

## COPING WITH STRESS THROUGH VALIDATION: A TOOL OF THE TEACHING TRADE

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*Teachers are isolated from other adults throughout the work day. Lunch time is often the only time for adult interaction. Some researchers have argued that the alienation of teaching contributes to retention problems in the profession. This ethnography investigated the lunch-time activities conducted in congregational spaces throughout one inner-city school. The congregational spaces created a safe space for teachers to share their emotions, as teachers have to mask their emotions throughout their workday. In particular, it explored the teachers' need to congregate in order to be heard and validate their experiences in the classroom. The act of validation is a coping mechanism where teachers receive social support from each other. More research needs to explore these important relationships and spaces.*

Teaching is a characteristically lonely vocation, offering the practitioner only limited opportunities for adult-to-adult interaction during the course of the average workday. Once the classroom door is closed at the start of the day, each teacher becomes separated from the rest of the school, a characteristic that has created an isolationist and alienating culture (Rogers & Babinski, 2002) endemic to the teaching profession (Court, 1999). The individualistic nature of our educational system (Hargreaves, 1980) and the rigidity of the academic structure and schedule (Court, 1999) hinder teacher interaction during the workday. Moreover, current educational reforms and new curricula have added to the teacher workload, leaving even less time for professional interaction on a daily basis.

Researchers have documented how this isolation contributes to a lack of community among teachers (Rogers & Babinski, 2002), which forces them to become autonomous in their working style

(Tickle, 2000). Teaching has essentially become known as an extremely private activity (Wheelan, 2005). Discussions in the literature have indicated that teacher isolation lessens teachers' interest in their work and undermines their long-term interest in their school (Zielinski & Hoy, 1983).

Studies have consistently reported that worker collaboration is necessary in order to overcome isolation (Court, 1999; Rogers & Babinski, 2002; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001; Zielinski & Hoy, 1983). As a result, many schools have begun implementing structured collaboration in order to create a sense of community and combat the negative effects of teacher isolation. However, Williams et al. found that teachers value spontaneous collaboration, developed from informal conversations, more so than ones arising from formal discussion. As researchers, we must go to the places where these informal conversations occur most often: the teachers' lounge and other congregational spaces used for teacher-to-teacher interaction.

A paucity of studies regarding informal social interactions among teachers in the literature exists. Research includes studies from abroad and fewer ones conducted in the United States. In addition, most of the research strictly addressed teachers' lounges and had not explored alternative congregational spaces.

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A scant number of research studies conducted in Israel, France, and England explored interactions occurring exclusively within teachers' lounges. They included investigations of how teachers' lounges and the relationships within these spaces were used to develop membership within schools (Kainan, 1994). Other studies revealed that interactions in teachers' lounges provided a support mechanism for teachers (Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, 2000; Kainan, 2002). Although some of this research is several decades old, the body of work provides a fertile ground for developing important research about this topic in present day.

Recent research conducted in the United States has explored interactions between administrators and teachers. Hallett (2005a; 2005b), for instance, observed informal teacher-to-teacher interactions that occurred in school hallways in order to gauge teachers' perspectives about their schools' administration. Though the majority of United States researchers appeared to have neglected the discussion, there is now increasing interest in teachers' lounge interactions among both practitioners and administrators (Keller, 1999, 2000). "Lounge talk" also occurs in classrooms, lunchrooms, or outside the context of the school day (Keller, 1999, 2000), though a dearth of research exists that actively observes this non-lounge, culture-forming interaction.

Hallett's work (2005a; 2005b) does include some interactions occurring among teachers in hallways, but this aspect of the author's research is very limited and is not the main focus. McGregor (2003) conducted the only other study focusing on teacher interaction in non-lounge school spaces, a project conducted in South Africa. The author explored and tracked patterns of teachers' social networks throughout the school. In sum, despite interest, in the United States there remains limited understanding of the teachers' lounge and congregational spaces used for informal social interaction between teachers in order to reduce teacher isolation. The present study adds to the literature and contributes a necessary discussion.

