

CHAPTER ONE

Understanding the Different Experiences of Teachers and Principals

Most educators can probably relate to the following three scenarios.

Everyone thinks of Karen as the Mother Teresa of the school. She is well known for going the extra mile, helping students at recess, bringing in items for needy families, and spending evenings in her classroom hosting parent gatherings. She attended the latest conferences on character education and positive discipline, and held a staff workshop to share the latest information from the conferences. Karen, however, feels like a fraud. She knows that she often yells at her students, and she feels guilty because she recognizes it reduces her classroom's morale. She finds herself yelling anyway.

Why does Karen yell, against her intentions and better judgment?

John enjoys his job as a principal. He likes to lead by example and makes great effort to visit classrooms daily. He has received

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many kudos for his dedication to his community. Recently, however, staff members have become upset by his absences during lunch. John has been going off campus more and more often to have lunch alone; for the staff, this means he is gone when they most need support and time to run ideas by him. Many perceive this act as a reflection of a deep lack of care, and question his reliability and authenticity.

Why does John “run away” despite the pleas of his staff?

Chris is the newest teacher on staff. He is well respected for having good control of his class and being enthusiastic about curriculum development. The mostly female staff appreciate having such a compassionate, masculine figure on site, especially one who is so kind and devoted to his work in education. To everyone’s amazement, Chris is noticeably shy with the elderly woman who volunteers for lunchtime yard duty and seems to avoid her whenever possible. Some staff are beginning to question why Chris would act in this manner.

Why is Chris so distant with this woman, when he is so good with colleagues and children?

Why? Why? Why? is the question that many educators, principals and teachers alike, strive to answer when faced with an interpersonal challenge. There is a belief that we should understand the cause of a problem before we can even attempt to solve it: You can’t fight an enemy you don’t know. Yet many of the explanations we usually come up with focus on individuals, their believed personality, their “strengths” and “weaknesses.”¹ In so doing, the personal and professional context of those people’s lives is often forgotten. Often, the context of people’s lives has at least an equal or greater influence on people’s actions than any individual choice (see Beaudoin & Taylor, 2004, for more information). The context will determine if you are your outgoing and funny self or your more shy and reserved self. It is important to understand context because it:

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1. Has the power to shape each individual's action
2. Colors how people expect others to behave
3. Is the backdrop against which problems develop

Consequently, no school culture can be truly addressed in any significant way until the context and the experiences of people are well understood. The more you know about the context and its unique impact on the individuals involved, the more power you have to address the situation effectively.

Whether you are a principal or a teacher, this chapter will:

- Assist you in articulating your own experience and depersonalize the struggles associated with your role
- Give you an insider's view into the responsibilities and pressures experienced by your colleagues
- Connect you further with compassion for others' responsibilities (compassion is always handy when addressing interpersonal tensions!)
- Allow you to use the ideas presented in the rest of the book successfully!

Principals often think they understand teachers' experiences because most of them "have been there"; in our research that has not proven to be true, as the leadership demands on principals often take precedence over remembering what it was like to be in a classroom. In addition, we tend to forget the nuances of experiences that have not been specifically named. For example, you may remember feeling generally overwhelmed at the end of the year but you may not (especially when overwhelmed) have actually articulated, named, and reflected upon exactly what happened. This makes it difficult to remember the details and implications of the experience. Finally, people's experiences on a principal career path can be distinct from those of other teachers in subtle ways. Your reference point provides only one perspective; certainly a valuable one, but it may overlap in limited ways with the integrated feedback of large numbers of educators.

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This being said, let us now explore briefly the experience and work context of

- a. Principals
- b. Teachers

PRINCIPALS²

- What are the stories you have about who principals are as people?
- What comes to your mind when thinking “principals should . . .”?
- Which ones of these “shoulds” may be unrealistic?

These are some of the main questions we sought to understand as we interviewed a large number of administrators from a variety of districts and communities. What we found over and over again was that principals’ daily lives were dominated by three experiences:

- Being mistaken for God
- Doing more, more, more
- Being everything for everyone all the time

Being Mistaken for God

People almost expect the principal to supply them everything they need, as if you were a counselor or a mommy or had a magic wand. I realized they wanted me to be God. I thought, “Oh, I didn’t apply for that job. I think the position is already filled!”

—Elementary School Principal

What are the implications of being mistaken for God? When someone places you on a pedestal or overestimates your authority, you become trapped into a role where you cannot be your preferred self and must instead:

- Never make mistakes
- Know all the answers
- Be able to solve everything
- Control everything at will (parents, students, cafeteria issues, etc.)
- Predict the future (e.g., school enrollment or even the weather)

An elementary school principal spoke of this:

The teachers expect that you will never make a mistake. That is an unreasonable expectation. I once had a teacher say, "You called a rainy day lunch and it did not rain. You ruined my whole week!"

Principals are often assumed to have unlimited amounts of authority in controlling students, parents, teachers, circumstances, and the school environment. The pressure of being powerful takes on a life of its own, becoming a story. It is then repetitively confirmed by the noticing of only certain events over which the principal actually does have a certain power.

Those events are, in reality, of a limited nature. Upon closer analysis, three words distinguish a principal's actual power: narrow, solitary, and visible.

First, the power is narrow, limited in scope, and applied to only very specific issues. People experiencing a principal's power may experience it as intense, but on a broader scale of time and school culture it may have only a small effect. For example, a principal may have the choice to transfer or lay off a teacher, an action that has an intense effect for that teacher, but that same principal may be unable to affect a broader issue, such as changing a school's culture.

