

CHAPTER I

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.1.0. TEACHERS - THE NEGLECTED SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

In recent years probably no professional group has been criticised as frequently or as intensely as teachers. The list of grievances is long and probably, more often than not, justified. Society perceives the present generation of teachers as mercenary, unprofessional, irresponsible, and lacking in the dedication and commitment which teachers of previous generation were reputed to possess.

If this is really true, it must be a matter of great concern. Something must be seriously wrong somewhere if a sizeable portion of a community completely lacks any motivation and commitment to its profession. It is rather frightening to think that so many are spending their lifetime in doing something which has no meaning for them, which gives them no sense of satisfaction and personal worth.

It is increasingly being realised that the effective and efficient functioning of any organisation depends primarily on the quality and commitment of its human resources. The same applies for the school system. The core transactions of formal education take place where teachers and students meet. But although books and articles instructing teachers on how they should teach and behave in class are

legion, empirical studies of the outlook and ethos of teachers as a group are rare.

The sociology of teaching is of comparatively recent growth and has yet to emerge as a coherent and systematic field of enquiry. Many sociologists, following the earlier lead of psychologists, have made their investigations primarily child-centred and the teacher has been virtually ignored. The teacher is as important as the child in the educative process and there is need for systematic study of the problems and concerns of teachers. Waller (1932) has observed in his classic - *The Sociology of Teaching* that most of the innovative programmes for the rehabilitation and improvement of the school have foundered on the rock of teacher apathy and teacher resistance. The right attitude and involvement, the mental health and job satisfaction of the teacher are essential conditions for the success of any school programme.

1.2.0 GROWING CONCERN ABOUT TEACHERS

Very recently, however, teachers and their problems have been attracting a great deal of attention in the West, especially in the U.S.A. Teacher stress and 'burnout' have become topics of increasing public and professional concern. Newspapers, magazines, T.V. shows have been carrying items and stories on teacher burnout.¹

Major sources of information has been the professional organs like the National Education Association, Nati-

onal Association of Secondary School Principals, American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education. In addition to a number of articles that have been appearing in professional journals, some have dedicated entire issues on this topic.² NEA made Teacher Burnout the central theme of their 1979 Convention at Detroit where it became a major issue of discussion and a resolution was adopted to encourage local affiliates to work with local school authorities for developing programmes which 'facilitate the recognition, prevention and treatment of stress-related problems'. William McGuire, the 1979 President, underscored the importance of implementing this resolution in his statement that mental and physical stress was driving thousands of sensitive, thoughtful and dedicated American teachers out of the classroom, that stress was leading to teacher burnout and the problem threatened to reach hurricane force if it was not checked soon. (Cunningham, 1982)

In the 1979 NEA 'Nationwide Teacher Opinion Poll', one-third of teachers surveyed said that if they were 'Starting all over again' they would not choose to become teachers. In addition, only 60% of teachers reported that they planned to remain in the teaching profession until retirement - and this, in spite of the rising unemployment and recession in U.S.A.

Mark and Anderson (1978) found that only 59% of teachers last more than four years in the classroom. It

is also notable that a substantial proportion of teachers - 41% in New York and 56.7% in Chicago reported physical and/or mental distress as a direct consequence of their work. (Cichon and Koff, 1978; Stress, 1980)

The First National Conference on Teacher Stress and Burnout was sponsored by Learning magazine and the Learning Institute and took place in New York City in April 1980.

The phenomenon of burnout does not seem to be confined to American teachers alone. According to a study conducted by the Stockholm University's Institution of Psychology covering 4,000 teachers in the Greater Stockholm area, teaching in schools was so taxing psychologically that 1 out of 4 teachers were thinking of quitting. They had serious doubts about the meaning of their work and many had developed psychological problems.³

In short, the impact of stress and burnout on the quality and consistency of education is easily imagined, and clearly serious. As Sarason (1977) points out, if it becomes increasingly the case that professionals experience a widening discrepancy in work between expectations and satisfactions, the negative consequences for their lives will have ramifications far beyond the spheres of their individual existence. The societal implications are great.

At the same time most teachers are still caring, involved in their work and perceive themselves as effective

in their roles. Studies have revealed that 10% - 20% of teachers in U.S.A. are affected by burnout. There are many more who find a meaning in their work. Viktor Frankl's theory that an individual who finds a meaning in life can withstand any amount of stress may help us to understand why some teachers in the same distressing situations do not burn out.

1.3.0 NEED FOR RESEARCH IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Unfortunately there seems to be a dearth of research in India in the related areas of teacher motivation, teacher morale, role-conflicts and anxiety of teachers. There has yet been no study on teacher stress or teacher burnout. The number of studies in the related areas mentioned above are only a handful in the First and Second Survey of Research in Education by Buch (1974, 1979).

