
BURNED IN

*Fueling the Fire
to Teach*

EDITED BY

**Audrey A. Friedman
Luke Reynolds**



Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

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Teacher Orientation

JIM BURKE

We will become better teachers not by trying to fill the potholes in our souls but by knowing them so well that we can avoid falling into them.

—Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

OUR WORK IS NEVER THE SAME. It makes a complex array of ever-shifting demands on us, each of which has the power to cause in us profound feelings of disorientation that can undermine our ability to do our work or experience the deep sense of purpose and pleasure we sought when we began teaching. We enter into the profession guided by a narrative we have lived, one we have waited to tell about ourselves: becoming the teacher who changes others' lives through our love of students and subject, instilling in students the love of a discipline of which we have now become a disciple. We imagine a life steeped in traditions that go back hundreds of years. During our preparation to become teachers we have been in conversation with ourselves, about who we are, why we are here, and what we will do with our lives. We are, at that point, deeply oriented, our existential compass firmly fixed on the northernmost point of our dreams. Then the bell rings. Kids come. Complexity enters. Life happens.

Our job, to paraphrase William Stafford's poem "Vocation," is to help the world (and our students) find out what it is trying to be. If it were easy, anyone could do it. But it is not and thus takes a very real toll on those who devote their lives to teaching, even as

Burn On, Teacher! (But Where's That Lighter?)

MICHAEL DUNN

YOU NEVER FORGET YOUR FIRST CLASS. Fresh out of college, as idealistic as they come, I was beginning a year volunteering at an all-boys Catholic high school in the Bronx, teaching religion and English to classes with 35 sophomore boys in each. It was early September 1990, and the hair was in the style of those square-cut Afros of the time. Their names and faces are indeed "burned in": Jamie from Puerto Rico, Ed from Bulgaria, Declan from Ireland, LeShawn from Jamaica, Carlos from the Dominican Republic. I still see them, wearing blue jackets and thin ties, waiting to find out if the newbie had the faintest clue what he was doing. They soon found out.

I began with an overhead transparency of my favorite prayer—the Prayer of St. Francis—asking them to read it along with me: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. . . . Where there is darkness, let me sow light . . ." A few read, many mumbled, and some seemed to be breathing somewhat heavier than the situation should warrant. As I went on with my lesson, heads began dropping onto bent elbows. After a few minutes I noticed Carlos in the front row making some sort of tally on his desk. When I asked him about it, he said that's how many times I had said "Um" so far (42), and the period wasn't even half gone.

I hadn't a clue what I was doing, nor an ounce of preparation, but through sheer persistence and a sense of humor, I survived. Now, 20 years on, beginning my 18th year teaching English at a

Getting Burned

ANDY HARGREAVES

IDON'T TEACH CHILDREN ANY MORE. Not directly, anyway. I teach adults who teach children. I try to keep a little bit of the child alive in all of them, of course. Just as importantly, I try to keep a bit of that child alive in myself—hopeful, passionate, playful, committed, trusting, resilient, and optimistic. In my life as a professor, I'm a writer and a researcher. I'm a consultant, a coach, and a supervisor. But more than anything, first and last, I'll always be a teacher. It's one of the very best things to be.

You might say it's easy to get excited about teaching when you're teaching highly educated adults. And in many ways, you'd be right. Mostly, they don't show up really late; they've usually eaten before they come to class; they don't intimidate their professors; and they don't beat each other up. And it's easy to be inspirational when you only have to teach two or three classes every week instead of four or five or even more every day. Any professor who claims they are burned out, you can argue, is just a whiny princess who can't even abide an infinitesimally small pea.

And yet, for all the advantages of academic life, there are professorial colleagues who do come to manifest that "deadening of the intellect" that Willard Waller harshly claimed afflicted the psyche of schoolteachers in his classic book *The Sociology of Teaching* in 1932. Not many people talk about burnout in academic life. Indeed, the whole idea of academic burnout might strike many other people like emergency room doctors, grief counselors, or troops in combat as just an outrageous oxymoron.

Subject Love

ROSETTA MARANTZ COHEN

FOR THE PAST 25 YEARS I have been investigating the mysteries of veteran teacher commitment, those peculiar traits of character and intellect that allow certain teachers to remain deeply engaged and invested in the profession over long periods of time while others burn out or grow bored and indifferent to the work. Back in the mid-1980s my doctoral dissertation tracked the careers of five veteran teachers working in large suburban schools who were still passionate and enthusiastic about teaching after spending upwards of 30 years in the field. Later, I looked at urban teachers who displayed the same traits: a strange and wonderful resilience to the assaults of bureaucratic idiocy, misbehavior, and overwork.

