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CAREER TEACHER

Burning Bright Without Burning Out

Posted by [Justin Minkel](#) on Sunday, 02/08/2015

At our district back-to-school meeting, one of the speakers paid teachers a ghastly compliment.

“It is said that teachers are like candles. They consume themselves to give light to others.”

I like the “giving light” bit. The problem is that candles are a

<http://www.teachingquality.org/content/blogs/justin-minkel/burning-bright-without-burning-out>

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I like the giving light bit. The problem is that candles are a nonrenewable resource. Once they're gone, baby, they're gone.

The metaphor is more accurate than the speaker knew. Pick a moment and day at random and ask a teacher how she's feeling. Odds are high that the honest answer will be, "Overwhelmed."

Teacher burnout reflects this reality. [About half of teachers leave the profession within five years, and 10% leave before completing their first year.](#)

How do we burn bright without burning out? How do we put in the diligence, creativity, curiosity, and time that teaching demands, while renewing and sustaining ourselves as human beings?

Teachers and former teachers, I'd love to hear your thoughts. For my part, I think the key has to do with the nature of pain.

Two Kinds of Pain

When my wife and I were going through childbirth classes, the instructor said something fascinating.

There are two kinds of pain. The first is objective: the amount of pain your nerve receptors will receive. The second is subjective—the way you experience the pain. The two variables that most impact the experience of pain are

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isolation and lack of control.”

The same thing that many of us love about teaching can contribute to isolation: within those four classroom walls is an entire kingdom of ideas, emotions, personalities, experiences, conflicts, and moments of pure poetry.

That sense of a world contained within itself can be wondrous. But it can also become stifling.

Teachers at [my school](#) have exceptionally high job satisfaction (despite a student population that is 99% poverty, our turnover each year is virtually zero), yet we also work incredibly hard, even by the standards of this demanding profession.

Part of the reason we love our jobs is that we have a culture of collaboration rather than isolation. We observe one another teaching, we support each other, and we innovate together.

To go back to that childbirth class, the “pain” component of teaching (long hours, exhausting work) is inevitable. But camaraderie and autonomy shift the perception of that work load. It’s not a burden imposed from outside and shouldered alone, but work we choose that is shared with talented colleagues.

The second variable—a sense of control—is critical, too. The article [Why Do Teachers Quit?](#) quotes researcher Richard Ingersoll:

“One of the big reasons I quit was sort of intangible, but it’s very real: It’s just a lack of respect. Teachers in schools do not call the shots. They’re told what to do; it’s a very disempowered line of work.”

Bill Ferriter

The Tempered Radical

Tricia Ebner

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I teach in a school that pairs autonomy with accountability, so we have a relatively high degree of control over professional choices. We're responsible for certain outcomes in terms of student learning, but the way we achieve those outcomes is not micro-managed.

Choosing to work hard on behalf of your students is very different from being forced to do a set of tasks in a prescribed way. It's the difference between jumping into a cold river for a bracing swim, and being pushed.

So What?

What matters, of course, is not just teachers' feelings but outcomes for kids. Students benefit from a stable community of professionals working in collaboration to become increasingly effective teachers. Students suffer from high turnover, depleted teachers, and school cultures that stifle professional autonomy and collaboration.

In schools where collaboration and autonomy are the norm, teachers tend to put collaboration and autonomy at the heart of their classrooms. In schools where isolation and top-down mandates are more common, you see more desks in rows and heavy-handed use of the behavior chart.

Teaching is hard. There's no way around that. But the ways in which we collaborate, innovate, and make professional decisions can determine the difference between the teacher who leaves after three years and the teacher who continues teaching for decades, burning brighter every year.

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3 Comments



Scott Louis commented on February 8, 2015 at 6:45pm:

Nail...Head...Hit...

A metaphor's accuracy depends on the recipient, and this one is quite real for me. My walls and I have a unique relationship, they are always there to reflect my lesson's intentions. They understand me... When I struggle, they remind me that I am working towards a personal goal of change.

