

# The Urban Review

ISSUES AND IDEAS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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# The Urban Review

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# Reconsidering Teacher Alienation: A Critique of *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools*

**Michael Vavrus**

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Within research on teacher burnout, stress, and alienation there exists a lack of emphasis upon the social milieu in which teachers work. This essay considers the conceptualization of alienation as a form of burnout in Anthony Dworkin's *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools* (1987) and how such a combination inherently limits the value of policy recommendations he and others are making for eliminating teacher burnout and stress. The basic theoretical dichotomy surrounding the use of the concept of workplace alienation centers upon whether it is (1) an objective state independent of worker perceptions of working conditions or (2) a subjective situation in which laborers' attitudes are measured. Without any overt rationale Dworkin adopts the subjective approach, eliminating any analysis of *actual* working conditions of teachers. Referring to Marx and then quickly dropping further references to his theories by accepting a primarily intrapersonal analysis is historically characteristic of alienation studies in education. Despite his stated desire to examine "structural causes" of burnout, Dworkin's adherence to a subjective, psychological model for understanding teacher labor while muddling Marx's theory of alienation of labor severely diminishes the social usefulness of his book.

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The development of the concept of "burnout" among people in jobs requiring a high degree of client interaction parallels the focus since the 1970s upon individual fulfillment and health concerns. Stress as a disease of modern culture has come center stage to the workplace with burnout serving as one of stress's manifestations.

At the time that national commissions have been berating the quality of teaching in public schools, evidence indicates that teachers are susceptible to burning themselves out in their work. Despite the negative impression of teachers mounted by the media, it could be postured that teachers who become burned out are individuals dedicated to their work and their clients—not employees who are uncaring and incompetent regarding the quality of their work. The context of the attack upon teachers rarely examines the work setting in which teachers must labor. Compounding this oversight is the research on burnout which is aimed at documenting its existence and noting personal causes and potential cures for the individual rather than looking into the workplace environment for both the source of and solution to the problem.

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This lack of emphasis on the social milieu in which teachers find themselves in the research on burnout is what drew me to Anthony Dworkin's book, *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools: Structural Causes and Consequences for Children* (1987), with its subtitle suggesting an examination of the "structural causes" of teacher burnout. Documenting teacher burnout is one thing; searching for forces within the school system itself for the causes of burnout is another. Unfortunately, in this book, the investigation for structural causes becomes mired in psychological models.

I wish to focus here on Dworkin's conceptualization of alienation as a form of burnout and how such a combination inherently limits the value of policy recommendations he and others are making for eliminating teacher burnout and stress.<sup>1</sup> The basic theoretical dichotomy surrounding the use of the concept of workplace alienation centers upon whether it is (1) an objective state independent of worker perceptions of working conditions or (2) a subjective situation in which laborers' attitudes are measured in terms of a discrepancy between how the organization of work is perceived compared to how employees feel work ought to be constituted. After a two paragraph review of these two positions (p. 22), Dworkin without any overt rationale adopts the subjective approach, eliminating any analysis of *actual* working conditions of teachers.

In taking the subjective route Dworkin is drawing upon a contemporary sociological approach (Seaman, 1959, 1975) which acknowledges perfunctorily the contribution of Karl Marx yet obfuscates the notion of alienation of labor through empirical models which focus upon personal assessments rather than objective work settings.<sup>2</sup> Dworkin, however, fails to take heed of or consider Seaman's (1975) own observations that many students of alienation of labor "find the connection between the classical notion of alienation and the empiricized versions . . . too tenuous" (p. 113), that the "subjectivist cast of the bulk of empirical work on alienation draws considerable fire" (p. 114), and that critics point out that "these research styles represent alienated methods—i.e., dehumanized and quantified ways of making objects out of persons" (p. 115).

