

# The Loneliness of the Special Education Teacher

Harry N. Chandler, MEd

Those who have studied teacher burn-out have identified a number of reasons for it, ranging from decreased respect from pupils and parents to salaries which are much lower than those in other jobs demanding an equal level of education. Usually, up around the top of the reasons given for teachers either quitting their jobs or staying on the job but doing as little as possible, is the isolation in which teachers must work. In most jobs the employee works with intellectual peers in his own age bracket. Sales clerks meet many different types of people each day, but they also have the opportunity of comparing notes with fellow employees. Most white collar workers do their jobs in a comparatively relaxed atmosphere; they have almost constant contact with fellow workers, and it seems at least to a teacher, that they have a lot of time for planned or unplanned rest and conversation breaks. While most professionals might practice their craft in solitude, they have a flexible schedule, time to meet others for lunch or golf, and the financial ability to attend the frequent conventions at which their fellow specialists gather.

Public school teachers, dedicated to working well with students and keeping current on materials and techniques, tend to spend most of their time either confined with young people or working alone on papers. Spending time with young people is just what most teachers want when they enter the profession. But being neophytes, they fantasize about some ideal child who is anxious to learn, probably has a high IQ, and wants to model his or her life after that of the all-wise

mentor who has come into the classroom to share wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. There are ideal pupils, but there are also just as many who are not ideal; some are just hard to deal with pupils. The student teacher may get an inkling of this reality, especially if he or she has a master teacher who disappears the first day the trainee arrives only to return when it is time to grade his unpaid substitute. Student teachers, however, have classes to attend and fellow students they meet with regularly. They are usually living in a dorm or an apartment with others in the same situation and are working toward a goal of graduation or certification.

In a lot of cases these student teachers are being taught by professors who haven't been in a public school classroom for a good many years, except to observe for an hour or so per semester. Some have never been public school teachers. Most of the higher education professionals have no idea what being a classroom teacher is all about, and so they are unable to prepare students for the surprises which await them. A good point that can be made in discussing a longer training period for education students is to extend the curricula to include more fulltime work in real public school classrooms. Such an extended time (up to a full year pulling a full elementary or secondary teaching load) would probably weed out all but the most determined student teachers. It would also work a change in schools of education for students who, when they see what it is *really* like in the classroom, could demand

classes which prepared them for that reality.

Public school teachers do not work in a total adultless vacuum. There are times when they can go to the faculty room; however, most faculty rooms resemble cells, and the regular inhabitants of these dives are more likely to be depressing than supporting. A good administrator will try to make teachers feel good about themselves and their jobs, but a good administrator today is sometimes too busy to do this with all the public relations now necessary to keep schools open. There are teacher meetings and committee meetings, however, they are held after school when everyone is very tired. These meetings seem to be divided between the usual boring ones that are more punishment than reward, and those which are successful only because they are so on target that no social interaction is possible. While younger, usually single, teachers see a good deal of each other after working hours, older teachers, those who are not holding a second job after they leave class, seem to spend leisure time with those individuals not in education.

It is that long haul, from early morning to four or five in the evening, which is so deadly. There might be time for a quick visit to the teacher's room, or for lunch with a fellow schoolteacher, however, the grade level in teaching is a factor; elementary teachers have less time away from students than do most secondary teachers. There might be a contact with parents, but this is most often during lunch when a teacher would rather be correcting papers or trying to eat. Parents often come after school when an attempt is being made to grade papers, do lesson plans, or run out the door after only nine hours of work. Parent-teacher meetings are all too often unrewarding for all parties involved—not unlike arms limitations talks. The teacher's day amounts to six or more hours of isolation from other adults, an attempt to do a good job with few extrinsic rewards. Fortunately, there are intrinsic rewards: the kindergartener who learns to share; the first grader who adds, "I love you teacher" to a hug at the day's end; the awkward eighth grader who gains grace on the gym balance beam. Best of all, is the ex-student who comes back from college or a job to say that the teacher really did make a differ-

ence in life's direction.

Few of the successful students seem to come back to visit the special education teacher. Those ex-students returning are more likely to be dropping in, not noticing that there is a class being taught. Most return during their time off from the state hospital, between convictions, or they may just be trying to borrow money, find a place to stay, or help in finding another job. The special education teacher might hear from an old student's grateful parent, but most often she has to be content with not seeing familiar names in the police records in the local paper.

