

# IS IT BURNOUT?

*Demoralization happens when educators face persistent challenges to their professional values.*

**Doris A. Santoro**

**T**he word “burnout” is commonly invoked to explain experienced teachers’ dissatisfaction with their work and their subsequent departure from the profession.

The word suggests a flame extinguished—that teachers have exhausted their personal resources and have nothing left to offer.

Certainly, teachers in high-pressure environments with inadequate supports are susceptible to burnout. School leaders should be attentive to these conditions and address them.

However, burnout is not the only type of dissatisfaction that may contribute to experienced teacher attrition. After researching the sources of teacher dissatisfaction for more than 10 years, I have discovered another challenge to teachers—and one that might even be more pervasive than burnout: demoralization. Demoralization is a form of professional dissatisfaction that occurs when teachers encounter consistent and pervasive challenges to enacting the values that motivate their work (Santoro, 2018a). Teachers who experience demoralization believe that the school practices or policy mandates that they are expected to follow are harmful to students or degrading to the profession and that their attempts to alter them have been fruitless.



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# OR DEMORALIZATION?

Demoralization is a *moral* type of dissatisfaction that needs to be understood as a problem of professional ethics. It can affect all kinds of teachers—from those in high-poverty schools under close scrutiny for student-achievement gains to those in well-resourced institutions that routinely make the lists of the top schools in the United States. What connects demoralized teachers in these distinct environments is that they believe that they are doing wrong in the name of the profession they love.

## **A Moral Conflict**

Teachers experiencing demoralization are faced with moral dilemmas, but these dilemmas are not the type that demand, “What’s the right course of action?” Instead, the moral dilemmas teachers often face take the form of, “I am confident about the right course of action, and I am not allowed to take it.” Demoralization reaches its peak when teachers believe that they are violating basic expectations that educators should embody: Do no harm



to students, support student learning, and engage in professional behavior.

These principles of educator conduct are not idiosyncratic or romantic. They were identified more than 50 years ago by education sociologist Daniel Lortie (1967) as norms of “client responsibility” (what students, their families, and their communities deserve) and norms of “craft performance” (what teachers should reasonably be expected to do as part of their professional responsibility). They shape the moral centers that bring teachers to this work, guide their practice, and sustain them over the long haul.

And yet I find that in many schools teachers feel these basic beliefs are being violated. Here is a sampling of the kinds of situations that may exacerbate teacher demoralization:

- Failing to meet students’ learning needs due to a scripted curriculum or mandated textbook.
- Following school practices that increasingly focus on academic achievement, even though students arrive at school with profound emotional needs.
- Witnessing students feel worthless as schools are graded, ranked, and closed.
- Being pressured by school leaders to pass students so schools can improve publicly available graduation rates.
- Witnessing school leaders’ rejection of teacher expertise and initiative in favor of adopting expensive products and services that yield dubious results.
- Observing the increasing use of alternative and fast-track licensure programs that degrade and deprofessionalize teaching.

These challenges are taking a severe toll on the profession. Surveys show a “precipitous drop” in teachers’ job satisfaction since 2009 and an “undercurrent of despair” about their work (MetLife, 2013; Office of Performance Evaluations, 2013). A Gallup report, “The State of America’s Schools” (2014), described teaching as “vilified.” The same report drew on daily tracking research conducted in 2012 that revealed teachers were least likely to agree with the statement, “At my work, my opinions seem to count,” compared with 12 other occupations. Of the 100 percent of teachers in one survey who began their

careers feeling enthusiastic about their profession, only 53 percent remained enthusiastic in 2015 (American Federation of Teachers & Badass Teachers Association, 2015).

Given this profound dissatisfaction amongst teachers, school leaders are wise in trying to reverse it. However, the most robust data do not reveal conclusively that the problem is burnout *per se*. We know that teachers are experiencing dissatisfaction (Keigher, 2010), but, like doctors, we must be careful to look for the true source of the problem in order to properly treat it. A headache can be caused by many things, from dehydration to a concussion, but the remedies will be very different for those problems. Similarly, school leaders need to get to the root of teacher dissatisfaction so it can be diagnosed and treated properly.

### **Finding the Right Remedy**

Burnout is only one possible manifestation of dissatisfaction, and it is one that lays the problem squarely at the feet of teachers. When we say a teacher has “burned out,” we suggest that there is something wrong with the individual, and we imply that teachers come to the profession with a finite amount of personal and professional resources. The logic of burnout suggests that if these resources were not in sufficient abundance or were not properly conserved, then they will dry up.

The demands of teaching are profound, and it is understandable that without sufficient external and internal supports, teachers may have nothing left to give. Usually,

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the recommendations for attenuating burnout involve self-care, mindfulness, and boundary setting. All of these can be invaluable tools for teachers who face the many stressors embedded in this work. However, these prescriptions for well-being assume that the problem is about individual resilience, tolerance of adversity, and managing workload. The recommended fix will often be an “inside job” to be undertaken by teachers as individuals.

In contrast, the diagnosis of demoralization characterizes the problem as a value conflict experienced as a result of policies, mandates, and school practices. The individual teacher has not failed. In demoralization, experienced educators understand that they are facing a conflict between their vision of good work and their teaching context (Santoro, 2018a). The values that teachers bring to the work (serving students and their communities, upholding the dignity of the profession) are still worthwhile, but are being thwarted by the conditions in which they work.

By responding as if teacher dissatisfaction is the individual’s problem, school leaders can make the problem

even worse and repel some of the strongest and most dedicated experienced teachers in their buildings, districts, and states.

