

**The Authentic Teachers: The Feelings that Novice and Veteran Teachers
Experience in our Schools**

Esther Berkson

Abstract

Numerous years in several New York City elementary and nursery schools resulted in this article, which investigates teachers' emotions, specifically vulnerable feelings, related to their work. Often, teachers are quiet about their struggles, not wanting anyone else to know that they struggle, not wanting to expose their vulnerability. However, occasionally teachers open up and reveal that they are often frustrated, and feel isolated and hopeless. The focus of this article is to communicate to teachers, based on the results of this survey with 30 teachers, that they are not alone in their feelings of frustration and vulnerability; that these feelings can change with work experience; and finally, by being aware of and communicating their feelings, the excitement, happiness and frustration that working with children can bring, teachers can provide encouragement, motivation and camaraderie to each other.

Introduction

I just finished my first year of teaching and a tough year it was. Thirteen preschoolers, most of them really nice, four of them...challenging. Allow me to share some “funny”, inconvenient moments that I shared with these four.

Joey, a child who took pleasure in using four year old expletives, would at the most inconvenient moments and several times a day, pull his shirt up to expose his cute little belly. He would announce to all around (as if we could miss this sight), “Look at my belly! Belly!”

Tom, furious that he did not have a job that day, would lay on the floor screaming until his face was purple. “I want a job! I hate this school! I hate this school!”

Sara, a child who does not know the definition of “No”, would march off the rug at circle time and call her friend over to blocks. Apparently, Sara needed help building “the coolest building ever” right then and there. Across the room she would shout, “Come over here Friend! We’re gonna make the coolest building ever!”

Haley, a child who was having trouble making and keeping friends, would take a child safe scissors and snip her colleagues’ hair. When I had to revoke Haley’s scissor privileges, she threatened, “I am going to tell my Mommy on you!” Incidents like these made me leave the building with my head hanging low. When a colleague passed me by and asked how I was doing, I of course picked my head up, plastered a fake smile on my face and said “Great! Just Great!” I would get into my car and drive home in silence – no music, windows shut – replaying the horrible events of the day in my mind. “Why”, I would reprimand myself, “are you doing this? You could work for the phone company,

stress less and get paid more.” I felt that the behaviors that I was seeing were my fault. But truthfully, I was not completely sure of that.

You see, I knew that the techniques that I was using in my classroom were appropriate. My classroom functioned very well. I had routines that the children knew and followed. Parents and supervisors would tell me that the children loved school and were learning so much. Everyone was pleased except for me. Couldn't they see what was really going on? Those “funny”, inconvenient moments were glaring and colossal events in *my* eyes. Those were the moments that were most painful to me. What was going on inside of me? Why did I feel so tormented? Was I the only one who felt this way?

With some tactful, casual questioning, I found that usually the teachers spoke of their triumphs. “Oh my”, I thought to myself as I listened to their golden moments, “I *am* the only one struggling!” However, occasionally these teachers *do* open up and reveal their frustration. They were sometimes as frustrated as I. Relief passed over me. I was not alone. Perhaps, I thought, it could help all teachers to know that they were not alone in their feelings of frustration and vulnerability.

Teacher Vulnerability

There is a reason that we go into the field of education. Teaching is one of the few professions which allows us to infuse our work with our values and insights. The phone company does not allow for this. Quality teaching, or authentic teaching, “comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. If we want to teach well, we must learn more about the human dimensions of our craft...” (Palmer, 1997). The most dangerous teachers are the teachers who are objective – that is they teach from an emotionally safe

distance - when they teach. These teachers are so frightened to feel vulnerable that they teach from an objective, emotionally safe distance. This type of teaching is dangerous because it lacks passion, and therefore leaves students feeling uninspired and unmotivated. For those of us who want and need to work in a field where our thoughts and beliefs can change someone's life, teaching is the perfect place.