In addition to social isolation, teachers must face the constant societal and professional requirement to mask their emotional state on a daily basis. Teachers may be expected to be positive and professional while hiding their true emotions from students, parents, and administrators. This requirement can be emotionally taxing and have significant effects upon the practitioner. In light of this phenomenon, the present study drew upon Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor.

The author investigated public occupations where social façades were required on a daily basis, (e.g., flight attendants, bill collectors) and concluded that subjects would only reveal their true emotions to co-workers in private spaces.

Although the professional requirements of social isolation and maintaining an emotional façade can be difficult for teachers, informal social networks and interactions can combat these effects through social and emotional support. Social networks are the patterns people establish among themselves (Nestmann & Hurrelmann, 1994), which can develop into social support. Theorists Gottlieb and Sylvestre (1994) explained that in social support theory, the support network is created through shared meaning and knowledge. Groves and Couper (1998) further discussed how these support networks create common norms. Support can occur in informal settings (Whittaker & Garbarino, 1983) and within personal relationships (Gottlieb & Sylvestre, 1994). It is important to point out that, although social networks of teachers were explored in the research, this does not mean that social support always develops from within these networks.

Guided by the theoretical frameworks, the present study specifically addressed the following questions: Where and how do teachers find spaces to socially interact? What occurs in the interactions between teachers in congregational spaces? What are teachers' perceptions of interactions and relationships created in congregational spaces?

## **Method**

I designed the present study as an ethnography to allow a focused look at the inner workings of one school. My intent was to gain a micro-level perspective that could then lead to further research at a macro-level (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). I collected observation and interview data during the 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 academic years in one K-8 inner-city school that I provide the fictitious name, John E. Farmer School, (N = 100 teachers and staff members). The often difficult context of urban schools creates an enhanced need for social support among teachers, a perception that justified my selection of an inner-city school.

To document teacher-to-teacher interactions, I conducted observations in the teachers' lounge and other congregational spaces during the various lunch periods. I observed three groups of teachers: the kindergarten to second-grade lunch group, the fourth-grade lunch group, and the

seventh- and eighth-grade lunch group. The results are presented in Table 1. I also completed observations in the teachers' lounge that was mainly used by volunteer parents and teaching assistants. Observations occurred with me eating lunch with the teachers in these spaces. I completed the field notes in congregational spaces immediately after each lunch period. When I conducted observations in the teachers' lounge, I simultaneously completed field notes. I completed a total of approximately 312 hours of observations.

Additionally, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 16 informants: 13 teachers, 1 principal, and 2 student teachers. The interviews were conducted as a method for gaining the teachers' perspectives about the relationships and interactions in the congregational spaces. I selected the purposive stratified sample of teachers (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003) based on the following categories: race, gender, age, teaching experience, number of years at Farmer School, and if and where they ate lunch in certain communal spaces.

TABLE 1: *Congregational Groups and Number of Teacher/Staff Per Group*

Congregational Group	Number of Teachers/Staff in Group	
	2005-2006	2007-2007
K-2	10	8
4	5	7
7-8	11	11

The interviews were between 20 and 40 minutes in length, and certain interviews with teachers were conducted over multiple days. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent. A member-checks process ensued whereby each interview participant received a transcript of his or her interview and was asked to review the information gathered for accuracy. It is important for me to point out that the majority of the data presented in this article are from observations which best depicted teachers' use of validation.

MAXqda2, computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, guided my analysis of the observational field notes and interview transcriptions. Open coding was used to initially analyze and identify various themes in the research, then focused coding was used to analyze the core themes arising from the research (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Together, these two coding methods organized the broad scope of the information into the emerging themes of the research. Constant comparative analysis was used to compare themes among the coded categories (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001), ultimately creating a kaleidoscope of information with the different patterns. I used classical content analysis to count the number of times a code was used in the project.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) translated the concepts of quantitative validity and reliability into terms relevant to qualitative research and applied the concept of trustworthiness to the qualitative paradigm. They conceived criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research as existing in the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of a study's findings. With these elements accounted for, qualitative research could then demonstrate a high level of trustworthiness. I took several steps in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the present study. The first was a triangulation of the interviews with member checks of the transcripts, as discussed previously, to ensure accuracy. Secondly, transferability was strengthened in the presentation of the results. I report the findings in responsibly detailed description to aid readers who want to reproduce the qualitative method within another framework.

