

Addressing Teacher Disengagement

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Abstract: This chapter is a literature review exploring the significance of teacher disengagement in education. The manuscript examines the current educational crisis with the shortage of qualified teachers. It highlights the problematic conditions teachers work in today and their impact on them. The literature concludes with current literature that focuses on retaining teachers.

Keywords: Teacher Attrition, Teacher Disengagement, Well-Being, Emotional Dimensions

Introduction

Teacher attrition is a severe educational issue impacting the quality of education across Canada. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) put it, “unfortunately, the story of teacher shortages is not new: The nation has been in a recurring cycle of teacher shortages for at least the past 50 years” (p. 5). It has been noted that researchers must understand the motivation, priorities, and experiences of the next generation of teachers to address teacher shortages (Johnson & Kardos, 2008). Teachers are in great demand, yet fewer and fewer feel the call- or wish to remain. The current teacher shortages across Canada are creating alarm bells for policymakers and administrators due to the quality of education students receive, as it is estimated that between 30-46% of teachers quit within their first five years of teaching (Winkelsas et al., 2022). Therefore, research should examine the current state of the teaching profession to address teacher shortages.

Researchers Phelan and Janzen (2024) argue that education reforms with ideologies of the market have “promoted provincial disinvestment from social and educational programs” (p. 4). This disinvestment has resulted in unequal social and economic realities in public schools as teachers are faced with responsibilities for achievement and the duty of care. The increase in inequity, educational reforms based on ideologies of the market, and managerialism have created what Phelan and Janzen (2024) call “miserable teaching conditions,” as externally imposed direction can cause feelings of self-doubt, frustration, guilt, shame, and inadequacy. This can cause teachers to grapple with the purposes and consequences of their work.

Santoro, a leading scholar on teacher demoralization, argues that the present (and increasing) teacher shortage will only be resolved by recognizing the moral and ethical sources of experienced teacher dissatisfaction (Santoro, 2018). The limited research on teachers' moral and ethical experience creates a further responsibility on researchers to understand teachers' inner experiences within school systems and what causes them to fall out of love with the teaching profession. When teachers enter the teaching profession, they want to do good work, help others, and make a difference while also accessing the moral rewards within the teaching profession. However, the emotional dimensions within the professions can harm a teacher's sense of doing good work. The emotional depth of the profession affects teacher well-being due to ongoing value conflicts with reform changes. This literature review will examine the emotional dimensions of the teaching profession and the causes of teacher disengagement from the profession.

Teacher Attrition

Across North America, teacher attrition rates remain an ongoing issue within the educational field. Attrition rates, a process when employees leave their profession, are highly associated with teachers in their first five to seven years of teaching; the loss means novice teachers cannot be retained long enough to develop into highly qualified instructors (Shockley et al., 2013). However, the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated teacher shortages, as many experienced teachers either left or retired (LaTronica-Herb & Noel, 2023). Thus, teacher attrition is not only confined to teachers within their first five to seven years. Many researchers have linked teacher attrition as problematic over the past few decades due to an insufficient supply of new teachers to keep up with the demand (Ingersoll, 2007).

School boards and educational ministries need to be able to retain highly qualified teachers. Headlines across Canada highlight the growing issue of teacher shortages. Multiple factors that lead to teacher attrition have been cited,

such as stress, heavy workloads, pedagogical and curriculum changes, classroom management, technological demands, work outside of school hours, and salary (Harfitt, 2015). However, the discourse on teacher burnout emphasizes the individual teacher as the problem rather than the broader educational reforms and teaching conditions (Phelan & Janzen, 2024). Santoro (2018) indicates that burnout suggests that a teacher has nothing more to give. Therefore, teacher burnout is viewed as the failure of the individual teacher. Demoralization “occurs when teachers believe that they are complicit in harming their students or damaging their profession. These are moral challenges that threaten their definition of good work” (Santoro, 2018, p.118).

Teachers can be left with guilt, shame, or worry due to upholding a rule or policy that the school reinforces, even if the teachers do not think it is within their students’ best interests. Teacher disengagement is critical for researchers to examine as the new generation of teachers no longer views teaching as a lifelong profession due to the availability of career options (Johnson & Kardos, 2008). However, teachers are the backbone of quality education. Teachers leaving the profession is problematic due to the cost incurred and the consequences of the quality of teaching; students bear the cost of teacher attrition rates (Thierry & Collin, 2013). It is essential to examine how the practice of teaching and the cultures within teaching impact teachers’ decisions to stay or leave the profession. In response, researchers must understand teachers’ inner experiences and the emotional dimensions of teaching to improve teacher shortages.

