



ARE YOU DEMORALIZED OR “JUST” BURNT OUT?



As the 2019-20 school year begins, some teachers are less excited than others to return to the classroom.

Teaching, after all, is a demanding job: Nearly half of K-12 teachers (46 percent) experience high levels of stress on a daily basis, according to a [2013 Gallup survey](#). The poll found that teaching was among the most stressful occupations in America, with teachers experiencing higher rates of daily stress than nurses or physicians.

*Demoralized
or burnt out?
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Too much stress can lead to dissatisfaction, which in turn contributes to a 16 percent U.S. teacher attrition rate that is [nearly double that](#) of the world’s highest achieving nations including Finland, Singapore, and Canada.

However, not all dissatisfaction is created equal, NEPC Fellow and Bowdoin College professor [Doris A. Santoro](#) found during the decade-plus she has spent researching the topic.

In her [work](#), Santoro distinguishes between two major types of dissatisfaction. One she calls burnout. The other is demoralization.

Burnout, Santoro [writes in *Educational Leadership*](#), is framed as an individual experience. It happens when a teacher finds herself in a situation with too much pressure and too little support.

“Burnout is only one possible manifestation of dissatisfaction, and it is one that lays the problem squarely at the feet of teachers,” she writes.

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 burn-out suggests that if these resources were not in sufficient abundance or were not properly conserved, then they will dry up.

Because it's seen as an individual experience, burnout is viewed as the teacher's problem to solve. Commonly proposed remedies include mindfulness, self-care, boundary-setting, and a focus on healthy behaviors like exercising more or eating nutritious foods.

Demoralization, by contrast, is a moral conflict. It occurs when teachers experience a fundamental disconnect between their professional values and their working conditions.

“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,” Santoro writes.

For example, demoralization may occur when a teacher believes that a mandated curriculum fails to meet her students' learning needs. It may also occur when academics are emphasized at the expense of students' emotional needs.

Demoralized teachers are often highly skilled veterans who, by all external measures, are doing a great job. Yet they are filled with despair because they perceive that they are not serving students ethically or that their profession has been degraded.

As such, demoralization cannot be addressed with a vacation or a good night's sleep.

Rather, alleviating demoralization requires a more systemic response. For example, school leaders should eliminate obstacles preventing teachers from serving students' needs. District leaders should consider teacher input when selecting curricula or programs. And lawmakers must reconsider well-meaning policies that, once implemented, lead to unintended consequences that harm students and schools.

“Demoralization is a process, not a single event,” Santoro writes.

But it's a process that, if remedied, creates a better environment for students and teachers in schools.

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NEPC Resources on Teacher Employment and Retention

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