This article presents observational data in a literary journalistic fashion, a writing style that presents teachers' interactions as realistically as possible, giving the reader greater perspective into the conversations. Additionally, as Bochner and Ellis (1996) discussed, there are different means of written expression through ethnography, which helps to open the word to a wider audience. The literary journalist writing style used in this article aims to do as such.

## **Results**

Through this ethnography, I found that teacher participants had a need to feel heard and validated. The sharing of their thoughts, feelings, and/or concerns among their co-workers within the safety of the congregational spaces provided a way for releasing tension about their students and job. The themes of validation emerged in three

areas: the academic progress of students, students' behaviors, and the job itself. The teachers' discussion involved positive and negative perceptions of the three themes.

### *Validation About the Academic Progress of Students*

At times, conversation would focus upon students' poor academic progress. For example, one long-term eighth-grade substitute teacher, Maria, talked about her students' grades with another teacher, Kat:

I can't wait for the parents to come in with your students. I gave them all Ds. I should have given them Fs. Heck, I gave them all extra credit to like seven students. Only one of them actually did it.

I added: "It seems like you gave them the chance with the extra credit." She responded:

That's just it, I have given them the chance. The parents are going to come in and I can't wait to talk with them. I tell ya, they can be morons. Did I just call them morons? I didn't mean to call them morons, did I?

Maria called the students "morons" but did so out of her frustration with the students' academic progress, showing her concern for the students. She was able to express her frustration with the students' academic progress within the safety of the congregational space.

Samantha Washington, a kindergarten teacher, had similar concerns with students' lack of academic progress as a result of language barriers. One day, while I was in the office signing-in for the day, Samantha walked in and said to the administrative assistants and teachers in the office: "So do you have a tutor for Turkish, Spanish, Russian, and Jordanian? Because I have all these students that don't understand a word!" It was a rhetorical question, but Samantha was able to have her concerns heard. This expression was a release for the frustrations and tensions she was feeling about her students' language barriers in connection with their academic progress.

The need to feel heard and validated about students' academic progress was also situated within praise and excitement for students' progress. Abby is a teaching assistant and also runs a computerized test prep program called *Fast Forward* to help students improve their daily test scores. Abby gives the students incentives when they achieve a certain percentage. In the teachers'

lounge one day, Abby was talking about a student who had been struggling:

I have *Fast Forward* you know, I have the second graders after school and also work with the big kids upstairs. If they test 200 to 250 I give them a Smartie [candy incentive]. If they double their score, I give them two Smarties. This one kid, I told him to get a 150. He is a little slower. He walked out the other day with a whole handful of Smarties!

It was obvious that Abby was excited about her student's progress, and she had the need to share this enthusiasm with other adults. Abby just needed to be heard and validated, and the social support within the congregational space allowed this to occur.

Teachers also talked with excitement when students worked hard to excel. Eighth-grade teacher Linda was weeks ahead from the due date for book reports and recapped a discussion she had with a student: "I have a kid [John] come to me and say, 'What's the next book report so I can get started. I'm like, 'We didn't even finish the first one!'" Reading teacher Laura added: "Mine is not due until the 15th and I already had 13 kids turn them in. These are not the older kids of course, they're fifth and sixth graders."

Maria had a similar situation with overachieving students: "There is a lunch group [of students] that comes in, and they did the work for Thursday when I was out. On Friday, everyone did the homework and wanted to go ahead a chapter." Kat replied: "That's a good problem to have." Linda, Laura, and Maria were able to use their adult time within the congregational spaces to express the stories behind their students' eagerness and received validation.

