

When teachers fail

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EFL literature is splendid in its positivity and I can see why this should be. We are a “young profession” and we have the enthusiasm of youth. Until 25 years ago we had no trade newspaper and then, in UK, the EF Gazette filled this gap and we suddenly realized we now had something we had not noticed we hadn't had!

Howatt wrote a history of our foreign language teaching profession and we suddenly discovered we had a past. Can you imagine a self-respecting tribe without one?

This April, at latefl in Exeter, Peter Grundy coordinated a session in which people could come and pay tribute to people in the profession who have recently died. So now we have a space and a place for obituary offerings. What tribe does not honour its dead?

EFL literature is splendid in its positivity. Since the early O'Neill, Wright, Maley and Duff days of the 1970's we have seen an explosion of both international coursebooks, national coursebooks written by foreigners to those countries and a national coursebooks written by local people as happened in Romania with Rod Bolitho as consultant.

UK alone has produced something in the region of 300 or more teacher resource books in the past 30 years. (When I started teaching EFL in the 1960's it was a case of Old Mother Hubbard.....our cupboard was indeed bare then.....)

EFL literature is splendid in its positivity. Since the young Co-Build days in the 1970's we have witnessed the birth, infancy and now adulthood of corpus linguistics that has revolutionized our dictionaries and offered us a new understanding of how the oral language works (Carter and McCarthy, Cambridge Grammar of English)

There is much to be positive about and much to be proud of. However light without dark is hardly convincing and I feel that EFL literature needs to also be open to the downsides of our work. How many articles have you read in the last ten years about clinical depression among the seven or so million EFL teachers worldwide? I can think of one only, published in HUMANISING LANGUAGE TEACHING (www.hltmag.co.uk) ((Yr 7, Issue 6 Nov 05). How widely is ELT teacher burn-out dealt with in our professional literature? I can think of two or three references in the past ten years in the magazines and journals I read. In January 1999, Issue 10, ETp published a piece of mine on burnout and mutual supervision under the title WAVING NOT DROWNING.

A sad fact is that an industrialised country needs more teachers to staff its schools than there are people in the population who have a talent for this type of work. A hundred years ago, in 1901, UK had these numbers of professionals:

doctors and surgeons :	23,200
Barristers and solicitors	21,000
Clergy:	25,000

Teachers:	230,000
Accountants:	12,500

(source: The Middle Class, a History, Lawrence James Abacus 2006)

So back then , 107 years ago, ten times more teachers were needed than doctors!
Were they all right for the job?

It is reckoned today that China alone has just under two million people teaching EFL. Is it likely that all these people are good at the subject and overjoyed to be teaching it? I think not.

I would suggest that there are a percentage of teachers of any subject in schools who are desperately unhappy in their job and who would give the eyes from their heads to escape from the situation they are in. In the meantime they create havoc all around them. There is no animal more dangerous than the one that feels both hopeless and cornered.

What I would now like to do is offer you some passages from a recently published book, Marco Impariso's **Mal di Scuola**, that came out in Italy in 2007. Roughly translated the title means "**School Ache**". Impariso looks at teachers who are failing and he does this partly through the eyes of the school inspectors' reports. Let us look at three teachers he presents who are clearly totally out of place in any school environment.

Teacher 1. (Inspector's report)

Mr R seems happy to ignore the minimum obligations of his job. This state of affairs is fully known to Mr R's colleagues, superiors and students. In this situation Mr R lives a state of permanent aggression and takes every opportunity to create conflict and tension in the school. Mr R does not know the curriculum and does not wish to get to know it. In class he reads the newspaper.

Mr R has other interests. Working as he does in an evening school, he has another daytime job. His absences are numerous and he never lets people know in advance, which makes it very hard to find people to stand in for him.

..... Mr R spends his time attacking the Head and the Deputy Head. These complaints come at a rate of two a week. During my meeting with him, Mr R declared that his students "are animals who are worthy only of my contempt."

You might well ask what happened to Mr R who went even further and physically attacked the Deputy Head and nearly had a fight with his own angry students. The first inspectorial decision was to demand his transfer to a daytime school but then it was decided to keep him where he was and to monitor his teaching for a year!

Teacher 2.

The inspector's decision in the case of Ms G was that "*given her state of strong demotivation, total absence of didactic intent and dramatic relational difficulties, Ms G should be transferred to non-teaching duties.*"

Impariso sketches this picture of Ms G in class:

At times when Ms G was quiet she would lean on the window sill and look out, staying silent for hours on end. At other times she would pull a novel out of her bag and settle down to read it. Occasionally she would cry for the whole of the lesson.

She got through four inspections!

The class representatives in the January of that year complained that “ so far we have done nothing; the teacher never explains anything, she writes a few phrases on the blackboard and then quickly rubs them out.” If a student asks her anything she responds with insults and threats. Most of her class groups have decided to ignore her. To avoid being gone at during her lessons the students do their homework, study other subjects, read the paper and the inspector says that a modus vivendi has been created, based on mutual silence.

In her interview with the inspector Ms G told her that for years now the idea of entering into dialogue with the students has seemed to her to be immensely psychologically difficult, and even to say the name of the subject she is meant to teach leaves her feeling sick.

As I read these lines from **School Ache** I am as horrified at the pain of the trapped animal that Ms G seems to be, as at the mayhem that she causes round her.

How many Ms Gs are there across the schools in the country where you teach?

Maybe these Ms Gs hide their pain, rage and despair better than Ms G does in her Italian context.

Teacher 3

She was one like so many others. For fifteen years she's been teaching in the same school without any complaints against her. In October 2004 Mrs C began to feel got at by her colleagues. “ they've marginalized me,” she told the inspector. Her students have no pity. They see her in difficulties and take full advantage. They laugh in her face and go at her for being badly dressed. Mrs C is absent from school more and more often; she is sucked into a negative spiral. At first she tells the inspector that there is nothing wrong but then finally admits, in her last meeting with him, that there has been a change:

“ I have always taught. I do the same things I did years ago. It's the students as have changed. I can't understand them anymore and I don't see why they don't follow me.”

She then admits she is in the grip of anxiety and that the very idea of leaving home and walking into her classroom fills her with moral and physical dread.

A medical examination allows her to give up teaching. She feels liberated.

How many teachers like the three described above are there across Europe and World? My feeling is that there are many more than we think and before you say to yourself that you could never get like this let me sound a note of caution. I couldn't see myself behaving like Mr R or Ms G, Teacher 2, but the case of Mrs C, the last one, seems to me very different. Yes, I could see myself being sucked down into the anxiety vortex that swallowed her.

One last thought: do the publications of other professions have the courage to look at the undersides of their work? Do medical and farming publications look at the high suicide rates of their people and speculate on the causes?