacher–student relationships, and increased attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). National data further illustrates the scope of the problem. During the 2021–2022 school year, 8% of public-school teachers moved to another school and another 8% left the profession (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Additionally, 84% of public K–12 teachers reported insufficient time during the workday to complete responsibilities such as lesson planning, grading, paperwork, and communication with families (Doan et al., 2024).

While organizational factors remain major contributors to burnout, professional development has largely emphasized curriculum, pedagogy, and instructional practice rather than teachers' capacity to monitor and respond to their own cognitive and emotional experiences (Schussler et al., 2018). Strengthening self-awareness is not intended to replace organizational efforts to improve working conditions; rather, it represents one practical approach for helping teachers navigate the demands of teaching with greater intentionality.

Specifically, we propose a literature-informed conceptual framework that integrates teacher noticing, self-regulation, and Attention Restoration Theory to support early recognition of burnout, intentional in-the-moment responses, and restorative practices that promote sustainable teaching. We argue that teachers can strengthen professional sustainability by intentionally attending to, interpreting, and responding to their own cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical experiences before stress becomes chronic.

Burnout Through the Lens of Teacher Noticing

Teacher noticing refers to educators' ability to attend to, interpret, and respond to meaningful classroom events in ways that inform instructional decision-making (Sherin et al., 2011). Rather than simply observing what occurs in the classroom, teachers make professional judgments by selecting information they perceive as important and determining how to respond. This process is recognized as an important component of effective teaching because it shapes instructional decision-making in complex learning environments.

Although teacher noticing has primarily focused on students and instruction, the same cognitive processes can be applied inward. Throughout the school day, teachers experience cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical cues that provide information about their own professional functioning. Viewing these experiences through the lens of teacher noticing positions self-awareness as an active professional competency that supports intentional decision-making rather than as a personal wellness strategy.

This perspective aligns with self-regulation theory, which describes how individuals monitor their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, evaluate their effectiveness, and adjust responses to achieve desired outcomes (Zimmerman, 2000). Self-awareness represents the first step in this process because teachers cannot regulate experiences they do not recognize. As educators become more aware of emerging patterns of fatigue, frustration, or cognitive overload, they create opportunities to respond before stress becomes chronic.

Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995) further explains how sustained attentional demands gradually reduce the cognitive resources required for reflection, decision-making, and self-regulation. As attentional fatigue accumulates, teachers may become less likely to recognize early indicators of strain and more likely to rely on automatic responses. Viewing burnout through the combined lenses of teacher noticing, self-regulation, and Attention Restoration Theory reframes prevention as an ongoing professional practice focused on recognizing and responding to stress before burnout develops.

Recognizing and Responding to Early Indicators of Burnout

If burnout develops gradually, then recognizing early indicators becomes essential for prevention. Before emotional exhaustion or disengagement becomes evident, teachers often experience subtle cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical changes that signal increasing occupational strain. Developing the capacity to notice these indicators allows educators to respond intentionally before stress becomes chronic.

Early indicators commonly emerge as difficulty concentrating, mental fatigue, increased irritability, reduced instructional flexibility, withdrawal from colleagues, or persistent physical fatigue (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Kaplan, 1995; Maslach et al., 2001). Although these experiences are common during demanding periods of teaching, recurring patterns across multiple domains may indicate that cognitive and emotional resources are becoming depleted. Recognizing these patterns represents the first step toward intentional self-regulation rather than reactive coping.

Table 1 organizes these common indicators into four domains—cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical—to support professional reflection. Rather than serving as a diagnostic tool, the table is intended to help teachers identify emerging patterns of strain and consider whether intentional adjustments or restorative practices may be warranted.

Responding Through Self-Regulation

Recognizing early indicators is valuable only when followed by intentional action. Self-regulation involves

Table 1

Early Indicators of Teacher Burnout Across Four Domains

Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral	Physical
Difficulty concentrating	Irritability	Withdrawing from colleagues	Persistent fatigue
Mental fatigue	Frustration	Avoiding collaboration	Headaches
Forgetfulness	Anxiety	Rushing instruction	Muscle tension
Indecisiveness	Feeling emotionally drained	Reduced instructional flexibility	Disrupted sleep
Increased distractibility	Reduced enthusiasm	Postponing responsibilities	Difficulty recovering after the workday
Difficulty adapting instruction	Diminished patience	Relying on habitual routines	Other stress-related symptoms

Note: Table 1 was developed by the authors as a literature-informed conceptual resource synthesizing common cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical indicators associated with teacher burnout. The table is intended to support professional reflection and self-awareness and should not be interpreted as a diagnostic or validated assessment instrument.

monitoring one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, evaluating whether they support professional goals, and making adjustments when necessary (Zimmerman, 2000). During the school day, these adjustments are often brief and occur within routine instructional activities rather than through formal wellness interventions.

