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SELF-TALK AND TEACHER WELLBEING: ADDRESSING BURNOUT AND MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN AFIKPO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
Teacher burnout and moral disengagement remain critical challenges in Nigeria's education system, particularly in Afikpo Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. These issues undermine teacher wellbeing and erode trust in the profession, with negative consequences for classroom effectiveness and student outcomes. Recognising the importance of psychological resilience, this study examines self-talk as a cognitive and social-psychological mechanism that can strengthen teacher wellbeing and reduce disengagement. By fostering a positive mindset, self-talk enables teachers to reframe stressful experiences, sustain professional values, and maintain ethical commitment in their practice. Using purposive sampling, 150 teachers from five secondary schools participated in a cross-sectional survey measuring self-talk, burnout, and moral disengagement. Regression analysis was employed to explore the relationships among these variables. Findings reveal that self-talk is significantly associated with reduced burnout and lower levels of moral disengagement, highlighting its potential as a practical intervention for teacher education and professional development. The study recommends integrating self-talk strategies into teacher training curricula and promoting supportive school cultures that prioritize mental health and wellbeing. Such measures can enhance teacher resilience, improve retention, and strengthen the overall quality of education in Afikpo and beyond.

Keywords: Self-talk, Teacher wellbeing, Burnout, Moral disengagement.

Introduction

Teaching is an emotional task. While instructors do not always freely express their emotions, their expression is frequently limited by emotional display guidelines, such as exhibiting good emotions, repressing negative emotions, and keeping the strength of their emotions reasonable (Franco et al., 2025). When the repressed emotion is spent, teachers frequently experience burnout in the process of accomplishing their goals and instructing professionally. Researchers have investigated the detrimental implications of burnout, which occur not only at the individual but also at the interpersonal level (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). At the individual level, burnout weakens professionals' inner desire, passion, excitement, and career idealism; at the interpersonal level, this deeply seated motivational crisis manifests as apathy and discouragement (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). In this vein, it has been demonstrated that teacher burnout has detrimental implications in educational environments, such as students' poor evaluation, classroom management, and a lack of support (Franco et al., 2025). More importantly, it has been shown that pupils can identify burnout signs in their teachers (Franco et al., 2025). In this vein, a recent review (Franco et al., 2024) shows that burnout among teachers may lead to moral disengagement, given the evidence of its impact on teacher behavior. Multiple studies have

found that the quality of teachers' motivation and emotions are important predictors of the motivational climate reported by students.

Evidence suggests that negative emotions, such as exhaustion and depersonalization, limit the use of autonomy-supportive strategies and promote more controlling practices (Franco et al., 2021), whereas experiences of personal accomplishment and positive affective states promote a more need-supportive style (Burel et al., 2021). Similarly, motivational profiles characterized by strong regulated motivation and low autonomous motivation lead to increased burnout rates and a less supportive educational environment for students' psychological requirements (Franco et al., 2021). These findings highlight the importance of emotional-regulation skills, such as self-talk, in protecting students' well-being and learning while still upholding moral values. Despite evidence of the effects of teacher burnout on the teaching-learning process and its context, there is a scarcity of literature that examines the consequences of this phenomenon on teachers' behavioral and motivational patterns, such as moral disengagement.

According to Bandura (1991), moral disengagement refers to eight interconnected cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to disregard internalized moral standards and engage in immoral behavior without experiencing distress. Internal controls, according to social cognitive theory, are only effective when activated. Moral disengagement mechanisms disconnect internal standards from the construction of conduct, rendering them ineffectual. Assume Sam has an internal norm that bans theft, yet he took a newspaper from a cooperative society office without paying for it. He may believe that being an informed citizen is more essential than paying for the paper (moral reason). He could even intend to leave the paper at the café when he was finished with it, thus he was merely "borrowing" it (euphemistic terminology). He may believe that the cooperative society office is a giant, cruel organization that will not notice the missing paper (dehumanization) or perhaps deserves to have the paper removed because it charges so much for their service (attribution of responsibility). These mechanisms help us interpret his behavior as independent to his internal standard against theft. Thus, he can leave the store, paper in hand, satisfied that he has done nothing wrong.

Research on approaches to prevent moral disengagement began in pedagogical contexts. For example, McAlister discovered that simply explaining the mechanisms of moral disengagement lowered persons' proclivity to disengage (McAlister, 2001). More recently, Bustamante and Chaux discovered that a critical thinking intervention reduced moral disengagement in ninth grade pupils (Bustamante and Chaux, 2014). These efforts suggest promising instructional approaches for reducing moral disengagement. Another set of studies looked at potential organizational solutions (Barsky, 2011), and discovered that higher levels of participation in defining performance goals at work made people less likely to morally explain or delegate blame (two moral disengagement techniques). Thus, the current study attempts to determine if positive self-talk reduces levels of moral disengagement among instructors, utilizing Afikpo as a case study.

