Our Voices Define Our Worth: An Investigation into Alleviating Teacher Burnout Through Playback Theatre

By Jennifer L. Strekas
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Abstract

This paper investigates the research on burnout and teacher-specific burnout, probing for suggested methods of preventing burnout in teachers. Gaps in the studies and in the suggested methods of prevention are recognized, focusing on the individual nature of stress related to teacher burnout and the need for prevention methods to focus on teacher voice. Playback Theatre, a form of improvisation theatre based on personal stories from an audience, is explored as a tool for preventing teacher burnout.
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“I’ve decided to take a one year leave of absence,” a fellow English teacher confessed to me one quiet afternoon in her room. My heart immediately sank, because this was no ordinary teacher. This was an extraordinary teacher. As my mentor three years earlier when I embarked upon my first teaching job, this woman inspired and supported me. As she spoke those ominous words, deep down I knew what they really meant – she wasn’t coming back.

I have to admit that I wasn’t surprised. This woman was a close friend, not just another teacher in my school. The signs had been there from the beginning of the school year in comments she made at faculty meetings, in conversations at lunch, in exchanges with her students and in her tears. I wanted to be optimistic that it was only a one year leave of absence, but her eyes gave her away. The one year leave of absence, I discovered, was our administrator’s idea. She, too, hated to loose this remarkable teacher, but had also noticed that things hadn’t been the same for her this year.

What upset me the most was the signs – the signs that a fellow teacher was struggling with stress from more than one direction. Everyone in the faculty noticed the signs unless they chose to ignore the tears flowing during faculty meetings, but why wasn’t there something we could have done? In reflecting back upon the situation, I feel that it was simply too late. My friend, and colleague, was already burned out.

Basics of Burnout

While the word burnout seemed apropos in describing my colleague’s situation, I realized that I didn’t know much about the term at the time. Freudenberger (1974) is credited with first using the term in his book, *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement*, characterizing burnout by a loss of enthusiasm or inspiration, especially when one’s hard work fails to yield desired
results. Only a few years later, Maslach (1976) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which measures the existence and degree of burnout. Maslach linked burnout specifically to professionals, finding three sub-categories of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. The concept of burnout caught on and continued to develop. Mattingly (1977) defined burnout as “a pattern of symptoms, behaviors and attitudes” (p. 131) which are different for every individual. Wouldn’t life be simpler if everyone burned out in the same way? Unfortunately each individual mixes his/her own recipe for disaster, making it difficult to have one common solution.

Burnout was a worldwide dilemma in many professions, evidenced by the continuing number of studies taking place. Each study complicated matters further by extending and adding on to definitions of burnout over the next decade. Freudenberger (1980) continued work on burnout, noting that burnout occurs in those who desire to attain idealistic goals. Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) note that burnout is a progressive loss of this idealism, agreeing with Maslach that it results from work. For Pines and Aronson (1981), burnout is characterized by “physical deletion, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, emotional drain and negative self-concept and attitude” (p. 15). Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey & Bassler (1988) explain burnout as emotional and physical fatigue which results from the combination of stress and ineffective tactics for coping or dealing with the stress.

It is easy to recognize that the term burnout had ballooned. Gold (1984) noted the definitions of burnout in many studies were vague, leaving room for interpretation. Maslach (1981), one of the pioneers in work on burnout, points out that there is not even one simple spelling of the word anymore (i.e., burnout, burn-out, Burnout, Burn-out). While there isn’t one recognized, theoretical definition of burnout, several aspects of burnout seem to remain constant.
The MBI is still the only globally recognized system for measuring the existence of burnout and the degree, even decades after its creation. Stress is commonly associated with burnout in many of the studies (Brouwers et al., 2001; Gold, 1984; Naylor, 2001; Schwab, 1983; Speck, 1993; Terry, 1997) Stress can be a major factor leading to burnout, but is not the same as burnout. If nothing else becomes clear by tracing burnout through the literature, I have discovered that burnout is a very broad term, recognizing burnout as a negative effect of varied stressors, most often related to the work environment. Burnouts effects can be felt physically, intellectually, socially, mentally, and spiritually on a person (Terry, 1997). Even more simply stated, burnout is a problem which cannot be ignored.

