QUIET SCHOOLS NETWORK

Why Introverted Teachers Are Burning Out

By Michael Godsey

Jayson Jones was my favorite person to call when I needed a substitute for my high-school English classes. Jayson was an aspiring teacher who was extremely popular with the students and related especially well with many of the at-risk kids. One day, I walked into the classroom at lunchtime, and he was sitting alone in the dark, listening to music. "Oh, an introvert?" I said. "I had no idea." He smiled and responded, "Absolutely. I do this every day to recharge." Unfortunately for me and thousands of future students, Jayson has left the classroom for the workshop: He's refurbishing furniture instead of teaching and says that his "introversion definitely played a part."

I've written about the challenges faced by introverted students in today's increasingly social learning environments, but the introverted teachers leading those classrooms can struggle just as much as the children they're educating. A few studies suggest that introverted teachers—especially those who may have falsely envisioned teaching as a career involving calm lectures, one-on-one interactions, and grading papers quietly with a cup of tea—are at risk of burning out. And when these teachers leave for alternate careers, it comes at a cost to individual children and school districts at large.

The term "introversion" can mean a variety of different things in different contexts. Carl Jung defined it as an orientation through "subjective psychic contents," while *Scientific American* contends that introversion is more aptly described as a lessened "sensitivity to rewards in the environment." It's generally accepted, however, that as Stephen A. Diamond gracefully describes it, "[Extraversion and introversion] are two extreme poles on a continuum which we all occupy."

The most common use of the term is to differentiate between introverts (who are energized by quiet space, introspection, and deep relationships and are exhausted by excessive social interactions) and extroverts (who are energized by social interaction and external stimulation and tend to be bored or restless by themselves) as a way of explaining different personal reactions to similar contexts.

It's in this sense of the word that some teachers are citing their introversion as a reason why today's increasingly social learning environments are exhausting them—sometimes to the point of retirement.

After 11 years of teaching English at a public high school, Ken Lovgren left the profession, mostly because he was drained by the insistent emphasis on collaboration and group work. Engaging in a classroom that was "so demanding in terms of social interaction" made it difficult for him to find quiet space to decompress and reflect. "The endless barrage of 'professional learning community' meetings left me little energy for meaningful interaction with my kids," he told me. "I suspect a lot of teachers feel as I do."

In fact, it was easy to find other teachers who cited their introversion as a key reason they decided to leave the K-12 classroom. John Spencer, a former middle-school teacher who has written about the struggles of an introverted teacher, is now teaching at a university. "It's easier to be a professor as an introvert," he said. "There's so much silence and solitude built into it."

And Jessica Honard, the author of the book *Introversion in the Classroom: How to Avoid Burnout and Encourage Success*, told me that she left the teaching profession because she never had the time to recharge after constant exposure to such a stimulating environment. Claiming that she's known many other teachers who have left because of exhaustion, Honard primarily blamed a lack of awareness and understanding of introverted personality types. She

explained: "It's a constant bombardment of social stimulation, and most teachers simply are not taught how to cope with it."

In some ways, today's teachers are simply struggling with what the *Harvard Business Review* recently termed "collaborative overload" in the workplace. According to its own data, "over the past two decades, the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50% or more." The difference for teachers in many cases is that they don't get any down time; they finish various meetings with various adults and go straight to the classroom, where they feel increasing pressure to facilitate social learning activities and promote the current trend of collaborative education.

This type of schedule and expectation for constant social interaction negates the possibility to psychologically "recharge" in relative solitude, something that's crucial to many introverts. Lovgren described his lunches alone in the sunshine as a place "to be alone and recharge … to think about big ideas and prepare something worthwhile to say to the kids during discussion." Spencer wrote that introverted teachers in general may eat alone at lunch because they're "tired of being 'on' all the time … [and] they simply need time to recharge." Brian Little, a widely acclaimed speaker and psychology professor at Cambridge University, refers to these opportunities to recharge as "restorative activities." In a 2005 article, he wrote that "for a biogenic introvert who has been protractedly acting out of character as a 'pseudo-extravert' the best restorative niche would be one of solitude and reduced stimulation."

In the same article, Little explained how introverts can "act as extraverts" and adopt culturally scripted behavior traits (what he calls "free traits") for limited amounts of time. But he warned that "protracted free-traited behavior may compromise emotional and physical health." In other words, Little's findings confirm that introverted teachers are at risk of burning out.

Although the reasons for burnout are varied and hard to pinpoint, some statistics suggest that 41 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years of entering it. Teacher attrition among first-year teachers has increased about 40 percent in the past two decades—a trend that's coincided in part with the growing emphasis in classrooms on cooperative and student-driven learning and on "collaborative overload" in general.

