

Self-care, balance and the IB learner profile

Cuidado de sí mismo, equilibrio y perfil de aprendizaje del IB

Matthew Allen^{1,a}

¹Universidad San Ignacio de Loyola, Lima, Perú.

^aDirector del Departamento de Idiomas.

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Correspondencia

Email: mallen@usil.edu.pe

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Notas

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Summary

Anecdotal evidence suggests that educators tend to expend themselves for their students with little thought for themselves, often leading to excessive stress, work-related illness, burnout, and attrition. The following discussion adapted from *Self-Care for Teachers* (Allen, 2013) reviews the international research on this topic and proposes an alternative approach. The research not only confirms this persistent pattern of excessive stress, overwork, and illness but also confirms educators' typical inattention to their own needs. Conventional approaches to the problem of excessive stress, overwork and its attendant maladies focus on the external: management strategies such as induction and mentoring programs, salary incentives, or more recently, teacher help lines and wellness programs. The author advocates a more balanced approach, looking inward as well as outward for solutions to this perplexing problem. Although balance is often conceived as a static ideal of symmetry and proportion, it may be best understood—especially in an educational context—as the practical dynamic process of “moving artfully between extremes”, a definition which might equally apply to classroom management, curriculum design, assessment strategies, professional development, prevalent attitudes, and work-life rhythm.

Key words: Excessive stress, balance, self-care.

Resumen

La evidencia anecdótica sugiere que los educadores tienden a dedicarse por completo a sus estudiantes y no tanto a sí mismos, lo que a menudo conduce a un estrés excesivo, a enfermedades relacionadas con el ámbito laboral, el agotamiento y el desgaste. El siguiente análisis del libro *Self-Care for Teachers* (Allen, 2013) revisa la investigación internacional sobre el tema y propone un enfoque alternativo. La investigación no solo confirma este patrón persistente de exceso de estrés, trabajo y enfermedad, sino que también corrobora la típica falta de atención de los educadores a sus propias necesidades. Los enfoques convencionales para solucionar el problema del exceso de estrés, de trabajo y las enfermedades concomitantes se centran en factores externos: estrategias de gestión tales como programas de orientación y asesoramiento, incentivos salariales o, más recientemente, líneas de ayuda y programas de bienestar para los maestros. El autor aboga por un enfoque más equilibrado, buscando soluciones para este desconcertante problema tanto interna como externamente. Aunque el equilibrio a menudo se concibe como un ideal estático de simetría y proporción, puede ser mejor entendido—especialmente en un contexto educativo— como el proceso dinámico y práctico de “moverse ingeniosamente entre los extremos”, una definición que podría aplicarse igualmente al manejo del aula, al diseño curricular, a las estrategias de evaluación, al desarrollo profesional, a las actitudes prevalentes y al ritmo personal y laboral.

Palabras claves: Estrés excesivo, balance, autocuidado.

Part I: An unsustainable imbalance

Clearly, many teachers are stretched to the breaking point and for many reasons. Because of the pace of curricular change and the race for information technology. Because of overcrowding and underfunding, mainstreaming and standardized testing. Because of overwork and lack of support and recognition. Most of all, perhaps, because of unrelenting time pressure. Ironically, teachers' extreme dedication makes them all the more vulnerable, for as the British Columbia Teacher's Federation of Canada says in its study of job-related stress among its membership:

Teachers' commitment to teaching appears so strong that they are sacrificing their physical and mental health, and in some cases their relationships, to maintain their programs and classes... This represents a severe and unsustainable imbalance in many teachers' lives (Naylor, 2001, p. 10).

In all fairness, administrators suffer a similar fate (Hastings, 2008). Indeed, there is a curious conspiracy at work in overwork.

The majority of teachers who work excessive hours do so because they want to do their best for their students. But there also exists a strong yet subtle pressure on teachers to add to their workload regardless of what this existing workload might be (Naylor, 2001, p. 12).

As one head of school recently said to me, "our teachers can't stop taking on more work anymore than I can stop from asking them to, even though we both know we shouldn't". With the best of intentions, we all tend to put our students first and sacrifice ourselves as necessary.

However, the recognition that overwork "represents a severe and unsustainable imbalance in many teachers' lives" contains the seeds of its own solution—that is, creating a more sustainable way of working and being that helps educators to regain their balance—. Rebalancing our lives as educators requires a paradigm shift, a concerted effort to change deep-seated habits of mind and linked emotional responses. Although we naturally look outward for help and deserve to be supported in our essential work, given the many external stressors beyond our control—the pace of curricular change and the race for information technology for example— we may be

best-served to look inward as much as outward for the solution to over work and excessive stress, focusing primarily on our own self-care.

Part II: Research review

Although my research has focused on the USA, Canada, the UK, and Australia, the pattern of teacher overwork, stress, illness, and attrition will be familiar to many of my colleagues in international schools. While there may be some difference of opinion as to the causes and solutions, there can be little doubt that many teachers live with extreme levels of stress and suffer many stress-related illnesses, that teachers' morale suffers, and that they often leave the profession prematurely as a result (Hastings, 2008).

The problem has been well documented for a decade and is international in scope:

The literature on teacher workload and stress is unambiguous: teacher workloads are excessive and stress related costs are growing. What has occurred in England, Australia, and the USA, is happening in Canada (Naylor, 2001, p. 18).

The BCTF worklife surveys, their British counterparts, and the American government statistics all point to a persistent problem without a simple solution. However, the best remediation plan would likely balance internal and external considerations and strategies.

The magnitude of the problem.

