The Dissatisfied Teacher

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Teacher dissatisfaction has grown steadily over the past few years. As a new teacher with a degree in elementary education, I have a sincere interest and concern in how this problem may be remedied. I hope to persuade the reader that a specialized course concerning the philosophical self is beneficial and necessary for future educators, their students, and our country by analyzing the causes of dissatisfaction and my own experiences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Powell for everything he taught me and for everything he unknowingly helped me learn about myself. I consider him to be an excellent and effective educator and I thoroughly enjoyed being his student and teaching assistant.

I also would like to thank my family for being supportive and encouraging as I completed my final semester at Ball State.
Educators will always be asked why they choose their profession. Why do they work so hard for such little compensation? How do they put up with more than twenty children for eight hours a day? Most teachers have already asked themselves these questions and can give reasonably well thought-out answers. But what happens when we cannot answer these questions or do not really believe the answers we give?

I recently completed my student teaching assignment, and, unfortunately, I cannot say that it was a completely positive experience. For many reasons, my experience was highly stressful and I was not given the proper support. I was not prepared to handle the level of stress that I experienced and I now know first hand the kind of damage that unmanaged stress can do. I have struggled to write this proposal because I began to deeply doubt myself and question my choice to teach after such a negative experience. However, I am learning from real experiences and using them to help future educators.

Educators are becoming increasingly more dissatisfied with teaching and they are leaving the field at an alarming rate. Approximately one third of new teachers will drop out of education within their first three years of teaching. After five years, another forty-six percent of new teachers will leave the field (Kopowski). Researchers have conducted many different studies regarding the reasons why teachers, both new and veteran, leave the field, but there is no cure-all solution to the problem. However, as I work through my student teaching experience and prepare to enter the field, I have a fresh perspective of the various struggles that
new teachers face. My experience as an education major place me in a position to analyze what may be missing in teacher education.

Currently, there exists a high degree of overall dissatisfaction with teaching as a career, but I think, more importantly, teachers have an overall dissatisfaction with who they are as a self. Throughout the following proposal, the term “self” is used to encompass the ideas behind the facts that make a person who they are and how a person may define him or her self. “The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts” (Tatum). The study of the self involves these factors and how to define a self if one or more of these factors are removed.

Through my experience as a student and a teacher I have come to believe that teaching, more than any other paid career, involves one’s whole self. In order to help future educators manage the everyday stresses of teaching and to increase overall teacher satisfaction, I propose the creation and implementation of a course or sequence of courses about the self that is designed to help teachers better understand who they are and how to take care of themselves. This course will combine philosophic concepts, stress-management techniques specifically directed to help teachers, self-exploration opportunities through various art forms, writing and discussion prompts, and a journaling method used during the duration of the whole course. I believe that this course will decrease the levels of dissatisfaction with teaching, which not only means an increase in teacher satisfaction, but productivity and success as well. After analyzing some common problems that new teachers face, I will outline how stress management can help teachers succeed and
improve their overall health. Next I will explain how learning about the self benefits our future, our students, and us. Then I will explain the benefits of learning to truly question through learning about the self. Finally, I will describe my own class experiences, which provided the inspiration and ideas behind this proposal.

In order to understand how this course can help future educators, we must first understand a few of the many reasons that teachers are dissatisfied. The *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* taken in 2006 found that "the teachers who were the happiest with their jobs also reported they were assigned to classes they felt qualified to teach, had enough time to prepare for their classes, and felt like there were opportunities to be involved in team building and problem solving." This means that the opposites of these three factors can prove to be major causes of dissatisfaction for educators. The lack of qualification, preparation, team building, and problem solving opportunities are not the only factors that are leading teachers to become dissatisfied, but they provide a good place to start looking critically at the causes of dissatisfaction.

New teachers often feel unprepared to teach certain classes or feel like they do not have enough time to adequately prepare, which leads to large amounts of stress and anxiety. This was a large factor in my own stress and dissatisfaction. I was told to not sleep if I was unable to get everything done. This was a very unhealthy piece of advice and led to even more stress on my part. Stress is really the biggest factor in teacher dissatisfaction. The lack of team building and problem solving opportunities also causes dissatisfaction. Many educators, especially new educators, may feel unsure of themselves when it comes to team building and
problem solving. New teachers may feel that they are too inexperienced to offer much help. An understanding of one's self may help educators feel more comfortable and sure of their abilities and knowledge and therefore lead to new ideas being shared and more productive problem solving.

