Identifying Teacher Shutdown in Inner City Schools

Teaching is a demanding profession, particularly in an inner city environment (Melendez & Guzman, 1983). Many students come to the classroom with physical and emotional needs that far surpass teacher preparation and expectations (Duke, 1984). Teachers who are unprepared for this environment can expect to have a head-on collision with cultural differences. They will most likely experience isolation, self-estrangement, and powerlessness within a very short period of time (Duke, 1984; Gray & Freeman, 1988; Byrne, 1998).

The accumulated effects of stress and the psychological toll associated with inner city teaching have been documented extensively. The research shows that teacher burnout, which occurs over a period of months or even years (Merseth, 1992), often results in greater teacher attrition in inner city settings than in other school environments (Truch, 1980). Some time ago, however, Bloch (1977) and DuBrin (1979) noted that, in many cases, the stresses and psychological effects of inner city teaching crippled countless teachers within days after entering this environment.

During the year that I served as an inner city teacher, my experiences and observations made me aware that teachers in this environment quickly exhibited some of the same symptoms as teachers who experienced burnout. Through my own experience, I came to believe in the possible existence of a phenomenon in addition to burnout, and the immediacy of its onset suggested that it is deserving of a new name.

In a study of what is often thought of as illiteracy, Daphne Key (1998) used the term shutdown to describe the reluctance of some women to speak in the presence of those they deemed more powerful or educated. In this study, the term shutdown will be used to describe the inability of teachers to perform classroom responsibilities due to the stress, anxiety, and fear that occurs within weeks or even days of accepting positions as inner city teachers.

This research project began to take shape several years ago when I accepted a job teaching in an inner city elementary school. It was my intention to apply what I had learned in teacher education courses and integrate the fine arts into every area of the curriculum. I hoped to study the effect of an arts-infused curriculum on the learning potential and self-esteem of my students. However, my professional preparation and previous experiences as a teacher had not prepared me for the students or the faculty members with whom I would work. During the first two weeks of school I tried to rid my room of years of accumulated grime. I dug through piles of outdated teaching materials, and sat through faculty meetings in which open hostilities among the staff were displayed. I became aware that the school culture was very different from any I had ever experienced. My optimism and research plans began to fade. Even though I had taught the same grade level in another public school system, I began to sense that I was in for something for which I was not prepared, and the students had not yet arrived. When they did arrive, the task that lay before me seemed daunting at first, then incomprehensible, and by mid September, insurmountable.

I had planned not only to integrate creative expression and fine arts (Delacruz, 1995; Rubin, 1997) throughout the school day but also to utilize learner-centered

teaching methods that promoted student responsibility and high levels of thinking. These were the methods I had used successfully in other school environments. These methods gave me confidence in my ability to be an effective teacher and hope that I might empower my students as an inner city teacher. By the end of the second week of classes, however, I had witnessed more destruction, disrespect, and violence than I had previously witnessed in my entire lifetime. I had thoughts of transferring to another school as soon as possible after achieving tenure. By the end of the first month, I realized that I might not be able to endure the stress for the three years required to achieve tenure. In less than two months, I was completely exhausted because of the amount of energy it took daily to teach and deal with stress, anxiety, and fear for my personal safety. By mid October, I was certain that every day might be my last, and I realized that there would be no integration of fine arts in my inner city classroom.

Within this short period of time, it seemed that everything I believed about effective teaching had all but vanished. And this was when the focus of my research interest shifted to something much more basic and meaningful -- a need to understand the reality of my inability to function, much less thrive, in this environment. Hence, the need to examine the impact of inner city schools on teachers and the possibility of shutdown as a phenomenon became the focus of my research.