Both the personal and the financial costs of overwork and stress-related illnesses are enormous. For example, in England: Each year 2.7 million teaching days are lost through sickness and 2 500 teachers take early retirement on grounds of ill health. A large secondary school with an average number of absences could face annual supply costs of up to 100 000 GBP. Nationally, the bill is around 300 million GBP. Classes are disrupted, work programs interrupted, and the remaining staff are overburdened (Hastings 2008; NASUWT, 2010; Paton, 2013).

In the USA, attrition rates and associated costs are equally sobering. From 1988-2008, the attrition rates among US teachers rose by about a

third: an increase from 5% to 8% of all public school teachers leaving the profession and an increase from 12% to 15% of all new teachers leaving (NCES, 2012). Predictably, attrition is highest in the first 3-5 years with 30% of all new teachers leaving the profession (Gonzalez & Stallone, 2008). The total cost of replacing all US teachers leaving the profession—including recruitment and training—may be some 3.5 billion USD, to say nothing of the human toll (AEE, 2008).

It is sometimes argued that such figures merely reflect demographics—the retirement bulge of the baby-boomers— or that they are comparable to the attrition rates of other professions, but such is clearly not the case. For example, in the US, retirement accounts for only 16% of all those leaving the profession, and half of the rest leave because of their frustration with teaching (Anna, 2009; Tabs, 2004). Again, in the UK, comparisons between teaching and other occupations are telling: some 37% of secondary vacancies and 19% of primary vacancies were due to ill health, as opposed to 9% of the vacancies in nursing and 5% of those in banking (Hastings, 2008; NUT, 2008).

Granted, attrition is a complex phenomenon with multiple causations, but there is little doubt that teachers are leaving the profession in droves, largely because of their frustration with increasing workloads, unclear expectations, overwhelming stress, perceived lack of support, and comparatively low wages (Naylor, 2001, 2010; Anna, 2009). The big question is what to do to stem the flow of good teachers leaving before their time. Some districts offer financial incentives to continue teaching, and greater attention has been paid to new teachers' induction in recent years, but these measures provide a partial solution at best. As important as salary increases may be, teachers typically leave the profession largely for non-monetary reasons (Anna, 2009). Induction programs may benefit new teachers, they have little to offer experienced ones, and mentoring programs may add yet another duty to those already overburdened.

Of stress, germs, and disillusionment.

There is good evidence that teachers get sick more often than their counterparts in other professions. The simple total of sick days taken by teachers can be somewhat misleading, however. For one thing, teachers (officially) work fewer days per year than other sectors, so while the total number of sick days

may be roughly the same for policemen and civil servants, their proportion of sick time is likely to be significantly higher (Baker, 2000). Teachers are also notoriously reluctant to take sick leave, often “struggling in when they are quite ill” in the belief that their students cannot do without them (Baker, 2000; Hastings, 2008). Do teachers get sick just because they are around all those bugs that children bring to school? Well, partly, but stress plays a huge role too.

Of course, students bring their colds and flu to school, and disease spreads among those most susceptible, not least of which are the care-worn care-givers. But teachers also suffer from stomach ailments more than any other profession and have a high incidence of migraines, illnesses closely related to stress (Hastings, 2008). In the UK, researchers tracking the health of teachers suggest that at least 50% of all staff absences are stress-related (Hastings, 2008; NASUWP, 2010). Such a high incidence of stress-related illness is particularly sobering given the clear link between long term/stress leave and premature retirement (Hastings, 2008; Naylor, 2001).

An increasingly hostile environment.

When we think of school, we like to think of laughing children, dedicated teachers, and proud parents, but schools are becoming increasingly difficult places to work. Although we can distinguish between the attitudes of “stayers”, “movers”, and “leavers”, overall about 40% of America’s 4 million teachers appear disheartened and disappointed with their jobs, about the same ratio as in Canada and the UK (Yarrow, 2009; BCTF, 2006, 2010; NUT, 2008).

The reasons are many and varied but typically include the increasingly of their role, the pace of curricular change, the isolating nature of their work, the lack of palpable support, and the limited recognition and rewards, and the time constraints and seasonal pressures. In general, many teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the scope of their job, unsupported and isolated, and unclear about expectations (Gonzalez & Stallone, 2008). A difficult and draining job by nature has been made even more so by mainstreaming, a culture of tests and inspections, and the unruly behavior of pupils (Naylor, 2001, NUT, 2008).

Teachers frequently complain about overwhelming stress and lack of support from administrators, parents, and the community; however,

administrators may suffer the effects of overwork and its attendant stress as much as their staff and are almost certain to feel more isolated than their teachers who at least have each other to complain to in the staff common room (NASUWUP, 2010; Gonzalez & Stallone, 2008). It should come as no surprise, then, that a study of 300 head teachers by the National Association of Head Teachers in the UK discovered that while head teachers took fewer sick days than their teachers did, their stress levels were at least as high if not higher.

One in three was on regular medication for stress, and one in four reported serious (stress-related) health problems such as high blood pressure, chronic insomnia, and eating disorders. Although their attendance and performance at school may have been as reliable as ever, the pressures were showing in other ways. More than half claimed that their family lives had suffered, and one in six said they were alcoholics (Hastings, 2008, p. 1).

Toward a more balanced approach.

As we have seen, various remedies to teacher distress, illness, and attrition have been proposed and piloted in the last decade or so. The emphasis has largely been on external factors and management strategies such as the induction programs, mentorship, and salary incentives mentioned in the USA (AEE, 2008; Anna, 2009). In the UK, the emphasis has also been external, offering support through a teacher helpline and providing wellness programs which are being piloted elsewhere (Worklife Support, 2010; Hopkins, 2010; Ferguson, 2008; BCTF, 2012). There is good evidence that pressure can be relieved, that sick days can be reduced, and that school climate can be improved through strategies as simple as providing water as well as coffee in the staff room, dedicating times when sports facilities can be used by staff, and appointing “well being coordinators” (Naylor, 2001; Hastings, 2008).

