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## **The Teachers' Burnout - in the Light of Life Meaning and Personal Values**

*Working is a test for the man character* (Kozielecki, 1988, p. 217). People sometimes pass such tests, sometimes fail. There is a great number of publications analyzing a role of work in human life - both, in Polish and foreign literature (e.g. Bańka, Derbis, Kohn, Schooler, Cooper).

*The relation between people and their work, and the difficulties that can appear when that relation goes awry, are nowadays perceived as the significant psychosocial phenomenon. The use of the term burnout for this inadequate relation is in usage since 1970s in the United States, particularly in the context of professionals working in human services. The term went beyond scientific context and was popularized by Greene's 1961 novel, A Burn-Out Case. The hero of this novel is a spiritually tormented and disillusioned architect who leaves his job and moves to the African jungle. Even earlier writing, both fictional and nonfictional, described similar phenomena, including extreme fatigue and a loss of idealism and passion for one's job. It is worth mentioning that the significance of burnout as a social problem was identified by both practitioners and social commentators long before it became a focus of systematic scientific exploration* (Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001).

Work can be very important aspect of our life. It can be the source of true life satisfaction and the place of personal values' realization. Our job-failures in the people-oriented professions have exceptional meaning. Particularly, when we take into account potential consequences resulting in practitioner's burnout. It may affect negatively the disabled, or those who suffer or for those who are ill. Generally, when one or more members of staff, in the people-oriented institution, experiences constant failures or lack of satisfaction it may cause serious, negative consequences for the client.

It is widely acknowledged that work in people oriented professions is frequently perceived as a kind of calling or mission. Maria Grzegorzewska stated that helping the disabled is a kind of social service (Tomasik, 1985, p. 113). *A particularly high risk of occupational stress is experienced in the professions whose nature is to work with people (human services). Such jobs are also called helping professions. Among many jobs within that group (...). Work in the helping professions requires permanent emotional contact with other people. Those people – clients are very often in difficult life situations resulting from their social, health or educational status. At the same time, employees in the helping professions face high (sometimes unrealistic) expectations created by the general public. Teaching is a helping profession of great social importance, particularly when it is viewed from the perspective of occupational stress. All the negative consequences of stress have an influence on the quality of work and, at the same time, on the quality of educational or tutorial services received by students* (Pyżalski, 2006).

The awareness that working toward the others is meaningful can be the *sun of men's life* (Tomasik, 1985, p. 113), can create feeling of disability and can be the beauty of the life. There is an element of truth in the notion that the teachers' duties are not easy to fulfill. The role of teacher is characterized by Krzysztof Konarzewski (2004) as a *indefinite and unclear, psychologically difficult, internally incoherent and conflicting with other roles*.

The teaching profession is one of the most difficult jobs. In such jobs specific consequences are required, to be more strict: psychic-moral feature. The ethical character of teaching is regarded as a core of the profession - an important contributory factor. Many prominent Polish pedagogues has undertaken the question of personality of the teachers. According to Jan Legowicz (1975): *Everything is important what comes from the personality of the teacher*. M. Grzegorzewska fully joined special education and pedeutology efforts' on the way in searching the truth on the teachers. M. Grzegorzewska stated that the special educators should fulfill following requirements: *the teacher must shape own hierarchy of the values*. This means, that such system provides framework for teachers' professional career. M. Grzegorzewska underlined the importance of the teachers' strong attitude in coping with the occupational burdens and in the fulfilling their own moral obligations - *You have to be yourself, otherwise you are going to decline your moral existence* (Tomasik, 1985, p.115).

Burdening character of teachers' responsibilities sometimes influences not only the occupational but also the other spheres of life. The special educators' frustrations, lack of work successes or limited level of sense in work with the disabled can contribute to the serious crisis for example: professional burnout, defined in Ayala Pines existential perspective, as a *process of disillusionment*. The realistic and meaningful life aims and stable „the helper's” hierarchy of personal values, can be advantageous for the clients and prevent a helper from the serious emotional crisis.

Many authors underlined the significance of the life meaning. Prężyna (1996) stated that the *life meaning is the one of the outstanding human needs*. Fulfillment of this need can be induced through the cognitive and emotional activities undertaken by an individual. Life meaning has a specific human dimension. Only the man can experience such need. Fulfillment of this need is essential condition of human being. Axiological dimension is one of the human being dimensions. According to John Steinbeck, the man is entangled with the net of the good and the evil. *Every our activity, every our day, attitudes toward the others and to ourselves are based on values. There is no escape from validation. The ignorance of values can cause serious problems. Every negation is also the choice from the perspective of values, too* (Chudy, 1996, p. 143).

The choice of the particular values and formulating creating on that base personal aims and endeavors can establish the life meaning. The person primarily engaged in his/her job duties sometimes may experience discrepancies between accepted values and own conducting. Some researchers state that such situation may be

described as a *value crisis*. According to Piotr Oleś (1998), such crisis is divided into four dimensions: *difficulties of building own hierarchy of values, significant changes in values, lack of integration of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes concerning values assessment and inability to fulfill values in real life.*

*In some cases, people might feel constrained by the job to do things that are unethical and not in accord with their own values. For example, in order to make a sale or to obtain a necessary authorization, they might have to tell a lie or be otherwise deceptive or not forthcoming with the truth. In other instances, there may be a mismatch between their personal aspirations for their career and the values of the organization. People can also be caught between conflicting values of the organization, as when there is a discrepancy between the lofty mission statement and actual practice, or when the values are in conflict e.g. high quality service and cost containment do not always co-exist (Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001).*

Decreased level of life meaning may be caused by the internal chaos. The professional burn-out symptoms are partly similar to the symptoms of the value crisis and the low level of the life meaning. It is widely acknowledged that the Ayala Pines *existential perspective of burn-out* linked mentioned issues. Such approach highlights the relationships between the educators' personal values, their meaning of life and suffering from professional burnout. She claims that the main factor contributed to burn-out is our faith in deriving the feeling of the life sense from work. We want to believe that our life is meaningful. We wish that what we do is important, and in consequence - we are useful. According to Victor Frankl (1998), *searching for the meaning of life is the human strongest motivational factor*. When people try to find the meaning of their life through occupational activities and feel that they fail – they are in the risk of burn-out. It is worth mentioning, that Max Scheler objective approach in defining values and their hierarchy were the inspirations for Frankl attitude.

