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# BURNOUT AND THE READING TEACHER

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It's the end of the school day on Friday and most of the teachers are congregating in the lounge and classrooms, happily anticipating the weekend. Carole, however, walks straight to the parking lot without pausing to speak to colleagues as she did in former years. Today she informed the principal that she would not be renewing her contract as a remedial reading teacher and, although saddened by her decision, she also feels relief that months of increasing frustration and self-doubt have reached a conclusion.

She reflects upon the ideals and commitment she possessed as an undergraduate excelling in the teacher education program and recalls one professor's adage, "If the child doesn't learn, it's not the child's fault but the teacher's." She remembers her three years as a classroom teacher during which her youthful enthusiasm and creativity and her work after school on a Master's degree in reading education kept her too busy to examine her teaching effectiveness or job satisfaction. She thinks of five years spent as a remedial reading teacher and of the multitude of circumstances which prevented her from genuinely making a difference in the education of as many students as she had hoped. As Carole reaches her car, she vows to herself never again to allow a job to frustrate her and harm her self-esteem to this extent.

In later years Carole will tell friends that she "burned out" as a reading teacher. If pressed for details, she will cite abusive and unmotivated students, excessive administrative demands on her time, uncooperative teachers, apathetic parents, and lack of supervisory support. She will also feel, but probably never mention, a lingering hurt and shame that she somehow failed as a teacher.

Part of the tragedy of this hypothetical but all too familiar example of Carole is her feeling of isolation in dealing with the stress and depression culminating in burnout generated by her work as a remedial reading teacher. Ironically, her high levels of enthusiasm and success in her preservice education program

and the excitement of her initial teaching experience did little to prepare Carole for the inevitable frustrations and disappointments in remedial teaching over which she had little or no control. Although a certain amount of stress and other burnout-inducing factors are present in any teaching situation, the authors of this article propose that the realities of certain professionals, such as reading teachers, magnify stress to levels that require explicit acknowledgement and preparation on a collective, profession-wide basis.

#### Teacher Burnout

The causes and consequences of teacher burnout and suggested remedies for it have received extensive coverage in professional journals in recent years (Bardo, 1979; Hendrickson, 1979; Jones and Emanuel, 1981; McGuire, 1979; and Paulus, 1979). Many teachers experience to some degree one or a few symptoms of burnout: chronic or somatic physical problems, mental and physical exhaustion, tension, cynicism and hostility, apathy and depression, detachment from others, and negative self-concept. Many authors, such as Landsmann (1978), offer useful suggestions for combating the symptoms of stress and depression; plenty of exercise and rest, healthful dietary habits, separation of professional and personal problems, and time for hobbies and friends.

Needle, Griffin, Svendsen (1981), however, remind us that although exercise, sleep, and sound nutrition help increase resistance to stressors, they do not eliminate sources of stress. Occupational stress results from a discrepancy between the teacher's work needs and expectations and the failure of the work environment to provide occupational rewards. Needle et al. concluded from their study of Minnesota public school teachers that "Combinations of stressors...are not equally distributed among teachers, and some teachers are at a higher risk for health problems as a result of the nature of their work" (p. 180).

Burnout is often perceived as a problem for the individual, to be dealt with on a case by case basis according to situational and personality variations. There are practical reasons for this approach since an individual teacher can take steps to alleviate frustrating circumstances while organizational change for stress reduction is a slow, problematic process. Too often, however, this approach leads to greater isolation and depression since the teacher comes to believe the locus of the problem lies in his or her own shortcomings rather than in the particular demands and characteristics of the job. Certainly, some individuals may correctly decide that teaching is not the career for which they are best suited. The education profession, however, has a responsibility to teachers who have invested years of college and professional work to acknowledge the realities of burnout, to train preservice teachers in stress management, and to actively support the mental and physical well-being of teachers in the field. Maslach (1976), a pioneer investigator into the burnout phenomenon, has concluded that "many of the causes of burnout are located not in the permanent traits of the people involved, but in certain specific social and situational factors..." (p.22)

### The Missing Reward

To understand why remedial reading positions may generate more stress and depression than some other teaching jobs, we must examine those teacher needs which are in discrepancy with occupational realities. Surveying Florida teachers of Dade County, Lortie (1975) found 86.1% chose as their major source of work satisfaction, "the times I have 'reached' a student or group of students and they have learned" (p. 105). Psychic rewards, in other words, were the teachers' major source of gratification rather than monetary rewards or fringe benefits.