Teachers discussed students' academic progress, but they were also concerned with students' well-being and how it affected their academic progress. When I was tutoring one day, a fourth grader named Brian was crying because his body was itchy. His teacher, Shannon, decided to send him to the nurse. Brian has Tourette's syndrome and itching can be a side effect. Shannon, whose eldest son also has the disorder, was aware of what was happening with Brian and hoped the nurse could help him. Instead, Shannon received an unexpected response. Frustrated, she expressed her concerns to her lunch group: "I send down [Brian] and I get this note: 'Don't send children down if they have a problem from home.' He was so



itchy and it's part of the Tourette's. It makes them feel like their skin is crawling."

Fellow teacher Ann added: "Plus, they just started changing his medicine." At this point there was not much that Shannon could do for Brian, but expressing her frustration acted as a coping mechanism for her helplessness. Shannon was able to reveal her frustrations in the congregational space because it provided a safe environment.

### *Validation About Students' Behaviors*

The teachers' main concerns were student behaviors and classroom management. The majority of the time, discussion about student behaviors was based on frustration. Again, the teachers told these stories as a way of release and to have someone listen as if they were receiving agreement.

Upper-grade teachers Linda, Felicia, and I were in the bathroom before lunch. Linda turned to Felicia and said: "I had to throw [Katrina] out of class today." Linda started to recount the story in detail and added: "Then she starts going off! 'I don't care! This is not your classroom, it's Jesus Christ's classroom!'" Even in the bathroom, Linda was able to briefly explain her frustrations to her colleague and friend. It was a two-minute release from a negative experience she just had with a student.

Abby also talked about an incident she encountered with a student while monitoring recess:

You know what a kid said to me today? I pretended to ignore it at first and then I went off. You know what he said? 'Dick licker.' I know what I heard. I'm not deaf, only in this ear (pointing to right ear), but I know what I heard. I told him, 'What did you say?' He said he didn't say anything. But what can I do? I know I heard it, but he says he didn't say it. I know he did. How can I make something up like that? What an ass.

Abby complained about a student cursing, but she also ended-up cursing out of her own frustration with the student's behavior. Yet, Abby was able to do so within the safety of the congregational space and away from the students.

In the first two examples, teachers were frustrated with the verbal behaviors of their students. Since the students were older and able to articulate their thoughts better than the lower grades, the older students' verbal behaviors were a point of frustration. On the contrary, the lower-grade

teachers were frustrated with the students' physical actions, as the younger children mostly expressed themselves physically.

Wanda, a first-grade teacher, stated:

I told my student to open to any page and read. He does this (imitates flipping a closed book back and forth). He reads the cover and back cover. I ask the other student to demonstrate, and then [William] does it again! I don't think he knows what a page is.

Samantha replied: "And good luck because you have George next year. Mom says that at two we figure he's autistic, but figures that the school can fix it." The people in the room started to shake their heads in shame. Brenda, a kindergarten teacher exclaimed: "Are you kidding?" "Yeah, we just wave our magic ed. wand and make it all better," added Karima. Brenda stated, "From womb to room?" Wanda was frustrated at the situation, but it was also out of concern that this first grader did not understand the meaning of a page.

Meanwhile, Karima, a kindergarten teacher, was frustrated at the actions of one of her new students. During lunch, she held up a textbook that had the pages cut out of it. She said to her coworkers:

It's from my new student. I have never seen this in my teaching career. She started at [Cranberry], wherever that is, then she went [Byberry] and then Florida. Now she's here. She needs to stay back in kindergarten. She hasn't learned anything, but she apparently learned how to use a pair of scissors at [Byberry]. In my 30-something years of teaching, I've never seen this! I mean, look!

Karima held up the book again and showed that it was literally cut into pieces.