The first part of my proposal for lowering teacher dissatisfaction is to teach stress management skills in an effort to increase the health of educators. Extreme stress is a large factor contributing to teacher dissatisfaction. Teaching is a high-stress, fast-paced, and ever-evolving career and it can be difficult to manage. “Half (51%) of America’s public school teachers say they feel great stress several days a week and are so demoralized that their level of satisfaction has dropped twenty-three percentage points since 2008 and is at its lowest in 25 years, according to an annual survey of educators” (Strauss). Teaching specific stress management techniques can at least help teachers deal with the day-to-day stressors in healthy and productive ways. Unmanaged stress combined with other factors can lead to anxiety and depression and feelings of helplessness. Teachers need to be healthy in order to be successful and effective. Proper stress management can help improve the overall health of teachers.

The second part of my proposal to help lower teacher dissatisfaction is to teach educators about the self in philosophical and personal terms. Everyone can benefit from learning more about him or herself but I think that teachers should learn more about themselves because of their strong impact on the future through the education of the future generations. In many different classes throughout my four years in college I have been told that I need to be aware of what I “bring to the
table." I have to understand how I react to certain situations, understand my strengths and weaknesses, and be aware of any prejudices I may have. These and many other sentiments belong in a category that I condense down into simply knowing who I am. My professors understand that teaching requires a certain sensitivity and awareness of one's self. Who we are affects what we do and what we do affects the children we teach. When we talk about teaching, however, it always seems to be about the children. Everything I need to know and do is for the benefit of the students. This is a wonderful goal, but ultimately I think teachers do not focus on themselves enough and this is causing job satisfaction to plummet. "Job satisfaction is incredibly important when it comes to teaching because it directly impacts future generations," says Laura Roberts, assistant professor of business administration at Harvard University. If you are happy, the quality of education improves" (Scholastic). Teachers are constantly trying to improve the quality of education, which can only lead to a better future. Children are our future and teachers at every level are in a unique position to shape that future. Knowing who we are, how we work, all of our abilities and weaknesses, and knowing how to take care of ourselves will lead to higher satisfaction. When teachers are happy and successful, students will be happy and successful. Self-awareness aids self-evaluation and reflection, which promotes better teaching. Effective educators are self-evaluators who reflect often on their work. Better educators mean a better future.

The biggest reason to promote a course about the self for educators is the value in learning about one's self. Even the smallest amount of knowledge that you
may learn about yourself is valuable. I believe that knowing how your own mind works, how you respond to certain situations, and any preconceived ideas that may affect your ability to teach is very important. These are all ideas that are touched on in classes and discussed for maybe a day or two, but they are never heavily taught or developed in the curriculum. Learning about yourself can impact your whole life, not just your ability to teach others. We are often told that we need to know ourselves and know what we bring to the table, but simply telling us to know something does not help us. Honestly, no one can teach someone else who they are because it is something that each person must discover for him or herself. However, in a safe, open, group-learning environment there are many topics and ideas that can be explored to help us learn about ourselves.

Educators can also help students learn about themselves in small ways. We can teach them about their individuality and how they all matter and are valued. Media, peers, and even adults are constantly (although in some cases, unconsciously) telling children who they should be when we should be helping them discover that for themselves. Understanding and believing in one's own individuality is key to helping students understand theirs. If we are not confident in who we are then our students will not be confident in us. We need student confidence in order to effectively manage a classroom and we need students to be confident in themselves so that they can succeed. These things do not happen on accident. If an educator has studied various ideas behind the understanding and defining of the self, then they may have a better idea of how to increase student awareness of their own abilities, strengths, and weaknesses.
Learning to truly question is the final reason that I highly suggest the creation and completion of this course for every student in the education department. It is not common for college-aged students to seriously ask or contemplate many of the questions that we consider in the Honors College courses. Many of the questions that we consider do not have an answer, but that does not mean that they should not be asked. It can be overwhelming, frustrating, and even frightening to ponder possible answers to questions such as "What is a self?" and "What makes one a self?" However, I do not think that the true benefit is in answering the questions. The benefit lies in asking the questions. When we are able to simply ask a question without an answer and begin to contemplate a reasonable response, we have achieved something great. I know that learning to ask difficult questions in an academic environment in which I feel comfortable and safe has had the biggest impact, not only on my education, but also on my life. An educator who is afraid to ask questions, especially truly challenging questions, cannot possibly teach students to ask their own questions. Unfortunately, our current education system is geared toward finding the answers, not asking the questions. We must change our lazy, complacent thinking into a higher-order questioning and problem-solving lifestyle.

