Chalk Dust in the Wind

An Examination of the Demoralized Teacher

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Abstract

Teacher burnout is now a significant issue in K-12 schools due to an unparalleled global COVID-19 pandemic. However, this burnout has roots in the demoralization of the teaching workforce, which is nothing new to the profession. This paper focuses on bringing light to the underlying reasons for this demoralization, steeped in classroom realities and the very nature of the profession. The paper draws on findings from an examination of research in order to show that teachers are largely demoralized due to their historically devalued status, the isolation and stress inherent in the profession, and the very "semi-profession" upon which the field stands. The analysis shows that something more is needed to fill the cup of teachers, who are beaten down by these historical and modern-day realities. The paper argues that relational trust may be one of those cup-filling modalities and concludes by suggesting that a century of recycled reforms calls for deeper and bolder action, and most particularly ones that bolster respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity.

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Introduction

Larry Cuban penned a seminal piece in 1990 entitled "Reforming Again, Again and Again" which chronicles recurring waves of school reform from the days of Horace Mann on forward. In it, he depicts reform movements undulating for decades without much visible impact on teaching practice. The problem is so widely recognized that other historians now also chronicle these movements (Cuban, 1984, 1990; Ravitch, 2010, 2014; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Elmore (1996) contends that schools "change" all the time—adopting this or that new schedule, textbook, or tracking system—yet never impact in any fundamental way how teachers and students interact. Reformers continue to try, and experts continue to generate hypotheses to account for reform failures while proffering solutions for change. The sad fact remains that most reforms don't work because they fail to acknowledge the realities of the classroom teacher.

This article explores realities of classroom teachers that place them in a demoralized context. First, it looks at the historical status of teaching. Then it examines the isolation and stress inherent in an autonomous classroom. Finally, the very "semi-ness" of the profession is examined, which further depreciates the career's currency. Moreover, some relief is offered in the form of "relational trust," to combat this demoralization and build the teacher back up. While certainly no silver bullet, relational trust offers a framework of viewing the teacher as a whole person with inherent need for community and trustful bonds with other school personnel.

Teacher Realities

Much has been written on the mismatch between reformer ideals and teacher realities. Kennedy (2005) juxtaposed teacher lines of thinking against policy demands to bolster her claim that reformers must ultimately adapt their ideals to the world of classroom teachers. Among other premises, she maintains that reforms, while not only incompatible with teacher dispositions and circumstances, can actually work to *impede* teacher practice. Similarly, Cohen's (1990) now-famous Mrs. Oublier depicts a teacher's notion of implementation skewing far from the reformers' intended target. Huberman (1995), too, found teachers who were uninterested in reform, either because they disagreed with the reform's intent or because they had been involved in, disappointed

by, and tired by an earlier initiative. Whether unreasonable, time consuming, or poorly adapted, policy reforms not only waste teacher and student time, but perhaps harm their commitment to learning in the long run.

The *No Child Left Behind* legislation heralded an era of even higher stress promulgated by high-stakes reforms and sanctions. In a study of the impact of high-stakes reforms, Valli and Buese (2007) found an environment where teachers related to students differently, enacted pedagogies at odds with their own visions of best practice, and experienced high levels of stress. What's more, the externally-driven mandates resulted in discouragement, role ambiguity, and superficial responses. The researchers conceded that such unfortunate byproducts might have been permissible if the reform had actually increased student performance, but "that did not seem to be the case" (p. 520). When teachers' work becomes excessively and externally regulated, unintended consequences occur. Such consequences result in lowered job satisfaction, reduced commitment and self-esteem, and early departure from the profession.

Further depreciating the emotionally drained teacher is the "organizational irrationality" of the urban school. According to Payne (2008), who researched public schools in Chicago, such "clinically depressed" (p. 53) climates not only wasted existing resources (financial, social, or otherwise) but also summarily rejected new ones if and when they become available. Payne contends that distrustful people have difficulty learning from one another, and that "beaten down adults" (p. 20) treading charred social webbing have little reason to share ideas with one other *much less implement new reforms*. Triage and self-preservation are the norm, a culture of "cover your own butt" and "is it in the contract?" (p. 45) informs teacher lines of thinking, and reform interests are placed on the back burner, if at all on the stove.

