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Elementary Teachers' Depression Symptoms Related to Students' Learning

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Depressive Symptoms in 3rd Grade Teachers: Relations to Classroom Quality and Student Achievement

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Teachers experience some of the highest levels of job-related stress, and such stress may leave them more vulnerable to depression. How do elementary school teachers' symptoms of depression affect the quality of the classroom environment and students' learning? A new study has found that teachers who reported more symptoms of depression than their fellow teachers had classrooms that were of lesser quality across many areas, and students in these classrooms had lower performance gains, particularly in math.

"Teaching is one of the most stressful occupations," notes Leigh McLean, doctoral student in the Department of Psychology, and Carol Connor, professor of psychology, at Arizona State University, who conducted the study, beginning when they were at Florida State University. "One of the troubling consequences of occupational stress is that it can contribute to elevated rates of symptoms of depression. Our study reveals some of the negative implications of higher rates of teachers' symptoms of depression for students."

The study appears in the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers looked at 27 teachers and their 523 third-grade students (primarily White and from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds) in a Florida school district. Teachers reported the frequency of their symptoms of clinical depression, and students' basic reading and math skills were assessed throughout the year. Using classroom video recordings, trained observers assessed the quality of the classroom environment.

The students who were the most vulnerable to the negative effects of their teachers' depression were those who were already struggling in math, suggesting that the children who needed to improve the most were less likely to be able to do so when they were in classrooms with more depressed teachers. Students with weaker math achievement made greater gains when they were in higher-quality classrooms with less depressed teachers.

Teaching is consistently identified as one of the most stressful occupations in the United States, but almost no mental health support systems exist in schools to help teachers cope with this chronic stress. Research on depression and teaching is sparse, but one study of early education teachers found that almost 25 percent had diagnosed depression, compared with about 18 percent of nonteachers. Although some pioneering studies have looked at the effectiveness of mental health interventions on teachers' classroom performance—and suggest that such programs have strong potential for positive change—most current models of professional development don't address mental health.

"Our study is one of the first to reveal that the constellation of symptoms that point to risks for depression hurt not only the teachers who experience these symptoms, but also the development of the teachers' students—especially students who are struggling academically," McLean and Connor note. "The study highlights the need for nationwide mental health support systems for educators, not only for teachers' benefit, but for the benefit of students."

Specifically, the study's authors suggest that schools engage mental health professionals to help teachers deal with depression. Professional development programs that help teachers learn how to handle adverse and stressful situations in the classroom as they're teaching would be beneficial, as would providing comprehensive health insurance that covers mental health support, they say.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Depressive Symptoms in 3rd Grade Teachers: Relations to Classroom Quality and Student Achievement by McLean, L, and Connor, CM (Arizona State University, formerly with Florida State University). Copyright 2015 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.