We may be required to teach certain content and skills, and we may spend a lot of time just trying to get our students to pass certain tests, but that is not why I want to be a teacher. I am becoming a teacher because I want to show students that there is more to life and learning than fill-in-the-bubble, true or false, and short answer responses. Life is complicated and most of the time we do not have the
answers to all of the questions, but the answers are not what matters. The process of asking the questions and working toward the answers is what matters. Once you have the answer you move on to the next question, the next adventure. Life is a process and not a final answer. The end does not matter. I know that my beliefs on this subject are what will help me become an effective educator. The truly effective educators do not teach students how to answer questions. They teach students how to ask them.

The process of designing a syllabus and structure for my proposed course will involve drawing from my own learning experiences. I was able to explore concepts of the philosophical self and learn about myself over my four years in college through an Honors College humanities sequence at Ball State University. We used a combination of novels and media to explore philosophic concepts related to the self. I think that this combination worked well and adding a journaling component, artistic self-expression, specific writing and discussion prompts, and a stress management component will help focus these concepts to further teach future educators. Students will greatly benefit from a dual-teaching configuration with one teacher from the education department and one from the humanities. I completed a course in high school where two teachers worked together to plan and teach a course. Both were present at each class meeting and divided the teaching time between them. It added a new element to the classroom because each teacher was from a different department and a different skill and knowledge set. I learned more in that class than any other class in high school. The honors college courses that I completed were structured as a whole-group discussion with the professor
acting as a facilitator. This is the only structure that really works for the content of this course. The teacher's role involves guiding the discussion and keeping it on track if it wanders unproductively but students make up the majority of the discussion. I also think that it was extremely beneficial to complete the sequence with the same professor for each course. Continuing with the same professor(s) helps the students continue to feel comfortable and safe enough to share meaningful but potentially deeply personal knowledge and experiences. Creating an environment where the students feel safe enough to share their personal thoughts and questions about deep philosophic concepts is very important to such a course and should not be overlooked. My experiences in similar courses are the drive behind my whole proposal and I am confident that this course has the potential to benefit the future of education in our country through increasing teacher dissatisfaction.

I understand that college students have full schedules and may feel like they simply cannot take another class. I am not suggesting that this class be made a requirement for graduation. If students do not want to take the course, they will not be invested in it or take it seriously. It will just be a waste of time and money for these students and for others who actually want to learn. I think students such as myself, who are part of both the honors college and the teachers college will be interested in such a unique course. It can be counted as credit hours toward both departments. If created as a sequence, students may have the option to complete one course but choose not to continue on the next semester. Any amount of exposure to learning about the self can be beneficial.
Teacher dissatisfaction is growing and it simply cannot be ignored any longer. My proposal is not going to fix everything but I think that it can help. Ultimately, learning who we are and how to take care of ourselves may be one of the best things that we can do for our students. We simply cannot properly educate and care for our students without first educating and caring for ourselves. In the classroom the teacher's mood, attitude, beliefs, actions, words, and goals make the biggest impact. If we do not build a safe environment for students to ask questions in then they will not ask them. If we are not confident in ourselves, students will not place confidence in us. If we do not treat students like they are valued individuals then they will not believe that they are. Future educators need to learn about themselves just as much as they need to learn how to teach.
Bibliography

http://www.nea.org/home/12630.htm

http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/how-satisfied-are-you


Tatum, Beverly. *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: 
Instructor:
Office Hours:
Email:

Texts
John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*
Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*
Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*
Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*
Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*
Kate Wilhelm, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*

Handouts:
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
*Redstockings Manifesto*
W.E.B. Du Bois, *Of our Spiritual Strivings*

Films
*Double Life of Veronique*
*Harold and Maude*
*The Ascent*
*The Lives of Others*

Attendance and Expectations:

“Attendance – Attendance is required. If you miss more than 4 classes, (that’s equal to 2 weeks of class) then you will receive a failing grade for the course. There are always extenuating circumstances (long term illnesses, family emergencies, etc.) so just let me know and we’ll work around those issues.”