Focus on Teacher Burnout

Far from being ignored during the 90’s, researchers began to focus on burnout in the teaching profession, considering it as an important variable in the appalling teacher attrition rates, which show that 30 percent of American teachers leave within their first five years (Dove, 2004). Studies conducted on teacher burnout continued to rely on the foundational definitions of Freudenberger and Maslach produced years earlier, while developing variations more specific to teachers. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) focused on burnout for teachers as a result of extreme feelings of meaninglessness, which are often linked to teachers’ perceived inabilities to get through to their students. Bullough and Baughman (1997) suggested teacher burnout stems from the futility of their work, specifically reflecting back on the idealism of first year teachers compared to the state they are in after only a few years. Ineffective. Pointless. Worthless. These are all feelings which denote a reduce sense of personal accomplishment. The appalling attrition rates suggest that man teachers are beginning to be worn down by these feelings as early as their first year.
Teacher burnout is also attached to other characteristics. Langle (2003) described burnout in terms of work-related exhaustion, which certainly rings true for teachers. Brouwers et al. (1999) began to specifically use the MBI in terms of teachers. Their study conducted in the Netherlands shed some new light on teacher burnout, linking self-efficacy to burnout. Self-efficacy in this case refers to a teacher’s personal belief in his/her own abilities to teach or get the job done. When teachers feel meaninglessness as a result of their efforts, it would be easy to understand how a lowered self-perception could only add to the stressors factoring in burnout. Along the same lines, Farber (1991) saw burnout resulting from the gap between the effort put in and the reward that is gotten out of this effort. Teachers give on a daily basis in many ways, but the thanks received are often seem far and few between. As Speck (1993) suggested, burnout is the final outcome of a value conflict in teachers which manifests as stress. If unmediated, this stress creates burnout.

I am suddenly reminded of my colleague and the feeling of frustration I felt that there was no form of mediation for her during in the stages before burnout. Research has proven that burnout is a real problem, especially in teachers. While it is great to have a workable knowledge of what burnout is and how it manifests, most teachers I know wouldn’t have needed a definition to identify it in themselves. It is a word that regrettably rolls off the tongues of colleagues in my own school quite frequently. Since studies on burnout in both teachers and other professions have been ongoing since the 70’s, there was no shortage of empirical data on the various burnout variables. Why with all of this research has nothing been done to alleviate the problem of teacher burnout in our educational system? By looking at few specific studies, I hope to highlight some gaps in the research and shed some light on their conclusions, specifically concerning prevention of burnout.
Key Studies on Teacher Burnout

There have been many studies conducted on teacher burnout in recent years, but I have chosen a few key studies which highlight the aspects of burnout which I have witnessed first hand with my own colleagues or experienced first hand with myself.

The Naylor study (2001) was a sample study of British Columbia teachers, investigating the extent to which increasing pressure of workload and stress effect teachers’ lives both at work and home. The study’s findings showed the teachers in British Columbia experienced multiple sources of stress which fit into three categories: increasing difficulty and complexity, volume of work and expectations, and lack of time, resources, support and respect. Naylor’s study concluded that the teachers sampled are suffering from stress due to an excessive workload, which may have ultimately devastating effects on these teachers. These effects include major physical and mental health breakdowns, stress-related leave of absence, or quitting the profession, which could all be considered signs of burnout. Naylor characterizes these findings as disturbing, noticing that while these teachers seem to care greatly about every aspect of their job, they feel as if nobody cares greatly about teachers.

Overall, Naylor (2001) points out that “the findings from these qualitative data closely match the findings in the international literature on teacher workload and stress” (18). Other studies published concur that an excessive workload is a common stressor factoring in teacher burnout (Brown & Ralph, 1994; Farber, 1984; Tang & Yeung, 1999). In each of these studies, one common uncontrolled extraneous variable is stressors outside of the work environment. Variables outside of work may equally contribute to the stress and lack of time to complete mandated work. I find it worthwhile to consider what else may be weighing on these teachers. Of the stressed teachers feeling the excessive workload pressure, how many are parents? How many are going back to school? Is there a significant difference in stress levels when the teacher
is single versus married? Personal and individual factors cannot be underestimated in the context of teacher burnout.