For an increasing number of population, occupational activity is the area of searching for the meaning of their life. In Pines' existential perspective the most important factor contributing to burnout is *failure in searching for the meaning*. *The root cause of burnout lies in our need to believe that our lives are meaningful, that the things we do - and consequently we ourselves - are useful and important. Frankl writes that "the striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man". When people try to find meaning in their life through work and feel that they have failed, the result is burnout (Pines, 1993, p. 33).*

When even the highly qualified and highly motivated workers, who identify with their jobs and expect to derive meaning of existence, are not successful in the workplace, then they feel unable to be effective and become vulnerable to burn-out. *When passionate, idealistic, and dedicated teachers feel unable to educate and inspire their students because of apathy, discipline problems, overcrowded classrooms, shortage of available support staff, excessive paperwork and excessive testing, they are likely to burn out. Indeed, when teachers' needs for self-actualization and self-esteem are unfulfilled, there is a high probability of burnout (Pines, 1993, p. 35).*

As Pines describes three dimensions of burnout, exhaustion is the central quality of burnout and the most obvious manifestation of this complex syndrome. *When people describe themselves or others as experiencing burnout, they are most often referring to the experience of exhaustion. Of the three aspects of*

*burnout, exhaustion is the most widely reported and the most thoroughly analyzed. The strong identification of exhaustion with burnout has led some to argue that the other two aspects of the syndrome are incidental or unnecessary. However, the fact that exhaustion is a necessary criterion for burnout does not mean it is sufficient. If one were to look at burnout out of context, and simply focus on the individual exhaustion component, one would lose sight of the phenomenon entirely. Although exhaustion reflects the stress dimension of burnout, it fails to capture the critical aspects of the relationship people have with their work. Exhaustion is not something that is simply experienced--rather, it prompts actions to distance oneself emotionally and cognitively from one's work, presumably as a way to cope with the work overload. The relationship of inefficacy (reduced personal accomplishment) to the other two aspects of burnout is somewhat more complex. In some instances it appears to be a function, to some degree, of either exhaustion, cynicism, or a combination of the two. A work situation with chronic, overwhelming demands that contribute to exhaustion or cynicism is likely to erode one's sense of effectiveness. Further, exhaustion or depersonalization interfere with effectiveness: It is difficult to gain a sense of accomplishment when feeling exhausted or when helping people toward whom one is indifferent. The lack of efficacy seems to arise more clearly from a lack of relevant resources, whereas exhaustion and cynicism emerge from the presence of work overload and social conflict (Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001).*

According to Mieczysław Kreutz (1962), it is worth mentioning that there is a serious risk resulting from burdening factors in teachers' work and life. It results in becoming apathetic, inactive, very often insensitive and malicious. Not being brother and friend to his pupil but rather enemy and mobber (Dawid, 1962, p. 63). Such behaviours, mentioned by Kreutz, are relevant to burnout factors in Christina Maslach approach. Fatigue and irritation refers to emotional exhaustion, lack of enthusiasm to reduced personal accomplishment and detachment, abruptness and "harsh" conducting in relation to pupils to depersonalization. One of the greatest risks which the burnout teacher can contribute to is limitation in fulfilling the students' needs.

It is worth mentioning the influence of burnout in the aspect of difficulties in fulfilling the students' needs and from the perspective of the special education rules (Plichta, Pyżalski, 2002). According to Jan Pańczyk (1999), such rules are relevant both, for special educators and for "regular" teachers. The burned-out teachers with indifferent or cynical attitude toward their students (which Maslach describes as a "depersonalization") do not follow the rules which are crucial, especially in the field of special education. The most serious risk lies in limited fulfilling such principles as "individualization" (treating someone as a unique, exceptional person). Maslach adds particular relevancy to the definition of depersonalization. *Depersonalization is an attempt to put distance between oneself and service recipients by actively ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging people. Their demands are more manageable when they are considered impersonal objects of one's work (Maslach, 2001, s. 5).*

*Within the human services, the emotional demands of the work can exhaust a service provider's capacity to be involved with, and responsive to, the needs of service recipients.*

*Outside of the human services, people use cognitive distancing by developing an indifference or cynical attitude when they are exhausted and discouraged. Distancing is such an immediate reaction to exhaustion that a strong relationship from exhaustion to cynicism (depersonalization) is found consistently in burnout research, across a wide range of organizational and occupational settings (Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter, 2001). Sęk (2000a, s. 111) defines depersonalization as a pathological defense mechanism which is specific in burnout. Teacher who depersonalize students are likely to treat them in a impersonal way. Very often it is visible as a labeling, cynicism or humiliation (Sęk, 2000b).*

There is a strong need to develop knowledge on burnout in terms of causes and methodology of prevention in people oriented professions. The attitudes, energy, competencies – everything people know and who they are establishes the most crucial factors which determine possible success in the process of rehabilitation. Burnout is not only the scientific notion or a term. This is not only the theory. Mainly, this is the serious risk for suffering in three environments: among clients, among teachers and among organizations.

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