Second, the power is solitary, meaning that it is held by one individual in the face of a larger group of subordinates. Although it may seem as though the principal holds more power than a group of adults, regardless of the group's size and whether it is made up of teachers or parents, this solitary voice in reality can become very insignificant. We have spoken

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to many principals who wish they could implement a new practice, yet have been turned down by the majority. Ultimately there may be a popular and/or vocal teacher on staff who may hold more influential power over such items.

Third, the power is visible to all in the community. Because of the distinct nature of his or her role in the school, the principal is also the civic representative and the one to lead publicly. This visible power can lead to an inflated, unrealistic perception or story of the principal as a person and as a professional. Following are some comments from principals:

I was promoted to assistant principal, and soon teachers who had twenty or thirty years' experience were asking me for advice, though I felt they had been teaching much longer than I had.

—Middle School Assistant Principal

When you go from the classroom into that office, all of sudden people look at you different, as if you have been gifted with all the answers in education. Sometimes we feel like we should; they expect us to! They don't realize we are just human, just like them.

—Middle School Principal

Teachers feel they personally have limited amounts of power and know that the principal has somewhat more power, without knowing the limit of that power. The power is visible, yet the limit is often invisible.

Principals don't have a lot of power, and anyone going into a principalship for power is in for a rude awakening. If there is power, it's shared power. You're in between a rock and a hard place, meaning you have to keep the parents happy, the teachers happy and the district office happy. Sometimes these are at opposing places. I don't think I have power. I say "sorry" a lot and "what do you want me to do?" If you say to [people], "Is there something you want me to do?", many times they don't know, but they feel better that you listened to them.

—Elementary School Principal

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There is a disconnection that may exist between teachers and principals in terms of understanding each other's realities. This is particularly true in regard to principals' lives, which may appear much more unpredictable and multifaceted to others than the known and visible routine of teachers. In other words, people get only a glimpse of a principal's day and may remain totally unaware of the full story. The pressure placed on principals to be powerful can have a whole set of undesirable consequences. This distorted story can, on one hand, create a context where teachers feel less capable than they actually are, engage in relationships in a disempowered way, and avoid responsibility on issues they could significantly affect. Teachers may end up taking a more passive role and expect principals to solve problems that pertain to everyone: "You have the power here . . . what are you going to do?"

As for principals, it can leave them with a false sense of entitlement and trying to impose demands on their staff (which typically backfires). Enormous amounts of responsibility can also bear heavily on one person's shoulders and create a context where mistakes are not only unavoidable but also accentuated by the community and difficult to forgive.

When teachers put you too high up it changes the way they treat you and ask questions. It puts the decision on you, which is bad because then you are responsible for everything. If you think someone is way up there, then you can't have honest conversations.

—Middle School Principal

Finally, the unrealistic story of principals as super powerful can create a false impression of them as invulnerable, without any particular human "needs" of their own and able to take in a lot of grief without being seriously affected.

Doing More, More, More

When the school year starts in August, you hit the ground running and you never stop. The school year is one big sprint.

—Middle School Principal

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In most school districts, principals are responsible for: planning student assessments, class placement, discipline, student study teams, clubs, sports, yard duty, lunch duty, administrative paperwork, observations, district meetings, planning, staff development, staff evaluation, grants, leading staff meetings, spreading information, memo writing, facilities, traffic, buses, cafeteria, food delivery, parents, Home and School Club, homework center meetings, community programs, counselor, planning assemblies, grade-level meetings, coordinating prep times, evaluate absentee rates, test scores, research, fundraising, supervising, conferencing, teaching, modeling, coordinating parent help, hiring process, firing process, conferences, professional growth, accommodating visitors, emergency contact, financial work/budget, staff cheerleader . . . and so on.

This pressure places an enormous amount of responsibilities on principals and can be unrealistic. Over the past hundred years, schools have been increasingly institutionalized and have faced more complex sets of requirements. The educational system has been facing more demands while being burdened with a limited budget. As a result the government has simply resorted to increasing the principal's workload. Given that, in many states, administrators do not have the luxury of an organized union's protection, they often feel forced to subject themselves to those demands with little possibility of protest. As discussed by two California principals:

If you don't know how to work with the superintendent, you're out. [In my area] there is no union to back you up. You work at the pleasure of the superintendent.

—Middle School Principal

A teacher once asked me when I was going to get tenure! I told her that [here] we don't get tenure. We don't even have a year-to-year contract. Our work is day to day. You simply have to do the best job you can for your people.

—Middle School Principal

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In other words, if educators are really committed to the work of leadership, their only real option is to do so with all the additional tasks. This can remind us of the situation a century ago, when employers subjected workers without job security to excessive amounts of work. The biggest difference in this situation is that there is practically no one to replace principals if they decide to leave.

How far can this go? How many more demands can be placed on principals? Current data reveal there may soon be a principal shortage, as people are less willing to work an average of 54 hours a week, in stressful conditions, with lack of resources, increasing responsibilities, and a sense that the compensation, in certain districts, can result in a pay cut when actual hours of work are factored in (Education Writers Association, 2002). In the meantime, current principals have the sense that they never can do enough.

Such a high level of accountability, to many different groups with different goals and preferences, also means that you can never satisfy everyone; you always receive some criticism and very little appreciation.

Having to let go a teacher, for example, is very difficult. If you keep the person, the staff may be upset because you are keeping a bad apple; if you ask them to leave, those who have bonded with the teacher will be upset. And then you have to live with this situation 'till the end of the year.

—Elementary School Principal

Our middle school team has worked hard with the union to organize a late-morning start on Wednesdays so that teachers can meet and collaborate with each other. We were very pleased to make that possible for teachers, and it is certainly in the best interest of students. Parents, however, started calling and were upset thinking that their children might miss out on academics. We really can never satisfy everyone.