Educational Reforms

Educational reforms have a profound impact on teacher well-being. Since the 1960s, when educational reforms began shifting their focus to market ideologies and accountability measures, the context in which teachers work has changed significantly. With the rise of global competitiveness, schools with higher performance records were seen as likely to contribute more economically by fostering a skilled workforce (Perryman, 2022). Consequently, schools adopted accountability and managerial measures to track student learning outcomes. This shift was driven by a “global interest in school performance measures that rely on standardized tests to measure, evaluate and compare national and subnational education systems” (Holloway et al., 2017. p.6). These accountability measures and managerialism reforms are rooted in market ideologies and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism refers to “private ownership of property, production of goods and services for profit, creation of competitive markets, and the division of labour” (Laitsch, 2013, p. 18).

The teaching profession has an inherent sense of obligation towards professional duties and, most importantly, obligation towards students. Janzen and Phelan (2019) argue that “the teacher’s obligation – the unremitting requirement to respond to the vulnerable other in each moment – is an affective enactment of the larger promise of the adult to the child” (p. 21). Therefore, teachers’ affective enactment towards students can cause negative emotions to emerge. Santoro (2011) argues that “the practice of teaching (demoralization) provides a new perspective on teacher retention that relies less on individual teacher psychology and more on an analysis of the state of the profession” (p. 3).

Analyzing the profession’s current state will provide insight into why teachers leave the profession at alarming rates. Phelan and Janzen (2024) state that the current educational reforms sideline teachers’ ethical responsibility, as the current objective within education is the importance of human, financial, and corporate capital reinforced by government policies and mandates. Educational reforms impact a vast network of meaningful relationships. Therefore, teaching under the current market-oriented reforms creates teaching conditions that do not always have the best interest at heart for students. Teacher demoralization is heightened when teachers must follow mandates that alter their professional ethics, cause students distress by following policies and procedures, and when teachers experience isolation for standing up for moral and professional ethics (Santoro, 2018). These directly impact a teacher’s sense of good work.

Hargreaves (1998) argues that “teachers’ emotions are inseparable from their moral purposes and their ability to achieve those purposes” (p. 838). In echoing the entanglement between teachers’ emotions and their purpose, Lai et al. (2024) argue that “teachers’ emotions are not arbitrary; rather, they result from the interactions between many factors that are easily overlooked (p. 2). Therefore, it is critical to examine the teaching culture and the environment in which teachers teach. For the teaching profession to flourish, teachers should be able to teach in a way that they find compelling, so they do not feel that their moral and ethical responsibilities to the field are being compromised.

Teacher Professionalism

In the 1980s, research examined the central component of educational reforms that focused on teacher professionalism. Keshmiri et al. (2023) state that “professionalism is defined as a set of behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics that includes adhering to ethical principles, establishing and maintaining effective relationships with colleagues and the audience, being trustworthy, and developing self-awareness in the professional role” (p.1). The rise of accountability measures can undermine teachers' emotional dimensions towards the profession. Ball (2003) argues that “the key elements of the education reform ‘package’ are embedded in three interrelated policy technologies: the market, managerialism, and performativity” (p.1). These policy technologies have significant implications for the inner lives of teachers.

It is important to note that “education reform brings about a change in our subjective existence and our relations with others” (Rose, 1989, p. ix). For instance, auditing and accountability practices are not just acts of observation, but they shape standards for performance and construct how teachers must operate within the more extensive school system (Sobe, 2014). Researchers must examine how teaching conditions impact teachers' emotional responses to the profession. New educational reforms must consider the role of social and interpersonal dimensions in retaining teachers. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) conducted a study that examined professional capital after the pandemic. The researchers state that “professional capital is about teachers having more independence from bureaucracies, but more interdependence with parents and each other. It is about open and collaborative professionalism, not individually autonomous professionalism” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020, p. 15). The pandemic shifted teaching culture to reflect the need for open collaboration. Now, more than ever, there is a need for educational reforms to include the emotional dimensions of teaching. The shift underscores the importance of educational reforms that address not only structural and pedagogical changes but also the emotional dimensions of teaching.

Emotional Dimensions

Given the conditions in which teachers teach, Ball (2003) argues that the “[policy] technologies have potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and learning and for the inner life of the teacher” (p. 154). Policy technologies, such as accountability and performative measures, significantly affect teachers' sense of self. Janzen and Phelan (2019) raise the notion that teaching is not a problem with the individual teacher but rather teaching is a “profoundly human endeavor, and for us, draws out the complex relational dynamics associated with an ‘impossible profession’” (p. 18). Therefore, these relationships are intricate, drawing open feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, resistance, and frustration.

