

26th Executive Board Meeting, 21-23 February 2006

The Health Of Teachers And Education Workers

Teachers' health and its impact on their work

1. Over the past few decades, teaching has become a more complex activity, both because of the new demands placed on teachers by technological/scientific and cultural developments and because of the increasing deterioration of employment relations. These factors have had an impact on the quality of education, particularly public education, and on teachers' working conditions.
2. One important aspect of these developments is health. EI has played a pioneering role in the fight to prevent and combat AIDS, a disease which affects millions of teachers around the world, causing many deaths among them and destabilising the education systems. However, there are also other, less visible – though equally serious – disorders which can result in enormous losses for teachers and education.
3. One such disorder is the "burnout syndrome", defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981) as a reaction to the chronic emotional stress generated by direct and excessive contact with other human beings and which, according to Schaufeli (1994), is the principal health disorder affecting teachers. The syndrome refers to a multidimensional phenomenon which involves three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of personal commitment to one's job. Studies have shown that burnout can affect highly motivated workers, who react to stress by working harder until they reach the point of collapse.
4. The incidence of burnout in the United States and other countries is alarming. A study by Farber (1984) showed that it affected between 10.3% and 21.6% of practising teachers. A study conducted in Brazil in 2000, based on a national sample of almost 39,000 teachers, indicated that 37% had little commitment to their job, 25% suffered from emotional exhaustion and 10.7% experienced feelings of depersonalisation.
5. Another study conducted by CNTE (2004) in ten Brazilian states showed that 30.4% of teachers and other education workers had experienced – or were still experiencing – health problems, with 22.6% requiring temporary leaves of absence or withdrawing from the profession altogether on health grounds. The main occupational diseases identified in the study included psychological and neurological disorders, vocal chord growths, heart and spinal problems, varicose veins, rashes and allergy to chalk.

Combating the root causes of burnout

6. Education International and its affiliates have long been striving to address the root causes of these situations. At the most general level, burnout can be associated with such factors as the lack or inadequacy of public funding for education, the fragmentation of the education systems, the introduction of processes which decentralise responsibilities without decentralising resources, and public service privatisation and outsourcing policies. At a more specific level, the main factors involved are low pay levels, the lack of initial and further teacher training, long working hours and overcrowded classes.

Adopting preventive and corrective measures

7. Our concern for the health of teachers and education workers stems from two reasons. Firstly, there is a need to protect teachers' basic personal and labour rights; secondly, if we wish to

provide quality education, we need teachers who are fit and fully available to do their job in adequate conditions.

8. This is why it is necessary to include health issues in collective bargaining and in the legislation of each country. At the international level – and in view of the 40th anniversary of the ILO/UNESCO Recommendations on the status of teachers – it would be important to highlight these issues, together with an assessment of non-compliance with the objectives set in 1966. To this end, EI could take steps to ensure recognition, by UNESCO and the ILO, of occupational diseases, such as the burnout syndrome, which are directly related to teachers' work.
9. This recognition would imply providing preventive and therapeutic treatments, guaranteed by the state, in each country, with no loss of tenure or remuneration throughout teachers' working life as well as in retirement.

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