There is a crying need for research into the social and psychological aspects of the teaching profession. In the face of growing public criticism we should try to understand why young, enthusiastic teachers turn into bored and aloof professionals in a few years time; why many of our teachers are apathetic and uninvolved and make no effort to improve their scholarship and skill while some others, placed in the same working milieu are enthusiastic, committed and show a constant desire to grow professionally. We should be concerned about the potential consequences such declining public confidence in education in general,

and the teaching community in particular, may have on the self-esteem and the professional self-image of the teacher.

Teachers are much maligned but not much attention has been given in research to the status and role, the concerns and anxieties, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of Indian teachers in the face of growing public criticism, social pressures and poor economic returns.

The teaching profession is unique in certain ways, and as such is concerned with certain stress-related conditions more or less peculiar to it. Teachers in the past were considered a special breed, unlike their fellow men. The stereotype persists to some extent even today. Besides, while some have designated teaching as the 'greatest calling', others subscribe to George Bernard Shaw's 'He who can does and he who cannot, teaches'.

It has been estimated that teachers typically make more than four hundred decisions a day. They dispense acceptance, rejection, praise and reproof on a wholesale basis. It is doubtful that many occupations or professions can lay claim to such a 'distinction'. It is sobering to think that any one of these decisions may have either a short or long range positive or negative influence upon a given student.

There are also few professions that are open to such intense public scrutiny. Part of the reason being that most schools are maintained by public money - funds

from state or local government, religious bodies or charitable organisations. Part of the reason being that there is a constant flow of information from students to their parents. More so, in urban areas, where the parents themselves are likely to be educated and more concerned about the education of their wards.

In the Western Societies, the teaching profession is one of the highest risk areas as far as violence is concerned. In the U.S.A. it is estimated that during a school year as many as 65,000 classroom teachers are physically attacked by students and many more are threatened and harassed. Fortunately in India the situation has not become so bad, at least in schools. However, teachers in India are increasingly facing a condescending attitude from both pupils and parents, especially in the cities. In the earlier era education was restricted to certain classes. Teachers and students normally came from the same cultural background and it was easy for parents and teachers to complement each other which made authority of both more effective. Again, formerly teaching was a prerogative of high caste and status. Those who now come to the profession are mainly the nouveau-educated or those who could not find better chances elsewhere. The status of the parents, both intellectual and socio-economic, is in many cases, superior to that of the school teachers. Children are quick to sense the disparity between the home and the school, they no longer respect their teachers, are unwilling to

accept their authority and teachers are unable to exercise control. The rise of 'student power' and its expression in growing insolence and defiance of authority is already a reality in many urban schools in India.

There are many other obvious factors like lack of social status, poor emoluments and facilities, lack of advancement, uncongenial working conditions, unwieldy classes and disinterested students that are potential sources of stress for the teaching community.

The absence of a high dropout rate and job turnover among Indian teachers does not necessarily mean that stress and burnout are not experienced by them. This may be due to entirely different reasons like non-availability of alternative job opportunities and fear of taking risks. It is hard to believe that they do not experience stress and are not frustrated and disillusioned with their professional life under the existing school situations and societal conditions.

It is also rather cynical to say that in India one takes to school teaching only as a last resort and no sensitive, dedicated, idealistic person joins the profession; or, that it is irrelevant to think of burnout in Indian teachers because they were never 'lighted up' or 'fired up' because burnout presupposes a certain amount of initial enthusiasm, idealism and dedication that has been progressively lost in the course of teaching.

1.4.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Under the circumstances, the investigator felt that a systematic study of stress and burnout in teachers in the Indian context was needed. Identification of the major sources of stress, the extent of stress experienced by teachers and to what extent the stress leads to burnout should be made. At the same time it was also necessary to identify the rewarding factors in a teacher's professional life, which make teaching meaningful.

A number of studies have suggested a positive relationship between attitude toward life (meaning in life) and attitude toward work or job satisfaction (meaning in work) (Brayfield, Wells, and Strate, 1957). The concept of meaning in life is based on Viktor Frankl's philosophy that an individual always tries to find a meaning or purpose in life. If he succeeds in finding a meaning in his life, he will continue to grow in spite of all indignities and will be able to bear much hardship, misfortune and stress. Frankl (1960) gives his views on the meaning of work. Work usually represents the area in which the individual's uniqueness stands in relation to society and thus acquires meaning and value. Some people argue that their lives would be more meaningful if only they had a satisfying job. Frankl contends that it is not the actual occupation as such but the manner in which one does the work, that makes it meaningful. In addition, a person who cannot find

fulfilment in his or her occupation because of prevailing conditions of work which are mere routine, mechanical and meaningless, has a chance to find meaning and fulfilment outside the occupation in private life, through myriad human relationships and leisure-time activities. In such cases meaning of life consists in giving form to that leisure. Certain persons restrict the meaning of life mainly in one area and to that extent restrict their experience.