One way in which recent studies have included personal and individual factors in the research on teacher burnout is by exploring the correlation between personal self-concept and burnout. Friedman & Farber’s study (1992) hypothesized that a relationship exists between the multiple dimensions of an individual teacher’s self-concept (i.e., feelings of professional competence, feelings of professional satisfaction, and perceptions of others in the educational system perceive the teacher) and burnout. Of all of the self-concept dimensions, professional satisfaction, defined as how one feels about gratification received, bore the strongest negative correlation to burnout among the teachers studied. Interestingly, there was a discrepancy noted between a teacher’s view of self as being competent and satisfied in connection to burnout. Often teachers perceived themselves was not how they felt others viewed them. From the teacher’s point of view, administrators and parents have an exaggerated and unrealistic sense of professional satisfaction in their teachers. These discrepancies factor heavily in burnout. Friedman & Farber come to the conclusion that teachers need to feel professionally satisfied and competent.

While this study only sampled elementary teachers in Israeli, other studies concur that teacher’s self-concept or self-efficacy in relation to their job is a predictor of burnout (Brouwers, Evers & Tomic, 1999; Farber, 1991; Friedman, 1991; Tomic, Evers & Brouwers, 2004). In studying a variable such as self-concept or self-efficacy, response accuracy is always an uncontrolled extraneous variable factoring in the results. Self-reported surveys and questionnaires are not always answered truthfully or accurately. Time available to respond,
perceived reason for study, and time of the year participating in the study are three possible variables which could inadvertently affect the outcome of the study.

Many of the research done on teacher burnout attempted to hone in one or two potential stressors leading to burnout; however, my own personal experience as a teacher reminds me that there isn’t one simple stressor, but many to be considered in conjunction with burnout. Several variables have been studied in correlation to teacher burnout which are briefly worth mentioning.

Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey & Bassler (1998) studied several individual, situational contributors to burnout in a correlational study. Their contributors included total years taught, years taught at current school, degree level, internal rewards, efficacy, school socioeconomic status, organizational rigidity, participation, principal support, peer support, friend and family support and student support. This was one of the first studies to factor in support as a variable in burnout, which I found intriguing. The presence or lack of support can be extremely significant in correlation to teacher burnout.

Punch & Tuettemann (1990) studied several potential stressors in correlation to psychological distress among secondary school teachers in Western Australia. Potential stressors included adequacy of access to facilities, student misbehavior, extent to which social expectations seemed excessive, extent of intrusion of school work into out-of-hours time and total workload. The study turned up a significant variance between the sexes. Women were more affected by the nine school-related variables, suggesting that female teachers are more prone to psychological distress due to work-related issues. Few studies have been done on the difference between male and female teachers on the issue of burnout, but the authors suggest there is a need to further investigate.
Abel & Sewell (1999) considered the correlation between stress and burnout in rural and urban secondary school teachers. Among the sources of stress causing burnout studied were pupil misbehavior, poor working conditions, poor staff relations, time pressures, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. While urban and rural teachers’ results suggested some differences in most significant sources of stress and highest predictors of burnout, their results were not extremely varied, leading the author to find modest support in suggesting the importance of considering the differences of urban and rural teachers in designing programs for stress management.

The significance in reviewing all of these studies lies in the continually expanding list of stress variables which lead to burnout. It is important to remember that there is not just one simple cause of any individual’s burnout. For teachers, research has primarily focused on the school environment, attempting to figure which variables factor the most in burnout, but what has the research suggested in the way of preventing teacher burnout? While all of the studies on teacher burnout may vary in theory as to the specific causes, a large number of studies make very similar suggestions for preventing burnout or dealing with work-related stress. Yet in reviewing these conclusions, I couldn’t get it out of my mind that it is the year 2005 and no significant strides have been made in preventing teacher burnout and attrition rates are still declining. There must be something that these researchers are missing.

What Has Been Suggested?