As a veteran teacher and administrator, I certainly applaud all initiatives, big and small, which provide practical support and palpable encouragement to my colleagues in the profession. Still, it is sobering to realize that perhaps a third of all teachers in the USA, Britain, and Canada remain discontent and feel overwhelmed by their work (Yarrow, 2009; NASUWT, 2008; Naylor, 2010), and one can't help but feel that there is something missing in our treatment plans.

Looking inside as well as out.

Thankfully, the research hints at an alternative approach even as it describes the pattern of overwork, stress, illness, and attrition which commonly afflicts educators. It has long been noted that many teachers conceal their problems and are reluctant to seek help (Curtis, 2009; Holmes, 2007). Although teachers are not the only profession “not to seek help when they need it most”, this attribute does distinguish us as educators (NASUWT, 2010). As Elizabeth Holmes says in *Teacher Well-Being*:

This is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the teaching profession. We can be devoted, sometimes beyond the call of duty, to the well-being of our pupils, but when it comes to nurturing each other (and I would add “ourselves”) the picture is not so positive (Holmes, 2007, p. 1).

My point is not to blame the sufferer but rather to enlist our generous and ingenious nature as educators. Our reactions are eminently reasonable—even admirable—after all, if unsustainable in the long run. As educators, we are self-selecting, inclined by our nature and the nature of our profession to self-sacrifice. We naturally fear the stigma and professional consequences of rehabilitation programs, and we are often too tired or preoccupied to take the very training we most need (NASWUT, 2010).

From the perspective of an already overwhelmed teacher, participating in workshops where the expectation is that the business of teaching will be done differently in the classroom is just one more thing on the saturated to-do list (Johnson, 2003, p. 1).

To take a personal example, I remember a fellow administrator who once confessed to me that she didn’t feel that she could fit in the time-management workshop offered at a conference she was attending because she had to go to so many others (on curriculum and assessment). We both smiled at the idea of not having time for time-management, and it was a guilty smile for both of us—we’re like that as educators. That doesn’t make us bad people or deficient professionals quite the contrary—but it is what it is. We just need to use our ingenuity to change our minds, quite literally.

In *Teacher Well-Being*, Elizabeth Holmes (2007) voices the need and the challenge of such a re-orientation:

We should be embracing the responsibility that each of us has for our own well-being. If this is to be achieved, many in the profession will have to undertake profound changes to their practice, preferably removing any element of self-sacrifice and over-conscientiousness from their daily work (Holmes, 2007, p. 1).

It seems to me, then, that a good part of the solution to the beguiling business of overwork and its attendant maladies lies in what I have come to call “self-care” (Allen, 2013). In my view, self-care is a missing piece of pedagogy, an overlooked aspect of educational leadership, and a simple necessity for every educator.

By ‘self-care’, I simply mean learning to look after ourselves properly so that we can continue to look after our students as we would like to. However much (or little) we are supported in our work and outside it, we would be wise to appoint ourselves our own ‘chief care-givers’ and consciously seek whatever it is which sustains us most and brings balance and harmony into our lives (Allen, 2013, p. 3).

Balance and harmony seem to be related. Indeed, one might argue that they are cause and effect for “as we become more balanced, we become more peaceful... we are meant to experience a deep, heart-felt sense of satisfaction in our lives... something we urgently need to regain if it has somehow slipped through our grasp” (Allen, 2013, p. 67). But in order to regain our balance, we must first ask what balance really is.

Part III: In search of balance

Balance is a complex and fascinating subject, rich in irony. Although it can literally be a matter of life and death for all of us, our balance is easily lost and often neglected. Although it is one of the hallmarks of educational excellence and a defining characteristic of the International Baccalaureate Program, balance is notoriously difficult to define and notably lacking in many IB schools (Stobie, 2009). And while almost everyone appears to believe in balance, few seem able to achieve it.

The concept of balance is not as simple as it might seem. As we dig deeper, it becomes apparent that there are many aspects of balance which we need to consider in our lives and work, and that some ways of thinking about balance are going to serve us better than others in the caldron of the classroom.

In particular, as educators, we might wish to balance:

- The personal and the professional
- The formal and the familiar
- The mind and the body
- Teaching and learning
- Being and doing
- Efficiency and effectiveness
- Doing things right and doing the right things
- Retaining one's own cultural identity and exploring others'

But first of all, let's consider what balance really is, how we know when we have it (or don't), and why it is so important to us.

(Re) defining balance.

Balance (like success) may be best gauged by the individual; however, some analogies are more helpful than others as educators. Let's start with the most prevalent definition, that of the International Baccalaureate Organization whose programs have been adopted by some 3 500 schools worldwide. I have enormous respect for the curriculum developed by the IBO, not least because of its whole-hearted humanitarianism. The humanitarian ideals of the IBO are enshrined in its Learner Profile which describes the attributes which all IB students should aspire to. The Learner Profile is meant to inform school culture at every level, and balance is arguably its most important attribute, if not its best articulated one.

Balance and the IB learner profile.

The IB learner profile is the IB mission statement translated into a set of learning outcomes for the 21st century. The attributes of the profile express the values inherent to the IB continuum of international education: these are values that should infuse all elements of the Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Diploma Programme and, therefore, the

culture and ethos of all IB world schools. The learner profile provides a long-term vision of education. It is a set of ideals that can inspire, motivate and focus the work of schools and teachers, uniting them in a common purpose.