Attention Restoration Theory suggests that short opportunities to redirect attention may help replenish the cognitive resources needed for effective decision-making (Kaplan, 1995). Consequently, brief intentional actions throughout the school day may help teachers interrupt escalating stress and maintain instructional effectiveness. Examples of these responses are presented in Table 2.

Operationalizing Self-Awareness in Professional Practice

Recognizing and responding to early indicators of strain represents only the beginning in developing self-awareness. Like other professional competencies, self-awareness is strengthened through repeated practice, intentional reflection, and the application of knowledge within authentic teaching contexts. Over time, these repeated experiences help teachers develop habits that support more intentional instructional decision-making and professional sustainability.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for operationalizing self-awareness through five interconnected professional practices: noticing, interpreting, responding, reflecting, and restoring. Building on teacher noticing, self-regulation, and Attention Restoration Theory, these practices are presented as a continuous cycle that helps educators recognize emerging indicators of strain, make intentional adjustments, and restore cognitive and emotional resources before stress becomes chronic. Rather than occurring in isolation, each practice informs the next, supporting continuous professional growth.

The framework is designed to be integrated into everyday teaching rather than implemented as a separate

Table 2

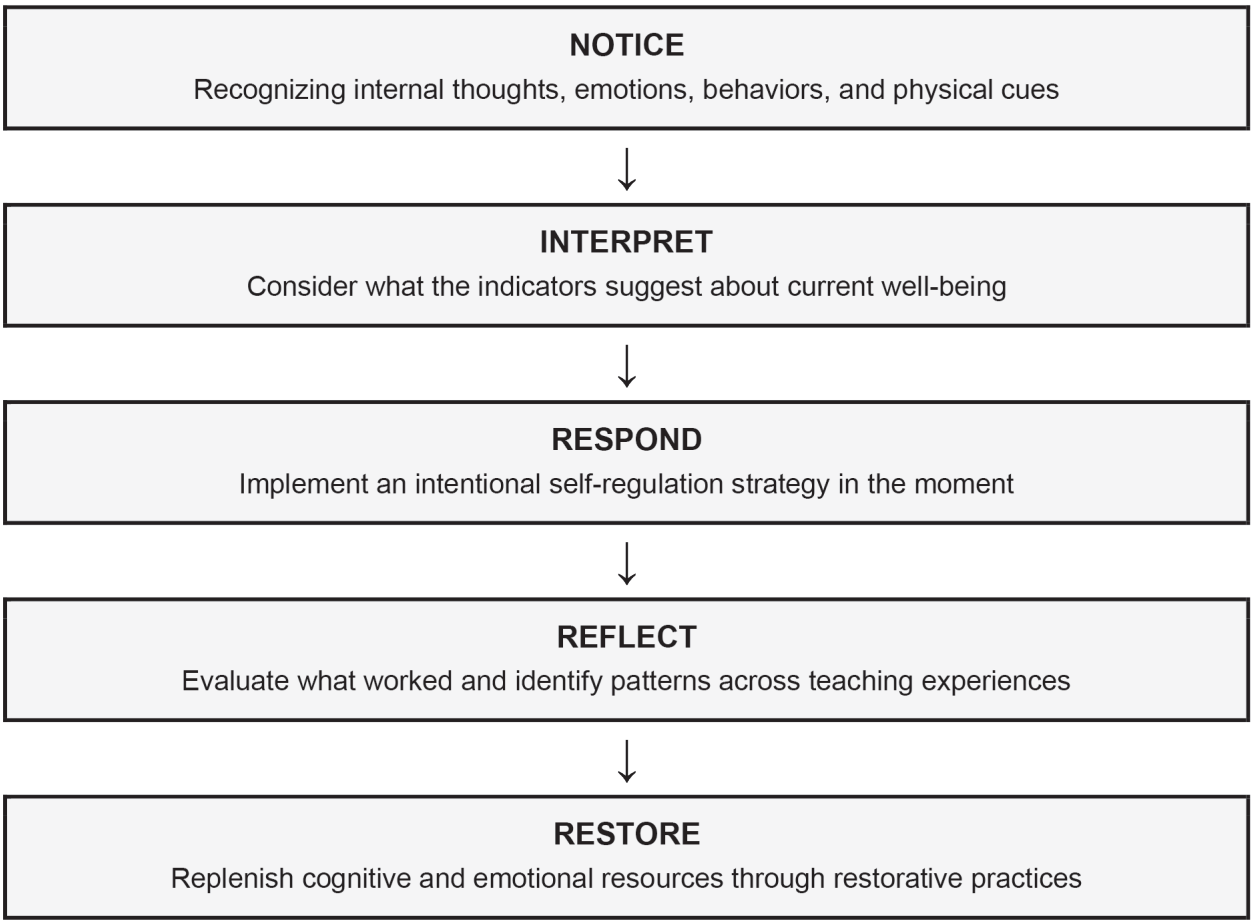
Examples of In-the-Moment Self-Regulation Strategies