When we infuse our passions into our classrooms we are exposing to children, to parents, to colleagues and to supervisors, something of our inner selves, who we are personally. In many circumstances we do not expose much of our inner selves to anyone. Yet we walk courageously into the classroom, and there we are, feeling naked, uncovered, exposed in front of all of these people. And yet we go on. And then, at the most "inconvenient moment" from the corner of our ear we hear "Look! Look at my belly!" No. No. Not now when my supervisor is here... with parents! I feel so naked! How can I go on?

Sylvia Ashton Warner sums up the vulnerability of even experienced teachers as she explains in *Teacher*, "If only I had the confidence of being a good teacher. But I'm not even an appalling teacher. I don't even claim to be a good teacher at all. I'm just a nit wit somehow let loose among children (Ashton – Warner, 1963)."

In a study done by Friedman (2000), new teachers revealed sharp declines in self-efficacy (belief in one's ability) as they found that they could not live up to their ideal performances. In another study, Brouwers & Tomic (2000) analyzed the relationships between self-efficacy and burnout in 243 secondary school teachers. It was found that low self-efficacy had an effect on emotional exhaustion.

In addition, “teaching *is* uncertainty” (Charney, 1998). Remember, it is hard to get this art just right. Even the most talented, skilled teachers have children in their class that fail and do not reach the teachers expectations. That is not our humiliation; that is our job. Facing these realities honestly and head on helps us to go on.

Surveying the Teachers

I designed a survey that attempts to ascertain the feelings that teachers experience. My survey also asked the teachers how many years they have worked in the field, the type of facility they work in and how they relax. The source of the subjects were 30 teachers from childcare centers, nursery schools and public elementary schools. These teachers answered questions in an anonymous manner so that they would be able to answer honestly. In addition, this method allowed the researcher to view the answers objectively. It was important to make a distinction between novice and veteran teachers because I wanted to find out if there was a clear rule. In other words, were veteran teachers always confident, happy and stress free? Were novice teachers always stressed anxious and insecure? Could it be that both groups of teachers experienced a little of all feelings? Therefore, teachers questioned in this field for five years or less were called novice teachers, teachers questioned in this field for more than five years were called veteran teachers. Before beginning the questionnaire, consent forms were distributed to everyone who took part. All of the subjects were English speakers; the questionnaire was given in English only. It is with this survey that I hoped to learn about the feelings teachers experience and the causes for these feelings.

The Novice Teachers' Responses

1. How much longer do you intend to stay in this field? Comment.

In response to this question, 90% of novice teachers saw themselves staying another five years. The remaining 10% felt that they would stay in the field for ten more years.

2. What holds you here?

The survey revealed many answers to this question. Among these answers, 45% of novice teachers cited liking children and the way they think, 30% said they were staying because the school day schedule was unavailable in any other field, 10% said that they loved being part of a team and 15% said that they stayed for the decent pay and benefits.

3. What drives you away?

When novice teachers were asked what pushes them away from working with teachers, 70% said that the salary was not high enough, 20% said stress related to the amount of work demanded of them and 10% said that their employer did not value their talents and efforts.

4. What is the most information that you can share with someone thinking of working in the field of early childhood education?

In response to this question, 60% said that it was important to let others considering working in early childhood know that this job is harder than they ever expected, 10% answered that the pay never seems to be enough, 25% said that

administrators never seem to know how encourage their efforts and 5% said that no other profession offers the feelings of pride like this job.

5. What methods have you found that offer stress relief?

Interestingly, 60% of the subjects named sleep as the best stress reducer that they have discovered, 30% named exercise and 10% said that they have no time for stress relief.

6. Was there a time that you felt very confident in your teaching skills? Please describe.

Here, 60% of novice teachers answered that they had experienced confidence and that it took a lot of work to get to that point. They also said that the confidence comes and goes. 40% of novice teachers said that they rarely felt confident.

They described their experience as a daily struggle with insecurities.

