

THE TEACHER BURNOUT SYNDROME

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Who of us has not felt at one time or another the frustration of not being able to accomplish what we would like to in our classes, of feeling that we are not valued by our students, peers and superiors, of not knowing whether our job is permanent or not; in short, who has not felt the stress that makes our life and work so difficult? It is this feeling of helplessness, this job strain which we refer to as "burnout". Many times we do not even realize that we are suffering from such a strain and think that we are over-worked or have come gradually to dislike our profession.

Firstly, how do we look upon our profession as teachers? And what about those around us? What do people in our environment think about us and teachers in general? Is our profession held in high esteem? Teachers and their task of teaching have been defined from many points of view.

B.F. Skinner sees teachers as an outmoded and inefficient instrument for teaching several of the natural sciences, and has come up with the 'teaching machine' to replace the out-of-date model. Paul Freire views teachers as an agent of social change, contending that there is no such thing as neutral education. Carl Rogers, on the other hand, believes that one person cannot teach another person,

but rather facilitate learning. The concept one holds of a teacher and his/her responsibility is important, since demands are unconsciously imposed on teachers, parallel to their roles in a given society. This along with other specific pressures build up, creating fertile conditions for burnout.

Secondly, what exactly is burnout? It is a physical, emotional and/or attitudinal exhaustion. There are different degrees of this syndrome ranging from mild cases (of irritability, fatigue and frustration) to extreme burnout manifested in physical ailments (such as insomnia, high blood pressure, anxiety, ulcers and depression). Teacher burnout was recognized as a professional problem by the National Education Association in the United States in 1980. William McGuire, then president, warned that burnout was becoming a major new malady threatening to reach epidemic proportions. And thirdly, can we identify the culprits responsible for this burnout as such? How do they interfere with our work?

These culprits are of different kinds: some like job security, administrative paper work, monotony and work conditions relate to the part of our work that we did not bargain on when we decided to become teachers. Let us briefly examine these culprits. The first one we will refer to is job insecurity. It is not always easy to obtain tenure either in public or private institutions and certainly one cannot do one's best in a situation where there is a possibility of not being able to fulfill one's most immediate needs. Also, little did we realize that so much of our time would be taken up by administrative paper work for, not only do we have to grade students' oral and/or written work, but we have to account for their attendance, tardiness and any other requirement imposed by the particular school in which we work. The conditions under which we work can also be exhausting. How many classes do we teach? Do we have to do any moonlighting? Since classes can be very tiring, do we have enough time to rest? Or even, do we have enough time to go from one place to another? When making out our schedule, one of the things we have to be careful of is of not accepting a larger work load than it is possible for us

to cope with. It is our professional desire to teach a class that is challenging and enjoyable and not monotonous, since the reactions and attitudes of the students change with every new class we teach. However, monotony can creep in from teaching from the "same old book" in the "same old way".

Boss and peer indifference can also be frustrating. Directors or principals are usually courteous in answering questions. However, very often they are totally unconcerned with serious problems one has. They have their own administrative load to carry and are, therefore, confined to their protective shell, the office. Rarely does the director or principal recognize the teacher's personal merits or professional services for the students, which go beyond what many of one's colleagues would lack the effort or originality to think of. And as for one's colleagues, either one doesn't know who they are or very often the relationship is purely a social one, without any pretense of sharing teaching problems, classroom experiences or creative ideas that would benefit the teaching staff as a whole. Then another enervating factor is the envy or jealousy that one's merits cause. This can be out in the open or deep down in our colleague's being. Then one day s/he strikes and the outcome is disastrous! How appalling it is to encounter so much fault-finding or indifference, but so little camaraderie and understanding.

And what about culture shock? If the teacher is a foreigner coming into a new country, there are so many cultural patterns that are totally different from his/her native land that it is difficult to adapt and adopt. And, conversely, if the teacher is a non-native speaker of English, it is difficult to assimilate "strange" idiomatic expressions as well as those cultural patterns involving kinesics, proxemics and semiotics. The first challenge here which many foreign teachers refuse to face and, therefore, burn out in no time is the need for understanding the students they must deal with daily. The second challenge which non-native teachers must face is overcoming the superficial knowledge they have of vocabulary, pronunciation and structure and becoming conscious of a deeper level of language

study: language and culture. If these challenges are not met, then anomie and disservice to the students are inevitable.

One of the relationships that has been greatly idealized is that of teacher-student. The teacher is, of course, supposed to be a generous and philanthropic creature whose patience is endless and wisdom inexhaustible. And the student must worship the teacher, forever studying and participating eagerly and never being absent or late. But in fact, what can burn out a teacher more rapidly than to feel that several students who sit in class defiantly every day could care less either for the class or the teacher. They are irresponsible, rude and indifferent. English is a subject in the curriculum which they must take. And what about students enrolled in bi-national centers because they chose to do so? If we examine the situation closely, we realize that many teenagers enroll because they want to be able to leave home for a few hours in the afternoon or they want to meet a boy or girlfriend and have a good time. Also we find that adults choose bi-national centers because English will enable them to get a better job. But many of them are not really motivated; they are beset by many pressures from their work, home duties and outside activities. The strain of a bad teacher-student relationship is one of the principal causes of burnout.

The physical setup of the classroom itself can be detrimental to both teacher and students: immovable chairs, poorly lighted and ventilated classrooms, overused chalkboards, uncleaned chalkboards and erasers, no audiovisual materials and outdated textbooks. Noise outside the classroom can unnerve the teacher who is trying to explain and the students who are trying to understand or work in groups.

From the above it is evident that the sole element that one has full control of is oneself. Thus the change must come from within. A teacher's attitude must be one of adaptation to his/her particular school and classroom situation. All the tangible and intangible culprits we have mentioned thus far have antidotes which are absolutely

essential. They will be the subject of another roundtable at our next MEXTESOL convention in October, 1986.

CONCLUSION

Teachers must create a professional consciousness through communication, buzz groups and constant contact with peers to avoid creating the illusion that they are alone in their feelings. This professional network in a sense creates a support system that helps combat burnout. Of course, there is need for more research in teacher behavior and burnout, which in itself may suggest appropriate steps to offset the latter. For concrete remedies and viable solutions come to our presentation at the MEXTESOL convention.