This kindergarten child was at her fourth school. Karima briefly mentioned how she had to hold the child back, that the student's actions were unacceptable, and her behavior was frustrating. Karima could safely express these emotions in the congregational space while gaining validation from the other teachers.

However, not all discussion and validation about students' behaviors was negative. Joan Bell, the special education teacher, and I were talking in the hallway. I mentioned that I was going to start to assist with the Buddy Reading program again in January when data collection was completed. Joan replied, genuinely excited:

Oh great! That's wonderful. These kids this year are great, I mean they were great last year, but they are exceptional this year. You should have seen it. On Wednesday, they were playing musical chairs. There are 11 of them from [Shannon's] class, and we also took 2 of the special kids from across the hall. At the end of the game, it was one regular and one special kid and none of them wanted to take the chair. It really touched me! I mean I was all emotional. Even now it still gets to me. It was so nice!

Joan's face started to turn red and there were tears in her eyes. Joan shared the wonderful classroom experience she had with the students. Talking in the hallway gave her an opportunity to share this event, whereas otherwise she might not have been able to share with others. It was a spontaneous conversation that gave her validation by talking about the occurrence in the classroom.

### *Validation About the Job*

As mentioned previously, teachers validated to each other their students' academic progress and behaviors. They had discussions about the job in order to seek validation. It was another way to release their thoughts, frustrations, and concerns about the job. The following story illustrates the theme:

One afternoon I was leaving the school after helping Shannon with knitting club. The art teacher, Yolanda, was in the hallway. She was looking through books that were stacked near the janitor's closet ready for disposal. Yolanda looked up at me and exclaimed: "Look at all of these good books they throw out. It's a shame! They should donate it somewhere." Yolanda took some of the books for herself and placed them on her art cart.

I responded: "There's that place nearby where they take those old books." Third-grade teacher, Tania, heard our conversation and came into the hallway: "No one wants to transport it, that's why." Fran, a third-grade teacher next to Tania's classroom, now came to her doorway and said: "It's because it's the way he [the district's chief executive officer (CEO)] wants it. They always get new books when someone new comes in."

"It's just a shame. Some of these books are brand new!" stated Yolanda. Fran agreed: "We'll probably have more new books soon, but I still use the old ones because they have good stuff in it." Tania added: "Me too! They have good material and I still use some of the old stuff."

The spontaneous conversation with Yolanda sparked a moment in which she and others could be validated about their feelings regarding the district's waste of money and the reforms that accompany each new CEO. It was also in this conversation that the teachers admitted they did not follow the district's policies when older materials work well for their students.

Other district policies, enforced by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), were scrutinized in congregational spaces. NCLB's policy of establishing highly qualified teachers required veteran teachers to take the Praxis, a teacher certification test. The teachers were required to do so because they did not take the test during their own certification process decades ago. Eighth-grade teacher Linda spent hours taking some of the exams on a Saturday. Monday during lunch she blurted out:

These new policies are really stupid. In my almost 30-year career I have been teaching 20 of them here (in eighth grade). They're telling me that if I don't do this test or that, then next year they will have to move me down to K-2 because I am (using her fingers to make quotes in the air) "more qualified" to teach them—come on!

There were "yeah"s and agreements among the teachers.

As Linda stated her frustration with the NCLB policies, teachers also discussed the internal policies that were coming down from the district office. For example, teachers were given math and reading posters that needed to be hung around their classrooms. The principal of each school had to do a walk-through of each room to make sure the posters were correctly displayed. Memos about the posters were then given to each teacher.

Martin, the fifth- and sixth-grade special education teacher, briefly stopped into the seventh- and eighth-grade lunch room to show off his memo concerning the math posters visual check. Martin was sharing it because of its positive feedback that he wanted to share with the group. Martin wanted to be heard and validated about the validation he had just received.

