

## Surviving the staffroom



**Have you ever worked at a school where the staff morale was terrible? Have you ever felt lonely and disconnected because no one talked to each other in the staffroom? This article takes a look at staffroom blues and offers a range of possible cures.**

Almost every school has one. The staffroom, teachers' lounge or teachers' area is a common feature. It's the place where teachers go before, after and between classes. It's where we exchange stories, unwind after a class and prepare for the next. The importance of this area in teaching is, however, often underrated. We are so concerned about what happens inside the classroom (and rightly so) that we don't always talk or think about what happens outside the classroom. Think about it.

### Has your staffroom got the blues?

Some staffrooms are just not a place where one wants to be. It may be a horrible little room in the corner of the school; it may be completely barren of resources or even devoid of chairs and work space. It is difficult to have a good working relationship with your colleagues if the common area is somewhere nobody goes!

However, even in more attractive staffrooms, things don't always go smoothly. It can get hectic in there. Because staffrooms are often small spaces with many teachers coming and going

all the time, opportunities for friction arise all too often. Why not give your staffroom a diagnostic test to see if it has the blues? You can do this by answering the following questionnaire.

### Staffroom diagnostic test

Is your staffroom suffering from the following symptoms?

In an average week, do you hear teachers say the following phrases or exhibit similar behaviours more than once?

- 1 'My beginner class is driving me crazy!'
- 2 'That's it. Next time that student is getting kicked out!'
- 3 'I just can't be bothered any more.'
- 4 'Referring to a particular class: 'They're just all so useless.'
- 5 'I hate my coursebook. I hate my coursebook. I hate my coursebook.'
- 6 'Can you believe what the DoS said to me?'
- 7 'I've been teaching ten years (or 5 or 12 or 20 ...)! It's the same old crap!'
- 8 'Only 83 days left until the summer holidays.'
- 9 'I'm quitting this place at the end of the year.'
- 10 'Can you all please shut up? I'm trying to prepare!'
- 11 'Who took the bloody scissors?!'
- 12 'Referring to difficult students or management: 'It's us against them.'
- 13 Teachers don't talk to each other. They just run in and run out.
- 14 Native English teachers are all stuck together in a clique. Non-native English teachers or teachers of other languages are in a different clique. There is almost an invisible line in the staffroom that nobody crosses.

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**15** Teachers all speak in hushed tones and about the latest injustices (real or perceived) from management. They give furtive glances towards the staffroom door.

**16** Some teachers have a cynical attitude – they have ‘seen it all before’.

If you answered ‘yes’ to more than six of these questions, your staffroom could be suffering from the blues. Even worse, burnout could be setting in!

### The remedy: a five-step plan to a healthy, happy staffroom

All these ideas notwithstanding, some teachers may still feel that they need to do something different, but don’t know what. What other avenues are open to English language teachers? Here are five paths that teachers often take, while remaining in the profession.

- **STEP ONE: Take care of your staffroom**  
If people spend time there, why not give the staffroom a little tender loving care? Install some plants, hang some posters on the wall, get an electric kettle and cups for a tea break. (To avoid rows over washing-up or using someone else’s mug, it’s probably best to establish and post on the wall a code of conduct about making tea or coffee, or storing food in the fridge.) Keep a can of air freshener in the room to occasionally spray around and freshen up the room.
- **STEP TWO: Support each other**  
During the ‘dead time’ between classes, support your colleagues. Ask about one another’s classes and give suggestions. Talk about the good moments you’ve had in class and not just the bad. Try prompts like: ‘What was the best moment in your class today?’ Share knowledge and tips. One staffroom we knew had a ‘yell jug’. Teachers would come in after a tough class, open the jug and shout into it before closing it again.
- **STEP THREE: Share and encourage development**  
Professional development is one way of

fighting burnout. Here are some examples of how to go about this: hold internal workshops on teaching techniques; observe each other teaching (where possible); post readings from professional websites (like this one!); post information about external workshops for teachers in your city; have a favourite activity of the week / month; post information related to external bodies (IATEFL or TESOL); start a teacher development group.

- **STEP FOUR: Do other things apart from talking shop**

Why not have some other things around the staffroom that can provoke conversation or a laugh? If you look up ‘job humour’ on the internet, you can find lots of humorous office posters and cartoons to post on a staffroom bulletin board. Include funny things in both English and the native language of the country where you work. English teachers are often fond of trivia and wordplay, so organize a timed weekly crossword challenge from an English newspaper (a group of teachers we talked to can do the *Guardian* weekly quick crossword in two minutes!). Post other challenging quizzes or word games on a bulletin board. One school we visited organized a series of monthly top 10 lists that teachers were asked to submit (examples include ‘Top 10 songs’, ‘Top 10 places’, ‘Top 10 films’, ‘Top 10 lazy teacher excuses’ and even ‘Top 10 smells’).

- **STEP FIVE: Get out of the staffroom (from time to time)**

You can try to organize group outings or friendly sporting events. These are great for building team spirit and boosting staff morale!

‘It’s a great place to work.’ When we hear teachers say this about their school, they are most likely talking about the working environment and staff relations, much more than the facilities or salary. If you already work in a great place, consider some of the above suggestions to make it even better. If not, it may be more important than you think to start trying some of these ideas!