The constructs which Seaman has developed as composing alienation are unrelated to an objective understanding of alienated labor (see Marx, in Tucker, 1973, pp. 52–106) with the possible exception of self-estrangement, "the inability of the individual to find 'self-rewarding' or 'intrinsically meaningful activity' . . . that engages him" (Seaman, 1959, p. 790). For example, in discussing his category of "powerlessness" Seaman acknowledges that his factors depart from the Marxian focus about the social nature of the production process. To add further fuel to the questionable usefulness of subjective items for analyzing workplace alienation, Dworkin notes in his literature review that "a measure of self-estrangement is empirically indistinct from the combination of measures of meaninglessness and powerlessness" (pp. 24–25).

What remains from pursuing this course of investigation is a vague idea of "cognitive liberation" (Flacks and Turkel, 1978, p. 194) which does not readily lend itself to public policy making. If Dworkin is suggesting that alienation is an undesirable state that should be overcome, he does not see that in his approach

“subjective freedom is not full emancipation; in fact it tends toward resigned acceptance of material bondage” (Flacks and Turkel, p. 194). Thus, the intrapersonal analysis eliminates key variables in the social structure which are crucial for understanding and overcoming teacher alienation.

In opting for the subjective approach Dworkin wishes to determine if “there exists a discrepancy between [a teacher’s] expectations about a work career and the career outcome” (p. 23) when research already suggests that teacher education students anticipate being involved in decisions affecting their own teaching, believing that this is the way schools ought to be structured (see, for example, Vavrus, 1979). Even Dworkin observes that preservice teachers “often assume that they will be granted the professional autonomy to exert control over the roles they are assigned to perform” (p. 69). Through his own observations Dworkin notes quite clearly the very real fact that teachers are not directly involved in policy making which determines the nature of their labor. But this work environment is labeled by him as “stress-laden” (p. 70) rather than alienating, a continuation of a psychological rather than social system analysis.

Dworkin further reinforces the subjective bias of alienation by noting that the constructs used by Seaman for understanding alienation are very similar to notions of burnout, allowing Dworkin to conclude that “*burnout is an extreme form of role-specific alienation . . .*” (p. 28). By confounding alienation with burnout and stress, the usefulness of alienation has been severely undermined as a concept for understanding teacher labor and behavior. As Gupta (1981) notes in her review of research on the various types of stress, “It is clear that sources of stress have been confused with aspects of stress . . .” (p. 19). Apple (1987) laments that using such terms as stress and burnout interchangeably with alienation is “quite unfortunate . . . since they make the problem into a psychological one rather than a truly structural one concerning the control of teachers’ labor” (p. 70). More appropriately, therefore, burnout and stress may simply be one of the manifested outcomes of alienated labor.

Marx, in his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” (see Tucker, 1973), recognized the stress workers may experience on an individual basis. Nevertheless, he is quite clear in noting that the cause of intrapersonal estrangement and stress does not stem from a psychological disorder within the individual. Within Marx’s theory of alienation of labor personal estrangement is preceded by separation from one’s work in which the following variables exist:

- (1) The relation of the worker to the *product of labour* as an alien object exercising power over him . . .
- (2) The relation of labour to the *act of production* within the labour process. The relation is the relations of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him. (Marx, in Tucker, pp. 60–61).

By utilizing only a subjective measure of alienation and now incorporating it into the concept of burnout, the unit analysis for Dworkin has strayed from a look at the social and political relationships and structure of schools as

workplaces as they relate to the labor of teachers as a group. By categorizing various types of teachers in their reactions to alienating work conditions, the intrapersonal approach, according to a National Institute of Education sponsored study, does not "acknowledge that the sources of renewal and the causes of stagnation are often external to the person and cannot be explained by concentrating on any one individual" (Freedman et al., 1982, p. 57). This in turn removes researchers and policy makers from the social relations of work and allows them to conclude in a narrow, distorted, individualistic and psychological context that, for example, "alienated [teachers] are, to a considerable extent, society's misfits" (Shaw and Funderburk, 1976, p. 368). Such a solipsism serves to reinforce the feeling within teachers that somehow they are at fault personally for being alienated and burned out and directs attention "away from a critical analysis of schools as institutions" (Freeman et al., p. 122).

