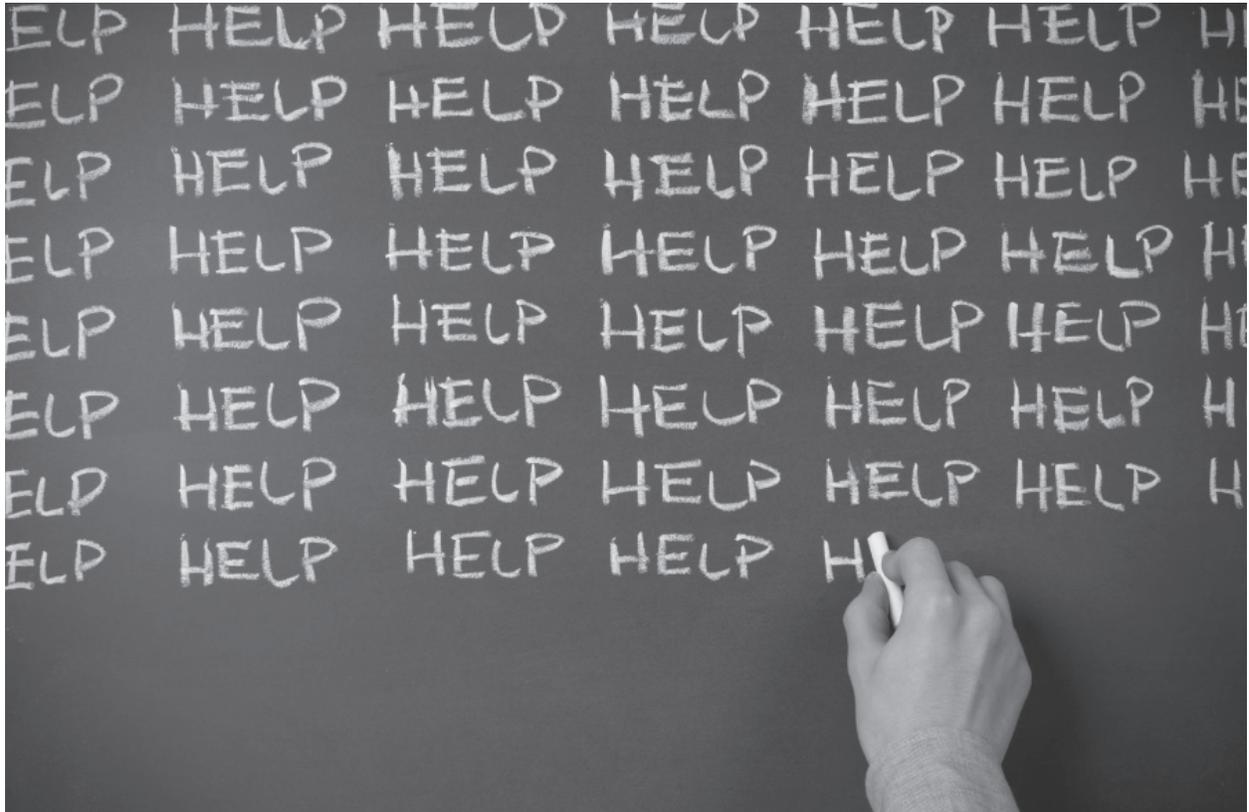


Igniting Teaching

BY ANDY HARGREAVES



The late Seymour Sarason (1982), a living antithesis of burnout when still writing in his 90s, drew on the work of Cherniss (1980) to describe burnout as “a change in attitude and behavior in response to a demanding, frustrating, unrewarding work experience.” The dictionary defines “to burn out” as “to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources.” Among human service professionals, Sarason says, burnout has become associated with “negative changes in work-related attitudes and behavior in response to job stress.” One of the major effects is “loss of concern for the client and a tendency to treat clients in a detached, mechanical fashion.” Burnout is not an attritional process of aging, but an emotional process of being overloaded and undervalued.

The people most prone to burnout are not those who are the least committed. You can't burn out if you've never been alight. The ones who burn out are often those who care the greatest, give the most. When you've too many people to see, you can go home feeling you've never seen enough of any of them. When you're deluged by paper, it's hard to be devoted to all your people. When you keep the candle burning at one end, it's desperately hard to keep it flickering brightly at the other, for every student and colleague, all the next day.

Some years ago, I studied how elementary teachers used their time (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). What they repeatedly talked about was their feelings of guilt. They experienced what is called depressive guilt—not the guilt of having a wrongdoing found out, but the guilt that comes from feeling you are hurting those for whom you care by never being able to care enough. An intense orientation to caring for the young and the vulnerable, combined with classroom conditions that restricted resources and created shortages of time, left some of the most dedicated teachers feeling they were always falling short.

