

Taking Care of Teacher



The importance of self-care in a demanding profession.

The affective skills - and social-emotional learning in general - are increasingly being valued and explored in schools and supported by research. In his excellent book, "The Social Neuroscience of Education" ¹ psychologist Louis Cozolino outlines many ways in which research in neuroscience is

highlighting the essential role of relationship and of the teacher in literally sculpting the brain of the learner. As teachers, knowing how to take good care of ourselves is important partly because we need to sustain our health and sense of purpose and enjoyment, but also because our pivotal role in relation to our students depends as much on 'how we are' as it does on 'what we teach'.

Teachers are sometimes described as being members of 'the caring professions' - a group that also includes doctors, nurses and social workers. For many this career path is a vocation, a calling - a gift even. We may feel privileged to be entrusted with the care, growth and learning of our students and we may find meaning and purpose in our daily efforts to nurture the next generation. As educators we give a lot - we invest our time and energy in our work, and we give something personal of ourselves to our students. This may often feel stimulating and rewarding, but over time we can also be in danger of burnout². There is always more that can be done, better ways of teaching things, more meetings to attend, more emails to respond to, more duties to take on. At the end of the day we may feel fulfilled and inspired, but we may also feel drained and exhausted. Teaching can be both nourishing and depleting, and if the balance swings towards the latter, sustainability and health can be at risk.

This article looks at stress and our relationship to it as an example of how increased self-awareness can help sustain us. Knowing how best to deal with stress not only helps us avoid burnout - it can also enhance our teaching skills.

Befriending Stress

If you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles.
Sun Tzu, 6th Century BC

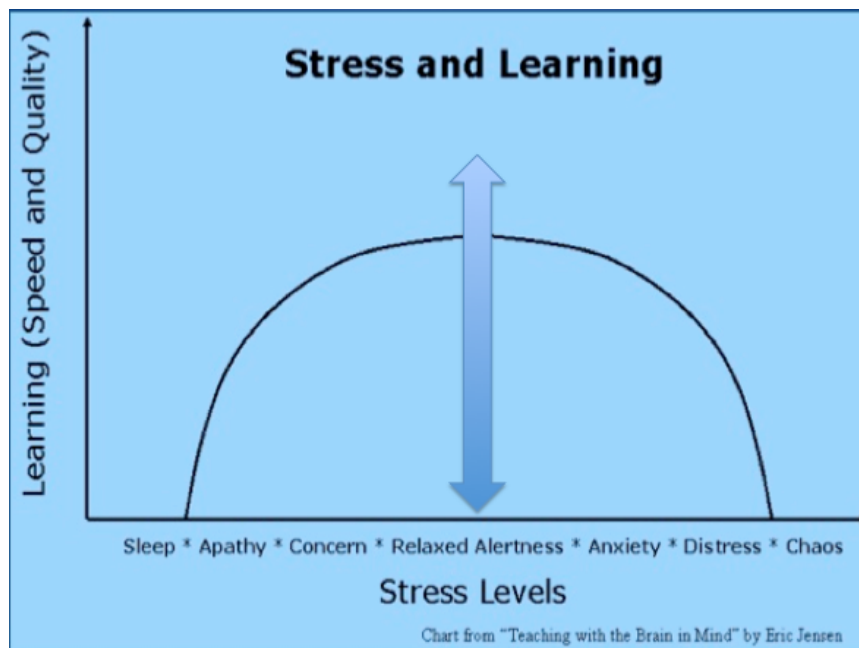
If we can we get to know our personal 'stress signature', to understand experientially how stress manifests in our mind and body and even to befriend it, can we use it to our advantage? From my own experience I believe the answer is

¹ "The Social Neuroscience of Education" by Louis Cozolino 2013 WW Norton & Co.

² <http://wmhp.cmhaontario.ca/workplace-mental-health-core-concepts-issues/issues-in-the-workplace-that-affect-employee-mental-health/job-burnout>

'Yes' - and I further believe that we can employ this understanding to enhance our pedagogical approaches.

First of all we need to accept that stress is not always our enemy, and that to get up every day and do the work we do, a degree of stress is necessary. This also applies to our students - a totally stress-free environment may not be optimal for learning. Looking at the graph below we can see how the absence of stress can induce apathy, lethargy and boredom. We cease to pay attention, are not engaged in our learning and will probably drift off into daydreams and even sleep. At the other extreme, a chaotic, highly stressful situation will induce an anxious response, and we then become incapable of opening to new learning.



Alertness does have a connection to the processes of fear and there is a semantic connection between 'alert' and 'alarmed'. We should then perhaps acknowledge that fear doesn't totally preclude learning - we are wired to learn to avoid danger through fear and there may also be some individuals who are at their most creative when under pressure - but in general teachers who cultivate deep learning and open investigation are often creating a state of 'relaxed alertness' in their classrooms and in their students. Similarly, in Language Acquisition theory optimal learning environments are described as those in which learners' 'affective filters' are lowered, so they can maximize access to the 'comprehensible input' that surrounds them. How though do we consciously create these optimal conditions for learning? In addition to our normal classroom management skills, one approach can be to develop a more mindful awareness of our own state of mind - and body.