But the subject of teacher commitment had been interesting to me long before I started any graduate work. I grew up in a family where professional passion was a daily object lesson. My mother, a French teacher in a regional New Jersey high school, was literally obsessed with her work. In the 1960s and 1970s she was the only working mother among all my friends, and though my father's salary alone was certainly adequate to support our family, she would never have dreamed of quitting. From the moment she began to work, teaching became the center of her life. Being a French teacher, she used to say, "defined her" and justified her "existence on earth"; it gave her credibility in a world where women's identities were often circumscribed by narrow domestic strictures, and it provided a safety net in case of financial disaster (a condition that, as a child of the Depression, she always vaguely feared). But my moth-

Practitioner Inquiry and the Messy Reality of Classroom Practice

CURT DUDLEY-MARLING

AS I BEGAN WRITING THIS ESSAY I read a piece by Cary Tennis (2010), an advice columnist for Salon.com, linking the depressing political environment to Fox News, a consumerist culture, and a failing educational system. This casual reference to “a failing educational system” is emblematic of what is widely taken as common sense among the media, educational policy makers, and the American public: Public schools in the United States are failing to adequately educate our youth. Americans’ ambivalence toward its schools is reflected in the most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup annual poll of the public’s attitudes toward the public schools. Reflecting a long-standing trend, Americans continue to express a low opinion of public schools in general, while ironically giving relatively high marks to their local schools (Bushaw & McNee, 2009). Presented with this finding, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan offered a particularly harsh evaluation of American schools:

Too many people don’t understand how bad their own schools are. They always think it’s somebody else’s kid who’s not being educated. They don’t understand that it’s their own kid who’s being short-changed. That’s part of our challenge. How do you awaken the public to believe that your own kid isn’t getting what they need and you don’t know it. . . . We need to wake them up. (Richardson, 2009, p. 29)

Burning Out in the Social Studies

JAMES W. LOEWEN

IN THE YEARS SINCE MY BOOK *Lies My Teacher Told Me* debuted in 1995 I must have spoken in front of 20,000 teachers of social studies and history. What have I learned? All kinds of tips and tricks on how to teach history more effectively, on the bright side. On the darker side, however, I've learned that teachers of history/social studies divide into two groups: those who teach creatively and those who don't. Unfortunately, I think the two categories divide about one-third and two-thirds. Students who languish under the second type spend more time with their textbooks than do students in any other subject.

This finding left me stunned at first. I would have thought maybe plane geometry. After all, how can students of plane geometry interview their folks about dodecahedrons? How can they use community resources? old folks? the census? the Web? books in the library? Yet social studies students can use all of these sources of information and more. The two-thirds of history teachers who just teach from the textbook are not happy. Some teach this way because they feel they must because their students face "objective," high-stakes exams, often associated with the No Child Left Behind Act. Most of these tests are in multiple-choice format to facilitate machine grading. Typically they are "twig tests"—not testing the forest for the trees, not even testing trees, but only the twigs—questions like "The Civil War began in (A) 1776, (B) 1860, (C) 1861, (D) 1961, or (E) all of the above." Teachers feel they must teach to these

Teachers: Arsonists of the Best Kind

AUDREY A. FRIEDMAN

Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

—William Butler Yeats

TO CREATE AND SUSTAIN ORDINARY COMBUSTION, three factors, known as the *fire triangle*, are essential: oxygen, a fuel source, and heat (Peige, 1977). Arson is the deliberate tampering with one or more of these factors to create combustion. In examining critical elements that lead to effective educational reform, Cohen and Ball (1999) identify a *learning triangle* of factors that enhance capacity and interaction: teachers, students, and materials (including technologies). They argue that the relationship among these three variables contributes to capacity as “interactions among teachers and students around educational material” (p. 2) yield instruction. Context (classroom and school), which is omitted from the triangle, however, is also a critical variable of educational reform because classrooms vary extensively within schools and schools vary extensively within districts. Of the four variables—teacher, context, students, and pedagogy (which includes curriculum and instruction)—the teacher is the only variable that (a) interacts with and impacts all three variables; (b) can manipulate or “tamper with” (in the most positive way) all three; and (c) can enter and exit the triangle at the most auspicious moments. The context provides oxygen, students are the fuel source, and pedagogy