Unfortunately, the walls are the only consistency I've had in the last two and a half years. Out of 17 years, they only represent a fraction of my experience, but they have been quite painful. I'd like to say humbling, but my pain receptors haven't let me consider that possibility yet. The year before this began, I earned the Distinguished Teacher Award in a district that decided to go to a Pay by Performance evaluation system. Distinguished Teacher status is very difficult to achieve because of all the requirements it takes to achieve it. The first is a qualifying teacher rating, and the second is a qualifying student performance level. Once I qualified, there was the leadership roles I was voluntold for, and the lifelong learning mandates, the three 3-page essay requirements I was coached through, draft after draft; and the three district level unannounced evaluations that I needed to be ready for on any given day during a

month long window, where I had to prepare high quality lesson plans full of multiple response formative assessments, checks for understandings, and a summarizing DOL(demonstration of learning) to close each lesson. Did I mention that every lesson had to be a detailed PowerPoint presentation that included all required elements stated on a page and a half reference sheet representing a department agreed (but not collaborated) list of said requirements. Although I didn't always have to create the lesson (My math team of 3 took turns), I was always having to work on a future lesson. I have become quite the Power Point animator guru. I have created some very cool PPs...

When it was over, I was at the limits of my professional and personal breaking points. It hurt, but, I was able to recover. Earning the distinguished award represented all that hard work's efforts, and I would receive an \$8000 raise in the coming school year. I felt empowered by my accomplishment, and the administrations seemingly strong support for me.

I had taught summer school every year, and again chose to teach it, but something happened...well, two main things: The first thing was that I had discovered a common core curriculum that I thought was great, and I decided I was going to keep using it to supplement the summer curriculum. The second thing that happened was I started to struggle, and the administration's support was different. I wasn't being coached; I wasn't even contacted when students began to complain. There were some inquiries, but real communication stopped. The pain was overwhelming...

That was just the beginning

That was just the beginning...

I'm not allowed to talk about the rest...

I'm now teaching at a new school. And I am still struggling a bit. My walls and I know why, and we know that these struggles will get better because we have concluded that the struggles represent change. And I'm going to face the struggles as long as I am given the opportunity...or if the limit isn't crossed. The walls and I also know that I don't have complete control over this. There is only so much a teacher can take...

[REPLY](#)



Alysia Krafel commented on February 8, 2015 at 10:51pm:

Stories like Yours

It is stories like yours, heard so many, many times, of casual disrespect of teachers so commonly embedded in the traditional structure of schools, that prompted my husband Paul and I to start a teacher powered school. We wanted to have a school where teachers are respected and well treated so they can do the same for their students. The type of deadening, overmanagement that you describe is truly tragic. So many gifted, excited teachers get chewed up by this machine.

[REPLY](#)





Jason Parker commented on February 9, 2015 at 11:55am:

The thing about candles

One of my favorite evenings every year occurs on Christmas Eve. Our Quaker Meeting has a special service. Everyone who walks in the door for the Meeting for Worship brings a candle. In the center of the room, we place a table. We start the service at dusk.

Each family or each individual is encouraged to share their reflections on the year past, their joys and sorrows, their hope for the holidays, and for the new year. As they share their message, they light their candle and place it on the table.

The thing about these candles - and all candles - are that they provide light. But one burning candle placed next to another burning candle does not diminish the light from the first. It amplifies it.

As the candles are lit, and as they work in proximity to one another, sharing the table, the room, and the spark, the room grows bright and members of the Meeting can see everyone else gathered in the room.

The light that one teacher can generate does not - and should not - diminish the light that an additional teacher can generate. It will amplify it. Nevertheless, our systems and structures must enable the time, space, and support to collaborate, to work together, to bring amplified light into not just one classroom, but an entire school. Not just one school, but an entire district. When we can create school designs where amplification of teacher expertise occurs naturally, students benefit, teachers benefit, and the

community benefits.

Let's share the light.

[REPLY](#)

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@JustinMinkel

explores the implications of this comparison - ow.ly/IKO4A

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by **Justin Minkel**

When my wife and I were going through childbirth classes, the instructor said something fascinating.

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by **CTQ News**

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way you *experience* the pain. The two variables that most impact the experience of pain are isolation and lack of control.”

There’s a powerful lesson for teachers in those words.

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