

CRISIS **IN EDUCATION**

**Stress and
Burnout in the
American Teacher**

Barry A. Farber

CRISIS IN EDUCATION

Stress and Burnout in the American Teacher



Jossey-Bass Publishers

San Francisco • Oxford • 1991

CRISIS IN EDUCATION

Stress and Burnout in the American Teacher

by Barry A. Farber

Copyright © 1991 by: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers
350 Sansome Street
San Francisco, California 94104

&

Jossey-Bass Limited
Headington Hill Hall
Oxford OX3 0BW

Copyright under International, Pan American, and Universal Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form—except for brief quotation (not to exceed 1,000 words) in a review or professional work—without permission in writing from the publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Farber, Barry A. (Barry Alan), date.

Crisis in education : stress and burnout in the American teacher /

Barry A. Farber, with contributions by Leonard D. Wechsler.

p. cm.—(The Jossey-Bass education series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55542-271-3

1. Teachers—United States—Job Stress. 2. Burn out (Psychology).
3. Education—Social aspects—United States. I. Wechsler, Leonard David. II. Title. III. Series.

LB2840.2.F37 1991

371.1'001'9—dc20

90-19770

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

JACKET DESIGN BY VARGAS/WILLIAMS/DESIGN

FIRST EDITION

Code 9134

A joint publication in
The Jossey-Bass Education Series
and
The Jossey-Bass
Social and Behavioral Science Series

Foreword

Over the past two decades, *burnout* has become a catchall term, pervasively used but ill defined (along with *low morale*), to describe one of the most common and serious afflictions of our nation's teachers. The term has been used to describe and often excuse the inability of many teachers to persist effectively in the classroom.

In assessing the meaning and significance of the burnout phenomenon, we must remember that the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s were times of great disappointment and discouragement in American education, times in which much of the blame for the perceived failings of education fell upon teachers. These were times when the turmoil of desegregation and busing produced new political conflicts around the schools; times in which a youth culture flourished and then faded; times in which new curricula, notions of open education, and other aspects of the romantic movement in American education sprang up and withered. The period witnessed times of serious financial hardship for the schools and diminishing financial rewards for teachers, times when collective bargaining agreements began to govern the working arrangements of the majority of American teachers. Many of the reform movements launched in the 1970s concentrated on minimizing or avoiding the perceived shortcomings of teachers rather than building on their strengths. Thus we had a quest for teacher-proof curricula, then for alternative schools. It is little wonder that teachers, faced with this onslaught of misfortune and blame, were increasingly demoralized and that teacher burnout became a common phenomenon. The entire profession of teaching was in trouble.

Given this background, one surprising aspect of the educational reforms proposed in the 1980s was the rediscovery of the teacher. While the many national reports and proposals for reforms contained criticism of the teaching profession, they nevertheless stated that teachers were an essential part of the solution, assuming that teachers could improve their performance and become more effective. Indeed, they came to the important, if obvious, realization that no improvement in educational outcomes of students was likely without more effective teaching. Thus, during the 1980s many of the dismal trends of the 1970s began to be reversed. Teachers' pay began to rise as did regard for teaching by both college students and those seeking to escape from other professions. A series of initiatives designed to enhance the status and performance of teachers emerged: proposals for merit and incentive pay, for master teachers and mentor teachers, for career ladders, and, more recently, for the development of new roles for teachers in decision making and for the restructuring of schools to accommodate and encourage these new roles. Withal, though, teacher burnout persists, accompanied by a hefty skepticism among teachers about the proposed reforms and their purported intent to improve the conditions of teaching.

As we come to recognize this dilemma of reform, Barry A. Farber's research tells us a vital tale. Until now, teacher burnout has been a widely misunderstood concept, with little specific explanation as to its occurrence, its variations and symptoms, or its solutions. It has connoted merely a generalized state of hopelessness and exhaustion, impossible for policy makers and managers to deal with in any specific way. Barry A. Farber remedies all of this. He carefully lays out the etiology of teacher stress and burnout, helping us to understand the varieties of burnout arising in different circumstances and requiring different responses. He reviews the context and history of the development of burnout with great thoroughness and care, enabling us to understand how it is the consequence of *many of the rapid social and educational changes of the 1960s and of the subsequent attacks upon teachers and the schools, of low pay, urban social disintegration, lack of parental-community support, and student apathy.* Farber discusses the alternatives available to combat teacher burnout, noting perceptively that the initial educa-

tional reform proposals of the mid-1980s, in imposing higher standards and requirements, did nothing directly to address the issue and had the potential, in fact, to make it worse. He notes too that individual coping strategies may ameliorate the local classroom conditions but can never solve the problems that lead many teachers to the burned-out state. He concludes that the best hope lies in the kinds of school-level and school-based improvement strategies that are now surging forward under the heading of “restructuring.” In this, he adds a significant and clinically based psychological perspective to the various proposals for this sort of reform.

