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THE BURN-OUT COMPLACENCY SYNDROME

* K.L. Gates

The following article has been based on personal experiences and dealings with over 40 teachers and three different principals during the period 1976-1981[#], while at the Mornington Island State School. It is also based on discussions with teachers from other communities, advisory teachers, principals and inspectors during this period.

The article intends to look at the meaning of *burn-out complacency* and how this syndrome so easily affects teachers and other workers, especially in remote Aboriginal communities. Although the article strongly supports all the recent innovations and planning in the area of curriculum development, conferences, and support systems in Aboriginal Education, still, that most fundamental criterion is missing - selection of teachers to work in these isolated areas with these innovated programs.

More importantly, the article also hopes to show what happens to the majority of teachers in these particular areas and how the *burn-out complacency* syndrome operates. Perhaps the reader may then realise why such schools have enormous staff turn overs. Perhaps, also, education authorities should view these proven burn-out teachers in Aboriginal Education with greater understanding, support and value.

It remains my strong belief that each and every one of us is capable of working in 'burn-out'. It is, however, much easier to adopt 'complacency'. 'Burn-out' is that period of time during which one strives to work at maximum level and efficiency. Set-backs and failures are brushed aside and the person keeps attacking, keeps forcing himself to reach goals pre-set by himself or by others. By forcing 'burn-out', working to the limit, however, one can soon become *burnt-out*. Burnt-out is a dangerous time for the individual. Either he recognises the situation and opts for complacency, or he 'cracks' and is in that situation of being of no use to anyone, or he leaves the situation.

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Complacency is the easy road, quickly learned, easily mastered, and an utter waste of time for all concerned. In complacency, the work level of the individual meets the minimum level of acceptance. Innovations, pre-set goals, high expectations are virtually non-existent. The feeling is one of - "Well, why bust my guts? It doesn't achieve anything - no extra pay, no added incentives..." It is a very self-defeating attitude that, I'm afraid, affects quite a lot of teachers in either the end of the first year or definitely the second year in isolated communities.

Teachers begin to justify complacency with such quickly circulated catch-cries as, "The community doesn't care. Look, they don't even bother to send their kids to school - why then should I bother?" "These kids are dumb, even I.Q. tests on Blacks support this notion." "Maybe if the parents showed a bit more interest, then I would too." "Look, I'm only here for another six months, why push myself? I'll just enjoy the remaining time." "The principal doesn't seem to show too much interest in what I'm trying to do, actually nobody does, and nobody seems to care." Complacency quickly penetrates and, like a disease, it can quickly infect a whole staff, especially if the principal is suffering from the syndrome as well.

The problem, however, may soon degenerate even further if, at the start of the next year, these complacency teachers continue to stay on. Very soon the majority of incoming, potentially 'burn-out', teachers succumb to the complacency syndrome.

I disagree with the view, so often put forward, that it is the continuity of teaching staff which is the major solution to the education of Aborigines, because nobody is questioning as to whether or not the teachers staying on are working in 'burn-out' or have simply regressed to complacency. Also, it is very easy to continue on in Aboriginal communities in complacency. With tenure of job, and a realisation that nobody really wishes to come to such communities, the individual teacher is not really threatened by being pushed out.

Added incentives of pay increases, enjoyable recreational pursuits, cheap living, the chance to save, etc., are further reasons to stay. Perhaps some accelerated promotions or transfer promises become a real factor as well.

Most teachers who have regressed to the ebb of complacency seek transfer. This is a good thing. What is to be done, however, about the complacency 'hangers-on'? And who is to judge whether or not teachers and principals in question are working or appear to be working in burn-out or are effectively disguising their complacency

through other areas of pursuit. It is worth noting also that some teachers can convey to others that they are 'burn-out' people where, in fact, they are very deceptively hiding an extremely complacent attitude.

It is my view that one of the most singularly important factors in ensuring a teaching team of 'burn-out' people in Aboriginal schools is the critical selection of the principal. Prior to appointment, the principal must have proved that he is an effective, honest, proven *burn-out* person. Secondly, if when appointed to a community school he shows that he cannot perform in burn-out, then he should be transferred forthwith. This may be within a year, or maybe two, of service. As soon as complacency becomes evident then so should a transfer follow.

The criteria must also apply to teachers. How ridiculous to send a first-year-out teacher to isolated communities - a person who has yet to prove himself as a burn-out person even in his own cultural setting.

The staffing of Aboriginal schools should become a cutthroat situation whereby only the best and proven are accepted into a very specialised area of education. Perhaps higher pay increments, the feeling of belonging to a specialised team, and a very personalised back-up system could hold a few incentives. Wider advertising for teachers specialised in the particular required curriculum areas should be pursued. Also vital is the fact that, where possible, teachers appointed have the ability and desire to work in situations where their social and personal expectations hopefully integrate with that of their new area.

Should teachers burn out or find that complacency entraps them, they should be eligible for transfer as soon as possible and also, they should not suffer transfer harrassment. While the *burn-out complacency* syndrome affects people in all areas of living, urban, rural and semi-isolated areas, this article centres on isolated Aboriginal communities where the syndrome is further compounded by other extreme isolation: limited social and recreational facilities, cross-cultural factors and, often, prevalent anti-social behaviour within the community - compounded incidences of either drunkenness, theft, fighting, swearing or racism.

Finally, I wish to point out that although this article has focused on teachers in Aboriginal communities, it is also very evident that this syndrome affects all other non-Aboriginal agencies on communities. This article has not set out to criticise or down-grade

teachers and other workers in communities. Its intention has been to express a view, perhaps new, perhaps speculative, and hopefully leading to further discussion and comment and perhaps action.

There is no weakness of character should a teacher become burnt-out. To continually attain 'burn-out' output is an extremely physical and emotional drain which individuals cope with at varying levels of success. To admit 'burnt-out', then to decide on a transfer to allow another potential 'burn-out' person to continue the work, is a very professional and conscience-minded act. To succumb to complacency after burnt-out and continue to stay, is a most selfish and counter-productive intention.

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