

# A CONCERN FOR THE TEACHING PROFESSION: IMPACTS OF DEMORALIZATION

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## Abstract

Within the United States public education system, many teachers encounter feelings of demoralization. They feel they can no longer access the inherent moral benefits that initially drew them to have the desire to teach in the first place. This study examined the contributing factors that cause demoralization feelings amongst public educators and the long-term implications for the institution and the students it serves. Factors such as the teaching environment, administrative support, and state-mandated curriculum and testing contribute to a loss of control and ability to serve their students and community best. Analysis of a teacher's anecdote indicates dissatisfaction with the profession due to demoralization. A demoralizing teaching environment can cause teachers to leave the profession as a whole. Departure from a career as an educator damages the teacher and negatively affects the students and districts that must fill vacant classroom teaching positions. Analysis of literature creates recommendations for further research and open dialogue between teachers, colleagues, and supervisors.

## Introduction

Educators in the teaching profession, particularly within the United States' scope, face a variety of personal and contextual hurdles that risk teacher attrition, and increase turnover rates. An overwhelming and rising problem facing educators today is demoralization. Unlike teacher burnout, teacher demoralization occurs when educators feel they can no longer access the moral benefits and fulfill an educator's moral duty while serving their students. Teacher burnout is addressed by managing self-care, which is quite different from addressing demoralization. Demoralization requires changes in the structure of the institution in which demoralization takes place. This study reviews the literature on demoralization to examine how demoralization ultimately affects teachers, school districts, and students. Overall, teacher demoralization puts highly qualified and credentialed teachers at risk of leaving their position or the profession as a whole.

## Problem Statement

Public educators are experiencing they can no longer fulfill their reason for teaching and feel demoralized, putting them at risk for leaving their position or the profession altogether (Santoro, 2013, 2014; Woestman & Wasonga, 2015). This problem leads to a strain on the supply of educators and risks high quality

and experienced teachers leaving. This is important because students are left educationally vulnerable. To understand the impacts of demoralization, we address three important questions. First, what are the most significant differences between feelings of burnout and demoralization among teachers, and what does this imply about the way teachers feel towards their job? Second, to what extent do teacher attrition and teacher turnover correlate with high feelings of demoralization within the profession? Finally, how is demoralization manifested in the teaching profession, and what actions should be taken to mitigate this phenomenon?

## Distinguishing Demoralization from Burnout

It is imperative to differentiate demoralization from burnout to examine the effects of demoralization. Demoralization and burnout may both lead to frustration within the field, job dissatisfaction, and risk of teacher turnover, but they are fundamentally different in their effects on professional educators. The same can be said about the failure to recognize demoralization and a misdiagnosis by outsiders as burnout. Misdiagnosis can lead to failure of remedy. The critical difference between these two phenomenons is their cause. According to Santoro (2013), burnout occurs when teachers fail to preserve themselves and their wellbeing. The resources in burnout are personal to the teacher and often lead to teacher stress.

In contrast, the resources in demoralization are the moral rewards that attract teachers to the profession in the first place. Rewards such as meaningful student connections, innovative lesson plan design, and bettering the lives of students and the community are essential to keeping teachers happy about their work and how they execute it. When school policies take these moral rewards away from educators, teachers encounter demoralization (Santoro 2013). In this framework, burnout is a personal problem having a unique individual-based solution. Demoralization is anything but personal since its cause can come from school policies. Hence, it cannot be addressed at an individual level as burnout can. Demoralization must be addressed at the institutional level where policy is made. Some institutional causes of demoralization among educators include destructive relationships with superiors, imposed policy and structural change, state-mandated curriculum and testing, and an overall loss of autonomy over their profession. To better understand demoralization and how the institution challenges the moral commitments that

teachers make to their students, colleagues, and communities, this study will review the literature that focuses on the contextual factors within schools, administration, and education policymaking.

## Methodology

This research explores the literature and studies that survey the potential causes and implications of demoralized teachers. The rationale underpinning this methodology is to produce contextual knowledge of the impacts of demoralization on teachers. A search was conducted with teacher and demoralization as keywords between the late 1990s and present to ensure time relevancy. The studies selected were qualified further by only utilizing peer-reviewed literature within this timeframe. A thematic analysis was conducted within this qualitative methodology to examine and identify themes and patterns amongst the peer-reviewed literature, such as significant contributors to demoralization and teachers leaving the profession. This methodology is essential as it highlights the research which has already been conducted but has yet to ignite significant action within the United States education system and provide any remedy.