The formal means, such as achievement tests, which are used to evaluate whether a remedial reading teacher has "reached" a student often provide the teacher with disappointing or ambiguous feedback for his or her efforts. The growth of the accountability movement during the last decade has added public scrutiny and pressure to the stress inherent in this situation.

Tuinman (1973-1974) has shown that students do relatively well on reading comprehension subtests of the major achievement test batteries when they do not have the passage to read compared to when they do. Pyrczak (1981) has found that college students, at least, can select a high percentage of standardized test answers correctly when they are given only the multiple choice answers to the questions but not the question stems or passages themselves.

These two research studies show that the validity of the accepted standardized reading measures are correlational in nature. What this means is that giving a standardized reading test of a traditional type to students who have had incidental, developmental instruction probably provides a pretty good indication of how well they read. Using these measures to show growth will not work, however, because the tests are really tests of knowledge of the world, speed of intellectual processing, and test-taking skills (including testwiseness). No doubt, knowledge of the world, speed of processing, and testwiseness correlate well with reading ability, but any remedial reading program which does not specifically develop these factors will get very little gain on these measures regardless of how much gain has been achieved in real reading.

Criterion-referenced tests are tests on which one can, in fact, show growth. Unfortunately, they evaluate a teacher's program based on the means and not the ends of the program. When these tests are used diagnostically, testing the means is justified. But when they are used to evaluate the success of the remedial reading program then it is analogous to evaluating someone's gardening ability by seeing if s/he owns a hoe, a tiller, and fertilizer. Professional support, then, is needed and test data are not like to provide it. In fact, the more a reading teacher focuses on the improvement of students' ability to read with comprehension, the less likely those efforts are to bear fruit on either criterion- or norm-referenced tests. The seeds of burnout are often sown when a teacher's efforts are largely unrelated to "success" as measured by these tests.

Part of the tragedy of burnout is that disillusionment comes first to those teachers who had hoped to make a real difference in their students' lives. Freudenberger (1974), who helped to originate the term "burnout" a decade ago during his work with free clinics, states that it is the dedicated and committed who are prone to burnout: "We would rather put up than shut up... But it is precisely because we are dedicated that we walk into a burnout trap" (p. 161). Without detracting from other teaching roles, it must be said that remedial reading teachers demonstrate this commitment when they accept the special challenges encompassed in their jobs. When this commitment is extinguished through unrelieved stress and depression, the dynamics of burnout, complicated by anger and grief, bring about a real sense of mourning for lost ideals (Freudenberger, 1975, p. 165).

Perhaps teachers' hopes for success should be tempered at the beginning with an objective appraisal of what the teaching process actually involves. Hawley (1979) reminds us that teachers risk failure any time they engage in teaching and often experience failure to a significant extent, yet, "...if there is a universal aspect of the teaching experience that is discussed less, one wonders what it is" (p. 39). Lack of success for a remedial reading teacher is particularly discouraging since this teacher is seen by others as a "safety net" who will somehow provide an academic rescue for a student who has failed in other settings. Hawley (1979) points out that fear of failure in teaching often results in the adoption of non-teaching practices such as rigid, set procedures or total lack of instructional direction.

For teachers who do risk failure through experimentation and originality, continued lack of successful results with remedial students may result in a "learned helplessness" syndrome similar to that reported for academically disabled students. Thomas (1979) reports that the phenomenon of learned helplessness develops when one sees no relation between effort and attainment of certain outcomes. In such cases the person reduces effort and no longer attains former performance levels. In a teaching situation, this means that the teacher is merely going through the motions without any expectation of significant educational progress. At this point the teacher is certainly doing a disservice to his or her own students and some type of intervention is required. The question remains as to whether that teacher was in turn done a disservice by a profession which failed to provide support and encouragement necessary to prevent deterioration of the situation.