Early Indicator	Possible Self-Regulation Strategy
Feeling mentally overwhelmed	Pause for one minute before transitioning to the next activity.
Difficulty concentrating	Review one instructional priority rather than multitasking.
Increased frustration	Use intentional breathing before responding to students.
Decision fatigue	Simplify choices and rely on established classroom routines.
Emotional exhaustion	Briefly step away during a planning period or transition when appropriate.
Feeling disconnected	Connect briefly with a trusted colleague.
Physical tension	Stretch, change posture, or take a short walk when possible.
Persistent stress	Schedule time for reflection and identify one manageable adjustment.

Note. Examples were developed by the authors through the synthesis of teacher noticing, self-regulation, Attention Restoration Theory, and teacher well-being literature. They are intended to illustrate practical applications of the proposed conceptual framework rather than prescribe a validated intervention

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Developing Teacher Self-Awareness Through Professional Practice



Note. Figure 1 presents a literature-informed conceptual framework developed by the authors to illustrate how teacher noticing, self-regulation, and Attention Restoration Theory can be operationalized through five interconnected professional practices and ten illustrative daily habits. The framework is intended to support professional learning and reflection and has not been empirically validated.

wellness initiative. To illustrate this process, Figure 1 includes ten daily habits that translate the five practices into practical actions that teachers can incorporate within existing instructional routines. These habits are intended to serve as flexible examples that educators may adapt to their individual teaching contexts rather than as prescribed intervention strategies.

The proposed framework positions self-awareness as a professional competency that develops through ongoing cycles of noticing, interpreting, responding, reflecting, and restoring. Similar to instructional planning, assessment, and classroom management, self-awareness can be intentionally strengthened through continued practice and reflection. Embedding these habits within everyday teaching may help educators support both instructional effectiveness and long-term professional well-being.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Learning

The framework presented in this article has implications for teacher preparation, professional learning, and future research. Although teacher education

programs have traditionally emphasized instructional planning, classroom management, assessment, and content knowledge, less attention has been given to developing self-awareness as a professional competency. Embedding opportunities for noticing, reflection, and self-regulation within teacher preparation may help future educators develop habits that support instructional effectiveness and long-term professional well-being.

Professional learning may similarly benefit from integrating self-awareness into existing instructional and leadership initiatives rather than treating well-being as a separate topic. Recognizing early indicators of strain, using brief self-regulation strategies, and reflecting on professional experiences may strengthen decision-making and support sustainable teaching. Although organizational changes remain essential for addressing burnout, self-awareness practices provide a complementary strategy educators can incorporate into their daily work.

As a literature-informed conceptual article, this framework is intended to generate discussion and guide future inquiry rather than establish effectiveness. Future research should examine its influence on teacher well-being, instructional decision-making, and professional sustainability across diverse educational settings, including teacher preparation and professional learning.

Conclusion

Teacher burnout continues to present significant challenges for educators, schools, and teacher preparation programs. While organizational conditions remain important contributors to teacher well-being, strengthening educators' capacity to recognize and respond to early indicators of strain represents one complementary approach to supporting professional sustainability. Viewing burnout through the lens of teacher noticing reframes self-awareness as an active professional competency that can be intentionally developed through everyday teaching practice. The framework's central contribution is the extension of teacher noticing from attention to students and instruction to intentional awareness of teachers' own professional functioning.

This literature-informed conceptual article integrates teacher noticing, self-regulation, and Attention Restoration Theory to propose a practical framework for recognizing, responding to, and reflecting on occupational strain before burnout becomes chronic. By operationalizing self-awareness through intentional professional practices, the framework moves beyond describing the causes of burnout to offering practical strategies that educators may adapt within their own teaching contexts. Future empirical research is needed to examine, refine, and validate the proposed framework across diverse educational settings. Until then, the framework offers teacher educators and school leaders a practical starting point for embedding self-awareness within professional learning aimed at sustaining educator well-being.

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