7. What are the areas that you struggle with as a professional at work?

This question brought up an array of answers. The responses include children's situations that you can do nothing about, misguided priorities on the part of administration, cleanliness of the center and school, poverty levels of the families and the struggle to summon the courage to express oneself in the classroom.

8. What is the biggest classroom stressor? Describe.

When asked to name the biggest classroom stressor), 90% of the subjects named children who misbehave as their biggest stressor. Although these teachers approach discipline carefully, tremendous frustration is experienced when these methods do not always work. Too much time was spent dealing with two or three children. Subjects described communication among teachers and assistants as a

very delicate process, if not done well the atmosphere in the classroom is miserable therefore, 5% said dealing with assistant teachers was their biggest stressor, and 5% said paper work and not enough time to complete it was their biggest stressor.

In the second part of my questionnaire, I asked novice teachers to rate their feeling on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being rarely felt and 10 being felt very often. I also asked teachers to express why they felt that way if they wished. It was found that jealousy was felt very rarely by all who answered. When jealousy was experienced it was in relation to lack of patience with the professional growth process. Resentment was experienced moderately and connected to not being able to express oneself in their classroom. Anxiety was felt often among novice teachers questioned. Anxiety, was linked to being unsure of oneself in front of parents, administrators and staff. Among novice teachers the feeling of fulfillment, excitement and pride was often moderate to high. Excitement, one subject noted, was experienced when students have fun, when it is evident that they are learning and when they express their understanding and respect for each other. Paranoia ranged from moderate levels (60%) to high levels (40%). Paranoia, one subject responded, was experienced when he was being evaluated and observed. Joy was experienced often among all novice teachers. One teacher responded that joy was felt when the students are happy to see him, when he has conversations with his students and when his students are having fun. 100% of all questioned said that they felt inadequate often. One teacher noted that lack of positive feedback was a large part of the reason for her feelings. Finally, 100% of

the teachers said that they were highly motivated. Many teachers noted that the more confident that they became, the more motivated they were to work.

The Veteran Teachers' Responses

1. How much longer do you intend to stay in this field? Comment.

80% of the respondents said that they would stay in the field for as long as they possibly could and 20 % said that they had to get out soon. One subject responded that they had enough and they had to get out.

2. What holds you here?

Here, 75% of those asked said that they would stay because they loved the children, 20% answered that time and money had been invested in this career so they were staying, and 5% said that their school was like a second family.

3. What drives you away?

60% of those questioned said that they could not imagine anything that would drive them away, while 40% said stress and age.

4. What is the most information that you can share with someone thinking of working in the field of early childhood education?

Here, the answers varied greatly. While 30% shared that teaching was unbelievably rewarding, 20% felt that the schedule was a great for an adult raising children, and 50% warned that this was a career that demanded physically and emotionally.

5. What methods have you found that offer stress relief?

Interestingly, 90% of those that answered said that spending time with family was a great stress reducer, 5% said that a hobby was helpful and 5% said that exercise was their solution to stress.

6. Was there a time that you felt very confident in your teaching skills? Please describe.

100% of the respondents said that they have felt confident in their work at most Times.

7. What are the areas that you struggle with as a professional at work?

As a professional at work 60% of those questioned said that parents often caused their struggles, 20% said that time demands were taxing, 10% finding the energy to keep up with the physical demands of the job was a struggle, and 10% claimed that children who are challenging can be their biggest struggle.

8. What is the biggest classroom stressor? Describe.

75% of the veteran teachers questioned said that lack of resources was their biggest stressor. It seems that veteran have seen a decrease in the amount of supplies that schools give to children for classroom use. Like novice teachers, 25% said that it was difficult to help children with challenging behavior. Some commented that they have seen a great rise in the number of troubled children coming into their classrooms.