Self-Talk is concerned with the frequency with which people speak to themselves, rather than the content of speech: (1) self-reinforcement, (2) self-criticism, (3) self-management, and (4) societal judgment. Inner speech's adaptive role is well known as the key to self-control (Oles et al., 2023), counter-factual thinking required for identity development (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007), change of perspective used for life review and a significant life change (Oles, 2019), or a way to organize a personal meaning system (Oles et al., 2020). Inner conversation is a phenomenon similar to inner speech that can reduce anxiety while increasing self-confidence and motivation; consequently, it is used as an example in sport psychology and other types of goal-directed activity (Hatzigeorgiadis et

al., 2009), and it can lessen moral disengagement in instructors. Self-reflection implies interior speech and allows people to understand, know, and better themselves while also reflecting on their interactions with others, such as during psychotherapy (Oles et al., 2023).

For decades, philosophers and psychologists have been fascinated by the experience of "talking to oneself," or conversing with oneself internally (Brinthaupt et al., 2009). There are numerous titles for the subjective experience of talking to oneself, including inner monologue or dialogue, auditory imagery, private speech, inner speech, self-talk, and self-statements. Among these words, most theorists and researchers refer to talking to oneself openly as "private speech" and quietly as "inner (or internal) speech." One question about this psychological process is whether it is a minor phenomenon that only reflects cognition or consciousness (Fields, 2002) or whether it plays a major role in social and self-regulation. Psychological theory and research (Brinthaupt et al., 2009) suggested that talking to oneself does in fact serve important cognitive and regulatory functions. Hence, if the variable of self-talk can serve as an important cognitive regulation, there is possibility that it can serve as a regulator of teachers' burnout and reduce moral disengagement. Therefore, the following objective were postulate:

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the level of burnout and moral disengagement of teachers in Afikpo local government area.
2. To assess if there is an association between burnout and moral disengagement among teachers in Afikpo Local government area.
3. To examine whether self-talk could influence burnout and moral disengagement among teachers in Afikpo local government area.

Research problem

Existing research has focused on the various characteristics of teacher burnout in order to better understand the mechanisms that underpin their attitudes, which in turn affect their involvement (Franco et al., 2021; Franco et al., 2025). Burnout has been shown to reduce a sense of purpose and dedication to teaching, resulting in bad behaviour such as moral disengagement. Moral disengagement methods include being impatient in giving students with meaningful explanations and examples, as well as failing to provide opportunity and autonomy in the learning process (Maslach et al., 2001). According to studies, low burnout teachers engage in enriching teaching environments, whereas high burnout teachers generate hostile and restrictive teaching environments.

The literature established that there exists relationship between teachers' burnout and moral disengagement, understanding the impact of positive self-talk on such relationship is crucial for identifying the underlying social mechanisms and developing effective social control strategies for such incongruent behaviour. Hence, this present study aims to fill the gap by examining the impact of positive self-talk on the relationship between teachers' burnout and moral disengagement. By examining these associations in-depth, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and providing valuable insights for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. Thus, the following hypotheses were postulated:

1. There would be higher level of Burnout and moral disengagement among teachers in Afikpo local government area.

2. There would be a significant association between burnout and moral disengagement among teachers in Afikpo Local government area.
3. Self-talk would significantly influence the level of burnout and moral disengagement among teachers in Afikpo local government area.

Method

A total number of 150 teachers participated in the study. They were drawn from five government secondary school in Afikpo, Ebonyi State Nigeria. The schools were randomly selected out of nine major schools in the city. They consist of both male and female teachers. Their age ranges from 27 to 60 (M = 43.5, SD = 1.89). The following questionnaires was administered to them: Self-Test Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) by Maslach et al. (1996), a shortened 13-item Moral Disengagement Scale by Cervantes et al. (2024), and Self-Talk Scale developed by Brinthaupt et al. (2009). The data was analyzed using Regression analysis as it allows total capturing of the relationships and the interaction effect.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Self_Talk	53.5867	5.59144	150
Age	40.7133	6.23299	150
Gender	.5000	.50168	150
Bournout	12.6333	4.93096	150
Moral_Disengagement	32.5600	6.19859	150

The mean table above indicates that there is more increase in positive self-talk among teachers, leading to more decrease in the level of teachers' burnout, though the standard deviation was not significant enough. The mean table also showed that self-talk is higher than moral disengagement, and the deviation was significant (M = 32.56, SD = 6.19). It indicated that there exists higher moral disengagement among teachers, thus, the first hypotheses were accepted.

Table 2. The result from the correlational table on the relationship among the variables of Age, Gender, Burnout and moral disengagement.

		1	2	3	4
1	Self-talk	-			
2	Age	-.010	-		
3	Gender	.012	-.053	-	
4	Burnout	-,163	,095	,042	-
5	Moral Diseng.	.022	-.017	.006	-.140

***N = 150, p = <.05.*

The result of the correlational table above indicate that age and burnout are negatively correlated with the factor of self-talk, thus, (r = -.10, p = >.05; r = -.16, p = >.05). Only the variable of moral disengagement (r = .22, p = >.05) is positively correlated with the factor of self-talk. Burnout correlated negatively with moral disengagement (r = -.14, p = >.05)., thus, the second hypotheses were accepted.