The unfortunate reality is that burnout is as contagious as the flu in school systems. “The contagious aspect of burnout can potentially incapacitate an institution as it spreads through faculty, administration, classified staff and students” (Johnson, 1993, p. 11). So, what has been suggested by the various studies to stop the spread of teacher burnout?
As researchers have diligently devised studies to identify and target specific causes of burnout in the teaching profession, it seems that little action has been taken as a result of this information. Conclusions have been drawn in several cases which recognize the need for further investigation into various aspects of the burnout syndrome, such as differences for males versus females (Punch & Tuettemann, 1990), burnout as a syndrome and development of intervention systems (Schwab, 1983), individual differences in stress proneness, coping strategies, personality variables and degree of satisfaction (Sutton & Huberty, 1984), and prevalence, causes, consequences and management of teacher burnout (Tomic, Evers & Brouwers, 2004).

Much of the research has also suggested training programs to boost teachers’ confidence and to help them to deal with the many varied stressors (Black, 2003; Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey & Bassler, 1998; Brouwers, Evers & Tomic, 1999; Brown & Ralph, 1994; Hammond & Onikama, 1997; Terry, 1997). Yet, as Farber (1984) points out, there has been little empirical research to validate any of the few intervention programs in place. Farber noted that there was some preliminary evidence that support groups aided in reducing feelings of isolation, promoting support amongst colleagues, renewing commitment and increasing professionalism in teachers, but the number of studies has been significantly small.

Aside from training programs to help teachers cope with stressors in their lives, the use of support systems has been another suggested outcome of the research on teacher burnout (Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey & Bassler, 1998; Farber, 1984; Hammond & Onikama, 1997; Speck, 1993). Stress is inevitable in the teaching profession. Teachers don’t need to avoid stress, but they need to learn how to deal with stress to avoid burnout. Support systems can help teachers properly deal with stress on both a physical (i.e., proper diet, rest and exercise) and psychological level (Terry, 1997).
Currently many intervention programs for teachers don’t address all three aspects of burnout recognized by the MBI, focusing primarily on individual factors instead of also including environmental factors. This type of approach suggests that burnout occurs because a teacher has failed individually to cope with the stress, but the reality of the situation is that anyone in a similar situation could burnout just as easily (Schwab, 1983). Support systems have the potential to help teachers deal with stress leading to burnout on both levels; yet, why are there no systems like this in place in every school? The underside to the idea is the stigma that support groups can carry. Often associated with therapy, many teachers may not be willing to openly attend a support group, leaving teachers alone to cope individually with their stress or to burnout without any preventative measures in place.

This is where I sense that those involved with the prevention of burnout are at an impasse. Researchers have recognized the problem and have made suggestions which have simply not caught on in school systems. Due to the extreme nature of the burnout syndrome, it cannot be cured by tackling only one level at a time through intervention strategies or support systems alone. As I suggested earlier, there is a gap in the suggested methods. Underlying all of the stressors contributing to burnout, there is one missing piece to this puzzle.

A few astute researchers have identified a need for the teacher’s voice to be heard as a start to a solution. Brown & Ralph (1994) realize the specific need for teachers to be actually heard by other colleagues, administrators and even in the community. There is a huge lack of communication in the educational system. Teachers deserve to be treated like dependable professionals, worthy of being consulted and listened to instead of reprimanded and ignored (Friendman, 1991). Simply stated, “Teachers never get a chance to express their feelings” (p. 7). This affects teachers not only on an individual level, but on a community level as well, lowering
the morale of the entire team of educators. In the absence of satisfaction and unity, burnout breeds and begins to spread. “The job is made far more difficult by the failure of others to understand the complexity, responsibility, and stresses that are inherent in teacher” (Friedman & Farber, 1992, p. 8). This statement recalls the importance of voice, specifically the teacher’s voice, and being truly heard on a deep level. It is easy for the single voice to get lost in the sea of mandates, announcements, and complaints, but one simple fact remains: The teachers’ voices need to be heard.

