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HOW BAD EDUCATION POLICIES DEMORALIZE TEACHERS

By John Rosales

We often hear the term "teacher burnout" to describe how some educators feel overtaken by the pressures of the classroom. But are these really cases of burnout or have many educators become "demoralized"? These are similar but also distinct forces, says Doris Santoro, Assistant Professor of Education at Bowdoin College, and both are driving dedicated and talented teachers out of the profession.

In a [recent article for the American Journal of Education](#), Santoro argues that demoralization at the hands of rigid education "reforms" is often misdiagnosed as burnout, a condition that has more to do with how an individual responds to everyday stress. Demoralization, according to Santoro, occurs when much of the value of teaching has been stripped away by rigid, ill-conceived education reforms, creating a high level of frustration and helplessness among teachers. "Burnout" is not the issue. As she explains to NEA Today, the work of teaching has changed and it is therefore up to school communities and policymakers to help restore the "moral rewards" of teaching.

How does teacher demoralization differ from teacher burnout in terms of cause and effect?

I make a distinction between demoralization and burnout primarily in terms of cause. The effects – apathy, bitterness, depression, exhaustion, isolation – may, in fact, look remarkably similar. Burnout is studied most frequently by psychologists who examine how an individual's personality, physical and mental health, and coping strategies help to manage stress. Burnout tends to be characterized as a natural by-product of teaching in demanding schools and leaves the problem of burnout as an issue of teacher personality and/or naiveté. Burnout is characterized as a failure of individual teachers to conserve their personal store of resources.

In demoralization, the resources – what I term the "moral rewards" of teaching – are embedded in the work itself. Demoralization occurs when the job changes to such a degree that what teachers previously found "good" about their work is no longer available.

Moral rewards are what bring many of us to teaching: finding ways to connect meaningfully with students, designing lessons that address students' needs, using our talents to improve the lives of others. It is a sense that the moral dimension of the work is taken away by policy mandates that affect their teaching directly.

Explain a bit more about the moral dimension of teaching, particularly how it relates to the recruitment, retention and attrition of teachers.

The moral dimension of teaching is the aspect of teaching that suffuses instruction and curriculum, but also exceeds them. It is where teachers talk about what is good, what is right and what is just about their work. What is it about teaching that enables us to find and express moral value? How is what I am doing bettering the world or myself? How does my teaching improve the lives of others?

The moral dimension of teaching goes beyond questions of student achievement (for example, "Will this raise my students test scores?") and includes asking about how the teaching affects all involved as persons (for instance, "Is how I am teaching good for my students and for my wellbeing?"). I believe that we get into trouble when we divorce achievement-type questions from moral questions. They must be held together.

Teaching attracts individuals who seek to do good work in spite of the profession's relatively low status and pay. Research has also shown that the ability to enjoy the moral rewards of doing good work sustains teachers throughout their careers. Of course, salary, school conditions, and structural supports like time for collaborative planning or smaller classes must be addressed, but in concert with the moral dimension of the work. These issues are often intertwined.

How do so-called education reforms lead specifically to demoralization?

...continued page 3

From Your President

Rick McClure



I took an article I found in *Before the Bell*, published daily by NEA, and put it in this issue of the Advocate. In reading the piece, I found that it described almost perfectly what's been happening not only in our schools nationwide, but here in OMSD as well. We teach in a community that has large numbers of children who live in poverty, come from immigrant families, and don't speak English as their first language.

We all know from experience that schools serving children like ours tend to have the lowest test scores. This is not an excuse, as some would accuse, it's reality. The law, however, assumes that our kids are capable of producing the same test scores as children in more privileged communities. It is this collision of fact and fantasy that in turn create the conditions that produce the demoralization written about in the article.

The article talks about the moral rewards of teaching. It is those moral rewards that brought most of us to teaching to begin with. It is the ability to make a difference in a child's life. It is the ability to take those teachable moments and actually take the time for them so that we can see our students learn something meaningful—even if it isn't part of the curriculum. It is about recognizing that teaching is at least partly art, and allowing the artist in us to work in our classrooms. It's being recognized by our peers and administrators for something other than high test scores, and more importantly not being punished for having low test scores.

I've heard this phenomenon described as taking the fun out of teaching. I think calling it demoralization is much more accurate. Making it impossible to focus on those things that bring the moral rewards is bad for us as teachers. What's worse, though, is that it's bad for our students. To lead them to believe, as we surely have, that the only thing that measures their worth is how they score on the tests we give them is even worse. For example, there are some administrators in OMSD who have insisted on using a practice I describe as abusive. Namely, making kids sit with their hands on their desks and their eyes forward if they dare to finish a test before time has run out. To me this particular practice shines a spotlight on all that is wrong with modern education. It says the only thing that matters is test scores. Never mind the damage it does to children. While this may be the worst practice I can think of, it's hardly the only one we engage in that hurts the children we serve. Just think about how much time we spend "sprinting" to this test or that test. Think about all the 30-day plans that are focused on nothing other than improving test scores. How sad for our students, and how sad for us with what it forces us to do.