Table 2: The regression analysis on the impact of positive self-talk on teachers' burnout and moral disengagement.

Model Summary[b]

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.164[a]	.027	.000	5.59131	.027	1.002	4	145	.409

a. Predictors: (Constant), Moral Disengagement, Gender, Age, Bournout
b. Dependent Variable: Self Talk

P = <.05

The table above summarized the influencing strength of positive self-talk on teachers' burnout and moral disengagement. Identifying that Burnout correlated negatively with moral disengagement (r = -.14, p = >.05) in the correlational table indicates that both are consequences of each other. The unstandardized regression coefficient (B) revealed that burnout and moral disengagement are negatively predictor of Self-talk, indicating that for any one unit increase in Self-talk level, burnout and moral disengagement decreases by .02. The contribution of self-talk in explaining the variance in burnout and moral disengagement is 3% (R^2 = .03), and the model was significant $F(1, 125) = 1.02$, p <.05. Thus, the third hypotheses which stated that self-talk would significantly influence the level of burnout and moral disengagement were accepted.

Discussion of the findings.

The study investigated the influencing strength of self-talk on teachers' burnout and moral disengagement among teachers in Afikpo local government area. The descriptive statistic showed that the level of self-talk is higher than that of moral disengagement and that of burnout, indicating that the higher the positive self-talk one hold decreases the level of burnout and moral disengagement of such person as a teacher in teaching profession. The correlational table showed that teachers' burnout is linked to moral disengagement, indicating that exhausted instructors may justify unethical behaviours or withdraw from student well-being. Direct studies on burnout and moral disengagement among teachers are limited, research shows burnout undermines professional ethics and empathy and serve as key factors in moral decision-making (Franco, et al., 2025). This has been confirmed in this present study. In high-stress environments, burned-out teachers may rationalize neglect, reduced accountability, or detachment from students, aligning with mechanisms of moral disengagement such as dehumanization or diffusion of responsibility. This dynamic risk normalizing unethical practices in schools affect both teachers' conduct and student behaviour.

The construct of self-talk was confirmed in this study as a catalyst for meddling the consequences of both burnout and moral disengagement among teachers. Self-talk has been one of the important components of the self-regulation process. The tendency to talk to oneself as a self-instruction play a critical role in the self-control process (Berk, 1992; Morin, 1993; Vygotsky,1987). Oles et al. (2023) noted that self-talk is important for inhibiting impulses, guiding one's courses of

actions, and monitoring one's goal progress. Similarly, Carver and Scheier (1998) viewed self-talk as a reflection of a "meta monitoring" of one's behaviors and how well one is progressing toward one's goals. As such, Carver and Scheier argued that it influences emotional reactions and responses to behavioral deficits, which has been confirmed in this present study as it predicted negatively the consequences of burnout and moral disengagement.

Implications of the study

Empirically, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature linking teachers' well-being challenges with risky behaviours such as burnout and moral disengagement. They underscore the importance of more research to establish causal pathways that shape these relationships. The result also calls for more research across diverse populations to capture contextual variations, which may alter how teachers' well-being issues translate into risk behaviours. The study found that self-talk was directly associated with decrease in burnout and moral disengagement. This suggests the need to explore more potential factors, such as resilience or social support, and to examine contextual factors that may also buffer the impact of self-talk.

Recommendations for future studies

Future studies should leverage on these findings by drawing on multiple data sources, including more diverse samples. Such approaches would provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the complex associations of self-talk, burnout, moral disengagement and teachers' well-being. Longitudinal research, in particular, is crucial for tracking how these variables develop over time.

Conclusion

Self-talk is a tool of the mind and instrument of organizing thoughts, emotions and booster of productivity. This study addresses how burnout could be related with teachers' moral disengagement. The study found that burnout was associated with teachers' moral disengagement, hence, confirming the study second hypotheses. The study also addresses the influencing strength of positive self-talk on the consequences of burnout and moral disengagement among teachers. The regression table showed that as self-talk was found higher, that burnout and moral disengagement were negatively correlating, indicating that the two consequential factors are negatively predicting positive-self-talk. It indicates also that teachers tend to experience low burnout and lower moral disengagement when they have positive self-talk to themselves. Therefore, integrating positive self-talk as strategies against burnout should be prioritized in teachers' training curricula. This strategy should be recognized as a catalyst to teachers' well-being.

Recommendations

1. Positive self-talk was found being correlated negatively by burnout and moral disengagement, hence, integrating self-talk as strategy into teachers training curricula need to be prioritized.
2. Enhancing teachers' well-being promotes supportive school cultures, hence, providing burnout-free school environment is a key to eradicate moral disengagement among teachers.

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