### **When School Leaders Undermine Good Work**

It can be difficult to determine what is causing teacher dissatisfaction. Demoralization, in its later stages, has many of the same outward symptoms as burnout. Teachers

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experiencing demoralization may describe feeling depressed and exhausted and report physical ailments.

The difference in demoralized teachers is that they retain their commitment to engaging in good work and, by all outward measures, are performing very well. It is their frustration of not being able to do good work that is the source of their dissatisfaction. They may feel a sense of complicity in harming students or undermining the profession, which leads to guilt and shame that make the work intolerable.

The teachers I have interviewed who are experiencing demoralization are leaders in their buildings and districts. They are asked to lead professional development, build district curriculum guidelines, and initiate special programs. Many are nationally board certified and have received awards for their teaching. Teaching well and providing service to their communities is how these educators choose to embody good work, but something is causing a conflict with that choice.

For example, Diane<sup>1</sup>, a 21-year veteran teacher who I interviewed during my research, was demoralized when she could see no way to do good work *and* follow her state’s testing requirements. During a high-stakes state exam, Molly, one of her 4th grade students, was stuck on the word “selection” in the test’s directions and asked for help. When Diane told Molly she couldn’t help her due to test administration regulations, Molly broke down and sobbed. Molly’s parents called Diane later that evening to apologize for her behavior. They were concerned it had compromised Diane’s job. Diane told me:

As a teacher, my job is to answer questions for kids. As a teacher, it is my job to make my students feel safe and cared for and part of a community. These kids were nine years old. They have certain adults in their lives that they’re supposed to be able to trust and that they care for. The fact that Molly felt that she was hurting me in any way, shape, or form by not

being able to perform was wrong. It was wrong that I couldn’t answer a child’s question or that I couldn’t read a word for her. Everything I’d been taught had already said that these are the things you’re supposed to do for kids. You’re supposed to help them to get to the next level. And, if you are giving them a test, it should be appropriate to what they know and are able to do. I had words and actions [for] things that I wanted to be as a teacher, and I was able to enact [them] until this point. At this point, I was no longer able to be that person that I know I want to be. I have to be this other person who feels monstrous, actually.

To make matters worse, Diane’s principal and superintendent later discounted her concerns about administering high-stakes tests as a “personal” issue and characterized her voicing of her concerns as “unprofessional.”

In contrast to Diane’s experience, another teacher I talked to, Vanessa, had a 14-year-old career in which she had a great relationship with her principal. She believed her principal listened intently to her concerns. They did not always see eye-to-eye, and their conversations could get heated. However, their touchstone question was moral: “Is it good for kids?” This shared moral concern enabled them to build mutual respect, even in the midst of strong disagreement.

Vanessa, however, became demoralized when a new principal joined the faculty who seemed to operate without a shared understanding of good work. He had scant classroom teaching experience and refused to engage her in conversations about teaching and learning. From Vanessa’s perspective, he believed the only worthwhile goal was teacher compliance with district mandates, while she envisioned a much broader purpose for her work. Vanessa believed that her new principal interpreted her concerns as personal complaints in response to district mandates, rather than her attempt to uphold her

professional responsibility from the more expansive position of good work.

When school leaders ignore teachers' moral concerns about their work, they miss an opportunity to identify crucial common ground. Successfully responding to demoralization requires that school leaders recognize teachers' moral motivations, listen for the moral concerns when teachers raise questions about policies and practices, and problem solve with teachers to identify how they can find a way to do good work in the midst of mandates. This allows teachers to take action, ideally with the support and encouragement of their school leaders, to find a way to enact the moral purposes that brought them to this work.

### Moral Power to You!

What would it have looked like for Vanessa's new principal to attempt to understand her point of view? Or for Diane's principal to acknowledge her concerns as a matter of professional ethics, rather than labeling her speaking up as "unprofessional?" Even if both Diane and her principal were beholden to the state requirements for testing conditions, they could have collaborated with their teachers as allies by discussing ways to minimize the potential harm to students.

School leaders who care about improving teacher satisfaction and retention should consider incorporating strategies that address demoralization into their plans. The very first step might be to determine the *source* of teachers' dissatisfaction. One way school leaders can do this is to listen for, recognize, and respond to teachers moral concerns (Santoro, 2108b).

Responding thoughtfully to teacher's moral concerns may involve:

- Facilitating discussions about what good teaching entails. Learn what faculty members believe supports them or prevents them from engaging in good teaching.
- Becoming curious about teachers' resistance. School leaders can find out about the principles that guide teachers' work in these conversations.
- Inviting teachers to develop proposals to resolve or address value conflicts in their work.
- Separating federal, state, and district initiatives into three categories: nonnegotiable, desirable, and better-off-ignored. Protect teachers from unnecessary new initiatives. Sustain focus on the initiatives that advance

the goals and mission of the school. Communicate the relationship between the mission and goals to the expectations you have for faculty.

- Sharing responsibility for difficult decisions with teachers (for instance, passing or suspending students). Avoid passing the buck.

- Instituting exit interviews and collecting data on why teachers leave a school or district.

Demoralization is a process, not a single event. Preventing and reversing demoralization entails that school leaders be cognizant of and recognize the moral commitments teachers bring to their work. It means working with teachers to articulate the features of good work and to support ways that good work can be done in their classroom, school, district, and state. [EL](#)

<sup>1</sup>All names of interviewed teachers and their students are pseudonyms.

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