I understand very well why our schools focus so relentlessly on test scores. The law punishes schools and districts that don't live up to the impossible demands that are made upon us. Why, though, do we allow those policies to lead us to engage in practices we know are bad for our students? I know many of you ask yourselves these questions all the time. Perhaps it's time to start asking them out loud at our sites.

BAD EDUCATION POLICIES

My preliminary research shows that it is never one single event or policy that leads to demoralization, but a compilation of mandates that change the character of teachers' work. It depends on how the policy is implemented at a particular school and what a particular teacher views as central features of good teaching.

It is undeniable that teachers who work high-poverty schools tend to experience the most Draconian forms of high-stakes accountability. Examples of policies that may demoralize teachers are scripted lessons that divest teachers of using their talents in planning, mandated curriculum that allows no space for teachers to respond to students' academic needs and interests, and testing practices that make teachers feel complicit in doing harm to their students.

For instance, one teacher I interviewed spoke of her district's requirement to have first-grade students sit for a three-hour exam without a break. Other teachers have mentioned their school's mandated fidelity to the pace of commercial curriculum even though students were not ready to move on to learning a new concept. Overall, the high-stakes accountability climate has neglected conversations about good teaching.

How do burnout and demoralization differ in regards to individual responsibility vs. community responsibility in preventing and addressing the problems?

Certainly there are teachers with personalities that render them prone to burning out – they do not have healthy boundaries or may find self-realization through self-sacrifice. There are also sick school cultures that can contribute to burnout. For instance, schools where putting in anything less a twelve-hour day is viewed as a lack of commitment to the job.

Demoralization, being rooted in the practice of teaching and having policy- and system-based causes, should be addressed by whole-school communities. Current federal policy initiatives require data from teacher surveys on levels of support in and working conditions of schools be published in state and district report cards. Why not include questions such as: When, why, and how do you find value in your work? What enables you to teach at your best? What prevents you from engaging in good teaching? While some responses to these questions may be cynical or blame students and their families, it is likely that they will also point to aspects of policies that require revision in the interdependent goals of improving student learning and retaining talented teachers.

Absent better policies, can teachers do anything to keep from becoming demoralized?

Teachers should first resist the label of "burnout" if what they are really experiencing is demoralization. Demoralization indicates a problem with the profession and practitioners collectively can call attention to the

ways in which the work is changing. Demoralization is not a personal problem, so it cannot be avoided individually. Naming and resisting policies that impede doing good work need to be addressed collectively.

There is no shame in demoralization – it is the work that has changed, not the failure of an individual to tough it out. Teachers can ask themselves, colleagues, school leaders, policy makers, parents, whoever will listen: How are we able to access the moral rewards of our work? What do we need to do to "remoralize" our teaching?

INTRODUCING DON TAYLOR

I'm Don Taylor and beginning April 1st, I along with Susana Salas, and other CTA Staff working out of the Ontario Regional Resource Center (RRC) are being reassigned. These changes became necessary due to the loss of two Regional UniServ Staff in this area and due to the loss of membership because of layoffs. This made it necessary for CTA to reassign Regional UniServ Staff to insure that all CTA members in the area would continue to receive the highest level of support and service. Let me assure you that Susana and I, along with your President, Rick McClure, are working to make this change as seamless as possible.

Here are a few things you might want to know about me. My first teaching assignment was as an opportunity middle school teacher. My next assignment was to a high school where eventually I was assigned to teaching seniors American Government. It was here my active participation began with my local. Among my greatest memories are: 1) Leading my local in a school board election to unseat three incumbent board members thus electing a teacher friendly board majority, 2) Bargaining the highest salary increases in the county, thus putting my local's salary schedule consistently among the top three in the county, and 3) Leading my local to be the critical participant in two successful school bond elections. These experiences have taught me the power of team building and organizing members in collective action. While there is no replacement for individuals acting on principle, there is no greater reward than working as a unified local committed to improving public education and protecting the rights of our members. I look forward to many joyous celebrations as we continue to keep OMTA the most effective voice for our members and the students we serve.

I promise you my full commitment to you and OMTA.

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2012 – 13

OPEN ENROLLMENT

OMSD is going to be changing its Open Enrollment procedures this year. Rather than have American Fidelity come to school sites in order to meet with teachers during working hours at their own sites, the administration will instead have our benefit technicians available on most days during open enrollment from 3 – 8 at either Briggs or the Hardy Center. -

This is a big change from how things have been done in the past. It's important to remember, though, that it is not necessary to meet with anyone in order to sign up for benefits again for next year. All anyone needs to do is to log onto SCSEBA Online Benefit Access (SOBA) by going to the payroll/benefits page or through MyOMSD "Quick Links" on the district website. Once there simply click on the link, log on using your username and password, and then simply follow the prompts to renew your benefits for next year. If you don't remember your username or password you can email either Juliet Orozco or Glenda Figueroa in Payroll/Benefits and they can assist you. The Payroll/Benefits department plans on releasing a step-by-step guide to help everyone through the online process.

For those of you who wish to meet with an American Fidelity Rep regarding voluntary benefits, they will be available at all of the sites where you can go to sign up for your district benefits.

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OMTA
Executive Board Meeting
April 2nd
Rep Council Meeting
April 23rd

OMSD
School Board Meetings
April 12th
7 pm at Central Language Academy

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