By definition, then, all IB students (and teachers) are meant to exemplify the IB Learner Profile attributes. They are meant to be “Knowledgeable, Thinkers, Communicators, Principled, Open-minded, Caring, Risk-takers, Balanced, and Reflective” people. Most of these Learner Profile attributes are clearly defined. For example,

Thinkers exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognize and approach complex problems, and make reasoned, ethical decisions. Communicators understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication [and] work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others (IBO, 2008, paragraph 3).

Balance seems a bit more elusive. According to the Learner Profile, balanced (teachers and students) understand the importance of intellectual, physical, and emotional balance to achieve personal well-being for themselves and others (IBO, 2008). It’s difficult to argue against this definition, despite its tautology, because it is so clearly well-intentioned; however, this definition of balance is limited by its vagueness, by its emphasis on achievement, and by its omission of the spiritual.

Although in Alexander Pope’s words, humans may be by nature in “a middle state” (Pope, 1733, p. 3) spiritual things do matter to many of us and may provide part of the antidote to the overwork which plagues the profession. Also, given our propensity for perfectionism as teachers, we are probably best served to think of balance not as an “achievement” –some ideal state akin to nirvana accomplished by someone’s single-minded effort– but as a practical strategy, daily goal, or continual process for all of us.

Seen this way, balance becomes more of a common journey rather than a personal goal, an essential aspect of our professional skill and dedication rather than an adjunct to our professional life. It follows, then, that balance should be just as important to us as teachers as preparing our lessons or

marking our papers; that balance should become a key component of teacher assessment and promotion; and that every school should activity encourage its teachers to be balanced through training, incentives, and wellness programs. The implications –as well as the rewards– of taking balance seriously are enormous (Allen, 2013, p. 62).

Imagining balance.

Let's take the most popular images of balance one by one and consider their relevance for us as educators.

- 1. The acrobat**, or to be more precise, the tight-rope walker, comes easily to mind. As educators, we easily relate to the drama of keeping our balance before the crowd (our class), and “the tight-rope term” is an apt expression for the time of maximum anxiety and flaring tempers –typically the second to last term of the year. One cannot help but admire the dexterity and temerity of the tight-rope walker, who often plays to the crowd by almost falling and quickly recovering. And this is the main limitation of the metaphor, for the image is one of danger and trepidation– almost falling and barely holding on. It is also an image of solitary exhibitionism, not group effort. As educators, we need a more positive image of balance –not just avoiding disaster but walking with poise and assurance– preferably one that allows us to move forward with our colleagues and students as well, since our success ultimately depends upon our shared effort.
- 2. The teeter-totter** is an inevitable and useful image of balance –probably the first image to come to mind for many. There is a playful part to this activity, a fond memory for many of us. But the teeter-totter image is limited by its implication of extremes and antagonism. Up-down; success-failure; love-hate. Although we naturally think in these terms, they rarely serve us well– especially in education. To begin with, one person wins while the other loses: the usual dynamic of the teeter-totter on the playground but hardly our highest goal as educators.

Also, these are false dichotomies. As Carew (1640) reminds us in his sonnet *Mediocrity in love rejected*, the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. As Canfield (2005) argues in *The success principles*, failure rightly understood is actually a sign post to success (chapter 2). And as I

see it, the teeter-totter is only an apt image of balance for the trembling moment when it is absolutely horizontal the balance game being relatively rare on the playground because of its difficulty.

3. **The pie chart** is useful because it acknowledges the different aspects of our lives that need to be considered if we are to maintain our balance (some of these are listed at the beginning of the chapter, and others will come up in the next section). We all have minds and bodies; many of us have mortgages and marriages. But some of us are more creative, some more practical, some more athletic than others. So the pie chart only works as an image of balance if we accept that different people require various sizes or numbers of slices, although we normally think of symmetry –the “perfectly” divided pie– as an expression of balance.
4. **The mathematic equation** ($Ax + By = C$) is an elegant and highly abstract solution to the problem of the pie chart, bringing together a number of disparate elements in a clear logical relation. It’s a good image of balance because it recognizes that different things are more or less important to different people but that all aspects are needed and related. The weakness of this metaphor, from my perspective, lies in its strength: that it’s a bit too abstract and rational for what is really a very earthy, vital, messy, and even passionate thing. Whatever balance is for us in our actual lives, it can’t be something as coldly rational as symmetry and proportion, because it has to take into account our individuality, creativity, enthusiasms, and changing desires.
5. **The scales of justice** is another almost inevitable image of balance, given its cultural currency, longevity, and power. It certainly communicates the urgency of the choices before us (remember that we said that balance could literally be “a matter of life and death”). But the scales of justice is a curiously blood-thirsty and surprisingly ambiguous image. Here, “your life hangs in the balance”, but justice is both blindfolded and wielding a sword which doesn’t bode well for any of us. If this image resonates with us as educators, it is probably because of the weight of responsibility we carry and our fear of being judged –not to mention our constant need for instruments of assessment– but we need to stretch our imaginations further.

6. The Tao or *Ying-Yang* symbol is the best image of balance to me, despite my western upbringing, because it expresses balance as harmony, but not the easy static harmony of logic and symmetry so much as the difficult and dynamic harmony of blending with the opposite. The general idea of Taoism is that while everything has its place and nature, nothing is altogether one thing or the other and that everything is in motion. In Taoist thought, our goal is not so much to balance opposites (like the teeter-totter or scale of justice) but rather to “be present” in the moment, responding to the opposing forces that ebb and flow around us.