—Middle School Principal

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Other effects of this pressure may be: exhaustion, imbalance of personal and professional life, feeling overwhelmed, and depression.

I know it will never be enough even if I stay here every night until 10. It has tremendous effect on family life. Sometimes I don't see my children for several days, and, even when I am sitting home on a Sunday thinking "it's me time," I'm not able to be present. My mind is still at school.

—Middle School Principal

Finally this pressure demands such an extreme amount of work focused on the community's children and families that, ironically, very little time can be left for one's own. It is not surprising that the turnover rate for principals between 1988 and 1998 was 42% and that approximately 40% of principals leave the field because of politics, bureaucracy, and unreasonable demands (Education Writers Association, 2002).

Being Everything for Everyone All the Time

The principal is often perceived as the person to go to if you have a problem, particularly if it is a big problem. People are aware of their own needs and do not necessarily realize that their demands are multiplied by at least 30 other staff and countless families. We have heard teachers and parents wonder what a principal does with his or her time, especially if the principal does not respond that very day to a question or request.

We once met with a principal at 1 P.M. We walked in as she was just finishing checking her e-mail. She announced to us that while she was busy on lunch duty, the district office had sent an e-mail, expecting all administrative staff to meet at the district office at 1 P.M. We stood there, stunned that a district could possibly mandate principals to be at a meeting an hour and a half after an e-mail had been sent.

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Principals clearly experience a pressure to be available. Principals have to be willing to drop everything and do what the district prioritizes for them. They have to be at the beck and call of the system and able to meet many multiple demands. Principals have to ensure that everyone is happy, the school is running smoothly, and all the paperwork is completed.

The implications of this pressure are great. First, principals can never fully know in the morning how their day will go—will they have to be prepared for a life-threatening emergency or have a peaceful day? They have to be somewhat on guard all the time and can never totally relax or achieve a sense of control over their day.

My biggest "Aha!" when I went from a being a teacher to being a principal was that I can never control my day. As a teacher, I would spend hours planning for every hour of every day. However, as a principal, I could have nothing on my planner for a particular day and that day will end up being crazy!

—Elementary School Principal

Second, such bombardments of requests by many people require that decisions be made quickly. This may result in decisions that are not always ideal and may not even represent what the principals themselves would have preferred, given a chance to reflect, as illustrated in the following comments:

You have to make these quick decisions and then later on you realize . . . Oh . . . no . . . did I really say that?

—Elementary School Principal

At school you have to make so many decisions so quickly that you end up not being as collaborative as you'd like. Things come back from your staff to bite you if you make too many decisions in isolation.

—Elementary School Principal

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Third, principals not only have to be everything for everyone all the time at school, but this pressure carries into their personal lives. Specifically, numerous principals have shared how any public appearance has the possibility of turning into a school conversation, whether they want it to or not. This is particularly true of principals living in or near the community served by their school.

In many ways, this pressure does not allow principals the freedom to perform other identities in their public community, or the space to enjoy the richness of their lives and the multiple roles they wish to fulfill.

I live in this community. It's 24-7. When I go out, for example to a softball game, all the parents approach me and want to talk about their kids. I don't mind sometimes, but sometimes I'm with my godchildren or I'm coaching, and I don't get to just be a person. My principal friend and I laugh because you never go out in shorts and sandals with messy hair. I can't be seen buying beer. You feel like you have to explain that you really still are a good role model.

—Elementary School Principal

It would be nicer if more people got that I'm a person, I'm not just the administrator. There is a tendency on the part of people to think that the administrator is a different animal. I am a parent, I am a human being, I am a mother, I am a wife, I am a runner, I'm a lot of things. What I do here is another skill that I have, and I'm a person underneath it all.

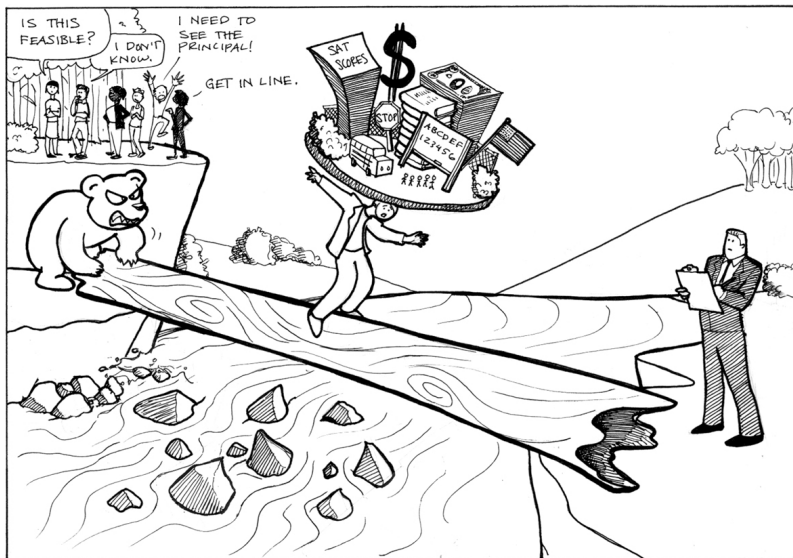
—Elementary School Principal

In Sum . . .

These three pressures (being mistaken for God; doing more, more, more; and being everything for everyone all the time) have the effect of rendering a principal's life highly stressful, can create a sense of inadequacy in the face of unrealistic demands, can be isolating, and may lead to

burnout. We were inspired by a middle school principal's description of the experience of this role (Figure 1.1): "A principal has to walk this difficult obstacle course with a beach blanket Babylon hat, with everything attached on it—school safety, scores, budget, buses, traffic, cafeteria, etc. They have to keep everything balanced while everybody is watching you, evaluating how you're solving problems, and wondering if you're going to fall into crocodile-infested waters."