The special education teacher's lot is more lonely than that of the regular classroom teacher, but it is filled with more contact with parents and other teachers. Many special education teachers have an aide, or at least share an aide with other special programs; some share rooms with other specialists. It is possible to build a mutual support system if there are kindred souls about. Most often, however, the special teacher is alone with her specialty.

There is a constant need to talk to regular classroom teachers to find out how "mainstreamed" students are doing. There is a need to visit principals, vice-principals, counselors, or child development specialists to find out how those students are behaving. Parents need to be called, some almost daily; evaluation team meetings and IEP sessions need to be attended. In addition to the teacher meetings, building and district committee meetings, and extra duties of the regular class teacher the special education teacher often has a concurrent set of meetings to attend within the district and/or county special education departments. Add all this to the special education teacher's paperwork, an avalanche of paperwork which the regular class teacher would go on strike before doing, and the product is a work load which is never finished until school ends in June.

With all of the daily contacts—other teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents—unless the special education teacher is in a very large school building, she is often the only person who has much empathy for the special child. Even with the move toward adding some information about special students into the

school of education curriculum, most regular class teachers come to their jobs with little understanding of the handicapped child. It can become very wearing to have to explain about learning disabled students to teachers, over and over again, often to the same teachers (who might not believe you in the first place). It can also be exhausting to meet the ignorant or hostile reactions of the regular class teachers who say, "Yes, but he just isn't answering the questions on the test," or, "he has to flunk," or, "she does come to class everyday and tries hard, but I can't give her a passing grade if she can't remember how to spell." Perhaps some of the special teacher burn-out is attributable to constantly trying to sell a product which few want to buy.

Something which has been said in this column before, but which certainly bears repeating, is that naive or just plain stupid professors in college level training courses for teachers of the handicapped "set up" special class teachers for burn-out by insisting that all children can be taught successfully in the *present* public school system. Those same professors probably ruin a great many careers and blight a good many lives by telling prospective teachers that if a child fails, it is the special teacher's fault. There are combinations of circumstances militating against the success of special students in today's schools. Many of these circumstances cannot possibly be met and mastered by the one special class teacher, or even by an entire district's special education department. It would be charitable, to say the least, and it would help the special teacher meet her professional ethical standards, at best, if some higher education level teachers would return to the public schools for a quarter or more, fulltime, to see how the special classroom teacher spends the day.

Much of the special teacher's time is spent in meetings with teachers, administrators, school board members, and, most of all, parents, trying to explain what is being done to help the special student and why that student is different. Thank God for the successes; the student who learns to sound short A, or read a CVCE word, or regroup through zeros in subtraction, or (for reasons known only to social studies teachers) memorize all of the Presidents in order, or find a job, or

go to college. But for each of these successes there are fellow professionals who should know better than to ask, "So? What's the big deal about all that?," or parents wanting the teacher to deliver even more, or administrators and school boards expecting good results on low budgets. How sweet it is to have an LD student leave the special class and slip back into the mainstream without a ripple; conversely, how it adds to the special teacher's load of guilt to look at the other students in her class and know how hard she has tried, even though unsuccessfully, to help them to be equally successful.

It is not unusual to find special class teachers requesting transfers into the regular classroom, nor is it unusual for them to leave teaching altogether. As budgets shrink, as aides and other specialists who support special class teachers are eliminated, it will become increasingly difficult to keep good teachers in classrooms designed for "different" kids. Regular class teachers are suffering a morale problem. They are being told in print, on the air, and to their faces that they are useless bureaucrats battenning off the public purse. These regular class teachers, however, usually have been trained in a school or philosophy which considers failure the fault of the child. The special class teacher is as much a target of public criticism as is her regular class colleagues. Moreover, she is often a target of criticism by her regular class colleagues. The training of the special class teacher has not prepared her to lay the blame for failing to make a handicapped child average at the door of society, parents, the school, or political system. Since school boards and higher level administrators often attempt to mollify irate taxpayers by blaming the problems of the public school on the teachers, it is unlikely that anyone in authority will attempt to build in a teacher's support group. The special class teacher will need to turn for support and counsel to other specialists; she also will need to let professional organizations know that teachers, as well as students, need advocates on their side.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my own in-school support group who give me the perspective and sanity to write these columns. Karen Jones, Carmen Baker and, from across town, Kris Heath.*