

## **Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay (Doris Santoro)**

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Volume 26, numéro 2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071443ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071443ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Maxwell, B. (2019). Compte rendu de [Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay (Doris Santoro)]. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 26(2), 184–187. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071443ar>

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Review of

## *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay*

By Doris A. Santoro, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018

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Stanley Cohen (1972) on moral panic. Donald Schön (1984) on reflective practice. Daniel Goleman (1995) on emotional intelligence. It is a rare and admirable thing when a piece of academic work brings a phenomenon out of the shadows by putting words to it. Such an achievement requires sensitivity to people's experiences and mastery of a literature, yet enough freedom of thought to escape the confines of prior thinking. Doris Santoro's book *Demoralized* is this kind of scholarship.

The term "demoralization" refers to a cause of teacher attrition that most teachers are aware of and, to varying degrees, may have witnessed themselves but which did not, until this book, have a proper label. For teachers, demoralization is a feeling of deep unease about their work that occurs when working conditions seem to prevent them from teaching in a way that is consistent with their own professional standards and values. Teachers become demoralized, Santoro says, when they "cannot do what they believe a good teacher should do in the face of policies, mandates or institutional norms. The source of the problem is dissonance between educators' moral centers and the conditions in which they work." (p. 43). The factors that contribute to teacher attrition are well known and well documented (large class sizes, low pay, under-funded schools), as is the reason why high teacher turnover is a problem (teacher shortages force schools to hire inexperienced or unqualified teachers) and the kinds of educational institutions most critically affected by teacher attrition (urban and rural schools in poorer areas serving racialized groups) (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hamond, 2017). However, the vocabulary for describing the psychological process that leads teachers to quit the profession owing to dissatisfaction with working conditions is restrictive. Unless a teacher leaves the profession for personal or life reasons, such as wishing to pursue another career or to adjust to a change in family circumstances, burnout is the usual suspect.

As Santoro points out, burnout is an individualistic concept. Impacting early-career teachers most acutely, burnout suggests that each teacher has finite physical and emotional resources, that difficult work conditions consume these resources rapidly, and that when they are exhausted teachers are no longer able to work effectively. If the cause of burnout resides within the individual, so does its antidote: teachers need to become resilient to increase their tolerance for difficult work conditions. Tending to affect experienced teachers who have already demonstrated their ability to persevere through teaching's political and interpersonal turmoil, demoralization, by contrast, is a concept that lies at the intersection of working conditions and the individual teacher's professional expectations, standards, and values. That is, burnt

out teachers consider abandoning teaching because they feel unable to meet the professional expectations imposed on them by *others*. Conversely, demoralized teachers consider abandoning teaching because they feel unable to meet the professional expectations that they impose on *themselves*.

Santoro describes demoralization as a particular kind of dilemma of professional ethics. When faced with a typical ethical dilemma, the teacher does not know which course of action professional values call for. Demoralization occurs, however, when teachers know exactly what professional values require of them but cannot do what they believe needs to be done (p. 48). If the causes of demoralization are institutional, then the resolution to the dilemma of demoralization is to be found in changing the policy, practice or leadership context that generates the dilemma or, of course, quitting teaching altogether.

This book, then, is about elaborating, substantiating, and exploring the concept of demoralization through the analysis of a couple dozen case studies of mid-to-late career teachers who have lived through the demoralization process. The five chapters that draw directly on material from interviews with teacher participants make up the core of the book. Most of these chapters focus on specific sources of demoralization: policies that are perceived as being harmful to students (chapter 3) and that degrade teachers' professional integrity (chapter 4), and the role that school administrators and unions can play in both aggravating and attenuating teacher demoralization (chapters 6 and 7, respectively). Chapter 5 stands apart by presenting inspiring examples of successful struggles against demoralization. In terms of structure, each chapter pivots between long narrative descriptions of a teacher participant's experience with demoralization and Santoro's extensive analysis of the narratives and then concludes with a bullet-point list that, depending on the chapter, summarizes the chapter's key points or offers practical remoralization strategies.

Written in a way that makes its ideas accessible to the work's intended audience of professional educators, *Demoralized* makes an important contribution to the literature on teacher attrition and offers teachers and school leaders a new way to talk about their concerns about practice and the profession. However, it does have certain limitations in relation to both substance and form.