A bit ethereal, I know, unless you begin to feel this way of thinking in your bones and see it in action. This world view has only begun to make sense to me as I have studied the martial arts, especially *Tai Chi Chuan* which is so deeply rooted in Taoism. Despite my religious beliefs which run somewhat contrary, I can see much wisdom here and many practical ways that Taoism can help us shed our stress, reconnect with nature, and regain our perspective.

Assessing balance.

Fortunately, balance is easier to recognize than it is to define. By analogy, it might help to think more about the inside (homeostasis) than the outside (falling). But even from what we have said so far, you might ask yourself whether your life –including your work life– is permeated by:

- Peace and productivity
- Pleasure and appreciation
- Understanding and harmony

Or would it be more accurate to say that your life is characterized more by:

- Stress and struggle
- Duty and necessity
- Striving and confusion

Do you end the day exhausted feeling “used up” vaguely disoriented, somewhat irritable, and a bit depressed. If so, you are in good company: many teachers feel this way at the end of a busy day in the classroom. Much of the time, it seems to be an inevitable state.

But consider an alternate possibility. You might leave the school with a sense of peace, productivity, and pleasure; tired of course, but with the “good kind of tired” that you associate with your favorite sport or pastime? If so, your life is probably in good balance, however extreme your efforts have been in whatever direction all day.

The motion not the mean.

I mention “extremes” because the art of finding balance –“poise and contentment”, if you prefer– is not the search for some abstract “mean between extremes” (in this respect, Aristotle was wrong). For us as educators especially, balance has more to do with moving artfully between extremes. We know this from “the normal extremes” of our most effective teaching as we are being present for moments of hilarity when they come up, insisting on absolute seriousness when necessary, being focused and demanding sometimes, easy going and lenient at other times, inviting participation or discouraging discussion as the situation (and our professional judgment) dictate.

As taxing as it may be, there is something that seems effortless and feels jubilant about days like these. Somehow, we just feel that we are “in the flow” and we’re right because time itself flexes with us in our best spent days in the classroom. Suddenly, we are happily surprised that the period is over and a little sad that the day has ended, but able to return home contented.

Finding balance in the maelstrom.

This idea of moving artfully between extremes has a larger application too. When I think of the best balanced and most content teachers I have known, they have often embraced extremes in various aspects of their lives. Let me give you two simple examples.

One was an extraordinary individual in some respects but multi-talented and good-natured as many teachers are. What set him apart was the passion/dedication he brought to his many different activities. He was a first-rate science teacher, an able administrator, and accomplished soccer coach. He not only held a Ph.D. in Chemistry but was also an expert sky-diver. He loved to travel, and led student trips to various exotic locales. It seemed that he was good at everything.

And so he was. However, at one point, he was also courting burnout. He had taken on too much and was running out of patience with his colleagues. He was able to regain his balance by renegotiating his position so his duties involved less of the administration which he found aggravating and more of the classroom time which he loved, but he never did anything by half. His secret was not moderation but moving artfully from one thing to another. He did whatever he did with intensity, but then did something else, and organized his life accordingly day by day. I was always proud to be teaching with him, and admired him both for his many accomplishments and his sense of balance.

I can think of another good, if very different, example of a teacher who found balance by moving artfully between extremes. He was fortunate to teach in a school District which had a sabbatical program (you could deposit 20% of your salary in a special fund and take every fifth year off with the District paying you 80% of your salary). When he was working, he was completely dedicated to the school: absolutely absorbed in his classes, contributing to every meeting, spearheading various student activities. When he was on sabbatical, he was completely dedicated to his travels: enjoying the food and culture of the country, documenting his journey and sharing his experiences. He was extreme in his dedication but artful in moving between teaching and travel and planning his life accordingly, another remarkable example of balance.

What comes to mind as think of these colleagues, though, is “presence”: they were truly present in whatever they did, not staggering half-heartedly from one commitment to another as we so often do. They also understood what they needed and were determined to provide it for themselves whatever the school offered or didn’t.

Part IV: Educational implications of balance

A balanced curriculum.

Even though Daniel Pink and others have demonstrated that “soft skills” may be what matter most for our students in the 21st century, we are often inclined to underrate them ourselves professionally (Pink, 2006). But consider the implications of our actions. If we know that our students need to learn empathy, communication, critical thinking, and creativity, if follows

that we should prize and cultivate these attributes ourselves so that we can model and teach them.

Legitimate professional development with 21st century skills in mind might therefore include taking a poetry class or learning to paint, taking up tai chi or learning to play chess, joining a discussion group or volunteering at a soup kitchen (Allen, 2013, p. 181).

We might also expect some dynamism in the manner of the Taoist model of balance described earlier. In a well-balanced (dynamic) life, our personal-work-family columns might flex and blend together a bit so that we could occasionally bring our family lives to school just as we now sometimes bring our work home with us, and some of the activities that we might first consider as personal (self-care) could come to enhance our professional work more (and more directly) than we might have imagined.

Balanced professional development.

How many highly efficient meetings and well organized presentations have you attended which were superficially productive but profoundly unimportant? If we focus on the outside—schedules, rules, procedures, marks, and markets—we are liable to lose sight of the core of education which is inside, especially inside us as educators. Again, in light of brain based research and 21st century skills, by far the most important thing that we bring to the classroom is ourselves. Not our curriculum, not our technology, but ourselves as people, grown like our students from the inside out.

Consider the professional development implications of brain-based learning. We don't just "set the stage" for learning as we once thought; the empirical evidence now is that we cause learning by our attitudes and emotions (Doidge, 2007; Deak, 2009, 2011). And, if we know that our students need to learn empathy, communication, critical thinking, and creativity, it follows that we should prize and cultivate these attributes ourselves so that we can model and teach them.