This work on guilt led me to make a systematic attempt to investigate the emotions of teaching more generally, the factors that created positive and negative emotion in teachers' work (Hargreaves, 1998). We interviewed 50 elementary and secondary teachers and began to look at what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) termed the emotional labor that is required and performed by those who work in the people professions. Emotional labor, Hochschild said, was the labor involved in having to manage your feelings to meet the expectations of the job, e.g., calmness and kindness in a flight attendant, irritability in a debt collector, and caring in a nurse. Even when clients were difficult and working conditions were poor, individuals in the people professions had to engage in a kind of acting, making themselves feel things they didn't initially feel or suppressing the feelings they did feel.

Teachers we interviewed reported many incidents of exercising emotional labor in their work. Having to be enthusiastic with your class when you feel really tired, needing to remain calm with an irate parent, suppressing an urge to criticize a colleague to his face—this was the emotional life that seemed to accompany the job. Some of this emotional labor we found was a labor of love. When the emotional labor helped teachers reach their children, bring lessons alive, reassure parents, and motivate colleagues, it was labor worth expending. This was even more true when work conditions gave teachers the freedom to inspire their students and the time to know them well.

But emotional labor was seen as negative and debilitating when it had to serve other people's imposed purposes and when there was no time to care for people properly. Hochschild (1983) found this to be the case when the flight attendants she studied had their work speeded up, their crew numbers reduced, and their tasks increased in order to cut costs and increase airline efficiency. The flight attendants' response was to work harder and harder until they became exhausted, left the job for something else, or

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persuaded themselves that passengers had changed and were no longer worth caring for, thus managing their own inability to care by diminishing the deservingness of their passengers.

Public school teachers in rundown urban schools respond in the same way. In the United States and Canada, after standardized educational reforms, prescribed programs, over-tested assessment regimes, and

cutbacks in resources began to take a grip on schools, my colleagues and I interviewed well over 200 high school teachers about the effects of this new climate on their work (Hargreaves, 2003). What we found was the following:

- There was less creativity. Teachers described having to “teach to the test instead of being creative,” “feeling forced to leave out interesting exercises,” and being “too busy to try” being creative. In the words of one teacher, “Creativity and enthusiasm have become hopelessness and depression, and a lethargic outlook has evolved.”
- There was demoralization, literally loss of purpose. Teachers had a “feeling of betrayal.” They were “tired of being bashed” by the government. One spoke for many colleagues when he said, “I’m a good teacher. I love teaching and I really enjoy working with teenagers. But right now I am so depressed about the politics surrounding teaching that I sometimes don’t know how I will go on!”
- There was an exodus from the profession. Those who could leave, did. Because of the negative attitude of the government and deteriorating working conditions, teachers had “firmly decided to leave,” would be “leaving the profession as quickly as I can,” and “looked forward to retirement.” Teachers were becoming “very, very burned out.”

How can teachers and schools counter these tendencies toward burnout? They can care less, of course, conserving their energy and diminishing the flame. But in the end, it is Sarason, the community psychologist, who holds the key. If teachers are going to be able to keep on giving, he says, they have to experience more getting. You cannot keep drawing on the well without replenishing the sources of supply.

Paradoxically, a lot of what teachers get in teaching comes back from the very people who are the beneficiaries of their giving—their students. In the most cited book on the work of teaching ever, Lortie (1975) describes what teachers get from their students as the psychic rewards of teaching. Unlike lawyers, teach-

ers did not know whether they had won or lost. Nor could teaching tell them whether their students were cured or not. So teachers' rewards became personal, emotional, or "psychic." But here Lortie offered only faint praise. The rewards supposedly rested on exceptional individual cases of child rescue in the present and deferred praise from students who returned far in the future. What Lortie didn't also acknowledge was the sheer joy teachers experience with whole classes as well as individuals now, and not just in the future.

Every teacher knows this. There is intense joy in teaching when children stumble through their first words for the first time; when a student from a poor family who has struggled desperately hard in class makes the grade to get to college; when a once-bullying child puts his arm around a neighbor whose pet just passed away; and when a new teaching strategy that hasn't quite worked before is successful, or difficulty conveying a point is overcome. Getting positive feedback from the principal, receiving students' praise, seeing their passions ignited and the light bulbs going on—these are the moments when teaching gets under the skin and keeps teachers going even when everything outside the classroom conspires to defeat them.

In teaching, there is only one thing worse than burnout and that's a flame that's never been ignited or that has been deliberately snuffed out. Demeaning teachers, closing their schools, attacking their unions, standardizing their teaching, saying everything is broken, and testing everything else to death will simply return public education to an emotional Stone Age where the fire has still to be lit. This will be the destiny and the legacy of current US policy unless it starts to change fast.

It doesn't have to be this way. In the past few years, I have spent much of my time studying and working not with low-performing systems but high-performing ones. These include high-performing countries on the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests of student achievement, where the US fares so poorly: Finland, Singapore, and Canada (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Shirley & Hargreaves, in press).

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And they include high-performing organizations in business, sports, and education that have outperformed comparable peers and significantly improved on past performance, and often have done this with fewer resources or less support (Hargreaves et al., 2010).