Finally, we know from historians Tyack and Cuban (1995) that teachers are left behind almost exclusively from the policy arena, that nebulous body which calls most of their shots. To the degree that teachers are out of the policy loop in designing and adopting school reforms, "it is not surprising if they drag their feet in implementing them." (p. 135). Indeed, teachers do not corner the entire market of educational wisdom, but they do have unique, first-hand perspectives. What's more, they are the ones who carry out the directives. As "street level bureaucrats" (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977, p. 176), teachers hold the requisite discretion and institutional knowledge to make decisions about their pupils that add up to *de facto* policies over time which fit their particular classroom. We know that teachers make their mark on

policy by adapting, layering, and hybridizing at the practical level, but it might just empower them to know they had a hand at crafting the policy in the first place.

Demoralization

Santoro (2011) asserts that demoralization is an inability to access the moral rewards of teaching; it can lead to feeling depressed, discouraged, shameful, and hopeless. In a culture accustomed to blaming teachers for problems that are systemic, it is easy to rely on the shorthand of "burnout" to describe the source of teacher attrition. However, eschewing "burnout" and examining "demoralization" more closely, Santoro (2011) argues, may provide a way to confront the problem systemically rather than bearing the burden on a personal level.

The problem is not new. In Rousmaniere's (1997) history of teaching in 1920s New York, she contends that city teachers experienced reform initiatives as contradictory intrusions into their already stressful workday. One of the first ways she identified discouragement came from their increased workload without requisite reward. During this time period, schools were identified as the agencies which would support and socialize the expanding youth population. It was here where classrooms took on the mantle of the all-encompassing social service network, a trend which continues to this day. Indeed, in Rousmaniere's 1920s New York, the teacher was expected to address and assuage the problems of the poor, illiterate, unhealthy, badly behaved, gang-affiliated, and non-English speaking child. Such intensification may have been fair if it had brought with it commensurate compensation and support, but it did not.

Is asking a teacher to be so many things with so little reward demanding too much? And how much of that trend has continued? According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), the remnants of the hierarchical command structure installed by schools by the administrative progressives early in the century still, to this day, undermine teacher autonomy. What's more, layered on top of such expectations are vapid federal and state regulations that have burgeoned in the past three decades. And instead of providing commensurate compensation and support, administrators place their bets on the other constant of the teaching profession: regulatory paperwork. "Facing reams of forms to fill out," Tyack and Cuban joke, "overworked educators often feel more like professional accountants than like accountable professionals" (p. 139). Few schools give teachers the incentives or time for their own curricular planning, and self-sustaining professional development is

almost nonexistent. The day becomes about managing the concerns of the class in front of you while leaving a good paper trail. Where is the professional reward?

One might think that teachers, lacking support and compensation, might instead catapult up a respectable career ladder and attain a highly-desirable status. Sadly, this is historically not the case, either. Sociologist Lortie (1975) has noted that the work of teaching itself does not change much throughout one's career. Such is to say, the responsibilities of a 30-year veteran are virtually the same as those of a first-year novice. We might say such a profession is "career less" or lacking any meaningful professional ladder. Speaking of ladders, under most district's lanes-and-ladders compensation formulas, little reward or recognition exists for extra effort: The 30-year veteran who clocks in and out with the students makes more than the eager post-graduate who puts in college-level hours for the job. Kennedy (2005) maintains that such circumstances encourage teachers not to think of their profession as a prestigious vocation, but rather something that "does not require substantial intellectual or emotional investment" (p. 16).

Lortie (1975) also lists other features of teachers' work that discourage them from approaching it with pride and rigor. For example, he notes that there is virtually no induction into the profession. That is, teachers become fully responsible for their own classrooms just a few months after they themselves complete school. The transition can be sudden and oftentimes without a guide, thus reinforcing the notion that teaching is idiosyncratic and depends heavily on natural talent. In addition to unrealistic expectations, the teacher's craft is further stymied by "the absence of concrete models for emulation, unclear lines of influence, multiple and controversial criteria, ambiguity about assessment timing, and instability in the product" (Lortie, 1975, p. 136). Such ambiguity makes it difficult to know whether students are really mastering material and even harder to do so while managing mandates from both above and below. These uncertainties incentivize teachers to seek more tangible goals in the interim and "aim simply to move through the textbook" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 120) rather than ensure students grapple with, debate, master and make their own difficult ideas and concepts. Indeed, a career-less profession, fraught with ambiguity and instability, is not the picture of a healthy career.