What sort of diet is going to help us grow best from the inside out? What will reignite our enthusiasm, provoke our sympathy, stimulate our creativity,

stretch our thinking, and develop our communication? And how are these priorities reflected in the way we spend our professional development time and money now? From an institutional perspective, the best way for the school to promote personal and professional development might well be by investing in self-care training and/or setting up a wellness program.

Balanced programs.

Whatever the nature of the program—and you would hope that it would reflect local culture and concerns—the need for wellness programs is clear. Consider, for example, this no-nonsense declaration by the BC Teacher’s Federation:

A paradigm shift needs to take place in the education system in terms of teachers’ workload, stress levels, discipline strategies, administrative support, wellness programs, and parents’ responsibility. Teachers work long hours. There is a high rate of burnout and sickness. Wellness programs need to be established for teacher coping and student healthiness and self-esteem (Naylor, 2001, p. 10).

The connection between student well-being and staff self-care is important here, for students will naturally reap the benefits of a more harmonious staff. Small tangible things can make a big difference to teacher morale which permeates the school. Things as simple as providing water or redecorating the staff room have proven beneficial, as have morning yoga or Tai Chi classes (Hastings, 2008).

Secrets of successful wellness programs.

Because wellness programs especially for teachers are still in their infancy, our collective knowledge is limited. Some programs have been piloted in Australia; others have been established in the US in recent years (Adams, 2009; Hopkins, 2009). However, the most comprehensive programs that I know about began in the UK as early as 2001 as a private offshoot of the Teachers’ Benevolent Fund (TBF). Over the last decade, Worklife Support has developed wellness surveys, staff training sessions, and individual consultations; and a number of schools using their services report both notable improvements in teacher morale and considerable reductions in staff attrition and sickness (Worklife Support, 2010). As the “elder brothers” in the wellness movement, our UK colleagues have much to teach us.

A careful look at the case studies of six schools in the London Borough reveals several keys to success:

- Making wellness a school priority
- Establishing a baseline and assessing progress
- Creating a wellness team
- Spending time and money on ambiance
- Carving out the necessary time
- Being willing to think outside the box

For example, the headmaster of Hendon School made well-being a top priority, formed a wellbeing team with teachers across the school, conducted a baseline wellness survey, improved communications, and set about “to make the school look beautiful”, replacing the peeling white paint in the corridors with vibrant pinks and purples, refurbishing the staffroom with modern furniture and fittings, placing eye-catching statues in the corridors, and installing a ‘fountain of life’ in the courtyard outside. Ambiance does matter (Worklife Support, 2010).

The well-being team at Hendon has also organized dinner-dances and barbeques, sporting events, and a mentoring program. In-service days now incorporate social time to focus on people as well as program. On Friday afternoons, sixth form students organize an exercise program for teachers –a nice role reversal– and a member of the cleaning staff who is a trained masseuse is available for massage sessions (Worklife Support, 2010).

There is a nice mix of daring, ingenuity, and practicality here. Other schools in this group have also remodeled their staffrooms, have restructured deadlines or procedures to help teachers plan ahead, have added “significant details” on the teachers’ “wish list” (tea biscuits or a water cooler), and have organized Pilates or yoga sessions. These schools have also been willing to be unorthodox, whether it be outsourcing school clubs to free up teachers’ time, hosting wine/chocolate tastings, or providing salsa classes. Teachers feel more appreciated, and are therefore happier at work. There has also been a definite improvement in academic results, a noticeable by-product of teacher wellness that has prompted further study (Worklife Support, 2010).

Still, even with wellness programs, we would be well advised to keep balance in mind. For one thing, the “secrets” of successful wellness programs are largely the secrets of successful teaching: knowing your audience, developing your curriculum, assessing your results, and modifying your content/delivery. A balance of organization and discernment, presence and practice. Also, as splendid as such opportunities may be, they are not available to all nor universally appealing. Not only that, but there is a distinct disadvantage in linking one’s wellness too closely to external factors. A balanced attitude to wellness programs would be to give and take whatever was most fitting personally but to appoint one’s self the “chief care giver”.

Balancing our attitudes.

Indeed, our attitudes often do need to be rebalanced for our own good and the good of our students. Enormous effort is part of our job, but desperately trying to do the right thing all the time is actually at the root of our problem as educators. Besides which, there may not be one right thing to do. Dualism –good or bad, win or lose, right or wrong, now or then– does not serve either us or our students well pedagogically, particularly from a self-care perspective.

In the caldron of the classroom and the rhythmic fluctuations of school life, we are most in need of creativity and presence, peace and discernment: being there for our students, our colleagues (and ourselves) in the best way at the appropriate time. A natural approach to a natural process such as learning does make inherent sense. So does an emphasis on thankfulness rather than righteousness, if we want to remain positive and actually enjoy our lives, including our daily work. Indeed, I am convinced through long experience that one of the vital keys to our preservation, satisfaction, and success as educators is the appreciation of everyday school life with all its upheavals (Allen, 2013, pp. 225-226).

Seeing the classroom as a *collage*.

As we picture everyday school life, it may help to think of each day as a colorful collage. In one corner, a child’s radiant smile of triumph or pleasure or mischief. In the background, the constant hubbub in class and the inevitable milling and churning between classes. Scattered about, the outrageous comments, off-beat jokes, silly sayings, sudden insights, and ritual complaints. The intermittent clamor of the bell at the end of class.

Somewhere, the student running pell-mell down the packed hallway and the pungent odor of burnt coffee in the staff room. Here and there, the occasional tear but also the pervasive sense that we are all in it together. The amalgam of these things brings a peculiar richness and texture into our lives which we may not fully appreciate at the time but may well mourn when it ceases (have you ever noticed how sad an empty school can be?).