What can we learn from some of these examples of extraordinary success? Take Finland, for example, the highest performer on the international PISA results outside Asia. Finland is right in fashion now among international organizations and countries looking for exemplars of how to succeed in education. In 2007, I led a team that undertook the first external international review of Finland's modern educational system and the reasons for its high performance for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This is what we found out about the country's teachers:

Other nations are experimenting with ways of rewarding differential performance within the established teaching profession. Teaching is already an attractive and desired profession in Finland. It has high status in a learner-centered society, where it contributes to the wider social mission of economic prosperity, cultural creativity, and social justice. In a society with high taxation and relatively modest income differentials, teaching is paid quite satisfactorily. Working conditions and resources are supportive, schools are well equipped, and, like other professionals, teachers enjoy considerable trust and autonomy. Teaching is highly competitive and attracts high-performing secondary school graduates. Professional entry also requires Masters' [sic] degrees. Teacher training blends theoretical and practical components, and continuing professional development is becoming more integrated into the collective life and needs of the school. (Hargreaves, Halász, & Pont, 2008, p. 81)

In Finland, high achievement comes from high autonomy and discretion in the job, collective responsibility for achieving results, and strong trust of everyone who is involved.

It's the same in high-performing organizations, whether they are international auto manufacturers, hockey or soccer teams, or turned-around schools and districts. In our study of organizations that perform beyond expectations, where we undertook 18 detailed case studies, based on interviews with more than 220 members of leadership teams, we discerned 15 factors of high performance far above what might be expected (Hargreaves et al., 2010). Here are just four of them that help produce outstanding performance:

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The Fantastic Dream. Organizations that perform beyond expectations aspire to and articulate an improbable, collectively held fantasy or dream that is bolder and more challenging than a plan or even a vision. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, not a strategic plan or set of key performance indicators. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets that ranked 149th out of 149 school districts in England in 1996 but that now performs consistently above the national average, the collectively held dream (rather than supervisory harangue) that began its turnaround was that poverty would be no excuse for failure. In one small and very deprived English primary school, the dream was simply to hear the sound of children laughing again.

Fundamental Futures. Organizations that perform beyond expectations create their inspiring future by connecting with the fundamental meaning of a classic and honorable past. They often do this through the legacies of long-standing leaders who emerge from within the organization and through the inspiring symbolic narratives of leaders that evoke collective memories of the best of what they have been before. At Rulang Primary School in Singapore, the cutting-edge robotics program of integrated learning with 7-year-olds does not overshadow the school's half-century history, when it was just a few huts in a field, or the community leaders and former principals whose pictures are posted everywhere because they made the school what it is today.

Flair, Flow & Flexibility. Organizations that perform beyond expectations engage a talented team in which risk and creativity are valued and members participate and “play” in interchangeable roles and positions. Teachers in high-performing schools know what it is like to be totally lost in and absorbed by their work. They don't stick to their role or their contract but labor out of love beyond regular hours and interchange roles easily with parent volunteers and community members whenever the circumstances require it. In Ontario, Canada, special education resource teachers and regular classroom teachers take responsibility together for all students who struggle in a class, not just

those who are formally identified. In turnaround reforms being driven by the California Teachers Association, in the lowest performing 488 schools in the state funding often goes directly to the teachers, so it is principals who have to buy into the change their teachers have designed, not vice versa!

CounterFlow. Organizations that perform above expectations are prepared to run against the mainstream and to move ahead not by going with the flow but against or around it. These organizations don't just improve existing practice. They innovate with new practice, when everyone else is retreating to sole concentration on tested basics. In the Canadian province of Alberta, the highest performing English- and French-speaking jurisdiction in the world on the international PISA tests, 90 percent of the schools are engaged in school-designed innovations funded by the Conservative government with 2 percent of the education budget. In this province, which has just announced the end of all standardized testing because of excessive anxiety for students, innovation and inquiry are ingrained into the everyday work of teachers' practice. And in a small primary school in northern England where performance and morale had sunk to desperately low levels, turnaround was achieved not by strictness and standardization but by teaching meditation and philosophy to young students to settle them down and improve their capacity to reason their way through their behavior, and by introducing a thinking skills curriculum that rewarded young students who knew how they learned and knew how to help others learn with a Harry Potter–like wizard learner of the week award (complete with wizard's hat!).

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High-performing organizations don't burn people out and move them on when they are spent. They fire them up with engagement, enthusiasm, and an abiding but not sanctimonious sense of moral purpose and fulfillment. High-performing organizations don't go with the flow; they run against the wind. They motivate people instead of micromanaging them. And they inspire them with a collectively held dream rather than incentivizing them with performance-based pay or intimidating them with force and threats. In other words, high-performing schools, districts, and systems practice the emotional politics of inspiration rather than the emotional tyranny of desperation. This is what our best schools

and best leaders have always done. It is now more than time to make an entire nation of their efforts. The Singaporean education system—the highest performing country in the world—now talks excitedly about igniting teachers’ passions for teaching. If America wants to take off educationally once more, it’s time for it to find its own points of ignition.

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