Figure 1.1 Principals have to keep everything balanced while they walk an obstacle course and are evaluated for their performance



As will be discussed later in this book, many principals remain in the profession for their commitment to children and find ways to deal with these pressures. As illustrated in the following box, humor keeps many of them going!

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Box 1.1 Creative Metaphors About the Role of Principal

- “When you are the principal, sometimes you’re the bug, sometimes you’re the windshield!”
- “A principal has to keep on swimming upstream, despite the current, the storms, and the dams.”
- “Being a principal is like being a sewing machine, stitching things together and joining the different fabrics.”
- “Being a principal sometimes feels like acting in a Shakespearean play . . . you can’t leave during one of the tragic parts, only when the play is completed.”
- “Being a principal is like operating a TV remote control. If used unconsciously, one can get trapped into spinning through all the choices that are available and never focusing on one important thing. If used for its intent (to be more efficient), it can be seen as a way to maneuver through a lot of information and make a choice that saves time and brings a focus to time spent.”
- “Principals can act as manure or fertilizer. The potential is there for them to do things that stink a lot, but you can also very much help things grow.”
- “A principal is like a Cuisinart. It does all the different tasks with the different attachments. It takes different ingredients, mixes them all together, and makes a new product. It’s really fast, so you are dizzy all the time.”
- “When you are a principal, you act as a watering can. You fill it up and nurture everyone to grow: parents, teachers, and kids. One seed won’t grow alone and you have to give them all water. You also have to find out how to fill up your watering can.”

- “Being a principal is like being a mom . . . you are everything to everybody. You are always reminding people to do things and console them when they are hurt. You are trying to please everybody but you can’t.”
- “Being principal is like being Don Quixote. In the face of all the obstacles, you just stay hopeful, believe in your people, and believe that the best is possible.”
- “A principal is like an underwater juggler. You hold your breath, hoping everything goes where it is supposed to, but everything floats away. Sometimes you come up for air, see land, and things are the way you thought they would be. So you think, ‘Oh, I’ll just go back on down; it’s all right.’”
- “Being a principal is like being a car going down the highway ninety miles an hour.”
- “Being a principal is like being Jiminy Cricket. You are always showing up at the right times saying all the right things to keep them going.”
- “A principal is like a butterfly . . . people do mistake you for a Godlike creature but you are simply fluttering around campus, hoping to help someone have a better day and doing your best to make people’s lives more productive.”

TEACHERS

As most groups in any given culture, teachers receive pressure to be a certain way. These standards are often unspoken and are assumed to come naturally with the profession. It is interesting to explore how these pressures evolve over time and how they differ or continue. Here is an amusing look at published rules for teachers at the beginning of the 20th century.

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Rules for Teachers—1915

1. You will not marry during the term of your contract.
2. You are not to keep company with men.
3. You must be home between the hours of 8 P.M. and 6 A.M. unless attending a school function.
4. You may not loiter downtown at ice cream shops.
5. You may not travel outside the city limits unless you have permission of the chairman of the board.
6. You may not ride in a carriage or an automobile with any man unless he is your father or brother.
7. You may not smoke cigars.
8. You may not wear bright colors.
9. You may under no circumstances dye your hair.
10. You must wear at least two petticoats.
11. Your dresses must not be any shorter than 2 inches above the ankles.
12. To keep the schoolroom neat and clean, you must sweep the floor at least once daily, scrub the floor at least once a week with hot soapy water, clean the blackboard at least once a day, and start the fire at 7 A.M. so the room will be warm by 8 A.M.

SOURCE: Cabell County West Virginia Board of Education, Old Sacramento Schoolhouse Museum.

- Which one of these pressures still exists for teachers in the 21st century?
- If you were to write the rules for the present time, what would come to mind?
- Do you find current pressures to be very different from the rules published in 1915?
- What are the effects of these pressures on teachers' job satisfaction, relations with each other, and performance as educators?

Intrigued by these questions, we surveyed and/or interviewed 240 teachers from a variety of public schools in California. These teachers have various degrees of experience and work in school districts with a wide range of population, ideologies, and socioeconomic status.³

In our research most teachers reported that the pressures to be a certain way were very strong (4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5). Four main pressures were identified as placing significant stress on teachers. The pressures were to (1) sacrifice personal time; (2) be super responsible; (3) always be in control; and (4) be perfect role models. As such, the current rules for teachers at the turn of the 21st century could be playfully written as follows:

Rules for Teachers—2004

1. You will do constant “little” extras
2. You will embody responsibility and be “on,” always
3. You will never smile before Christmas
4. You will be 100% pure and conservative

While reading this section, some readers will relate more than others to certain pressures. These reactions can be based on their personal experience of race, class, gender, subculture of current school, and various other life occurrences. Also, pressures may vary in how they are expressed from one school environment to another. Let us now explore each one of these pressures in more detail.