This is where all of the research and suggestions for prevention fail to hit home for every teacher. Teachers are individuals with individual needs, but all teachers also have something in common. No matter which combination of stressors is rapidly eating away at any particular teacher, burning out their will to teach, the chance for their voice to be heard is the only honest place to start. Voicing opinions, feelings, concerns or satisfactions anonymously through a research study leaves teachers alone without support, never really being heard. Through voices, teachers can overcome the feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness and teachers can come together (Johnson, 1993). To me, the most insightful research has keyed in on the fact that teachers are essentially voiceless in their own profession, but the importance of this has been lost in most attempts at burnout prevention. This may be understandably so, because teachers in my own school act a bit like hermits, living in silence and seclusion behind their closed doors, shut off from our community of teachers. Getting teachers out of their rooms and voicing themselves without being reprimanded is essential, but finding a supportive environment in which to allow this happen is vital. Is there a way to make this happen even in the most closed off of teacher communities? I believe there is.

The Power of Playback
In the case of teachers, the sheer volume of current research suggests that burnout is an epidemic and is spreading rapidly. Definitions seem to mean less when there are so many, but the physical and mental toll of burnout on teachers means more, especially as teachers are leaving the profession. Without an effective strategy for dealing with burnout, it will continue to wipe out teachers. Stress management training programs and support groups have not caught on in many schools. Perhaps this is because educators are intelligent people who know how to manage stress, but there is a deeper problem in education. Teachers are being silenced. An effective method for combating the seemingly inevitable stress and resulting burnout in teachers would bring teachers together as community, giving them a chance to really be heard for whatever reason is on their mind. This is where I would like to offer the concept of Playback Theatre as a potential solution to this problem.

Although its roots were first planted in the same decade as burnout, Playback Theatre has a considerably smaller volume of printed work, and certainly less scientific study surrounding it. Playback Theatre was a term coined by Jonathan Fox and his original theatre company. He imagined a type of theatre which was spontaneous and combined the rich oral tradition of storytelling, centering on the idea of community-building. Fox envisioned playing back the story of a teller from the audience with the help of actors, music, and movement (Fox, 1994; Fox, 1999a; Salas, 1993). The term Playback Theatre refers to both the theatrical form and to groups using this form. Salas (1993) describes Playback Theatre simply as “an original form of theatrical improvisation in which people tell real events from their lives, then watch them enacted on the spot” (p.6). The aim is not to literally reenact every precise moment from a story, but to capture the essence of a teller’s event. Without a teller, there would be no Playback Theatre. This social interaction is an essential aspect of Playback Theatre. Ritual is an equally
important aspect of Playback, as well. The ritualistic process grounds Playback Theatre, helping to bring meaning to the event (Fox, 1994; Fox, 1999c; Salas, 1993).

It is important to note that Playback Theatre has its roots in psychodrama, but it is not therapy. It is not traditional art or theater either. It crosses “the boundaries of art, psychology and education” (Fox, 1999a, p.11). Playback is a community-based theatre, being used in education, as social service, as a marker of transition, in organizational development and in therapy. Playback is considered “an interactive social process with the purpose of service to its audience” (Salas, 1999, p.18). Playback Theatre does not explain or judge or comment. It is just the chance to watch one’s life from the outside (Hoesch, 1999). This aspect of Playback Theatre brings a sense of renewal on an individual, social and environmental level (Fox, 1999c, p. 121).

Playback Theatre has even emerged as a research method, based on the idea that understanding people is both a public and a private process (McKenna, 1999). By its own nature, Playback is both of these. McKenna (1999) also defines Playback as a journey on several levels: entrancement, communion, emotional literacy, and connectivity. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for my purposes, Fox (1999b) notes Playback Theatre as an invitation for deep stories. Here is where I see this ritualistic, community art form, known as Playback Theatre, connecting with burnout, specifically for educators. Could the opportunity for teachers to tell their stories and have the essence played back help them to deal with the stress on several levels, opening up support networks and preventing burnout in the long run?

Here’s How It Works

Playback Theatre is based around a ritualistic process. The key players in any Playback performance are the actors, the conductor, the musician and, most important of all, the teller. A Playback performance begins with the conductor, who leads the show and connects with the tellers, warming up the audience. The audience has a chance to warm up to the idea of being a
teller, providing small moments from their day or expressing feelings on a theme or topic. The small personal emotions or moments are played back by the actors using a short form, such as fluid sculptures. The actors form a human sculpture, utilizing movement, sound and music to capture the essence of the teller’s suggestion.