Although research by Mottaz (1981) and his use of some of Seaman's factors is given consideration by Dworkin in his development of the burnout/alienation construct, he overlooks Mottaz' conclusion that "a substantial amount of the variance in self-estrangement remains unexplained by the present model" (p. 527) and recommends the identification of structural factors that cause alienation. Dworkin's idea of "structural causes," however, is a limited one, focusing upon building characteristics such as school size, grade level taught, and turnover rate of teachers. These demographic variables give no consideration to the dynamics of the management of schools with its resultant impact upon teacher behavior.<sup>3</sup> Failure to consider the social relations of the workplace in which teachers labor becomes a total departure from the Marxian idea of alienation.

Dworkin represents a line of research which attempts to relate such psychological states as whether or not one possesses a sense of internal or external control over events and then statistically correlates this to measures of alienation, stress, or burnout (see, for example, Fielding and Gall, 1982). However useful such information may be for personally understanding each individual, it presents a facade of examining constructs such as "control" while how much real control a worker such as a teacher may have is already *a priori* determined by externals: administrators, local and state school boards, legislators, and judges. But if Dworkin had used the framework of the *social* relations of work, external control as Marx conceived it would have become the extent to which a teacher has determination over the product and uses of his or her labor. (See Tucker, chaps. cited.)

Periodically within *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools* the reader is teased with statements that appear to recognize the value of teacher autonomy as a deterrent to alienation. Unfortunately the concepts and proposals presented provide relatively few new insights and are often combined with contradictory results. The closest Dworkin approaches to a true recommendation for a structural change within the schools is his acknowledgement of the importance of "supportive" principal. On one hand Dworkin envisions principals, through

human relations and management training, learning to empower teachers by involving the teacher in curriculum planning. However, this tenuous and hopeful arrangement only touches the tip of the bureaucratic iceberg under which teachers work and which, Dworkin points out, “with its separation of policy formation and policy implementation, takes from the teacher a sense of their personal efficacy as professionals” (p. 100). Yet nowhere in his research models does he directly address policy variables.

Beyond his comfortable training proposals for principals it would have been useful for the reader if Dworkin had elaborated on how such instruction will result in “supportive” principals who empower teachers. Although he offers no guidelines as to how far he wants principals to go in their “support” of teachers, apparently he does not perceive the principal “as the carrier and defender of the culture created primarily by teachers” (Noblit, 1986, p. 49). The type of principal he envisions (a variation upon the “effective schools” research findings which cite principal “leadership” as a key variable) appears to assume a harmonious workplace, neglecting the fact that given their managerial and laborer roles, principals and teachers, respectively, “may have different and mutually exclusive interests” (DeYoung, 1986, p. 82). In fact teachers have sold their “labor power” (Marx, in Tucker, pp. 167–190) to school systems which have hired managers, e.g., principals, who in turn place constraints upon the nature of teacher work by determining the processes and product of teacher labor.

As another means of attaining autonomy for teachers Dworkin lauds the idea presented by the Holmes Group report (*Tomorrow's Teachers*, 1986)<sup>4</sup> for a teaching career ladder with his own modifications in which the “career teacher . . . would exercise full control over his or her classroom” (Dworkin, p. 168). Such a hierarchy of career steps as now being conceived smacks of increased bureaucratic conditions, which Dworkin concurrently decries, serving to institutionalize alienating work conditions for the vast majority of teachers while exempting only an elite core, “reinforc[ing] the status quo of top-down management in schools” (Darling-Hammond, 1987, p. 46). As teachers compete among themselves for wages and power, a class system based on inequality within the teaching vocation is the likely outcome.