You Will Do Constant “Little” Extras

Most teachers are hard-working professionals and feel the pressure to work long hours. Society expects teachers to sacrifice and overwork in the name of dedication. In many schools there is a pressure, an unspoken message, that working long hours and doing “little” extras proves your commitment to students. While dedication in itself is a beautiful way of being, the problem lies in that there is no limit to the amount of work that needs to be done. The possibility of dedication becomes unlimited. You could always:

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Create a new lesson	Answer e-mail messages from parents
Clean your classroom	Call a parent
Change decorations in your classroom	Write more feedback on papers
Write more anecdotal records on your students	Learn something new
Write another parent newsletter	Support a new teacher
Plan another field trip	Develop new curriculum
Surf the Internet for resources	Take an online course
Head up a new committee	Mentor a student
	Collaborate with a colleague
	Add to this list

In our survey, systematically all teachers, when asked directly, reported having to sacrifice personal time to get the job done, and 83% of those teachers said they sacrificed personal time to complete their job most of the time or always. As stated by one teacher,

You could work as many hours as you want. You would never find an end to your time. Even when I go places and do activities with my family, I see [everything] as a teacher. I'm always thinking, "What can I use? This would be neat."

—Fifth Grade Teacher

Teachers are expected not only to teach their curriculum but also to tend to the extra needs of families and students, often during personal time. Teachers who work at a school with financially privileged families shared with us that a great deal of pressure was based around constantly providing more academic curriculum for students. This requires the preparation of challenging academic exercises and a richer curriculum. Other teachers find themselves working long hours focused on after-school activities and clubs, mentoring, tutoring, and socially caring for underprivileged neighborhood children.

Again, while a certain amount of dedication and little extras in one's work are not bad in themselves, in excess they have two major implications. They imply that teachers are pushed into sacrificing some of their personal time for their work. This may be a painful dilemma, costly both to family relationships and well-needed self-care activities. As illustrated by the following teacher comment:

Sometimes I feel so rushed and so tired and I think I come to school looking tired and drained. I feel like some parents want me to be perfect and perky with nylons and dressed to a T. I can't do that when I stay up until 11 grading and get here early in the morning to do something. I am so tired and I have no time for me. I look like I got hit. I can't go work out; I have to get this done. I find I don't have that balance for the gym and eating right. I am a better teacher when I do that. I'm nicer. I have more patience.

—Fifth Grade Teacher

Box 1.2 In Their Own Words

Teachers Speak of the Pressures of Dedication and Sacrifice

- "Give 100% of your time to your class."
- "Keep a cute and immaculately clean classroom."
- "Accept the fact and do not complain about how little salaries are, and apologize for having summers off."
- "Pay for all cool classroom materials and buy things for your students."
- "Do not complain: teaching is an 'easy' job."
- "Don't take personal days off because the kids are depending on you, and there's a shortage of subs."
- "Provide students with tons of homework at levels above grade level."
- "Do all the necessary paperwork all the time and have exciting lessons planned for your students so that all students are busy all the time."
- "Solve *all* student learning and behavior problems."

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Third, problems can develop when teachers chose not to fulfill the pressure of sacrifice and feel stigmatized by that difference. In the eyes of their school community, these teachers may be perceived as underperforming or less committed to the profession, even though they actually are, just not in that particular way. Teachers who are parents cannot win. If they put teaching above parenting, they may be questioned as a neglectful parent. If they put their family above teaching, they are in danger of not appearing as professional as others appear.

I had a difficult time balancing career and my son, mostly because of my feelings of hypocrisy. I felt that I was always trying to implement "best practice" for kids and then wasn't able to apply the same principles for my own. I felt that leaving him all day at the day care center was too long, and when I expressed wanting to leave our staff meeting early, it was met with strong objection. My principal told me that others resented it and said that we all had commitments (kids, appointments, personal lives) and I shouldn't be allowed to leave early if no one else could. I found this colored my outlook, and I scrutinized all demands on my time. I became really frustrated when we would be discussing, at length, a situation that was only applicable to one or two people (e.g., I can't get my e-mail to work. What do we serve for the brunch?). I think that my feelings were interpreted by others. They thought I was not caring enough for my students and school, that I was putting my child first and really didn't have a vested interest in that staff. I have never felt that the amount of time a teacher is at school (e.g., until 7 P.M. and on the weekends) is a just indicator of how effective or dedicated they are.

—Third Grade Teacher

In sum, the pressure of doing too many "little" extras and overly sacrificing personal time can have negative effects on individuals, school culture, and students. Common effects of this pressure on teachers include:

- Sacrificing their own needs for health, family, and personal space, which can eventually lead to dissatisfaction in their lives, family conflicts, and resentment against giving so much and not necessarily receiving significant appreciation in return
- Being drained of energy and, in some situations, facing professional burnout
- Feeling guilt and frustration. Teachers commonly worry that there is never enough time and that what is done is never enough or as much as one would like to do
- Doubting yourself and questioning your worth as an educator when you do set limits or try to be dedicated in ways that are different from those privileged by the pressure

Ironically, this pressure can also have negative effects on the teacher-student relationship. Although it may seem that students would gain from an overly dedicated teacher, it is questionable whether they gain on a level that is meaningful for them. Students may become more attached to and perform better for a teacher who is present, relaxed, and energetic than for a tired teacher who has prepared extra assignments. Teachers who spend enormous amounts of time and energy preparing as much as they can may sometimes become resentful of the lack of recognition and appreciation they get in return from students, principals, or colleagues.

In terms of the effects on the school culture, over-dedication can lead to comparison and competition as to who is the most dedicated and to a lack of time for bonding or supporting each other's work.

You Will Embody Responsibility and Be "On," Always . . .