The primary form of a Playback performance is the Scene (or story). An audience member is invited on state to tell a longer personal story. The conductor interviews the teller, allowing for the teller to choose their own actors for the tale and asking questions when necessary. The actors sit in ritualistic silence, listening deeply to the teller. When the telling is complete, the conductor invites the audience in with the phrase, “Let’s watch.”

The musician begins to play, setting the mood, as the actors, in silence, set up their minimalistic stage and grab fabric to aid in their portrayal of anything from a human to an animal to an inanimate object. When the actors are ready, the enactment begins. The story is played back with emphasis on the essence of the teller’s tale. The point is not to capture every moment literally, but to delve into deeper meaning, capturing images and thoughts important to the teller.

When the enactment is complete, there is a moment for the actors to acknowledge the teller. Finally, the conductor brings the focus back to the teller, providing a chance for the teller to speak whatever is on his/her mind. Often the scene has not only spoken to the teller on some level, but to audience members, as well.

One final form, often used to break up stories, is the short form, Pairs. The audience is asked to express conflicting views or feelings they may have on a subject or that is with them at the present. Actors, in pairs, play back both of the emotions, allowing the teller to see their two sides struggling with each other.
A Playback performance often ends with some form of closure, often alluding to the “red thread” which connected the stories. The red thread refers to the idea that one story begets another story; we affect each other through our spoken words (Fox, 1999c). The power of voice is strong. For teachers, the chance to be voiced through telling a story or through connecting with another story would be the beginning of developing a caring community.

Giving Teachers a Voice

_Our voices define our worth._ – Ruth Prescesky

As I have already mentioned, there is a pressing need for teachers let their voices be heard; yet, I can only speculate as to the reasons why teachers remain unvoiced. There is certainly evidence that suggests school cultures exist where the teacher’s voice is undervalued; therefore, rending it silenced. However, I also have the personal feeling that many teachers simply don’t feel comfortable expressing their feelings, thoughts, concerns or achievements in a group setting. So why would teachers in attendance at a Playback Theatre performance feel any differently? The beauty of Playback is grounded in its ritualistic qualities, providing a safe environment for all tellers. There are no surprises. The conductor takes the time to build trust with the audience, easing them into experience and making it easier for tellers to open up. The steps to a scene are always the same, providing comfort in the expected. Playback actors are there for the teller and not for themselves. The teller always knows that actors will give the story back to the teller, allowing for the teller to have the final say. There is no discussion of the story or psychoanalysis. There is just a chance to set the story free.

The ritualistic nature of Playback Theatre has many of its roots in storytelling. Playback Theatre capitalizes on the power of storytelling in building a community through shared narratives. Stories are told because life experiences are significant and worthy of being told. There is an inherent expectation that stories which are told will be accepted and appreciated for
what they are. The beauty of sharing stories is the human potential to forge new relationships from them (Dyson & Genishi, 1994). Storytelling brings together a community of people who respect each other and find new connections. Genishi & Dyson (1994) see storytelling communities as crossroads – “places where people meet, bringing their pasts, their differences, their hopes, their distinctive disciplines” (242). Through the storytelling in Playback Theatre, “both tellers and listeners make discoveries that give them a deeper understanding and acceptance of themselves and each other” (Trousdale, Woestehoff & Schwartz, 1994, p. 44).

This deeper understanding from storytelling can only come once community and trust have been built. “Storytelling builds a community first and then a community of learners” (Hamilton, 1994, p. 92). It is Bruner (1990) who explore the use of stories as a central tool for meaning-making in human lives. For teachers, sharing our stories is essential in helping to not only make, but give meaning to our lives. Various studies have found worth in using storytelling with teachers to reconstruct knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Whelan, Huber, Rose, Davies & Clandinin, 2001). In a teacher’s everyday life, a retelling of a story doesn’t provide the “opportunities to figure new ways to relive the story” (Whelan, et al., 2001, p. 143). The Playback Theatre experience provides the chance for the teller to sit outside their own story, witnessing from the outside in and opening up new possibilities in the mind.