As a graduate student, I had become somewhat familiar with factors that research identified as causes of burnout and teacher attrition. Behaviors that I knew researchers had identified as symptoms of burnout for veteran teachers had, in my case, been achieved far too quickly to be the result of stress that had accumulated over time. I realized that this rapid loss of efficacy was something very different and was not related

to the number of years I had taught or the tiresome minutiae that accompanies every job. I was exhausted beyond measure; however, I had not been working long enough in this school to be exhausted. I was unable to do what I knew how to do. I could think the thoughts necessary for research based methodology, but I was physically unable to act on these thoughts. It was as if I had suffered a shutdown of my capacity to take action as a professional teacher.

These experiences led me to sort through my interactions with other teachers in this school, and colleagues who had taught in other inner city settings. Piecing together conversations and observations, I began to suspect that perhaps other inner city teachers had also experienced the type of shutdown that happens over a very short period of time. In my case, it happened over the course of just a few days. It was professional shock. It was paralysis. It was overload. It was shutdown.

Many conversations took place with many teachers. However Claire, whose name was changed for this article, felt no threat in being quoted since she left her first grade classroom to have a baby (who was born two months early due to her mother's stress) with no intention of returning.

Contributing Factors to Shutdown as a Phenomenon

Several factors were found to contribute to teacher shutdown in the inner city environment. However, parents, student performance, behavior and teacher/administrator relationships were the primary causes of professional shock for Claire, who

instantaneously found herself trying to teach and develop a new personal philosophy of education simultaneously.

The work that the students turned in was very poor, and Claire recalled that some of it was gradable, but most was not. She recalled feeling disappointed in herself for lowering her standards, but acknowledged that she had to, or she would have failed the entire first grade. "When I entered the teaching profession, I was gonna save the world…be a model teacher. You know? Send me your poor, you're tired, and your hungry…That quickly came to a screeching halt." Little did she know that she would gain so much experience in these areas. Only a handful of her students had a parent who worked, and although few worked, many of her students remained unsupervised both night and day, and with regard to food, had to fin for themselves.

Claire admitted that she had received physical threats from her students' parents. Careful examination of the interview transcripts revealed that she had witnessed physical assaults on co-workers and spent the majority of each day handling one violent outburst after another, and doing very little teaching. For Claire, the stress of this crisis management paled in comparison to the anxiety that accrued from attempts to avoid calling on administrators for assistance.

As is common in this environment, Claire felt that she had a poor relationship with her administrators, and was offered no support when dealing with discipline issues in the classroom. The writing of office referrals was openly discouraged and viewed as a potential risk to job security. Claire learned quickly that to protect her job, she should involve the office as seldom as possible, stating that most of the teachers she worked with felt that they had to handle all discipline problems on their own. She recalled the

experience of four of her co-workers who were called to the office by the principal and addressed over a speakerphone on a particularly volatile day at school. The principal told the teachers to "keep those children in your room, or I'll find someone who can." Claire included, "My principal doesn't care how we keep them quiet, as long as we don't send them to her. She has seen children all over the school copying from encyclopedias and dictionaries and has praised those teachers for keeping their students so quiet. At any other school, you might be fired for that sort of "management."

Claire initially felt isolated and all alone in the problems she was having in dealing with discipline issues as well as her administrators. Research has clearly shown that new teachers who feel isolated rarely succeed (Dworkin, 1987; Goodlad, 1984; Gold, 1985). How much more restrictive is the feeling of being isolated in feelings of failure? That was Claire's experience when she felt she could not share the problems she was having with her peers, attempting to suffer in silence and believing that she was the only one who was having difficulty. However, she eventually tripped over the opinions and difficulties of co-workers. Claire found tremendous relief in the realization that she was not alone in her classroom difficulties. She admitted that she found comfort in knowing others were suffering like she was and sought opportunities to discuss her problems.

There has been much research on the positive effects of assigning mentors to teachers who are either new or new to a particular environment (Chiang, 1989; Debolt, 1989; Haas, 2000). It was with this in mind that I asked whether or not Claire felt her principal had encouraged interaction, support and dialogue as a means of helping one another to cope with the stresses of the inner city environment. Claire reported that her principal was divisive when it came to teacher dialogue or interaction, and stated that

both of her administrators went to great lengths to keep the teachers apart, stating that there were more rules for the teachers than the students, including that teachers who were seen talking to one another often suffered serious repercussions.