On the other hand, Felicia did not receive a good memo concerning the math posters. She went to her room to retrieve her memo and came back into the congregational space. She was set to retire in June 2007, but could have technically retired in January 2007. Felicia talked about threatening to retire in January due to this memo. The memo stated how Felicia did not have all the posters that were needed for her room. Since Felicia was deemed unprepared, Victoria, the math coordinator, was supposed to help Felicia remedy this problem. She felt that the memo was demeaning:

They are pushing me. I will retire in January if they keep it up! I'm 62 and have to wait only until January. My husband can't wait [for my retirement]! They keep it up, I might leave in January. I keep asking for math posters from [Victoria]. I never got them but now (reading from the memo) "Val is going to help me." Come on!

Elaine began to get upset about the posters check: "This is ridiculous! I've been teaching 31 years. I don't need this!" Felicia was upset about this experience, but adult time and safety within the congregational space allowed her to share the memo, express her feelings, and gain social support.

The majority of the validation about the job concerned the policies established in the district. There were also moments in which the need for validation about the job was a reflection of the profession. Shanae, a fourth-grade teacher, retired after the first year of data collection. During the end of her last year, she was slowly starting to clean out her classroom. In the cleaning process, she found a card that a student had given her 12 years before. Shanae came into the congregational space holding the card in her hand. She passed it around to everyone to share in the moment. Shanae was able to reflect about her career, the relationships she created with students, and receive validation, all within the time spent in the congregational space.

## **Discussion**

The examples of validation presented in this article demonstrate that the congregational space is safe for teachers to express their thoughts and feelings, while fulfilling their need to be heard and validated. By having a safe space and social support, my participants silently (and sometimes verbally) gave affirmation to their fellow colleagues. In essence, the social support within these spaces helps to ease the hardships of the emotional labor of the profession. The coping mechanism

of validation assists in allowing teachers to overcome the isolation of teaching, work through their emotions, and feel more connected to their workplace.

It is when teachers do not have a way of connecting to their workplace that issues arise in teacher retention and attrition. Researchers have found that teacher isolation can lessen interest in their work and their school (Williams et al., 2001; Zielinski & Hoy, 1983) and ultimately they feel detached from the school community (Rogers & Babinski, 2002). We are losing teachers exponentially, and isolation could be part of the equation. For those that go into the profession, 50% leave by their fifth year of teaching (Johnson & Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). The present study illustrated that the teacher-to-teacher relationships and interactions are important for coping within this profession of emotional labor.

## **Limitations & Future Research**

There were limitations to the methodology used for this study. The reliability of a study greatly depends upon the consistency and reproduction of the findings (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). The reliability of the data collection method, a crucial element in quantitative research, becomes problematic in qualitative research. Qualitative research is dependent upon the researcher as the instrument of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999; Shadish et al., 2002). Each researcher comes to a project with his or her own experiential base, perspectives, and skills, which may vary from others. As an inner-city educator, I had inherent biases.

In addition to reliability is the issue of external validity. External validity refers to the results of the research sample and whether and to what extent the results can be generalized to the greater population (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Shadish et al., 2002). External validity becomes problematic in ethnographic research because findings are based on a specific subculture, making it unlikely that the outcomes can be generalized to describe the larger culture. Thus, issues of reliability and validity come into play with the present study.

Since the concepts of reliability and external validity are potentially problematic in discussing qualitative research, the term trustworthiness is often used instead. According to Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000), trustworthiness: "Refers to

the quality (goodness) of qualitative research [and is a] revision of traditional criteria such as reliability, internal and external validity, and objectivity, to make them [the concepts] more appropriate to the assumptions made in the qualitative paradigm” (p. 260). Trustworthiness, therefore, is a term that combines the concepts of reliability and validity, and I used it for the purposes of the present study.

Overall, the present study provided a fertile ground for future research looking at teacher-to-teacher interactions. There is a need for more research to be conducted in alternative congregational spaces, especially in the United States, in order to enter the international conversation. The complete daily experience of the average teacher is lost without researchers’ further exploration of these interactions. Clarifying and understanding these relationships can guide teachers, administrators, parents and students into open and honest discussions about the pressures facing teachers and the loss of teacher talent.

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