Learning and Healing for Teachers

An empirical study by Peter Wright (2003) done on the potential for Playback to provide learning, healing and community-building experiences, found that Playback did indeed facilitate some form of change in many of the audience members who were willing to be interviewed. Learning was noted on three levels: personal (self-knowledge and awareness), social (focus on individuals place in the world with others) and instrumental (developing life skills). Unlike a stress management class mandated by administrators, teachers would have a chance for active
meaning-making through a Playback experience instead of being told what to do in an educational seminar.

Wright (2003) found that healing was also an outcome of Playback Theatre. Learning and healing influence each other, creating the Learning-Healing Dynamic in Playback Theatre. The social-aesthetic qualities of Playback factor into this dynamic. The aesthetic side of a story offers different views on emotions, engages response and awareness, and offers a chance for reflection on several levels. The social side of a story builds community and an awareness of the multitude of connections between the individual, the audience and the experience itself. For others in the audience, stories become universal, everyone can relate on some level, forging a strong connection. For teachers, a chance to share experiences and feelings could provide an opportunity to not feel so alone. Chances are other teachers can relate and Playback can open the lines of communication.

Wright (2003) sees Playback as “a powerful and profound resource to gain meaning in troubled times.” Playback can be a tool for change in both the tellers and the community of teachers in the audience, helping teachers to grow from their own experiences and others. Playback can be tool for teachers to learn about themselves and their stressors. Playback can also be a tool for healing those teachers who are already on the verge of burnout. Teachers need to overcome the feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness.

Playback can begin to provide teachers a voice, alleviating stress in the process. By the sheer act of voicing stories of their stress, teachers are lessening the hold these stressors had on their lives. By allowing other teachers to hear the story and relate to the stressful situation, a supportive community is being bonded together, releasing even more of the stress. Together in these supportive communities, teachers can continue to share their stories and voice their
feelings, healing together. Wright suggests that Playback’s healing comes in many forms. Participants can feel affirmed, endowed with status, catharsis and a sense of understanding. Playback Theatre is not therapy, but it can feel therapeutic.

One of the inherent problems ignored by the research was the stressors outside of the teaching environment which may factor into an individual’s burnout. Scientifically based, school-sponsored seminars on managing stress, which garner a full faculty’s attention, focus on work-related stressors, leaving room for little else. Teacher support groups, which reach a smaller population, may also feel pressured to tackle only school-related stress. The beauty of Playback Theatre is that whatever is on the teller’s mind is accepted. Even if a school-sponsored Playback performance presented a theme of teamwork and respect to help target concerns identified by teachers and administrators, a story might arise about a colleague’s divorce. While this may not initially seem to fit in with teamwork and respect in the school, the essence of the teller’s story may reveal that it is difficult for her to fully invest herself in a current project at school because of the emotional toll of her divorce. Teachers in the audience may realize their lack of respect stemmed from not understanding her situation. Maybe sharing her story will cause other teacher’s in her school to make more of an effort to include her, knowing that deep down she needs a team to help her move on. The deep listening is an essential tool in Playback Theatre, not just a tool for the actors, conductor and musician, but one which the audience learns to use better, as well.

Final Thoughts

This brings me back to my colleague and friend, who after several years of teaching has decided to throw in the towel, citing burnout as her reason. For a solid year stress had been surmounting in her life and not just from work, but from all around her. She understood the concepts behind managing stress, but there becomes a point when it is just too much to manage
anymore. The physical and psychological effects of stress had just become too much for even regular therapy sessions, anti-depressant drugs and yoga to alleviate. She was without a doubt burned out. It didn’t matter that she had no job waiting for her or that she had no idea what life held for her next, but she knew she couldn’t survive another year in her current situation.

She recently attended a Playback Theatre workshop I held for teachers, introducing the concepts behind and the forms of Playback Theatre. She could not hold herself back from being involved in the community that was emerging. She told stories and shared in others. She participated as an actor and a supportive teammate. In her eyes, much of the despair I had seen at the end of the year was replaced by a gleam of renewal. “Why,” she asked, “isn’t this required in every school district?” I didn’t have an answer, but deep down I wish it was.

Gathering teachers’ voices together, Playback Theatre can help teachers bring meaning to their own lives and find a shared strength in a teaching community, which can provide the support necessary to keep teachers afloat in these stressful times long after a Playback Theatre experience has ended.
References


