

Empowerment: Burn-Out Prevention. A Progress Report

Burnout

The prevalence of burnout in the population of teachers is rather high. The percentage of severely burnout teachers in Austria, Germany and Switzerland lies between 16 and 28 according to studies by Barth (1992), Kramis-Aebischer (1995), and Gamsjäger & Sauer (1996).

The findings about the development of teacher burnout – as a dependent variable of age – are not concordant. There seems not to be a positive correlation between age and the degree of burnout, as measured by burnout scales. Several studies indicate that there is a maximum of burnout between one and five years of job duration; according to others the peak is situated between seven and ten years (Schmitz 2000, p. 52sq).

When we started our seminar in Luxembourg, we were surprised that most of the (exclusively female) participants were very young. Most of them had been in-service for a period of two to five years. Just one teacher had an in-service experience of 18 years.

An important factor of burnout seems to be *the unrealistic assessment of one's own potential to act effectively in the professional field* - a phenomenon that is rather widespread in the population of beginners. Idealistic and emotionally highly involved teachers are most threatened by burnout, when they realize that they are not able to translate into action what they had dreamed of. Many of the young participants in our seminar, indeed, had started their professional life with great enthusiasm and high expectancies, but, after two years or so of professional activity, they had to recognize that their initial ideas were unrealistic.

When a teacher's role-definition is not just limited to the function of being an instructor, he or she inevitably gets into *role conflicts and role ambiguities*: How is it possible, for instance, to be an understanding pedagogue trying to establish a personalized relationship with his or her students and to be a civil servant at the same time who has to make a selection of "good" and "bad" students?

One more factor of burnout lies in the fact of *poor communication and cooperation* between the staff members of a school. Most teachers are "single combatants". At a first glance this seems to give you a high degree of freedom in organizing your personal pedagogical work, but it also goes along with an increasing isolation, which may become dramatic when you are confronted with problem situations you are not able to resolve by your own.

In a preparatory meeting we asked the teachers to write down their motives for participating in the seminar and the expectations they had. In relation to the first point, they mentioned stress, exhaustion, the feeling not to be able to meet the demands of their job. Concerning their expectations, they said that they wanted to improve their coping with stress, to develop more efficient strategies in dealing with difficulties, more specifically with "problematic" students, to get acquainted with new teaching methods, to find partners they can communicate with.

These statements are related to the factors generating burnout we mentioned before. Though the participants did not name the lack of communication and cooperation in their professional field, it became increasingly evident in the course of the two years we worked

together, that most of them had no partners they could cooperate with, and that their isolation – as regards their professional life – was hard to bear.

Self-efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy played a central part in our in-service training project. (The more accurate expression is “*perceived self-efficacy*” or “*self-efficacy beliefs*”.)

According to the American psychologist Albert Bandura, self-efficacy beliefs are “beliefs in one’s capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura 1997, p. 3). Self-efficacy beliefs are optimistic subjective self-beliefs related to one’s own competencies.

In comparison to people with low self-efficacy beliefs, those who have high beliefs are planning their actions in a more efficient way and are more aware of their real capabilities and resources. They take initiatives more willingly, they are more tenacious “keeping the ball”, and they are more resistant to failures (Schmitz 2000, p.13). It can be assumed that self-efficacy is a protective factor against teacher burnout (Schmitz 2001).

Self-efficacy beliefs can be *individual* or *collective*. The concept of *collective self-efficacy* is complementary to the concept of individual self-efficacy. It means that the members of a group or a human system share common beliefs about their competencies.

Taking into account that the degree of professional isolation is very high in Luxembourgish schools, we focused on collective self-efficacy. Collective self-efficacy beliefs should be enhanced in the group of the participants itself as well as in their external field of professional activity. Therefore the participants should be encouraged to collaborate in small groups and to conceive shared projects, and to find partners in their schools with whom they would work together.

Resources

In the *transactional theory of stress* by Richard S. Lazarus, the concept of *resources* plays an important part in the process of coping with stress (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, 1986).

Three kinds of resources have been distinguished: *personal resources* are, amongst others, cognitive and organizational abilities, perseverance and particularly self-efficacy beliefs; *social resources* are such things as being embedded in a social network, the support one can get from partners, friends, colleagues, etc.; the principal *material resource* is, of course, money, but also time, particular tools, etc.

During our in-service training, the participants should become aware of the resources that are at their disposal, and learn how to use them. At the same time they should also know about the *barriers* – personal, social, and material – that hinder a person to cope with stress effectively.

One of the most important social resources during the in-service training should be found in working together in *dyads* or so called *tandems*, not only during the seminar sessions, but also in between the seminars. This method of cooperative work in tandems has proved to be very effective in teacher in-service training (Wahl et al. 1995; Breitung-Muhr & Rucker 2000).

Action research

According to Altrichter & Posch (1998, p. 13), *action research* should help teachers to cope with problems in their professional practice by themselves, and to be innovative. At the same time their professional competence should be improved. Therefore, action research can be seen in a close relationship with coping and self-efficacy.

In the in-service training, the participants were expected to initiate an action research project, together with their respective tandem partner.

Diary

In the field of action research, keeping a diary has revealed itself as “one of the most important tools of teachers-in-research” (Altrichter & Posch 1998, p. 26). It becomes the “companion” of the teacher’s research process and of his or her professional development (ibid., p.27).