Thus Frankl hypothesises a positive relationship between meaning in life and meaning in work. We can also presume a negative relationship between meaning in life and stress and burnout arising from his work situations. High level of meaningfulness of life is expected to be associated with a lower level of stress and burnout and vice versa.

A person who finds his life, which includes his professional life, meaningful will be able to bear the stresses and strains of his job better; lack of fulfilment from his occupation, even if that is the case, could be compensated by meaning derived from other areas of life. On the other hand a person who finds life meaningless will be less able to cope with stress arising from work situation and is likely to be burned out.

Sargent (1972) investigated the relationship between job satisfaction, job involvement and meaning in life and found a significant correlation. Ruffin (1982) found meaning

in life to be related significantly with certain aspects of the job and not others. There are no studies known by the present investigator which focus on Frankl's theory of meaning and stress and/or burnout.

People spend a significant amount of time working on their jobs and work occupies a central function in their lives. Teachers, as a community, appear to be disgruntled. And with the recent attention on teacher stress and teacher burnout, it is a matter of importance to determine the factors which are related and possibly contribute to enhancing job satisfaction. If there is a negative relationship between meaningfulness in life and stress and burnout of teachers, then Frankl's theory is further validated. And this information may prove valuable for vocational counselors, administrators, and most of all, to teachers themselves, to plan coping strategies for preventing and mitigating stress and burnout. Whereas, if there is no relationship among these variables, then Frankl's theory is not validated with regard to meaning and satisfaction in work by this study. In as much as teachers promote the mental health of the young in their charge and help them to grow into individuals leading a meaningful life in society, it would be of interest to study the degree to which the teachers experience meaning themselves and if meaning helps them to tolerate professional stress and prevent professional burnout.

1.5.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Considering the yet unexplored areas of meaning, stress and burnout in teachers in India and in view of Frankl's hypothesis regarding relationship between meaning in life and meaning in work, the investigator was encouraged to undertake the study of the following problem,

'A STUDY OF MEANING IN LIFE, STRESS AND BURNOUT
IN TEACHERS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN CALCUTTA'.

1.6.0 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Being a pioneer in the field, the present study is necessarily explorative and descriptive, involving both qualitative and quantitative approach and has used open-ended questions and interviews for case-studies as well as standardised tests and statistical analysis and interpretation.

The study is limited to teachers in the City of Calcutta. The investigator conducted the study on Calcutta teachers, firstly because Calcutta is her city where she lives and teaches and trains would-be teachers; and secondly, because life in Calcutta, for the common man is more difficult, grim and stressful than in any other city in India. And if Calcutta teachers find life meaningful and are not burned out, we can hope, with reasonable certainty, that teachers in other cities and urban areas are also not likely to be burned out.

The present study has been confined to teachers of secondary schools. As it is the first study in the areas of meaning, stress and burnout, it was felt that limiting it to secondary teachers would be useful. Later investigators may make comparative studies with different categories of teachers such as primary teachers, college teachers, special education teachers. Moreover, stress is likely to be more prevalent in secondary schools than in primary schools for various reasons like adolescent student population, greater pressure for examination success and higher qualification and perhaps, higher ambition of the teachers.

As burnout is both a process and product, ideally the study should have been a longitudinal one - a follow-up of new entrants in the profession for atleast five years. However, such a study is not possible within the time constraint of a Ph.D. programme. Hence the study is limited to an exploratory survey and an in-depth study of a small number of extreme cases.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to have a deeper understanding of the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of school teachers of Calcutta. Meaningfulness of their life and the important sources of meaning as well as of stress in their working life are examined. It is also an exploratory study to find out if the syndrome of burnout at all exists in Calcutta teachers and what

is the level of their perceived burnout. Finally, the study tries to discover if any significant relationship exists between the level of meaning in life on the one hand and the levels of stress and burnout on the others.

Notes :

1. "The ABC's of School Violence", *Time*, January 23, 1978; "Teacher Burnout", *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 1979; "Teacher Burnout - A Growing Hazard", *New York Times*, January 7, 1979; "About Education", *New York Times*, July 15, 1980; "Help, Teachers Can't Teach", *Time Magazine*, June 16, 1980.

2. *NASSP Bulletin*, Vol.62, No.415, February 1978 and No.421, November 1978; "Stress And What Your Associations Are Doing About It", *NEA Reporter*, October, 1979 (entire issue); "Special Report - Teacher Burnout", *Instructor*, January, 1979.

3. "Teaching Takes Its Toll", *The Indian Express*, January 28, 1983. (PTI News)