As educators, we are typically tempted by our perfectionism to push for a pedagogical heaven on earth, “a place where everything is beautiful and nothing hurts”, where our students all achieve excellent results and nothing untoward ever happens. Surely it would be more realistic and healthy for us to move consciously, however slowly, toward a deep and abiding sense of purpose and appreciation instead of trying for personal and professional perfection.

To preserve ourselves so that we can continue to look after our students, we really do need to cultivate as much conscious appreciation of the here and now as possible; otherwise, we are likely to go under one term at a time, not unlike the frog in the beaker. And by “the here and now”, I mean what really is –not the way we want things to be, not our efforts to make them so, not just the good things that come our way, but the whole murky ebb and flow of actual experience going on all around us all the time–.

Balancing productivity and presence.

Being and doing, efficiency and effectiveness, doing things right and doing the right things are all part and parcel of the same thing: discerning the right way to work. There are times for all-out effort when we need to act as if nothing else matters for a little while in order to get something done. For many of us, marking falls into this category, since it is difficult to accomplish in fits and starts. Once you have the rubric and the marks scheme and have read enough papers, you can mark many with accuracy quite quickly; but once you stop, you have to “relearn” the material again before you can start again. The wise thing to do is to close the door, unplug the phone, and hunker down with a cup of coffee.

There are also times when we need to stop doing what we are doing – even though we are doing it in a reliable and diligent way (efficiently)– to try something different in the interests of effectiveness (getting a certain result).

If our report cards are beautifully written and exquisitely detailed but are taking us too long to write, we need to rethink our methods (Who is reading these reports? What do they really need to know? Is there a simpler way to say what needs to be said?).

As teachers, we often find ourselves working hard to do things right—following the exact specifications of the report card format in the previous example— when we might do better to consider whether we are doing the right thing.

By Bennis’s definition, this takes us into the realm of educational leadership, which may be limited in our prevue as teachers (Managing People, 1999). But take the telling example of exams. All schools have them, for better or worse, often in equal measure. It is common, for instance, for teachers to use tests as tools for classroom management under the guise of student assessment and equally common for administrators to retain arduous examinations to please parents as much as to assess learning. And it is remains difficult for many teachers and administrators to incorporate assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning (see Black & Williams, Inside the Black Box, 1998). Still, educational policies and practices can always be modified, if only in the manner of their implementation.

Most importantly, we would do well as educators to remind ourselves and one another in the face of such tangible commitments as examinations and report cards that our main focus should always be on our intangible effort to be present to our students in a unique, individual, and humane way. Just being with them with humor and understanding and enthusiasm, guiding, encouraging, and stimulating them in the quirky heyday of their early formation, adolescence, and teenage years is our biggest gift and greatest service to them. It’s us —not the instruction we provide— that is most likely to make a lasting impression on them.

How counts as much as what.

It follows, then, that as educators, our actions and attitudes far outweigh our instruction and production in importance. The most important thing we bring to class is ourselves and our capacity to be present to our students. Of course, we need to produce term overviews, lesson plans, assessment pieces, and periodic reports. The school will set its own standards and we will impose our own as

well. There are few shirkers in education, so our work is likely to be highly professional if somewhat overdone at times. But we are the essential ingredient of whatever we hope to accomplish at school. Let's take a practical example:

Report cards—a curious ritual in seasonal self-abuse that you can witness in almost any school—. And it's “curiouser and curiouser” as Alice would say because we typically emerge overworked and harassed, “wrung out” after a week of report writing, and push the “send” button, thinking that we have completed the task. Sadly, few of us have much wherewithal leftover for the most important part of the learning process which is really discussing our reports with our students and their parents.

No time for personal reflection, correction, appreciation, and shared goal-setting? How easily the product stymies the process unless we let the “how” take precedence?

If we were to let the “how” frame the “what,” we would probably be kinder to ourselves and our students in the long run. I know from my own experience that the ether is full of purple prose which students and parents have left unread or unheeded but that a kind word or quiet comment can make all the difference in child's life. I also know from my own experience that I can emerge from the marking tunnel or report card factory relatively well preserved or absolutely crushed depending on the small kindnesses that I offer myself. A cup of tea, an occasional stretch, the odd walk around the block, a reasonable goal to begin, a manageable daily quota, and a reward at the end. These are the things that shape my reality in the evening and make or mar my student's experience the next day.

Making our beds on the factory floor.

My allusion to “the report card factory” brings to mind Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) in which the grim figures of Gradgrind and M'Choakumchild preside drearily over a school room which is interchangeable with the factory floor. Sadly, utilitarianism continues to cast its long shadow over education despite Dickens scathing and incisive denunciation 160 years ago; however, we can learn as much about education from what Dickens advocates as from what he denounces in *Hard Times*. We need only consider Sissy Jupe who revels in her fanciful nature, Stephen Blackpool who freely admits that everything

is “a muddle”, and that most unlikely spokesman for educational reform, the circus-master, Sleary, who forcefully argues that people can’t always be working and studying but “must be amused”.

By implication, our educational practice –including that forgotten piece of pedagogy, self-care– should balance rigor and results with imagination, wisdom, and delight. When we find ourselves driven to slave-like labor or attempting machine-like efficiency and precision as we often do at “crunch times” in the school year, we should take a step back and think again. The school may seem like a factory during exam week or report card season, but that doesn’t mean that we need to make our bed on the factory floor. Our life and our health require still waters (Allen, 2013, p. 126).

Straight lines vs. Ragged edges.