The Seminar

Methodologically, the seminar was characterized by the fact that the participants were working on tasks directly linked to their practical professional activities. They were working in different social settings – individually, in dyads and in the plenum group. The periods of activity were framed by so called *theoretical spots* given by the trainers. These spots were lasting 5 to 20 minutes and were meant to reflect on past experiences, to build a theoretical frame around the participants’ activities, and to make a link to their professional situation.

The seminar was organized in four Modules.

The starting point of the seminar, in Module 1, was the *reconstruction of the participants’ own learning history (or biography)*. This task had been explicated to them in a preparatory meeting, and they had to do it as a “homework” for the first Module. By doing this reconstructing, the participants should get a deeper understanding of the main lines of their learning biography, and they should reflect on their personal, social and material resources as well as on the barriers impeding on coping with stress. In this context, working in dyads revealed itself as a useful method to confront one’s own view of situations with the perspectives of a partner.

The reconstruction of the learning history constituted the basis for the description and analysis of the different *social and professional networks* in which the participants are standing. This analysis also included reflections upon such aspects as autonomy vs. heteronomy, private and professional roles and the possible ambiguities or conflicts resulting from them. This task aimed at becoming aware of existing resources and barriers, and of personal strengths (resilience) and weaknesses (vulnerability). An analysis of this kind is necessary in order to make a realistic assessment of a problematic situation and of one’s resources, in other words to become more capable to cope with stress.

The next step consisted in conceiving a personal *research project* (in the sense of action research). The participants were asked to define a central topic of their teacher activity and to analyze its features and implications. This task should be done individually as well as in dyadic settings.

The three following Modules were operationalizations of the basis laid in the first Module and should therefore be described more briefly.

The topic of the second Module was *communication and cooperation*. On one hand, the participants got acquainted with an electronic communicative platform (*FirstClass*). Information and communication technologies are excellent tools in building learning communities. From this point of view, they represent an important material resource.

Another dimension we were working on was improving the perception of self and others and the communicative competencies in face-to-face situations. To engage a (female) clown as a referent seemed especially useful, as clown acting offers the possibility to show feelings that are generally hidden. The competencies we have to strengthen in order to be convincing as a clown are also important in every day school life (Ballreich 1992, p. 218):

- a positive attitude towards the own body, physical wellbeing and vitality, which are also sources of energy for cognitive functions;
- being in good contact with the supporting ground;
- high expressiveness;
- using improvisation.

The concern for physical wellbeing as one of the pillars of burnout prevention was a transversal our seminar.

Serena Vit and Lewis E. Graham have described these ideas in the context of cooperation and collaboration applying Csikszentmihalyi's *flow concept* to teams (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). This would enable the members to transgress the mentality of "the lonesome cowboy". Flow teams use the power of self-organization (Capra 1999). One of their characteristics, beside creativity and flexibility, is very intense circulation of information (Vit & Graham 1999, p. 434).

In the third Module, the participants got an introduction to an alternative method of teaching, which was – according to their wishes – the *project approach*. This workshop was build up in such a way that it could be considered as a model of the project approach. The same participative methods were applied as in real school settings, so that the participants were able to transfer this teaching method to their own classroom. And in fact, they started to apply this method in their own classroom after the workshop.

The aim of the fourth Module was to improve the participants' competencies in *dealing with problematic behavior*. We approached the topic on two levels:

On the first level, the participants got trained in the technique of *situation and case descriptions*. According to Schratz & Thonhauser (1996), working with case studies is an important element in teacher in-service training. In a first step, the participants should learn to make a distinction between description and subjective interpretation; then, in a second step, to become aware of the fact that various perspectives on the same object are possible and, consequently, also various and divergent interpretations. Taking into account these various perspectives and interpretations can be helpful in the assessment of a problem situation. On the basis of theoretical spots and video documents, the participants described a case taken out from their professional experience.

On the second level – in an interactive setting -, the technique of *peer counseling* was presented and exercised on the basis of the participants' case descriptions. Peer counseling is a well structured counseling session taking place without an "expert". The people participating in such a session are for instance members of the teacher staff. They discuss about and reflect on possibilities of actions to be undertaken in order to solve the problem (Mutzeck 2002; Tietze 2003).

The Module was closed by "*Returning into my network*", i. e. going back to the starting point of the first Module, and by *reviewing and evaluating the diary*. So, the participants had the opportunity of reflecting on the journey they had made together.

What the participants reported about the way they are embedded in their professional network was very diversified: from the teacher starting a school project in which all the colleagues are engaged to the one who makes a new start at a school she doesn't know yet. But they all spoke about being more honest towards themselves. Allowing themselves the need for resourcing, the right not to know how to go on and the right for getting help, the desire to take better care of their physical well-being are some examples of what was talked about. They agreed that they needed help from external professionals to transfer the methods they experienced during the seminars, action research or intervision for instance, into every-day-life of their schools. The (lonesome) lonely cowboy culture of our schools seems so deeply rooted in our schools, that it seems impossible for the individual teacher to provoke changes towards cultures of collaboration. If she finds allies among her colleagues to get the support from the Ministry of Education to start a school project, she is able to make innovations, which seemed impossible before.

The participating teachers and the coordinators of the seminars agreed after two years of working together that empowerment as a prevention of burnout may be a way to increase the quality of learning, teaching, and living at our schools.

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