

Policy reforms 'demoralizing' teaching profession, scholar argues

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A provocative new article in the *American Journal of Education* argues that many teachers in the age of rigid curricula, high-stakes testing, and reduced classroom autonomy are finding it difficult to access the "moral rewards" of their profession. This demoralization of teaching threatens to drive away even the most passionate and dedicated of teachers.

"The moral rewards of teaching are activated when educators feel that they are doing what is right in terms of one's [students](#), the teaching profession, and themselves," writes Doris Santoro, a professor of education at Bowdoin College. But, she argues, current policy reforms often take away a teacher's ability to be responsive to students' needs, and blunt the sense that a teacher is doing what is right for students. This in turn leads to feelings of [frustration](#) and [hopelessness](#) that are too often misdiagnosed as "teacher burnout."

"However, the burnout explanation fails to account for situations where the conditions of teaching change so dramatically that moral rewards, previously available in ever-challenging work, are now inaccessible," Santoro writes. "In this instance, the phenomenon is better termed demoralization."

To illustrate her point, Santoro describes the experience of Stephanie, a teacher Santoro interviewed in 2008 for a project on why once-passionate teachers decide to leave the profession.

Stephanie taught at a diverse elementary school in Virginia she felt was

"a collaborative, respectful environment that enjoyed a cooperative relationship with parents and the community," Santoro writes.

"Stephanie felt as though she was able to exercise her professional judgment and engage in good teaching ... and students, while underprepared, were eager to learn."

Stephanie drew moral rewards from her freedom to respond to her students' needs. For example, she told Santoro how she relished finding innovative ways to help her students understand scientific and mathematical terminology in her Spanish-language immersion classes. But Stephanie's sense of having the authority to do good work for her students was ultimately undermined by a new set of statewide curriculum standards adopted in Virginia. The reforms prioritized testing over "real teaching," Stephanie lamented. She came to see herself as not a teacher but as a dictator of facts.

"What had been hallmarks of good teaching for Stephanie—connecting student learning with their experiences, helping them learn to think in ways that will transfer to success in higher-order analysis and their everyday needs, and maintaining creativity in her work and her students' problem-solving—was being jettisoned by the exigencies of passing the test" and satisfying state standards, Santoro writes. "The moral rewards that she enjoyed previously by learning about her students' needs, finding new ways to reach them, and connecting learning to concerns beyond the school became stunted by mandated curriculum and scripted lessons."

Stephanie ultimately decided that, "This is not what I signed up for," and left the profession.

What happened to Stephanie is not burnout, Santoro argues. Burnout indicates a personal failing on the part of a teacher—an inability to cope with the stresses inherent in the work, or an exhaustion of the personal

resources needed to do the job. Stephanie's case was not one of personal failing. Rather it was a case in which the profession itself changed in a way that nullified the moral rewards of doing good work.

"Policy makers, educational leaders, and teachers need to find ways to promote, protect, and assess quality teaching that takes into account good teaching and successful (or effective) [teaching](#)," she writes.

"Attracting practitioners with the moral significance of the work, while at the same time eliminating the moral dimension of the practice in assessing teacher quality, is a recipe for demoralization."

More information: Doris A. Santoro, "Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work." *American Journal of Education* 118:1 (November 2011)

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