## Review of Literature

In a study published in a *Teaching and Teacher Education Journal*, Glazer (2020) interviewed twenty-five former public school teachers from a range of schools and outlined several completing theories used to study teacher attrition. One was an organizational theory that focused on the teacher environment and how organizations are structured and function. Another, called self-efficacy theory, focused on an individual's "ability to execute behaviors in pursuit of a desired outcome" (Glazer 2020). We will use these two theories to establish the findings of this paper and the demoralization framework.

## Teaching Environment & Administrative Support

Teachers find themselves demoralized because of their relationships with their school administrative faculty and leaders within education. A 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey (EQWL) was made accessible to public educators and school staff through convenience sampling. Sampling was executed via email and social media as well as a random sample of AFT members. Results indicated that "respondents felt least respected by elected officials, the media, and US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos" (2017). These results may be partly because leaders within education can often display destructive leadership behaviors (DLBs). DLBs are "actions that would be considered harmful and deviant toward followers and/or the organization" (Wasonga & Woestman 2015). Supervisors who display DLBs towards their subordinates are aware of their harm regardless of whether they are motivated to act destructively or do not feel helpful and constructive. An example of such behavior is when school leaders undermine good work and discount teacher concerns for their students. Using teacher interviews, Santoro concluded that DLBs cause teachers to feel they cannot conduct the work they believe

they are set to do (Santoro 2018). Based on the self-efficacy theory, as teachers feel they cannot produce the desired outcome, their moral commitment to themselves and their students is challenged. This challenge leads to feelings of personal job dissatisfaction from loss of professionalism and productivity declines for themselves and their students. It is these feelings that align with demoralization.

## Deprofessionalization in the Age of Accountability

Additionally, something that's been destructive to the teaching profession and a substantial cause of teacher demoralization is the age of federal accountability and assessment policies, all of which contribute to an organization's structure and evaluated function related to the organizational theory camp. From the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009, to the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, federal accountability is characterized through Statewide standards, standardized testing, educator evaluation and data systems (Urick & Woestman 2019). Effects of organizational changes such as forced testing and mandated curriculum correlate with the EQWL survey findings. The EQWL survey found that "40% of respondents reported having no influence or only minor influence in establishing curriculum at their schools," and "62% of educators somewhat or strongly disagreed that their schools have good systems of evaluation" (2017). Analysis of this data reveals that lack of control over the curriculum and school procedures contributes to removing teachers' creative liberties and sense of what they feel is right for their students.

Organizational changes that deprive teachers of the creative process in teaching again strip educators of what they view as teaching's mission. Federal accountability policies help one discern the difference between successful teaching and good or quality teaching. Under Federal policy, successful teachers are merely competent in delivering a state-mandated curriculum for their students to pass their state-mandated tests. Simultaneously, good teachers also sustain the ethical and virtuous dimensions of teaching (Santoro 2011). More often than not, it is those "good" teachers who encounter demoralization due to a loss of autonomy in their work created by federal accountability policies. State-mandated testing and evaluation systems have taken away the educator's ability to craft lesson plans in a way they feel caters best to their students. Removing any authority they have over their craft leaves educators feeling less productive and incapable of doing their job.

Santoro (2011) examined specific teacher's accounts regarding state-mandated testing. For example, Stephanie, who was expected to follow Virginia's Standards of Learning in the 1990s, found that the shift to a prioritization of testing over teaching made it so that the supplemental test prep materials she gave to her class now translated as the entire curriculum. More specifically, Stephanie described it as a "slap in the face to me as a

professional” and “dismissed her pedagogical knowledge, constrained her pedagogical judgment, and so tightly circumscribed her pedagogical authority” (Santoro 2011). This disregard for an educator’s pedagogical opinion and autonomy over class content falls into the self-efficacy theory because the teacher cannot work towards their desired outcome. In this case, state-mandated testing undermined Stephanie’s desire to connect the student’s learning with their experiences. This disconnect not only demoralizes teachers but is deprofessionalizing teaching as a whole. Another analysis of narratives from former teachers identified as “invested leavers,” certified teachers who made it past their new teacher phase and left schools entirely never to return, not even in the form as administrators or in nonprofit organizations. The overall themes for their resignation included “autonomy and imposed curricula, testing culture, and bureaucracy and job insecurity” (Glazer 2020). These themes hold when compared with data from the EQWL survey (2017). The results of this survey showed that teachers felt little to no control over their day to day classroom level decisions and that much stress does not come from students but comes from the flux of testing and other state requirements. Much like Stephanie had, many qualified and credentialed teachers grew dissatisfied with their job and the obstacles created by their supervisors and state mandates and left teaching because of prolonged demoralization. Much more than just teacher attrition or turnover, demoralization comes at a higher cost for both school districts and students.