Teaching Mindfully

When looking at the general development of mindfulness in education, I find it helpful to distinguish 3 main aspects:

In the work that I have done with teachers around learning to 'teach more mindfully' (as opposed to learning to 'teach mindfulness' programs to students) we have looked at various ways to enhance our sense of classroom presence and our sensitivity in the moment whilst teaching and interacting. Key to this is developing the ability to notice physical sensations and mental or emotional reactions to what is happening right now.

Body as Barometer



The more we can tune in to the body, and use it as an early warning radar system or as a barometer that is giving us information about our reactions to what is happening around us, the more we will be able to assess the climate and to make informed decisions that can help create a more responsive classroom. Understanding our own emotional reactions and triggers also helps us develop greater empathic understanding for others and we can learn to not overreact or to take things so personally.

One common cause of teacher burnout is the stress that is brought on from dealing with difficult students and difficult situations³. How can we learn to navigate such stormy waters more skillfully? By using the body as a compass we can sometimes chart a better course than if we rely solely on the more analytical, problem-solving part of our brain.

Not so long ago, I was about to take a group of high school students on a 'sensory safari' – a walk off campus that would involve silence, deep listening and reflection. Having worked in middle school for the majority of my teaching career, I have never seen myself as a high school teacher. As we left the school it began to rain lightly and I stopped the group in a covered alleyway to explain the ground rules for this somewhat unusual learning experience – one that can work against the naturally social grain of the teenage brain. As I stood waiting for the group to assemble I noticed a knot in my belly and an elevated heartbeat. There was a dampness in my palms. A familiar stress signature was beginning to take shape and I took a moment to tune in and turn towards these symptoms. Was I feeling threatened? Yes. Why? Perhaps the body language of the students, my sense that they might not be into this, that I was maybe taking them too far out of their comfort zone. Underlying that I realized I have always had a secret fear of teaching older adolescents. Perhaps because of my own issues with authority and some deeper rebellious tendencies, perhaps because

³ Job stressors, personality and burnout in primary school teachers

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1348/000709905X90344/abstract/>

of my experiences at age 11 when I was the youngest and shortest of 800 boys in a British grammar school where bullying was the norm. For whatever reasons, my vague fear of not being able to control a group was manifesting itself as threat symptoms in my body.

When we are threatened we close up, our thought processes narrow down towards 'tunnel vision' – not a good state to be in for teaching mindful awareness in nature! So what could I do? All of this happened in the space of a few moments, but the key step had already been taken - by noticing the physical symptoms, and acknowledging what I was feeling I was already giving myself some space to maneuver with awareness, instead of being subconsciously propelled by my reactions. Deciding then that a closed response was not where I wanted to be for the next 40 minutes, I was able to turn a little towards the physical symptoms, take a deeper breath, let go more on the out breath, allow these symptoms to be there ("I don't have to like feeling this way, just need to accept it") and then to use this heightened awareness to guide me into the next moment.

By focusing my alertness onto what I wanted to achieve, onto connecting with the students, and internally clarifying my intentions, I was able to avoid overreacting when I saw them not sticking exactly to the ground rules that had been set. Better to have a flexible response, to allow things to settle a little than to sternly force them to behave and be quiet. Acknowledging openly that this exercise was unusual - a challenge even - may have helped the process unfold whereas clamping down and being demanding might have provoked their own threat or avoidance response and could have cut them off from the sensitive learning experience I was attempting to create for them.

Being Mindful

How can we develop this increased capacity to notice what is going on in the moment and to choose to respond rather than react? Some teachers may just naturally have this gift, but for many of us it can be struggle – especially when we are so used to spending so much time in our thoughts and rely so heavily on our analytical problem-solving skills. For me, what has helped has been the gentle and repeated practice of training the attention. The foundation of 'Teaching Mindfully' is 'Being Mindful', and for many of us this can be enhanced through developing a personal mindfulness practice. This increased capacity for sustaining attention becomes even more important when turning towards more challenging emotions, thoughts or situations. Mindfulness is in essence a training in developing relaxed alertness, and once we begin to feel some confidence in growing this for ourselves, we can then begin to apply it in our classrooms – without ever needing to turn it into a lesson on mindfulness. Some teachers may then want to go on to explore helping students develop this capacity for themselves.

Understanding ourselves – our minds, bodies and emotions is a key life skill and one that can legitimately be a core part of learning in schools. In order for this to be meaningful, the more we as teachers understand and can take care of ourselves, the better job we will do in the classroom – and this is especially true for those children who may have missed out on some aspects of social and emotional development at home. A sensitized, self-aware teacher can give children a crucial second chance to

develop their emotional and social intelligences - and the research⁴ is showing that this happens not so much through what we teach, or through cerebral engagement with SEL programs, but through the way we interact in carefully crafted learning environments. Ours is indeed a 'caring profession'.

We all deal with stress in different ways – for some it's running, dancing, playing music or hiking. Knowing what nourishes and what depletes us are key factors in sustaining positive mental, emotional and physical health and in avoiding burnout. Mindfulness does not replace these activities, but as a portable skill it can enhance our preferred ways of de-stressing and furthermore we can take it with us into the meeting or the classroom. If you would like to explore this area further the course book by Mark Williams "Finding Peace in a Frantic World" is an excellent resource. Better still, check out local availability of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) courses - which are a training more than a therapy. They deal specifically with understanding 'the exhaustion funnel', burnout and depression. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses can also be highly effective in doing exactly what their title suggests.

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⁴ *"The Social Neuroscience of Education" by Louis Cozolino 2013 WW Norton & Co.*