This support of a career hierarchy confounds his recommendation for eliminating conditions causing “deskilling” among teachers, that is, a teacher’s skills suffering from “atrophy” from a lack of use due to administratively prescribed curricula and teaching strategies (Apple, p. 68). Dworkin sees the supportive principal as the key to stemming the increase of deskilling. However, teachers will be faced with similar classrooms whatever career tier they find themselves in. The result for the high ratio of teachers who will be at the bottom of the hierarchy is “to strip from workers the capacity to organize work themselves, to detach special skills and knowledge concerning work processes from the workers themselves, [and] to create an expanding mass of increasingly interchangeable and easily replaceable workers” (Flacks and Turkel, p. 210).



In one of his more remarkable assertions Dworkin reveals his ambivalence towards his topic of burnout and alienation by stating,

it may be inappropriate to emphasize improvement of teacher morale as a means to improving the quality of education. Although not directly measured, it is suspected that improving the quality of teachers may be a better way to improve student education. . . (p. 126)

[Therefore,] school resources ought to be redirected toward factors which contribute directly to better student achievement, not toward making teachers more contented. (pp. 164-165)

How Dworkin is able to separate out teacher morale from his factors of alienation and burnout and from his statements about teacher control and empowerment is perplexing. With his comments on "improving the quality of teachers" Dworkin allows himself to join the ranks of teacher-bashers who presume that teachers are the direct cause of any problems associated with student achievement (as measured by narrowly focused standardized tests). For over 15 years reviews of research and commentaries on teacher morale and satisfaction have been nearly unanimous in observing that involvement in institutional decision making increases teacher morale and job satisfaction, thus improving the quality of instructional activities (see, for example, Ambrosie and Heller, 1972; Belasco and Alutto, 1972; Ellenburg, 1972; Coverdale, 1973; Greene, 1973, 1987; McClure, 1973; Knoop and O'Reilly, 1975; Lortie, 1975; Freedman et al., 1982).

By downplaying teacher morale Dworkin seems to have lost sight of the relationships under which teachers labor: the manner in which instructional services are delivered is a function of the mental state of teachers who in turn are affected by the conditions under which they must provide those services. "Since working conditions dramatically affect the quality of services provided clients," Noblit explains, "policies are of little value unless promised services can be delivered with some integrity" (op. cit., p. 42). Teacher integrity and a sense of professionalism becomes, therefore, severely undermined in work conditions contributing to low morale. Such alienating work conditions, which Dworkin avoided studying head-on, are the same ones which Dewey assailed for failing to account for "human factors and relationships" by means of "a corresponding distortion of emotional life" (1920, p. 99).

In taking an ahistorical approach to correcting teacher burnout and alienation Dworkin overlooks a broad societal context in which he could have further examined his topic. Apparently he is representative of researchers and policy makers who assume that the arrangement of schools with a division of labor between principals and teachers is natural and unalterable, but are unaware of being "caught up in the larger conflicts inherent in the capitalist economy and a liberal capitalist state" (Carnoy and Levin, 1985, p. 5) where a central role of schooling is to reproduce the unequal hierarchical relationships found in capitalist work settings (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). "These conflicts," Carnoy and Levin clarify, "reside in the contradictions between the unequal relations



underlying capitalist reproduction and the democratic basis of the liberal capitalist state” (p. 5). In seeking to overcome the lack of equality in policy formation between teachers and managers of schools, Lynne Strieb (1987), a member of the Philadelphia Teachers’ Learning Cooperative, notes that “the nature of schools can be otherwise, their possibilities otherwise” (p. 26).