#### Burnout: A Personal or Professional Problem?

Certainly, as the popular posters around schools state, "No one ever said teaching was going to be easy," but prospective teachers should be warned that they often must face professional problems and anxieties alone, without the benefit of collegial support.

The development of ideals and standards for teachers is often done at the expense of sufficient attention paid to the reality context in which the ideals must be implemented. Teachers like

Carole in our opening scenario have graduated from programs where learning theorists are studied who claim that success is ensured by exacting application of their respective learning models. These teachers use materials claimed by publishers or their sales staff to be "teacher proof" and sure to excite and motivate any student to learn. They get jobs in schools where any admission of difficulty or uncertainty is likely to be a liability at contract renewal or evaluation time. They interact with other teachers who are also reluctant to reveal any professional problems or weaknesses. Thus, professional concerns which should be openly discussed and resolved become guilt and resentment inducing deep personal problems.

An obvious implication of this situation is that teachers must have opportunities to openly discuss sources of their own frustrations and to collectively support others experiencing stress and depression. Remedial reading teachers may be able to alleviate many former private miseries by sharing their concerns and developing group problem solving strategies. For instance, reading teachers frustrated at the lack of relevance achievement testing holds for their teaching efforts may develop alternative ways of "keeping score." Remedial reading teachers must understand that they have to have other means for showing themselves and significant others that they in fact have accomplished something important.

Educators must respond to burnout on an institutional as well as personal basis, however. Cherniss (1980) argues that dealing with organizational factors such as job structure and work organization is more productive than attempting to alter the personality of the individual. Educational institutions can no longer tolerate a high teacher turnover rate as an acceptable response to job stress. Dean Corrigan (1981), president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, cites teacher burnout as the principal problem in schools today and as a contributing cause of an imminent teacher shortage. Teachers are dropping out not only because of low salaries, but ". . . because the conditions they need to practice their profession do not exist" (p. 26).

Finally, there is reason for serious concern in the education profession when faith is placed in methods, materials, and testing rather than in teachers themselves. In an era when there are numerous self-appointed experts on education gaining public attention, teachers such as remedial reading teachers must remember that they have an obligation as professionals to trust their own judgment in instructional matters, and to advocate policies and conditions which are in the best interests of their students.

#### A Personal Note to the "Burning Out."

If you are "burning out," the causes are much more likely to be outside than inside you. Nonetheless, until teacher burnout in general, or reading teacher burnout in specific, is seen as more of a professional problem than an individual problem, you are left largely on your own to deal with your frustrations. We

would like to offer our personal feelings on the matter, hoping that soon our profession will act to make these personal feelings unnecessary or obsolete.

As we see it, there are five areas which have an impact on reading teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction:

Teacher Competence—How well you can do the job that needs to be done given proper support.

Teacher confidence— How well you believe you can do what needs to be done given the actual job situation you have.

Teacher dedication—How hard you would be willing to work if you knew your efforts would meet with real success.

Leadership — How much encouragement and direction you get in doing the job that needs to be done.

Support —How much discretion you have in the quantity and quality of materials you use; how much cooperation you receive from other professionals with whom you come in contact while attempting to do your job; how many financial rewards and fringe benefits you receive; and, planning time, freedom from paper work, advocacy when criticized, etc.

It is in one or more of these five areas that relief must come for the burning or the burned out.

To begin with, we suggest that you do an honest, personal assessment of yourself and your job in each of the five areas. Be fair but be frank. Use this time to come to as much of an understanding as you can about the realities of your current situation in your profession. Next, make a plan to correct or improve one problem or situation which you feel is contributing to your burnout. Then, carry out your plan. Continue with this process of assessment—plan—carry out plan, one "hassle" at a time. Celebrate any success you have, seek out other reading teachers who are burning out and help them to assess—plan—carry out, and clamor to anyone who is important and who will listen that remedial reading teachers need and want more leadership and support. Reading teacher burnout is a professional problem with personal consequences for both teachers and students; let us deal with it as a profession.

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