Most people value the ability to be responsible. Having responsible staff members is necessary for schools to operate and is completely understandable in the context of the safety

Box 1.3 In Their Own Words**Teachers Speak of the Pressures to Be Responsible at All Costs**

- “Serve on numerous committees”
- “Have *all* students at grade level by the end of the year”
- “Cover *all* of the numerous state standards”
- “Have neat, well-organized classrooms”
- “Always keep in contact with all parents”
- “Have their students score high on standardized tests”
- “Teach math and language arts only: no art or ‘frills’”
- “Provide homework that is clearly explained to kids (for the ease of parents) to ‘keep kids busy at home’ and be responsible for its completion’

and education of large numbers of children. Being a responsible teacher usually implies being reliable, organized, and well prepared. These skills contribute to the survival of teachers, given the extreme and varied tasks that need to be accomplished. Teachers who are organized and responsible are often admired, consulted, and perceived as competent. Often, however, these teachers take on a lion’s share of the work, and this can also have negative effects. Again, it is the excessive form of this pressure that causes problems, not its appropriate and necessary form. In our research, 82% of teachers reported feeling the pressure to be organized and well prepared (beyond their preference) most of the time. In other words, while most teachers clearly value these ways of being and choose to function in a responsible and organized way, there are frequent instances where they feel compelled to engage in behaviors that they personally don’t value but that seem necessary to

avoid stigmatization from the community. We would like you, the reader, to reflect for a brief moment on your own ways of being responsible and organized.

- What does being responsible mean to you?
- Are you responsible and organized to your satisfaction?
- Do others perceive you being as responsible and organized as you think you are?
- What if your ideas of responsibility don't fit those of your school colleagues and administrators?
- What if you want to be responsible in a different way?

Consider this story:

I consider myself a good teacher and one who takes her responsibility seriously. I worked in this school district for nearly 10 years and was only absent in extreme cases. I had to be really ill to call in sick. I felt irresponsible being away from my class. I knew I had a problem when a family member decided to host a family reunion out of my town, and it happened to be during the middle of the school year. Attending the reunion would mean that I would be absent from teaching my class for almost a week. My family is quite important to me and knowing this event would only come around every 10 years made me quite interested to go. I wanted to be with my family and, yet, the stress of missing school was eating me up. My plan was to be honest with my district, explain the importance of this family time, ensure that I found myself an experienced, reliable substitute teacher, and leave a detailed education plan for him or her. I thought this was quite responsible. After talking to some colleagues, I was confused because each one warned me against being honest with our administration. I decided to see what the teachers' union president would say. The advice I received was to call in sick, plain and simple. Don't tell anyone where you are going and hope that you don't run into anyone at the airport. Now I was in a bind. I had planned to be honest. I was now burdened with worries and angry that I was being compelled to

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lie. What if someone commented on my tan? What if I found something educational from my travels that I wanted to share with my class? What if I ran into someone at the airport? What if someone from school phoned my home and I wasn't there lying sick on the couch?

—Second Grade Teacher

If you were this teacher, what would you have done?

This story illustrates well how pressures in the school system narrow possibilities and force teachers to act against their own integrity and will. In this story, everyone lost because of narrow ideas about being responsible.⁴

The school would have been more able to responsibly find an appropriate substitute who would have benefited from the detailed education plan prepared by the teacher, which would have been more relevant and appropriate for the students, who could also have shared the excitement of their teacher's trip. When criteria for responsibility are too narrow and inflexible, problems arise. When teachers are expected to model predictability and reliability as workers beyond the normal variations of life circumstances, more problematic, rigid ways of being become promoted.

You Will Never Smile Until Christmas

"Education 101" stipulates that control of your class, especially early in the school year, is critical to establish the foundation of a successful, effective instructional year. Most teachers fear that not following this pressure would either promote some sort of chaos or would be judged severely by their peers. This was evident in our research, as 68% of teachers (when asked directly) reported the need to control their students *beyond their personal preference* at least half the time. Above all of the fears associated with student behaviors was the concern that an observer would visit and evaluate, negatively, the state of the class.

Box 1.4 In Their Own Words**Teachers Speak of the Pressures to Be in Control**

- “Be strict and teach discipline”
- “Be in tight control of the class”
- “Keep classes silent when working, so you have a quiet ‘you-could-hear-a-pin-drop’ classroom”
- “Always be responsible for behavior of students”
- “Stay on top of them, don’t let them get out of hand for a second”

- What is your personal definition of being in control of your class?
- What percentage of the time do you control your class to your satisfaction?
- Would your principal and colleagues agree with that number, or would they have a different estimate?

Although a certain amount of control can definitely be useful and necessary in some instances, an excessive focus on this issue can actually be costly to teachers and have the opposite effect. For example, the expectation of control can get teachers to spend a large amount of energy worrying and plotting new ways to use classroom management ideas. It can also influence them to be strict and impatient—not their preferred self. It can create an unrealistic context where one person (granted, an adult) is expected to be responsible for the behavior of thirty others. In its extreme form, this pressure, more than any other, can drain teachers’ energy and enthusiasm. Some teachers even report feeling trapped between either connecting with their colleagues and being distant with students or connected with students but being distant from their colleagues. The following two stories illustrate these

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experiences, the first one being from a rather petite teacher who chose to be connected with her students while the second story illustrates a teacher's painful dilemma in attempting to stay connected with a colleague.

In the early 70s, I was teaching big classes and had found that the students worked best in small groups. These classes fairly bubbled with energy, and it sometimes happened that the door of the classroom was suddenly thrown open by the principal or vice-principal, who would stand with hands on hips and roar, "When your teacher is not in the classroom, I don't want to hear a sound out of you!" At such times I could never decide if it was worse to stand up and reveal that I was in fact present, or just to wait until he finished glaring and left! Whenever I tried later to explain my methods and reasons to the administration, there was no respect for such innovation, only respect for silence in the classroom. Years later I met one of my former students by accident, and she was very happy to see me again. She thanked me for these classes, as she had never forgotten the unique humanness of that environment in the midst of the rigidity of the school's style of education.