In fact, when you think about it, much of the difficulty that we have setting reasonable goals for ourselves in education probably stems from the industrial paradigm which still dogs the profession. We may well feel productive when we are preparing classes, marking papers, writing reports, entering grades, and booking appointments, but what are we really trying to produce as educators if not curiosity, eagerness, eloquence, understanding, and insight? And as much as we know that we are living in the information age rather than the industrial age, we still often seem bent on imposing straight lines and quotas on a variable organic process.

Nature –and I believe that learning is natural for us– just isn’t like that. As Ted Hughes suggests in *The Thought Fox*, ideas slip into our minds silently, unobtrusively, in their own time, with only a glimmer of growth to show their passing:

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business (Webster, 1984, p. 35).

I mentioned Taoism earlier and will return to it later; but for now, just remember that nature itself may be part of the antidote to the overwork which is the dark side of the industrial revolution and that our natural desire to learn is the heart if not the soul of education.

So let's content ourselves with a few ragged edges –not quite understanding everything, not having everything nailed down, leaving a little room for imagination and mystery while still being practical–.

Balancing complaint and appreciation.

As teachers, we like to complain, and we have much to complain about. In fact, when you enter some staff rooms, you can quickly see that complaining has been elevated to an art form with its own grim, inverted humor. There is nothing really wrong with this: people in other high-stress professions use gallows humor to keep themselves going too (just ask a fireman, policeman, or physician, and you will know what I mean). And complaining can be fun for a moment, as long as it doesn't become a debilitating and gruesome habit of mind.

So, for our collective good as educators, we might think about balancing chronic complaint with intentional appreciation. If we reflect for a moment, we all have much to be thankful for, despite the overwhelming aspects of our profession. For example, we might pause to appreciate the benefit of a good night's sleep, a job well done, and the laughter of children. Just having “the power to work” –both the job itself and the ability to do it– is in itself a splendid thing, especially as educators, since we hold the future in our hands every day and have “the leisure to rest” at the end of each term if not before.

As educators, we know that expressing our learning reinforces it, most obviously in the case of languages. We all know the language of complaint in all its nuances: ribald complaints, seasonal complaints, pet peeves, unvoiced objections, and serious discontent. Complaint has a well-established place in the ebb and flow of our lives, but we may need to brush up a bit on the language of appreciation which is lesser known but also has its nuances, grammar, and dialects.

The *tao* of teaching.

As Rudyard Kipling famously wrote, “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (The Ballad of East and West, Párr, 1889). As a westerner, I am reluctant to say much about eastern religion/spirituality because the associated world view, history, and culture is so foreign to me. A little bit of Taoism has sunk in over the years, however, chiefly through my practice of *Tai Chi*, and for this I am deeply indebted to my teachers.

From the Taoist perspective, reality is not one thing or the other but a blending or continuum of disparate things in constant motion. (Think of the *Ying-Yang* sign.) The cycle of day and night and seasonal changes are the obvious examples. Day fades into night with twilight, and as Cummings would say, “Spring comes like a perhaps hand”, not all at once. Yet there are thunderclaps, hailstorms, and enormous variations in seasonal temperatures. As teachers, we experience a similar reality of constant flux and sudden surprises in the classroom, and may be able to keep our balance/find harmony by moving artfully from one extreme to another.

But my mention of the seasons brings up another important point for self-care, which is that Taoism is deeply rooted in nature –in an understanding and appreciation of natural things and an effort to emulate them–. Hence many martial arts poses, including those in *Tai Chi*, are inspired by animals and linked to the elements. For example, the motions of the tiger, the crane, the snake, and the monkey are imbedding in the flowing motions of the *Tai Chi* form which resembles a river, water being one of the essential elements in traditional Chinese cosmology.

In fact, when you think about it, water comes into many religious traditions and spiritual practices. And that is worth remembering as educators because water teaches us much about adaptability and time, and can help us find peace. Our life and our health require still waters, not the factory floor. It is no accident that the good shepherd promises to lead his flock “beside still waters” in Psalm 23, and that Isaiah is lead to a quiet place near water to be restored. It also comes as no surprise that a school would install a water feature called “the fountain of life” as part of its wellness program (Worklife Support, 2010).

So it seems that one simple self-care strategy that we can glean from both East and West is to disconnect so that we can reconnect: that is, to unplug ourselves from all our electronic devices and distance ourselves from our daily cares from time to time so that we can immerse ourselves in nature to renew our spirits.

Part V: Summary – balance or burnout

Clearly, in the face of the “unsustainable imbalance” created by the external and internal pressures previously described, educators do need to find “a

more sustainable way of working and being”. This is not an easy task, but it is an essential one, not only for the well-being of the educators themselves but also for the students in their care. Starkly stated, the choice is really between balance and burnout, which makes the definition of balance a burning question. Rather than a rare and admirable personal quality, balance would better be seen as a fundamental professional characteristic which institutions and individuals developed through planning and practice, assessment and promotion. As Allen observes in *Self-Care for Teachers*:

Although balance is in many ways an individual matter, it is extraordinarily important to all of us as educators, and should be an essential part of our life and work together –part of our daily practice, professional development, and assessment criteria. Balance is best understood as a practical goal and continuous process rather than an ideal state or final destination. The most accurate and humane idea of balance would take into account all the aspects of our being– our minds, bodies, and spirit, our practical concerns, individual desires, attributes, and idiosyncrasies –as well as the flux of our daily lives. Consequently, we would move toward better balance by cultivating understanding, appreciation, and harmony rather than trying to impose artificial symmetry and proportion on our lives. Our shared goal would be to find peace and pleasure in the whirl of human events–, a practical necessity for all classroom teachers (Allen, 2013, p. 66).

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