Burnout, with all its symptoms, is itself symptomatic of the seemingly intractable problems present in many American schools. No one should think that it will be quickly or easily diminished or erased, since it is the consequence of each burned-out teacher’s profound and complicated psychological conclusion that his or her work is not efficacious. As such, burnout will itself be a substantial obstacle to educational reform and improvement, at least for several years. The situation calls for careful diagnosis and treatment for all affected individuals and groups in the schools. Nostrums—whether organizational, rhetorical, or therapeutic—will not suffice.

January 1991

P. Michael Timpane
President
Teachers College
Columbia University

Preface

Background of the Book

When I was training to be a public school teacher in the late 1960s, I was assigned books in teacher education courses that were strongly critical of teachers (for example, those by Holt and Kozol). When I became a teacher, community groups and the popular press were strongly critical of teachers. When I left teaching, in the mid-1970s, university experts were busy writing curricula, textbooks, and subject guides that, while not explicitly critical of teachers, clearly assumed that most teachers could not think for themselves and would be entirely ineffective if left to their own devices. In 1979, when I became a psychology professor in a college of education, the most pressing issue was the decline in quality of American teachers. This book grew out of a feeling that teachers have been maligned in this country for too long. From this perspective, the emergence of teacher burnout as a significant social and educational phenomenon is evidence not of the failings of teachers but rather of how difficult teaching has become in this day and age.

I started my own teaching career in a New York City public school in 1968, where I spent four often difficult, often rewarding years teaching both special and regular education. I spent my last year as a public school teacher in an elementary school in an affluent suburban community. Over these years, I became somewhat accustomed to many inexplicable bureaucratic practices and became better at handling many student problems as well. But what I could never get used to, nor entirely understand, was the seemingly con-

stant belittling of teachers by parents, media, school personnel, community leaders, and the public at large. Along with many of my colleagues, I grew increasingly bitter over the widespread accusations that teachers were racist, incompetent, dull, and oppressive. Most teachers I knew were, in fact, kind, decent, and personally committed to helping children, especially the underprivileged. Perhaps this now smacks of naivete, but it was a sincere belief in the late 1960s when idealistic feelings made teachers of many of us.

Many of us struggled even as we made our curriculum more “relevant,” “opened up” our classrooms, established precise goals, systematically rewarded small achievements, and fed breakfast to our needy students. Not achieving the successes we strove for was difficult to accept. Equally difficult was the attitude we felt from a public that seemed intent on criticizing rather than understanding, on condemning failures rather than acknowledging hard work or success. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many teachers were beginning to feel exasperated by the criticism, the lack of public support, the bureaucratic interference, the increasingly violent nature of schools, and the pressures placed on them to educate all children equally effectively.

Many teachers, myself included, began feeling that the satisfactions of teaching were no longer commensurate with the stresses. Some left the field, and others continued to teach without the enthusiasm or commitment they had once had. And many began to identify with a concept that seemed to reflect many of their feelings about work: *teacher burnout*. “I’ve had it, I don’t care, and I have very little left to give” are the feelings underscoring teacher burnout—a phenomenon that reflects both the difficulty of the work and the lack of available support and rewards to offset the stresses.

Teacher burnout is not an excuse that poor teachers invoke. It is a work-related disorder to which even the best educators sometimes succumb when faced with the nature and circumstances of teaching. Moreover, teacher burnout is not just a cluster of stress-related symptoms; it is a disorder that must be placed in a certain historical and social context. The perspective taken here is that teachers, traditionally a much criticized group, have been especially maligned since the mid-1960s and that it is far from coincidence that

the “discovery” and frequency of teacher burnout have occurred in an era that has been particularly critical of teachers’ efforts.