—Second Grade Teacher

Many years ago, I decided to share a classroom because I needed time to take care of educational demands and family needs. I was paired with a teacher who was thoughtful and passionate about teaching. We had things in common, so we assumed our management styles would be similar. As it turned out, she was more structured and controlling than I, and also more outspoken about her management program. I agreed to try to use it since I knew we should be consistent. My awkwardness grew as time went on because I knew I didn't want to control kids so much; I was used to a more democratic approach. The thing I most noticed was that my relationship with the kids was distant, like never before in my years of teaching. I attributed it to my not being there full time, yet later when I thought about

it more, I realized it was because I was uncomfortable laying down thick laws, a strict point system, and not resolving conflicts in a way I was used to.

—Third Grade Teacher

Ironically, teachers themselves do not even meet those expectations. . . . Think back to those staff meetings. Consider those staff members who whisper their opinions to their neighbors, giggle in the back of the room, correct papers while the meeting is going on, allow their cell phones to interrupt, and make unmannerly comments during discussions.

When control is the overriding theme, the school culture also suffers. The pressure to control in some schools is so high that the level of excitement for learning barely exists. Such pressure creates a stressful environment for both teachers and students, who may experience disconnection and disengagement.

You Will Be 100% Pure

There clearly is a professional pressure that requires teachers to be good role models. Most of the time, this pressure matches with teachers' intentions, since they willingly want to help children understand the socially agreed-upon "acceptable" behaviors. Schools were created to assist children in becoming "good citizens." Problems arise from the limited ways in which a good role model or good citizen is defined—what it includes and what it excludes. In other words, the issue lies in the narrow criteria dictated by the pressure and its invasiveness in all areas of life.

Half of all teachers responding to the open-ended survey reported experiencing the pressure to be a good role model, and, when asked directly, 90% of teachers reported feeling the good-role-model pressure most of the time.

Being a good role model often means replicating and modeling the political beliefs and values of the dominant

Box 1.5 In Their Own Words**Teachers Speak of the Pressure to be a Good Role Model**

- “Reflect present political views, and be conservative”
- “Always smile; be happy, patient and agreeable”
- “Never get mad”
- “Be nurturing”
- “Always be professional and prompt”
- “Radiate confidence and remain positive”
- “Get along with everyone”
- “Behave with a higher standard of behavior outside of the classroom than other people (even higher than parents)”
- “Do not drink alcohol or smoke”
- “Always be well rested (‘you work only nine months a year and only from 8:30 to 3’)”
- “Have an impeccable memory (know ‘Johnny’s’ name 10 years later)”
- “Of course, have perfect kids yourself”

culture—meaning white, middle class, heterosexual, and conservative. In our surveys, many teachers even reported the pressure to dress a certain way:

- “Dress in demure, modest, and conservative clothing”
- “Do not dye your hair, have body piercings or tattoos”
- “I can never run with my dog wearing old sweats”

The pressure around being a good role model requires that teachers walk, talk, and breathe according to society’s standards of “acceptable” behavior. Many teachers have commented on the fact that they can never act totally free outside of their homes (unless the home is at a great distance from school). This pressure requires not only that teachers represent the

dominant culture politically, but also that their actions are based in high moral standards. This means being a perfectly moral individual at all times, not only while at work. Even when the children are gone, anyone can walk into a teacher's classroom and make a judgment upon the appropriateness of her dress, her body language, her activities, and the cleanliness of her classroom, among other factors. When she leaves the school, a teacher is often conscious of the possible judgment or interpretation any bystander could make about everything. Within minutes, she could be judged on the vehicle she drives, the appearance of the car, any bumper stickers she has displayed, which type of music is coming from the car, where she is going, and if she is speeding.

This is even true when a teacher is enjoying a weekend or a holiday, as illustrated by the following story:

Once I was at the park on a weekend, enjoying a beer with lunch. I had on shorts and a bikini top because it was hot. As I played Frisbee, I heard, "Hi, Ms. M!" It was a student and his family. I felt completely awkward, as if I had been caught working at a strip club or something.

—Fourth Grade Teacher

As a result of this pressure, most teachers report hiding at least one aspect of themselves. In our surveys, 30% to 40% of teachers reported withholding personal information on a variety of items from their school colleagues. Aspects that were most commonly not disclosed fell in the categories of "experimentation during teen and college years" and "alcohol and drug use." Sexual orientation was the third most taboo subject, with close to 25% of teachers reporting that it was unsafe to share. These data are much higher than the proportion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the general population, which is estimated at 10%. Overall, this shows that teachers are most likely to refrain from disclosing any personal information, especially if there is any risk of it being considered outside of dominant norms.

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Question for Educators: What would *you* feel uncomfortable disclosing at your school site?

Why? _____

For some of you, the discomfort would be so great that you may not even risk writing the information down in this book. For others, what you may or may not wish to disclose is not apparent to you, because you are used to functioning in such a way. Yet again, a few of you may have the good fortune of being at a school site where you have great trust and connection with your colleagues.

What are the effects of this pressure and the scrutiny associated with it? Teachers have to be aware that somewhere, somehow, someone could see them engage in socially questionable behaviors. The costs of having to follow this pressure, which may not fit for them, and also of being the subject of social scrutiny, can be great. Common effects of this situation include:

- *Isolation:* Especially if you have to hide an important part of yourself or your life. Examples of this include teachers from a different ethnicity, religion, or class or those struggling with an illness, a divorce, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, political views, or simply hobbies that may stand outside of the norm. This isolation can disconnect these teachers from the rest of the staff and from their students, as they cannot fully relate. In other words, their whole sense of self cannot be involved genuinely in relationship.