Discussion

Through many interviews, the possibility that there is more than one type of shutdown has risen to the surface. In addition, it has come to light that the latter two types of shutdown to be discussed can be construed not only as the phenomenon, but also as the coping mechanism used to enable inner city teachers to return to work each day.

First, there was shutdown in what I initially considered to be its only form...the inability to function due to stress, a washing out of skills (Ward, 1988). According to Claire, shutdown, or the washing out of skills, occurred within days or weeks of entering this unfamiliar and highly stressful inner-city environment. She reported an inability to get through a single lesson, and also stated that she barely recognized herself after a few weeks, and was disappointed in herself because she changed her methods so radically in order to "make it." In addition, Claire reported the feelings of shock when she discovered that she was unable to use the teaching strategies learned in her methods courses.

The second type of shutdown was the inability or reluctance she felt to share her experiences with outsiders, but especially with other educators. Once she discovered that other teachers in her school were having the same experiences, the burden was somewhat lifted. However, the fear to discuss her problems with her administrators remained. And worse still was her fear to share her stories with educators who had not worked in this environment. Claire stated, "I had friends that were at other schools and they were just as

happy as can be. And I thought, what's wrong with me? This is all I ever wanted to do. How can I be so unhappy?"

The fear of being judged as incompetent made it impossible for her to discuss her situation, and also caused her to revisit feelings of self-doubt. Daphne Key (1998) refers to this type of shutdown as silencing, defined by Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) as "an extreme denial of self in dependence on external authority for direction" (p. 24). Keys (1998, p. 89) stated that "Those in positions of power should be aware of the subtle ways in which silencing, distancing…occur in well intended human interactions."

The final type of shutdown was the hardening or distancing that enabled Claire to continue to endure the ugliness of her environment. Detachment, dehumanization or robot-like behavior are cited by Truch (1980) as being common symptoms of teacher stress, and are one of the biggest problems in education today. Researchers have also shown that responsibility for people always causes more stress than responsibility for things, so people involved in teaching...are particularly susceptible to this kind of stress (Truch, 1980).

Claire readily admitted that she suffered from shutdown and considered her case to be severe. She was never able to overcome the stress she endured in her classroom, and even though she had had positive teaching experiences earlier in her career, she made the decision to seek a new career. Claire clearly expressed that she had shut down in all three areas. She experienced the shock, the silencing, and allowed herself to become desensitized to her environment. Although this desensitization enabled her to endure

three years in the inner city environment, her physical symptoms of stress could no longer be endured, and Claire found it necessary to flee.

Conclusions

Claire, who answered interview questions with openness and candor, admitted that her college methods courses had prepared her to teach the children of professors in her first school, but had done little to prepare her for teaching children in an inner-city school and described her environment with the phrases "war zone" and "hell on earth." Truch's research indicates that this stance is typical, not exceptional (1980).

Although Claire proposed solutions for making pre-service teachers more prepared by placing them in inner city schools for more field experience, she also stated that had she spent more time in this environment, she would not have become a teacher. This made the suggestion of spending more time observing in an inner city school prior to internship another problem. Pre-service teachers do everything possible to avoid going into these schools for observations or student teaching, and wisely so since there is a strong possibility that they will be placed with cooperating teachers who suffer from the phenomenon now defined as shutdown.

It is understandable that when faced with the challenge of putting their methods courses into practice, most interns prefer to attempt to meet that challenge in the most pleasant environment possible. And already facing abundant challenges, it would be unlikely that an intern would purposefully pick the inner city environment in which to complete the requirements of a degree. However, since so many school populations fit the criteria that classifies them as inner city schools, is it wise to give pre-service teachers so much discretion in picking the environments in which they train?