First, in regard to substance, the methodology employed to conduct the research on which the book was based is conspicuously lacking. We know that the participants answered a recruitment advertisement seeking "teachers with five to thirty-five years of experience who had moral concerns about their work but had not left" (p. 8), but one is left to speculate on the exact role the participants were meant to play in the research process. Was it a Delphi-type study that regarded the participants as expert witnesses and drew on their expertise to validate and refine the theoretical concept of demoralization? Or was the purpose of the interviews to uncover, provide evidence for, and help describe a previously unrecognized social phenomenon in the manner of grounded theory? Different methodological approaches call for different questions about the soundness of the chosen method. For example, if it was a Delphi study, were the participants selected really the best qualified to speak about demoralization? If a grounded theory approach was used, were the questions framed to minimize the expectancy effect and other forms of bias? Since the book provides no answers to the question of which research method the study adopted, the reader is at a loss to even begin asking questions about the its epistemological credibility.

Second, the way the terms "professional ethics" and "professional values" are used in the book is worryingly individualistic. As they are generally understood, professional ethics and professional values are collective notions (Abbott, 1988). The weight and authority of standards of professional ethics and the professional values that underlie those standards derive from the fact that the people who practice the profession share and endorse them. Yet the book speaks as if there were no such thing as collective

professional norms and values, only individual teachers' personal beliefs about professional norms and values. This is as much a misuse of the language of professional ethics as it is a strategic error. To the extent that teachers and their allies continue to view "professional ethics" as nothing but the aggregate of teachers' subjective viewpoints, their ability to mount effective opposition to the global educational reform movement will be diminished. A cacophony of opinions about what constitutes good teaching and the conditions that need to be put in place to fulfill that vision of good work is simply no match for the global educational reform movement and associated initiatives that lead to teacher demoralization (e.g., the over-use of standardized testing, mandatory text books, unfair "performance"-based teacher evaluation, etc.).

With regard to form, the book suffers from two noteworthy scholarly defaults: repetitiveness and advancing conclusions that do not follow from the results. The lengthy narrative descriptions of participants' struggle to enact their vision of good teaching in the face of formidable institutional obstacles peppered throughout the book are an effective device for illustrating the central construct. Too often, however, the commentary on the teachers' experiences with demoralization is simply a rewording of the narrative passages. Adding to this chunkiness are the overworked distinctions between demoralization and cognate notions like burnout and disillusionment. By the end of chapter 2, this ground has already been thoroughly covered. The final chapter revisits the issue but adds nothing substantively new to the discussion.

If these aspects of the book are repetitious, the recommended strategies for countering demoralization that conclude several chapters—as consistently pragmatic and sensible as they are—routinely overreach the findings. For example, at the end of the chapter that deals with demoralization and teacher unions it is recommended to "separate the federal, state and district initiatives into three categories: nonnegotiable, desirable and better-off-ignored" and "establish an ombudsman for the district" (p. 148-149). Both recommendations come entirely out of the blue in the sense that neither point was addressed previously in the chapter. Without detracting from its value as a work that expands the lexicon around teacher attrition, the book's repetitiveness and the addition of unjustified material do leave the reader with the impression that there was just not enough material in the research to warrant a book-length report.

These limitations aside, *Demoralized* is nothing if not even-handed. It shows admiration for teachers in their struggle to do good work but is careful not to lapse into idealization. It avoids categorical portrayals of teachers' unions and school leaders, seeing that their actions and policies can do as much to contribute to teacher demoralization as counter it. Most singularly perhaps, the book recognizes that the opponents and proponents of controversial educational reform initiatives like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are indeed united in a belief that the public education system is a powerful tool to reduce social inequality and promote social justice. In this regard, they both want what is good for kids. *Demoralized* is stark testimony to the fact that, in the US, educators are locked in an ideologically fueled stalemate over the best means to pursue this shared goal. This cannot be good for kids.

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**Bruce Maxwell** is Professor of Education at the University of Quebec Trois-Rivières. A former humanities teacher at the college level, he now teaches ethics and law for educators and preparatory courses relating to Quebec's statutory ethics and world religions curriculum. His research and writings focus on ethical issues in education and ethical development through teaching and learning in schools. He has published a number of articles, chapters and books on these topics including the co-authored *Questioning the classroom: Philosophical perspectives on Canadian education* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and, as editor, *The importance of philosophy in teacher education* (Routledge, 2019).