A range of factors such as morale, accountability expectations, and salaries certainly contribute to the attrition problems. However, one study by researchers in Spain showed that the structure of a teacher's personality predicted burnout more strongly than other types of factors. As school districts reportedly spend $2.2 billion annually on educator attrition, it's worth considering how to better respond to the range of other factors that help explain teachers' dissatisfaction, including introverted personality tendencies that aren't always compatible with modern pedagogical trends.

At least a handful of recent studies actually confirm this connection between burnout and introversion. Barbara Larrivee's book *Cultivating Teacher Renewal: Guarding Against Stress and Burnout* cites five different analyses that show "being introverted predicts burnout" in the general workplace. The Spanish researchers' study examined the teaching profession in particular, and found that "teachers with high scores in emotional exhaustion" associated with "low scores in extraversion." The same report, in agreement with several other studies it cited, concluded that introversion "means characteristics that foster emotional exhaustion … while they diminish personal accomplishment." Meanwhile, introverted teachers have regularly written about how they miss the traditional lecture format, about how they almost quit teaching, and about how they did in fact leave teaching for a job more suitable for introverts.

In order to slow the rate of teacher attrition, some people are recommending more induction programs for new teachers. However, this seems to—once again—overlook the needs of introverted teachers. I wouldn't even classify myself an introvert, and the school where I work is extremely respectful of each teacher's personal style. But I remember, as a new teacher, the overwhelming number of interactions that were ostensibly designed to help me—support classes, beginning teacher programs, department meetings, union mixers, "Back to School Night," constant public introductions, and administrative observations. I remember

desperately yearning to just quietly study Hamlet and read my new students' papers.

During that same year, the district assigned to me a mentor to help orient me—he took me out to coffee, and we just talked about good literature and lesson ideas for an hour. The principal, visibly flustered that we didn't observably "do anything," assigned me a new mentor who, among other things, encouraged me to divide my class into cooperative groups and then share the results with my department and administration. The implicit message seemed to be similar to what Lovgren said explicitly: "A calm and focused teacher is suspected of underworking, and so everybody, regardless of their personality type, is expected to work constantly in groups."

The primary concern, as always, is for the students, many of whom are introverts themselves and in want of role models and sympathizers in a culture that sometimes misunderstands kids who are seemingly "unwilling to stand up for themselves." Perhaps teachers and administrators who tend to be introverted themselves can instinctively provide the space the quiet student needs, and also model and value more reserved behavior. Teachers in Robert Coplan's 2001 study "believed that shy/quiet children were less intelligent and would do more poorly academically than would exuberant/talkative children. However, some of these findings were moderated by teachers' own level of shyness."

Coplan's careful use of the phrase "level of shyness" is a good reminder that introversion and extroversion are not diametrically opposed in black and white fashion; and in any case, people's personalities shift depending on the time and situation. As Jill Burruss and Lisa Kaenzig explained in their paper for the College of William and Mary, "Most people utilize both introversion and extraversion in their daily lives … no one list [of personality traits] adequately captures the uniqueness of any individual, but serves as a beginning guide to recognizing and understanding behaviors." And in many cases, people have similar needs: While writing about an introvert's need for solitude, Spencer conceded, "I think everyone can benefit from the lack of social distractions."

With that said, people's behavior does tend to cluster toward certain tendencies, and Burruss and Kaenzig reported that, with all the social interaction, group activities, common spaces, and noisy activities, "modern school seems designed for extraverts."

In order to say something worthwhile about big ideas, Lovgren said, many people need significant time and space for prior reflection—and any implication that active group work is categorically superior alienates those students and teachers. Like many if not most introverts, Lovgren isn't anti-social, or even anti-collaboration; he's just asking for less social stimulation and more freedom to think quietly. "If you give me time and space to complete the task in my own way, I'll come back to the group with a quality contribution."

It's also reasonable to assume that students will be better off when each of their respective teachers are in an environment that suits their teaching style. As the English teacher Abigail Walthausen explained in *The Atlantic* two years ago, "If the community of educators has agreed to value student learning styles, why not allow adults the freedom to play to their own strengths as well? I certainly know that while I am articulate in facilitating student discussion, my communication breaks down and I am a weaker teacher in a noisy room."

Earlier this month, Spencer, the former middle-school teacher who's documented his struggles as an introvert, wrote a popular blog post on "re-imagining school" for educators like him that offers some suggestions on how K-12 campuses can meet the needs of teachers who are less extroverted, from "providing professional development credit for personal learning" to simply offering them some options in regards to collaborative activities. Embracing ideas like these, schools could better accommodate the different personality types of their teachers; reduce burnout and save money on attrition; and foster an educational environment that encourages and cherishes introspective reflection within the students themselves.

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