Overview of the Contents

There are several other books and a plethora of articles on teacher stress and burnout, but my sense is that this book differs from the vast majority of such literature in several essential ways. First, as noted above, it provides a social and historical context for the emergence of teacher burnout within the past two to three decades. That is, it goes beyond a mere enumeration of the immediate causes and symptoms of this problem to a consideration of those factors—including teacher strikes, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and changing demographic patterns—that have provided a fertile soil for its emergence. Second, it provides multiple perspectives on the issues of teacher stress and burnout, at times employing the language and viewpoint of educators, at times those of sociologists, and at times those of psychologists. Third, it offers the voices of teachers themselves, talking not only about their classroom experiences but about the personal consequences of their work as well. Fourth, this book identifies several subtypes of burnout, providing a degree of specificity to this phenomenon that has heretofore been absent. Fifth, it provides no faddish answers as to how to deal with this disorder, no package of solutions; its recommendations are more cautious and its forecast for change more respectful of the seriousness of the problem. Sixth, and perhaps most important, this book is a rarity in the literature of either education or psychology—it is supportive of teachers.

Chapter One reviews the history of the burnout concept and the various ways that it has been defined. A fictional teacher manifests the varied symptoms of burnout as described by several prominent theorists. Chapter Two looks at the prevalence of burnout in different groups of teachers and examines its sources at both the individual and organizational levels. In Chapter Three, the focus is on symptomatology and the three different types of burnout that seem to occur. Chapter Four addresses the teacher shortage, especially these questions of concern: Who teaches and why? Who leaves and why? Three profiles of former teachers are offered. In Chapter

Five, the origins of modern-day teacher burnout are traced to several events and trends in the 1960s, including the general iconoclastic tone of that era, the unintended and unforeseen consequences of the civil rights movement, and the infusion of male teachers into education as a consequence of the Vietnam War. Chapter Six reviews some of the antiteacher books published in the 1960s and 1970s; it also looks at the way television and the movies have portrayed teachers over the years. Chapter Seven focuses on the ways teachers have historically been treated in this country; in addition, it discusses three prime aspects of the general lack of respect accorded contemporary teachers: public opinion, low salaries, and day-to-day treatment by parents, students, and administrators. Chapter Eight takes a close look at the particular problems of teachers in urban schools and their special vulnerability to the phenomena of stress and burnout, examining the issues and problems through a discussion of a “typical day” in an urban school. Chapter Nine addresses the specific problems and vulnerabilities of suburban, rural, private, and special education teachers. Finally, Chapter Ten is a wide-ranging discussion and critique of the solutions that have been offered for teacher stress and burnout at the individual, school, and societal levels.

Crisis in Education is based on empirical data that I and other researchers in the field have collected over the years. It is also based on critical reviews of the growing literature in the field and on the impressions gleaned from the approximately one hundred interviews that Leonard Wechsler and I have conducted with teachers over the past five years. This book is intended for teacher education courses, professional educators, and that growing segment of the public interested in education and the plight of teachers.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank several individuals for the enormous help they have provided me on this project. I'm grateful to Leonard Wechsler, whose experience as both a teacher and an administrator has provided me with a number of insights about the ways schools function. His interviews with teachers greatly complemented my

own; our regularly scheduled discussions about the issues contained in this book were both informative and motivating. He provided research help, comments on unfinished drafts, and the case studies of different teachers used throughout this book. Moreover, he essentially coauthored Chapters Six, Eight, and Nine.

I'd also like to thank several very talented graduate students: Melissa Kretch and Susan Schachner for their research assistance, and Laura Markham for her support, advice, political insights, editing abilities, and all-around helpfulness. Laura, who will surely one day write her own books, was an invaluable resource and someone whom I relied upon as a colleague. I'd like to thank Seymour Sarason, who taught me how to think about schools and the problems of education; there is no better source. I also benefited greatly from talks with Howard and Judi Aronson, April Farber, Isaac Friedman, and Stephen Suffit. I'm grateful also to the many teachers who so graciously contributed their time and views to this project, and to the Spencer Foundation, whose support for my early empirical studies provided the foundation for this book.

A special thanks goes to Gracia Alkema, former editor at Jossey-Bass, for her extraordinary patience and support. She has become a friend as well as a colleague. Thanks also to Mary White, her editorial assistant, who provided friendly pushes toward completion, and to Lesley Iura, Jossey-Bass education editor, for her vital help in the final stages of the publication process.

For their thoughtful and detailed comments on early drafts of the manuscript, I'd like to thank three anonymous reviewers as well as one not-so-anonymous reviewer—Bob Ancowitz, a fine and not-burned-out teacher at Central School in Larchmont, New York.

Finally, to my family: Thank you, dear April, Alissa, and David, for your encouragement and love. I promise to wait a while before the next book.

New York, New York
January 1991

Barry A. Farber

The Author

BARRY A. FARBER is director of the clinical psychology program and associate professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He received his B.A. degree (1968) from Queens College (City University of New York) in psychology, his M.A. degree (1970) from Teachers College in developmental psychology, and his Ph.D. degree (1978) from Yale University in clinical-community psychology.