“Readings - All of us have different philosophical, literary, cultural backgrounds. The reading for this course is by no means overwhelming, but some of it will be difficult and require close attention.” There will be quizzes or short journaling over readings and films that we cover.

“Participation - I don’t usually have a participation policy because a student’s level of participation is too often determined by his or her personality. I do expect, however, a level of participation that is positive and adheres to the classroom environment. I do reserve the right to detrimentally affect your grade if at my discretion if I deem that you do not meet these basic requirements. Finally, all phones and laptops are to be OFF when class begins.”
Assignments:

Quizzes – Quizzes will be given to ensure reading and may be announced or unannounced.

Journal – Every student is required to keep a journal over the length of this course. This can simply be a notebook used to record thoughts about what you read or watch and ultimately learn. There will be some journaling prompts given in class, which are mandatory. However, please feel free to use your journal at any time. We are going to learn a lot about ourselves, the self as a philosophic concept, and teaching the self. Your journal will help you think deeply about these topics and it will also serve as a record of your learning.

Initial and Final Self Projects – These projects will be explained and discussed in class where you will receive a rubric and description of both.

Stress Management – Part of the goal of this course is to help students learn how to manage the stress that goes along with teaching. We will explore specific scenarios and problems that cause large amounts of stress in the field of education and ways to manage these stressors. In order to decrease or eliminate stress in our lives, we must first be able to identify what causes the stress. Students will be required to write once a week in their journals about what triggers stress in their lives and how they manage it, or fail to manage it.

Grade Breakdown and Scale:

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<th>Grade</th>
<th>Minimum Score</th>
<th>Maximum Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93 - 100</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90 - 92</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>D-</td>
<td>60 - 62</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Everything below 60 points</td>
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Special Concerns:

"If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please let me know as soon as possible. If you need to request accommodation, you should also visit the Disabled Student Development Office, Student Center 307, 287 – 5293."

Academic Dishonesty:

"You are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. Please refer to Section VII and other applicable sections of the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities for information about what constitutes academic dishonesty. If you have questions about whether something is academic dishonesty, consult with me first for clarification."
Schedule:

Aug 20: Intro, in class Journal assignment
Aug 22: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Aug 27: Du Bois, *Of Our Spiritual Strivings*
Aug 29: Stress Management, Journal

Sept 3: *Double Life of Veronique*, Highsmith
   11-150
Sept 5: *Double Life of Veronique*, Highsmith
   151-287

Sept 10: Discuss Highsmith
Sept 12: *Redstockings Manifesto*

Sept 17: *Harold and Maude*, Dos Passos 3-106
Sept 19: *Harold and Maude*, Dos Passos
   109-227

Sept 24: Dos Passos 231-342, Discuss Dos Passos
Sept 26: Discuss Dos Passos, Dada Movement

Oct 1: *The Ascent*, Burgess 3-103
Oct 3: *The Ascent*, Burgess 104-212

Oct 8: Discuss Burgess, Read Androids 3-120
Oct 10: Stress management, Read Androids
   104-212

Oct 15: Discuss Androids, Read Wilhelm
Oct 17: Wilhelm

Oct 22: Fall Break
Oct 24: Discuss Wilhelm, Read Frankl 3-93


Nov 5: Discuss Frankl
Nov 7: Discuss Frankl

Nov 14: Self Expression, Journal

Nov 19: Teaching the self, Journal
Nov 21: Teaching the self

Nov 26: Teaching the self, Journal
Nov 28: Thanksgiving Break

Dec 3: *An Unmarried Woman*
Dec 5: *An Unmarried Woman*