But suggesting that schools can be operated under democratic working conditions, contradicting the capitalist ideology for configuring the work place, requires an open acknowledgement that school administrators and state legislators, who act directly and indirectly on behalf of capital expansion by using public funds to create a labor pool for private corporate capital gain, have little vested interest in modifying the school social system. Under capitalist values genuine involvement of teachers in policy formation would only be advocated if some kind of economic advantage could be realized for both the operation of schools and the greater society in which schools exist.<sup>5</sup> When Dworkin does attempt comment upon the societal context of his research, he imbeds his impressions under the veil of empiricism:

Increased achievement levels for students necessitate taking the student from a school-neighborhood-home environment that interactively and multiplicatively accentuates their disadvantage. Altering only one of the variables is inadequate; it may be necessary to rearrange many variables to affect academic performance. (p. 135)

Here Dworkin avoids talking about restructuring society although this apparently is what would have to be done if certain “variables” are to be “rearranged” especially since the low-income, minority students to whom he is referring are continuing victims of economic and political discrimination found under a capitalist economic system.

A positive direction in *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools* is the attention drawn to entrapped teachers—those who for one reason or another do not particularly enjoy their jobs yet continue their work in public school classrooms. Contrary to what may seem to be common sense, Dworkin notes that those individuals who leave teaching are not necessarily those who are suffering from a high degree of work related stress. Quitting teaching appears to be more a function of the generalizability of skills one holds to other forms of employment than the state of being burned out. Dworkin’s analysis suggests that “there are vastly more teachers who dislike their jobs but stay than teachers who dislike their jobs and leave,” speculating that “teacher entrapment is a more serious problem than teacher turnover” (p. 59), although losing experienced teachers for beginners could be affecting student achievement.

Nevertheless, what Dworkin has to offer anyone concerned about the entrapped teacher or the teacher who leaves for a more satisfying workplace is quite limited. Despite his stated desire to examine structural causes of burnout, Dworkin’s adherence to a subjective, psychological model for understanding teacher labor, while muddling Marx’s theory of alienation of labor, severely diminishes the social usefulness of *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools*.

## NOTES

1. *Teacher Burnout in the Public Schools* contains a broad base of references as well as numerous statistical models coupled with extensive analyses from data gathered from the Houston school system between 1977 and 1982. The purpose of this essay, though, is not to report to the reader all of the nearly 80 propositions Dworkin believes his research supports (see pp. 153–165 for a summation of those results) nor comment upon all of his concluding policy recommendations (see pp. 165–171). Others interested in public school policy in school systems with racially mixed teaching staffs and student bodies are encouraged to analyze those aspects of Dworkin's book.
2. Referring to Marx and then quickly dropping further references to his theories by accepting Seaman's methodology is historically characteristic of alienation studies in education (see, for example, Moeller and Charters, 1966; Parker, 1970; Hearn, 1971; Bush, 1974). An exception to this practice in which an attempt is made to incorporate Seaman's constructs into an objective measure of control over teacher labor is Zielinski and Hoy (1983). In that particular study one variable involving the social arrangement of labor, i.e., isolation from key decision makers in the school system, is used and then correlated with subjective measures of alienation.
3. Cuban (1987) summarizes,

If research into the results of planned changes in schools over the last half-century has shown anything it is that basic changes in the organizational structures are necessary prior steps in any sustained effort to touch what teachers do daily in classrooms. . . . In all cases [reforms] had limited impact on classroom instruction and administration when the structural arrangements within which both teachers and administrators worked were not altered. (pp. 41–42)

4. Commenting upon the Holmes Group report's social system perspective, Dreeben (1987) observes, "While responding to the prevailing political climate, it proceeds from no analysis of schooling, of school system organization, or of teaching as an occupation" (p. 49).
5. Many capitalists are realizing the problems inherent in the neglect of society's infrastructure while in pursuit of profit as evidenced in particular during this decade by the flurry of reports and commissions devoted to an analysis of the relationship between education and the international economic status of the United States. As the capital crisis in the United States increases, Felix Rohatyn (1987), an investment banker and Chairman of the Municipal Assistance Corporation for New York, has warned recently, "A major domestic reconstruction program for such facilities as railroads, bridges, waterworks, roads, and school buildings must be undertaken soon" (p. 3). There is, however, no guarantee that this concern for the infrastructure will necessarily translate into more money for schools and better working conditions for teachers.

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