The Historical Status of Teachers

Who has historically taken on the yoke of this thankless, moneyless, career-less profession? We know that in the earliest days of the re-

public, the profession was staffed by young, middle-class white men on their way to becoming lawyers or ministers. However, as industry and business became more commonplace, men left the teaching profession for more lucrative careers. By the early 20th century, almost four out of five teachers were women (Sedlak & Schlossman, 1986). Furthermore, since the time when women began to dominate the profession, the occupation's image, status, and desirability became suspect in the American mind. Teaching was seen as women's work, as something to move in and out of, more of a holding pen until women were married with households and children of their own. Men, on the other hand, rose to be administrators who then delivered technocratic top-down mandates which poorly-paid and insufficiently-organized women were then expected to enact (Mehta, 2013b). It is no wonder reforms fail when played upon such a scenario.

However, women were not the only ones who took the brunt of society's disdain for teachers. According to Berry (2011), the profession's standing in American society has been historically devalued by its sheer conspicuousness. That is, most of us have attended and observed at least 12 years of public school, and most of us pretty much know what goes on in a classroom setting. When it comes down to it, we could, if forced, teach any subject from elementary to high school by looking at the teacher's edition and remembering what we ourselves did. Indeed, that is the model upon which *Teach for America* and its numerous spin-offs have thrived. Labaree (1999) notes teachers are "way too familiar and too visible, and what they know seems to be all too common" (p. 22) for the profession to accumulate some cred. After all, how hard can it be to sit with a group of kids for six hours and deliver a district-mandated curriculum? Is it any surprise, then, teachers are frequently mocked for their assumed lack of intelligence and perceived inability to compete in the larger labor force? Lest we forget: "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." Indeed, the very conspicuousness and eased entry of the profession devalues it for men and women alike.

Isolation and Stress

Here one might trade the extra workload, low pay, lack of respect, and unrealistic accountability for the one thing teachers have more of than most careers: autonomy. Undeniably, a teacher can retreat to her classroom and make the world come alive for her students. She need not attend tedious cubicle meetings nor hassle with passive-aggressive coworkers. Her spacious classroom really is her office where

the payoffs from illuminating a child's mind are legion. Autonomy, however, carries its own price tag in the form of extreme isolation. Rousmaniere's (1997) 1920s teachers expressed that they worked in a "strangely lonely environment" very much isolated from their colleagues. They were further sequestered due to the popular ideology at the time that emphasized individual responsibility over collaboration. She found that "the professional teacher was defined by educators as a self-restrained and self-monitoring individual, uninterested in financial rewards and oblivious to working conditions" (p. 4). In the nation's largest city, teachers were taught to stand apart and quietly perform their duties, sanctimoniously accepting their dismal working conditions and lot in life. And it wasn't just happening in New York. She identifies the Chicago superintendent from 1909 until 1919 as remarking "isolation in schools" caused the worst educational problems at the time. Later, Lortie (1975) found that it was teaching's "egg-crate-like structure" which isolated teachers from colleagues and reinforced a culture in which everyone tried hard not to stand out.

But it's not just a physical isolation from which teachers suffer, it's an intellectual one, as well. Teachers spend a good portion of their workday with children and rarely interact with adult peers. And the effort to make curriculum understandable takes a harder-than-it-looks psychological dive back into the mind of a child or adolescent. Meanwhile, managing a slew of rapid-fire interruptions, teachers have very little time to think and process. Kennedy (2005) cites Jackson's (1968) classic study, *Life in Classrooms*, to affirm that classrooms are crowded and rife with distractions. "Even when events appear to be peaceful and orderly, the threat of disorder, distraction, and loss of control is always present" (p. 64). Indeed, the most expertly-managed classrooms fall victim to an almost constant stream of disturbances from fellow faculty, pull-out personnel, administrators, and intercom proclamations. Lacking any real cerebral stimulation, along with relentless fight-or-flight distractions, teachers are left with an intellectual isolation perhaps far greater than the egg-crate-like structure of which Lortie (1975) speaks.