Farber taught in the New York City public school system from 1968 to 1972 and in the Edgemont School System (Westchester, New York) in the 1972-73 school year. He has published a number of articles in professional journals on teacher burnout, on psychotherapist burnout, and on the ways in which the practice of psychotherapy affects psychotherapists. He maintains a part-time private practice in Manhattan and Westchester. His previous book, published in 1983, was *Stress and Burnout in the Human Service Professions*. His current research focuses on how patients construct images of their psychotherapists.

Contents

Foreword	xi
<i>by P. Michael Timpane</i>	
Preface	xv
The Author	xxi
1. What Is Burnout?	1
2. Sources of Teacher Stress and Burnout	37
3. Symptoms and Types: Worn-Out, Frenetic, and Underchallenged Teachers	72
4. Idealism and Disillusionment: Who Teaches, Who Leaves, and Why	98
5. Blaming the Teacher: The Troubling Legacy of the Sixties	126
6. Through the Looking Glass: How the Media Reflect, Distort, and Influence Our View of Teaching	155
<i>with Leonard D. Wechsler</i>	
7. The Erosion of Public Respect for Teachers: A Historical View	189

8.	Teaching in an Urban Setting: Stories from the Classroom <i>with Leonard D. Wechsler</i>	223
9.	Teaching in Other Contexts: Suburban, Rural, Private, and Special Education Classrooms <i>with Leonard D. Wechsler</i>	246
10.	Dealing with Teacher Burnout: Some Solutions and Their Problems	280
	References	315
	Name Index	339
	Subject Index	345

1

What Is Burnout?

IN RECENT YEARS, THERE HAS BEEN A SHARP RESURGENCE OF interest in our nation's public schools. According to a multitude of local and national reports, our schools are so replete with problems that education has come to a standstill for many children. Only 40 percent of this nation's seventeen-year-olds can comprehend, summarize, and explain what they have read; no significant progress has been made since 1971 in raising the reading levels of our students. High school seniors in this country have lower mean scores on a test of mathematical abilities than those of fifteen other industrialized nations. The high school dropout rate is estimated to be about 30 percent, with about one million students dropping out annually. *A Nation at Risk*, the report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) warned us pointedly about the "rising tide of mediocrity" in American schools. And John Goodlad (1984) asserted that the problems of American schools are of such crippling proportions that "it is possible that our entire public education system is nearing collapse" (p. 1).

But it has also become apparent to many who have studied the educational system in this country that teachers, as well as students, are victimized by problem-laden schools. A substantial proportion (26 percent) of all current teachers are seriously considering giving up teaching as a career within the next five years (Harris

and Associates, 1988). Attrition rates for new teachers during their first five years on the job average between 40 and 50 percent (Olson and Rodman, 1988). And nearly half the teachers in this country (49 percent) believe that morale within the profession has substantially declined since the school reform movement began in 1983 (Boyer, 1988). Too many teachers have become stressed or burned out. The primary aim of this book is to examine the nature of these phenomena in teachers—to investigate the reasons and ways that teachers are dysfunctionally affected by their work and to examine the solutions that may be available.

The impact of teacher stress and burnout on our educational system is easily imagined and clearly serious. Current teachers will pursue alternative sources of satisfaction and continue to seek career changes. New teachers will be difficult to recruit and retain, even with more attractive salaries. However, the most critical impact of teacher stress and burnout will surely be on the teaching process itself, particularly in urban schools with children who can ill afford a further deterioration of an already troubled educational system and who are unable to gain access to private schooling.

Although teacher stress has certainly existed as long as teaching, recognition of a serious morale problem among teachers in this country has become more explicit in the last twenty to thirty years. A series of autobiographical accounts of disillusioned teachers in the late 1960s first sparked public interest in teaching and the problems of teachers. Several years later a resurgence of interest in these issues was generated by the introduction of an evocative new term to describe a particular type of demoralization occurring among human service workers: *burnout*. As conceived originally by Freudenberg, burnout occurs in highly motivated workers who react to stress by overworking until they collapse. Subsequent definitions have attributed burnout to the discrepancy between a worker's input (what he or she invests in the job) and output (feelings of satisfaction and gratification derived from the work); a worker's perception of a mismatch between the two results in feelings of detachment, emotional exhaustion, and a loss of concern for those with whom one works. But regardless of the exact meaning of the term—and there is no consensus as to its definition—teachers quickly became the professional group most identified with this phenomenon. As