- *Self-alienation:* Feeling like a fraud, like someone you are pretending to be

- *Wasted energy:* Spending energy engaging in practices that you don't necessarily believe in and filtering out your natural inclinations

- *Resentment and frustration:* Being sour about having to participate in this situation

In some ways, this pressure leads to expectations of teachers being icons of virtue in society. Given that teachers can never be a perfect role model, it may at times contribute to disrespect from the community. Parents may judge a teacher as being too strict or not strict enough, too nurturing or too cold, too academically focused or not focused enough . . . who can fit the narrow mold of the perfect role model?!

In some ways, teachers are “on” all the time. Regardless of location or time, they are seen as teachers. Whether the student-teacher relationship is current or not, the teacher will always be seen as a teacher. In other words, once a teacher, always a teacher. What are the effects of this good role model pressure on teachers’ relationship with students? When a teacher develops contrived ways of dealing with students, potentially useful options of relating are left out along with the teacher’s unique and creative talents. In addition, the narrow way of relating may not fit with all students’ needs and leave some alienated, not to mention that all kids miss out on the possibilities of being exposed to the richness of each teacher’s multiple ways of being.

In sum, the extreme pressure to be a perfect role model can have several negative effects on children by:

- Modeling limited ways of being
- Exposing children to only the dominant culture and leaving them less able to appreciate the value of diversity
- Depriving students who may not fit in the dominant culture of a valuable role model
- Confirming the necessity of pretending to be someone you are not, or of attempting to belong to the majority instead of accepting and honoring your differences

The expectation of high morality is more prevalent from adults than students, who in general connect more readily to a teacher’s authentic self.

What are the effects of this pressure on the school culture? In extreme situations, the pressure on teachers to be perfect role models can create a false environment where everyone is pretending to be an icon of social perfection. In most

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situations, unfortunately, the staff know very little about each other as people, and, as a result, their conversation focuses on problem-saturated accounts of students or superficial conversations about work.

CONCLUSION

Which one of these pressures do you think would be amusing for people to read a century from now?

Although pressures can provide a sense of direction, their rigidity does not take into account the dynamics and complexity of relationships and context. As a result, these pressures can limit a teacher's access to possible solutions when faced with a challenging circumstance. These pressures

Figure 1.2 A teacher's mind and best judgment can become cluttered and impeded with confusing and opposing thoughts



can leave a teacher constantly doubting herself and her choices, which in the end can be very draining of energy and can actually contribute further to problems. This also contributes to the enormous teacher drop-out rate of 30% in the first five years (Merrow, 2001). In the end, a teacher's mind and best judgment can become cluttered and impeded with confusing and opposing thoughts. See Figure 1.2.

Despite all of these challenges, numerous individuals remain in education because of their love for children and the meaningful rewards of teaching (see the playful descriptions in the box below). In many ways this shows that these

Box 1.6 In Their Own Words

Teachers' Descriptions of Their Work Experience

- "Teaching is like a wild and crazy rafting adventure in mega challenging terrain . . . exhilarating, exciting, strenuous, exhausting, rewarding, and unpredictable, very up and down. One minute you are laughing and smiling, the next crying. But it's a rafting adventure for the huge cause of making a difference in the lives of others."
- "To be a teacher, you need to be able to have your eyes open, ears open, arms open, mind open, and heart open all the time."
- "Teaching is like being a Swiss Army knife, because you have to be ready each day and open to what tool is needed."
- "Teaching is quite a job! You are in charge of your own good time!"
- "Teaching children is like building a beautiful house . . . many tools are used, materials are needed, time is invested, and it is a labor of love."
- "Teaching is like holding the future in my hands."

(Continued)

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Box 1.6 (Continued)

- “As a teacher, I have to be a symphony conductor. Sometimes the brass is too brash and the percussion is too loud. I sense the tempo and mood and alter it, if necessary.”
- “Teaching can be a mini-adventure, almost every day.”
- “Teaching is a box of chocolates. Each day is a surprise. You never know what you are going to get.”

pressures can be minimized to a point where many people can have a satisfying work life and function at their best. An awareness of teachers' experiences of the context can foster not only greater compassion in the face of problems but also allow a more realistic and effective approach to the prevention and solving of complex problems.

NOTES

1. The concepts of personalities, strengths and weaknesses are introduced here as a reflection of the everyday conversations in schools. They are however incongruent with the post-structuralist philosophy presented in this book where individuals are not assumed to have a core personality with a set reservoir of assets/deficits but rather are constituted by multiple selves shaped by a variety of relationships and contexts. This will be explained further in a later section of this chapter.

2. Please note that by “principals” we mean both principals and assistant principals. We have chosen to use only one title simply to reduce the complexity of the text. We are also aware that not all principals will experience contextual pressures in the particular ways in which they are discussed. The experience of these pressures will vary depending on race, socioeconomic status, class, etc.

3. Our survey methods involved using two overlapping questionnaires. These questionnaires were completed during staff gatherings, and the participants were given the option of remaining anonymous. The first contained mostly open-ended questions, where

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teachers were asked, for instance, about the general pressures experienced. In answering the survey, most teachers did not have the time to detail an exhaustive list of all the pressures they experienced. It is likely that they mostly reflected on that which was salient in their experience that particular day or week. As researchers, it is a choice that we made to first ask open-ended questions to our participants in order to gather a broader range of ideas. The second questionnaire was a multiple-choice version that covered similar content area. It was interesting to contrast the response generated through free writing with the response from a more structured question.

4. Unfortunately, antagonistic relationships between the union and administrators add to these problems as tasks and responsibilities become so rigidly and narrowly defined that the possibility of being flexible and adapt to the changing realities of life becomes eliminated.