We know that community is important in schools and that "relational trust" is a major part of building community and contributing to a school's overall success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2009). And no surprise, the aforementioned stark conditions of teaching create higher than normal teacher turnover. The ideology of autonomy, coupled with high attrition rates, makes it very difficult to construct any closely-knit school community. Indeed, Lortie (1975) maintains that since the time of the common school, the "continual coming and

going" of staff members has mitigated against any meaningful teamwork. Ironically, the profession which helps to build our very communities suffers a community-less identity itself. Lortie also raises the salient point that, historically, schools with predominantly married women could not count on them to spend long hours on coordinated efforts. This predominately female faculty "found it difficult to expend time and energy beyond the formal work schedule" (p. 16) since they had husbands and children back home to which they must attend. Hence, community—not only crucial for student achievement but also an important intangible reward—got bypassed, and women inherited another reason for their work to be devalued.

And finally, if the historical record of teacher devaluation were not depressing enough, a form of helplessness also characterized their role. Lortie (1975) summarizes the teachers he examined as follows:

> There is a certain ambivalence, then, in the teacher's sentiments. He yearns for more independence, greater resources, and just possibly, more control over key resources. But he accepts the hegemony of the school system on which he is economically and functionally dependent. He cannot ensure that the imperatives of teaching, as he defines them, will be honored, but he chafes when they are not. He is poised between the impulse to control his work life and the necessity to accept its vagaries; perhaps he holds back partly because he is at heart uncertain that he can produce predictable results. (p. 186)

A Semi-Profession

Further complicating matters is the perception of the profession as weak and, hence, subject to external, technocratic models of control (Mehta, 2013). "Unless educators develop the characteristics associated with more developed professions," Mehta writes, "it will remain at the whim of external actors and logics seeking to control the field" (p. 38). Mehta argues that the teaching profession's historical low status and feminization have afforded teachers only pint-sized power over their craft. Teaching has generally been seen as a "semi-profession" which lacks the status, training, entry control, and base knowledge which other careers typically enjoy. As a result, the profession falls prey to assaults on both its legitimacy and authority. Here he talks about one of the most severe assaults resulting from the landmark report, *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Among other things, *A Nation at Risk* posited that children were not prepared for the future and the nation's school system was to blame. A flurry of reforms ensued.

Mehta (2013) writes that after *A Nation at Risk,* the Carnegie Foundation formed a task force to offer recommendations of its own.

A Nation Prepared advocated a new system in which teachers had greater control and discretion over their work. The authors admitted that teaching conditions "more nearly resembled those of semi-skilled workers on the assembly line rather than those of other professionals" (in Mehta, p. 125) and so recommended a three-pronged vision for the profession built upon teacher authority, defined standards for entry/best practice, and a more professional conception of the craft which moved beyond collective bargaining. Sadly, however, the three-part agenda lost steam after it left Carnegie and played itself out in the national policy arena.

Once president and now senior fellow of the Carnegie Foundation, Anthony Bryk advocated a new form of school improvement: relational trust. The interesting thing about relational trust is that, by definition, it builds relations among people by instilling trust and high personal regard. It also starts small, at the individual school, and cannot be technocratically mandated from above. Would such an idealist vision for the profession catch on? And has it really worked to improve schools?

Relational Trust

Intuitively, when an organization's employees relate well and trust one another, they are more productive and satisfied in their work. Bryk et al. (2009) highlight this point with a decade-long study of over 400 Chicago public elementary schools. By studying the outcomes of the *Chicago School Reform Act* of 1988 and its early 1990s decentralization (Hess, 1995), the research team successfully chronicled an elusive, cost-effective school improvement measure which they credited to relational trust.

Through case studies and longitudinal data, the researchers discovered a curious phenomenon: one school advanced while others lagged behind, despite both schools beginning with the same demographics, poverty level, and initial test scores. Bryk and his team found that the schools with high relational trust measures were more likely to demonstrate improvements in student learning. Moreover, their improvements were quite astounding: At the end of the study, schools with low relational trust scores had only a *one in seven* chance of improving. In contrast, half the schools that scored high on relational trust were in the improved group. And on average and over a five-year period, the improved group increased by 8 percent in reading and 20 percent in math (Bryk et al., 2009).