## Results

One of the most significant differences between feelings of burnout and demoralization among teachers and what this implies about teachers’ feelings towards their jobs is that burnout is a matter of a teacher’s self-care. In contrast, demoralization is a matter of situations the teacher cannot control and instead is forced upon them, circumstances such as state-mandated curriculum.

Demoralization is dangerous to the teaching profession as it relates to higher rates of attrition and difficulties in retaining teachers. This result answers the second research question by showing a positive association between teacher attrition and teacher turnover with high demoralization feelings within the profession. With qualified and seasoned educators leaving the profession or moving to different schools, students across affluent and low socioeconomic school communities are at risk. A thinning teacher force due to prematurely leaving the profession can lead school administrators to resort to what is known as out of field teaching. According to the National Education Association, out of field teaching is where teachers instruct subjects in which they have little to no qualifications. As it turns out, a third of high school math teachers have neither a major or minor in related disciplines, the same goes for a fourth of English teachers, and more than half of high school history students’ teachers lack a related major or minor (Ingersoll, 1998). With teacher demoralization

threatening high attrition rates, difficulty filling teaching positions with quality and qualified teachers has made administrators “hire less qualified teachers, assign teachers trained in other fields or grade level to teach in the understaffed area and make extensive use of substitute teachers” (Ingersoll, 1998). More often than not, novice teachers are those put into out of field positions. High levels of out-of-field teaching and lack of experienced teachers leave students with limited opportunities educationally vulnerable to unqualified teachers.

On top of costing students a quality education, teacher attrition is expensive for school districts. In response to the second research question, how is demoralization manifested in the teaching profession, and what actions should be taken to mitigate this phenomenon? Research shows that there are many underlying costs when filling in teaching vacancies. These costs can be broken down into separation costs, replacement costs, and training costs for the newly hired. These categories are further explored in a study that explored calculating the cost of teacher turnover. Separation costs are associated with teachers who classify as the invested leavers described earlier, transferring schools, or retiring. Replacement costs cover travel for recruitment purposes (e.g., job advertisements, recruitment fairs, and incentives). Training costs classify as the cost for new teacher orientations and fees paid by the school district to attend professional development presentation sessions (Watlington et al., 2010). This same study uses these categories to calculate best the cost of teacher attrition in two Southeast Florida school districts. In the 2004-05 academic year, St. Lucie County School District’s cost per teacher replaced was \$4,631, and in Broward County School District, it was \$12,652 per teacher. This financial cost is just one of many considering the emotional and morally damaging cost for teachers who have left the profession or the cost to a student’s education.

## Recommendations

Based on our analysis of the literature, we can make a couple of recommendations. It is evident that many considered burnout and demoralization to be intertwined and interchangeable. Based on teacher narratives, it is essential to differentiate the two as they are not the same, nor do they affect teachers the same. Burnout is a matter of a teacher’s self-care, while demoralization is a matter of school policy that exogenously challenges the teacher’s moral obligations. Because of this, we make two recommendations. First, we recommend there be further research into demoralization amongst public educators. Second, we recommend that school leaders facilitate discussions with teachers to promote constructive dialogue and teacher voice. In these discussions, we encourage teachers and educational leaders to take a step forward and have the difficult conversations to propose resolutions to the value and moral conflict that bring about demoralization. Additionally, this open dialogue should address which state mandates are negotiable, non-negotiable,

and which policies are already efficient and conducive to a healthy working environment. These steps will help alleviate and mitigate the moral roadblocks that teachers face within this career path.

## Conclusion

Based on this literature review, we conclude that state education mandates and destructive leadership behaviors from school administrators and education professionals pose a threat to the teaching profession's moral rewards. Both organizational and self-efficacy theory served as guides to understanding the different contributors to demoralization feelings amongst teachers. The changes in the structure of teaching fostered the loss of autonomy and feeling less efficacious for educators. These moral conflicts put highly qualified and credentialed teachers at risk of leaving their position or the profession as a whole. High teacher attrition and turnover rates have more than an emotional cost to our teachers' wellbeing and status as a whole. They cause inefficiency in our educational system by leaving students educationally vulnerable to underqualified teachers and stressing school district budgets. New teachers must be hired and trained to fill vacant teaching positions.

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