In the second part of my questionnaire, I asked veteran teachers to rate their feelings on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being rarely felt and 10 being felt very often. I also asked teachers to express why they felt that way if they wished. It was found

that jealousy was felt very rarely by all who answered. Resentment was experienced moderately to often and connected to an abundant amount of unnecessary paperwork. Low levels of anxiety were felt among veteran teachers and these feelings were most often connected to supervisory observations. Among veteran teachers, the feelings of excitement and pride were moderate to high. Excitement, one veteran teacher noted, was experienced when she saw the emotional growth of her children over ten months. Feelings of paranoia were reported low among veteran teachers. When asked to comment one veteran teacher responded, "I am who I am. Take it or leave it. I love my job. I do it well." Joy was experienced often among veteran teachers. One teacher commented that her favorite event of the school year is Winter Celebration. "On this day," she noted, "all of my families come in to my classroom feeling grateful and excited about the holiday season." Another teacher noted that "nothing beats having a student come back into my classroom fifteen years later – with a beard, a wife and a baby!" Veteran teachers felt inadequate rarely but frequent verbal communication with supervisors was helpful in eliminating feelings of inadequacy.

Summary of Teachers' Responses

It seems that teachers do not experience jealousy very often. Similar to novice teachers, veteran teachers said that resentment was experienced moderately. Interestingly, veteran teachers and novice teachers claimed the administration was the cause of their resentment. For example, lack of organization in the school as a whole, an abundant amount of unnecessary paper work and lack of flexibility that administration

grants. Novice teachers seem to feel anxious much more than veteran teachers. However, being observed is the cause for anxious feelings in all teachers questioned. All teachers questioned seemed to feel fulfilled, excited and proud when contemplating their work. Excitement, one subject noted, was experienced when students listen, cooperate, and show growth in social skills. Paranoia was not experienced often by veteran teachers because, most commented, they were self confidence was firm. It seems that novice teachers are still trying to find their professional selves and this process leaves them feeling paranoid, vulnerable and exposed. Joy was experienced often among almost all teachers questioned. Many of the teachers noted that being loved by students and their families brought much joy but others said that it was difficult to find joy in their work anymore due to bureaucracy. Only 10% of all veteran teachers questioned said that they felt inadequate often. Parent harassment or lack of feedback from their administrator caused many teachers, novice and veteran, to doubt themselves and feel inadequate. Finally, 75% of the teachers said that they were highly motivated, 25% were moderately motivated. Many veteran and novice teachers believed that administrators that had poor leadership skills and administrators that were not knowledgeable in the field of early childhood, were very disappointing and not motivational.

Conclusion

My query into feelings that teachers experience proved to be very informative. The surveys revealed a general pattern. There are similar feelings between novice and veteran teachers and there are also differences. I learned that newer teachers will feel inadequate often but I have also discovered that there were less feelings of inadequacy the longer teachers “hung in there”. It appears that teachers who have made it through

the tough times and spent more than ten years in the field tend to look forward to many more years to come. It is also important to note that the majority of the teachers who have stayed the longest, are still motivated. Perhaps this means that it is hard to extinguish a true passion for working with young children. Novice and veteran teachers have a lot to talk about. Veteran teachers have so much to teach the younger professionals and younger professionals have fervent mentors to show them the way. Novice teachers can take heart, with time those feelings of vulnerability and insecurity will slowly diminish. However, all teachers have their “funny”, inconvenient moments – no matter how long they have been in the game.

Perhaps the most important thing that this survey accomplished is the revelation that teachers are doing the best they can. They are not always perfect, confident and joyful. Ruth Sidney Charney tells us that to be a good teacher we have got to know ourselves and all of what we are feeling. Every day will not be joyful, some days will be tough. But, she reminds us, if we are patient and most importantly honest with ourselves, our passion will bring us back to our work.

By the way, I’ll be honest, I am not a first year teacher. I have been teaching for thirteen years. Exposing that to you, my reader, leaves me feeling quite vulnerable! Oh well.

Biography and References

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