

# Beat Back Burnout

“Sir, does it matter if I get a Not Achieved on the practice exam?”

“No. Nothing matters.”

“...ok thanks, Sir. See you tomorrow!”

**It's hard to trace the exact point where my Year 11 Music class began morphing into the existential-nihilistic grumblings of a sad old man, but there was a very clear moment when the metamorphosis was complete.**

Like chocolate and peanut butter, teaching and subsequent burnout pair naturally. When looking at our profession and the temperament of many who are drawn to it, this outcome almost seems like an inevitability - idealism very quickly loses energy when it is buffeted by all the meaningless tasks that crowd our days: meetings about meetings, data collection for the sake of data collection, spirals of justification for a management unit that ultimately just mean more meetings. All of this at the expense of time and energy that could have been focused on our real responsibility - being present and prepared with our students who very much need our help. Having been chewed at relentlessly by the Hydra of the Ministry of Education, NZQA, and the Teacher's Council, idealism inevitably inverts and becomes cynicism.

As with so many industries, the 2020 pandemic and lockdown pulled back the curtain on what was important to our students, and what was not. We saw clearly what they would miss out on, and the value that those things had. Amidst the anxiety and boredom was some small hope that at least now, having seen what we all saw, there could be an institutional change in how we filled our day. For a long time teachers had rightfully complained about how time-poor they were, and yet so much of this was self-inflicted. This was a golden opportunity to take stock of how we spent our time before the plague and consider how much administrative busy-work and acronym learning had any meaningful impact on our student's experiences.

The yern to get 'back to normal' as quickly as possible was entirely understandable, yet still disappointing given the

opportunity that had been presented to us. An even more drastic 2021 pulled the curtain back for longer, yet the rush to maintain the status quo in all industries was even stronger. It was impossible not to reflect on the way we had been doing things, and question why we wouldn't do things differently.

Amidst this mayhem, the Teacher's Council took the opportunity to double the registration fees of teachers. The consultation process, as the Council generously referred to their actions, was an offensive farce - the PPTA successfully took legal action against the Teacher's Council. Having admitted they were in the wrong, the Council lobbied then education minister and future PM Chris Hipkins to change the law so they could go ahead with their shaking down of the workers they claim to represent. Mid 2022 marked the beginning of over a year of negotiations, and inevitably industrial action. Our partners in the Ministry of Education spent months delaying and deferring, leaking half-truths to the media, all for the cause of doing nothing, rather than the minimal something that teachers were asking for.

Cynicism is noted as a common sign of burnout, and loss or absence of control is sometimes noted as a cause. My burnout was very much of the existential variety - it was never lost on me how lucky I was to have supportive friends in my place of work, and how much of a privilege it was to get to play a small part in the education of incredible young people. Yet it was in spite of this that I found myself feeling worse - at a foundational level, I could not shake a lurking despair about the state of things, an ever-more-apparent feeling that education as a sector was irreparably doomed. That there was no hope for it to get better because we had been given opportunities to make it better and we didn't. The Ministry is too disconnected to do meaningful good for our students - it could if it wanted to, but it won't. The Teacher's Council serves next to no function whatsoever, and if they act outside the law, they will simply change the laws to suit

their interests. NZQA and The Ministry appear to be at odds with each other and refuse to work together, yet we are somehow answerable to both.

While I do believe much of the doom I felt to be valid, I feel great shame at having sometimes let it impact the experiences of my students. A big part of the job is wearing the mask - don't make your problems your student's problems. The mask does invariably slip in moments of crisis, or towards the end of Term 4, but I had felt myself discard it altogether in some moments. Why are we lying to these young people about the state of things? We should respect them enough to speak honestly with them about the world we are sending them into. The covid-cohort in our care is in desperate need of consistent and supportive adults, not dramatic, apocalyptic, Eeyore-coded nihilists, which is exactly what I tended to turn into in my darker moments. The vital truth that I often missed in my rumination was that none of this was in my control, and it certainly wasn't something that my students had any control over. More than ever they needed a consistent, supportive, and present teacher.

Stoic philosophy teaches us that while we don't have control over the outside stimuli that might affect us, we do have control over how we respond to them. Whether or not one genuinely believes we have control over anything, or if free will is non-existent, I have found the Stoic sentiment is still a helpful thing to keep in mind. A conversation with a mentor helped me with this realisation: obvious in hindsight, but very easy to miss in the gloom. I spoke with said mentor about the unshakeable despair I was feeling and genuinely asked how they had been able to stave off cynicism, given how much longer they had stared into the abyss. They had to work very closely with The Ministry as part of their role and no doubt had a clearer vision of the disorder ahead. What I appreciated most in their response was their candour:

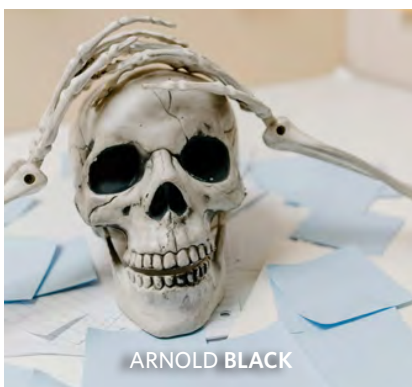
"I'm not going to tell you that it's going to get better. It's not." They affirmed that all they could do within their power was focus on why this job, this industry, was important to them - that at its core, it was about supporting and helping young people. They also quite rightly suggested that I make use of the counselling services that we teachers have available to us.

"Another light that shone through the gloom was realising that we get paid to make art and help young people discover their passion for making art. As I tried to refocus my attention on what was within my control I found myself accompanying my students in their performances much more frequently, and many of them had discovered songs that I loved when I was their age."

To be asked to teach and perform a song I had loved as an optimistic young guitarist, with a new generation of optimistic artists is an incredible thing to do for a living. These moments may make up a fraction of our day, but I realised I did have the autonomy to make the joy of creating art a bigger part of the job - it had been there the whole time.

I am in no way endorsing toxic positivity or delusional optimism as a cure for burnout. As people who care about art and the education of the younger generation, there is much that we should be furious about. Despair, anger and indignation should all be felt, but we should stay vigilant that we don't set up shop in those places forever, and that we are leaving enough space within ourselves for gratitude and connection with the people who count on us.

Today I got to tune all the school guitars to drop D and teach my students the riffs I loved when I was 14, and that makes me feel incredibly lucky.



ARNOLD BLACK

**BIO:** Arnold Black is the pseudonym of a secondary music teacher and faculty leader from Aotearoa.