Through careful review of transcripts, possible solutions to this dilemma have emerged. At present, some teacher education programs require pre-service teachers to split their internship between two grades. Because so many teachers seeking employment in public schools are likely to be hired for positions in this environment, it would be plausible to have pre-service teachers split their internship not only between two different grades but also between two different school environments.

Because Claire repeatedly stated that she was not prepared for the environment and that she found her methods courses to be useless, there is a definite need for improvement at the college level in the preparation of pre-service teachers long before they enter the courses that provide lab experience. Claire's suggestion that a panel of first-year teachers meet with students who are beginning their professional courses offers a valid first step in changing the way colleges prepare future teachers to handle their classroom responsibilities as professionals. Once this meeting has taken place and questions have been asked and answered, students would have a legitimate opportunity to evaluate their suitability and their willingness to take on the responsibilities that accompany a degree in education.

Another step toward solving this problem is the development and inclusion of courses specifically designed to expose pre-service teachers extensively to the growing variety of teaching environments they will most certainly face over the course of their careers. These courses should provide pre-service teachers ample opportunity to observe and work with students who are culturally diverse and educationally deprived. Additional courses in psychology and counseling should also be a mandatory part of teacher preparation, perhaps with a stronger focus on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the role

this hierarchy plays in inner city schools and a variety of other teaching environments. The goals of these courses should not be to train teachers to handle the problems the students have, nor to prepare them to act as counselors. Handling these problems is a responsibility that should remain in the hands of administrators and counselors. Rather, these courses should be developed to equip the inner city teacher with an in-depth understanding of the causes of the often volatile natures of inner city students, preparing them for the behavior problems they can expect to see. The courses should also serve to increase teacher awareness of the very real possibility that they are likely, at some point, to work with students who grow up in an extremely harsh environment with little or no supervision or role model.

Another possible solution would be, as Bloch suggested for teachers suffering with burnout, rotation in and out of the stressful inner city school environment, with everyone serving a term (1980). Of course, like Bloch, it is also my belief that during this period of time, hazard pay should be added to the teachers' normal salary (1980).

Although one might counter this suggestion with an argument regarding teacher turnover and how difficult it might be for students to have so many new teachers in their schools every year, it has been documented that turnover in inner city schools is already extremely high (Dworkin, 1987). My own was a school where tenured teachers were sent if there had been a problem with them in their previous position, all in an effort to encourage them to retire early. In addition, vacant positions were often filled with first-year teachers who were rarely emotionally equipped to stay more than a year in spite of having accepted the job full of enthusiasm and fresh ideas. Inner city teachers should be hired with the understanding that they would hold their positions for a maximum of two

or three years (unless they felt comfortable in the environment and requested an extension). Knowing that there was an end in sight, and knowing that they would be compensated for the additional risk and stress, we might see improvement in teacher and student performance in these schools, as well as a lower rate of turnover.

However, the most significant implication of this study is the necessity to affect change from the top down. This change can be achieved, but only if a realistic perception of inner city teaching is shared by professors, administrators and teachers. There must be acknowledgment and acceptance that change and growth are often painful, as well as a broad spread willingness to endure the pain.

The characteristics of our schools and their student populations are a moving target. It is critically important that professors and teacher candidates spend more time in the field, with model lessons being taught to real children by college professors. Not only would the candidates learn, but the professors would set more realistic expectations for their college students. In addition, solutions for management issues could be fashioned for specific populations on the spot.

Public educators often receive a black eye because they are the screen through which societal problems are viewed. However, it is not the job of public educators to solve societal problems. Nor is it the job of colleges to train them to do so. Rather, it is the job of colleges to prepare their graduates to teach, and no potential employment environment should be overlooked.

Colleges cannot change the fact that students are molded by their home environments, and inner city schools often mirror the home environments of the society they serve. Preparing teachers for what they might face will enable them to enter their

careers with realistic expectations and reduce the possibility of shutdown. These realistic

expectations yield the possibility of deeper teacher commitment, and within this

commitment resides the hope for progress and change.

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