For those new to the concept, Bryk and Schneider (2002) define

relational trust as a combination of both inter- and intra-personal respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity. Furthermore, they describe each characteristic as follows: Respect means to genuinely listen to one another and take other views into account. Personal regard describes a willingness to extend oneself beyond formal contract requirements. Competence is when actions produce desired results and everyone capably performs their required actions. Finally, personal integrity demands a certain ethical perspective to guide one's actions and words (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The authors describe how these four elements reduce risks associated with change, thus freeing up communication channels and allowing meaningful reforms to take hold. Relational trust makes teachers more willing to trust the principal, parents more willing to trust teachers, and all stakeholders more willing "to go the extra mile" for their students.

Why might "going the extra mile" for students make all the difference? Schools are inherently social enterprises, and social enterprises depend, one might argue quite heavily, on cooperative endeavors among the varied participants. Relational trust is the "connective tissue" that binds all these participants together (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) around a shared goal of advancing the education, wellbeing, thriving states, and future life chances of all children. Improving schools requires us to think more comprehensively about how to best organize the work and stature of the adults who work within school walls so that this connective tissue remains vigorous. From a policy perspective, we should ask whether any new initiative is likely to increase relational trust or hamper it.

Why do policymakers rarely make mention of relational trust? Perhaps it is enduringly esoteric and not quite quantifiable. After all, educators have their hands full "racing to the top" while "making schools accountable" utilizing "value added models" so that they won't "leave any child behind." As Bryk and Schneider (2002) attest, though, relational trust is the ingredient which allows meaningful reforms to take hold. What's more, other studies indicate teachers are more motivated to enact when they feel authentic buy-in. According to Turner (2001), unless teachers believe in and help structure new role expectations, they are unlikely to be wholeheartedly involved in enacting the reform.

Conclusion

If we can't stop the onslaught of technocratic, top-down mandates that serve to demoralize teachers, the least we can do is develop a teaching force built upon relational trust. Perhaps then the most sa-

lient reforms can take hold, teachers can feel more involved in the reform process, the semi-profession can ascend to full stature, schools can become more humane places in which to work, and authentic advancement can occur for everyone—teachers and students alike. Recall that John Dewey provided an alternative model for progressive school organization (Dewey, 1928) in the last century, which as we know, lost to the bureaucratic machine. But in Dewey's Chicago laboratory school, there was no need to bifurcate employees into teachers and researchers, leaders and policy experts, because everyone was interested in the same thing: improving learning for all. Rather than have "one expert dictating educational methods and subject matter to a body of passive, recipient teachers," Dewey instead supported "the adoption of intellectual initiative, discussion, and decision throughout the entire school corps" (in Mehta, 2013b, p. 32). However, if we never will escape the idea of teachers as widgets and top-down autocratic mandates as levers, at least we can provide the machine with the grease it needs to run smoothly in the form of relational trust.

Ancient sages and modern scientists all seem to agree that the key to happiness is strong bonds with other people. Indeed, the basic premise of social capital theory is that social networks hold value, both positive and negative. We would do well to ask ourselves how some of the positive consequences of social capital (mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness) can be maximized while some of the negative consequences (tribalism, nepotism, corruption) can be minimized. As Putnam (2000) reminds us, we've become increasingly disconnected from one another in the form of disintegrated social structures, and these fragmented ties diminish both our physical and civic health. However, these same relationships, if restored, are crucial for creating a society that is happy, well educated, healthy, and safe.

Indeed, we must have reasons for hope, and we must foreground these as much as we do critique, if we are to mobilize the next generation of citizens among our future educators. That said, however, in the broader context of educational and sociopolitical discourse, it is worth noting that the dominant critical view of educational and social institutions often assumes, as this paper does, that the problem we face is mostly one of education: that is, with proper education, the masses would see things as we educated critical thinkers do. The world as it currently stands, however, could very well be taken to suggest otherwise.

That said, a century of recycled reforms should at least force us to consider the hypothesis that external approaches to reform do not produce schools that function well. Perhaps the answer lies within, in the intellectual, social, and emotional capital of a strong teaching staff.

Darling-Hammond (1999) reminds us that schools centered on learners are not only intellectually rigorous places, but also exciting, humane places in which both students and teachers thrive. Such schools develop potential and provide an ability to think freely and independently. Indeed, in the contentious world of education, a rebuilt teaching force which sees the individual teacher not as demoralized widget but rather vibrant capital worth investing in is indeed a challenge, but perhaps a utopia worth at least tinkering toward.

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