As teaching is a complex human endeavor, educational reforms must incorporate a holistic view of the human aspects of teaching with a concentration on teacher emotions. The teaching profession requires a great deal of emotional output. In their research, scholars Schutz and Zemblayas (2009) provide one explanation as to why teachers leave the profession so early, which shows correlations to the emotional nature of the teaching profession. Emotional labour is associated with managing emotions but with a special focus on displaying particular emotions as a part of one's job (Kariou et al., 2021). Managing one's emotions can profoundly impact a teacher's well-being. Leading researcher of caring professions, Noddings (2012), states that “from the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as a carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study” (p.1).

Within the classroom and in educational settings, it is the teachers who develop close relationships with students and get to know them on a personal level. However, the teacher does not have the ultimate power to decide what happens to their students. The rules and policies govern and direct the teacher. Day and Gu (2009) argue that further research on the affective dimensions of teaching is critical as the “dimensions reinforce the association between cognition and emotion and because they act as reminders to policymakers, teacher educators, and school principals that “teacher effectiveness” is the product of the preparation and continuing support of both the head (cognition) and the heart (emotion)” (p. 17). Most notably, research into the emotional dimensions of the teaching profession is critical to sustaining and improving the working conditions for teachers. Levine Brown et al. (2023) state, “professional teaching standards suggest that teachers' emotional practice is central to their instruction and students' learning” (p.1).

Emotions are an integral component of teaching. However, many teachers are not prepared to handle the emotional dimensions of the profession, and educational reforms are not developed with teachers' emotions in mind.

The Inner Life of a Teacher

Teachers' daily encounters with co-workers and students significantly impact their well-being. For teachers to find their work rewarding and enjoyable, their mental wellness is crucial. Teacher well-being refers to "teachers' responses to the cognitive, emotional, health and social conditions pertaining to their work and their profession" (Viac & Fraser, 2020, p. 18). Research conducted on work intensification based on primary and secondary teachers in China indicated that the work burden teachers experience is related to three dimensions: time, workload, and social relations (Yue, 2021). Thus, teachers' work exceeds their working hours. In addition, various external changes and requirements result in teachers feeling a sense of loss and control over their work.

The last dimension is that the role of the teacher has dramatically expanded to include non-teaching responsibilities. In addition, teacher well-being is impacted by "external factors, such as job characteristics (i.e., job resources and job demands), and by internal factors, including teachers' emotional regulation strategies and mindset" (Ao et al., 2021, p. 1). Therefore, the emotional dimension within teaching is critical for sustaining teachers. The increase in non-teaching responsibilities highlights that the "structures of schooling (timetables, numbers of student contacts, one-way assessment systems...), and about the ways we try to reform schooling (targets, benchmarks, standards...) leave little time, space or encouragement for successful emotional understanding with students to occur" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 840). The increase in accountability measures and market-oriented school reforms create teacher performativity propelled by an increased sense of judgment and surveillance. Teachers are asked to conduct themselves in ways they might disagree with to be valued as a "good teacher," as they are tasked with adhering to the values and policies set out by the school board and government.

It is essential to highlight how the teaching profession's ethical and moral dimensions are often intertwined. Santoro (2011) argues that "violating moral principles (engaging in practices that seem wrong to the practitioner) may affect one's ethical life (the practitioner may sense a diminishment of [their] goodness as a teacher and a person)" (p. 335). In addition, "teachers may experience cognitive dissonance when they are told that to provide students with the education that they deserve, they must do things that appear to harm the students in their classrooms (Santoro, 2018, p. 69). Cognitive dissonance is "a state of mental discomfort that occurs when a person holds beliefs, opinions, etc., which are inconsistent, or which conflict with an aspect of [their] behaviour; (also) the fact of holding such inconsistent or conflicting beliefs" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2000).

Teachers' frustration and negative emotions due to their sense of emotional labour can make them feel disconnected from the profession. Yin et al. (2017) argue the importance of emotional regulation in meeting work demands. Teachers must be provided opportunities to cultivate their emotional skills and regulation. It is imperative that educational reforms focus on a holistic view of teachers' experience to prepare and sustain teachers in the profession. Dan Lortie (1976) identified the 'psychic rewards' teachers gain from the profession, namely the emotional satisfaction derived from teaching. Therefore, educational reforms must focus on the emotional dimensions of teaching and include ways in which teachers can yield psychic and moral rewards in teaching to help sustain teachers.

Teacher Practical Knowledge

By building practical expertise, teachers gain confidence in their professional judgment. Opportunities to enhance practical knowledge are essential for supporting teachers in developing autonomy from bureaucratic and micromanagement technologies (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Chaharbashloo et al. (2020) define "practical knowledge of teachers as concerned with the basic knowledge teachers utilize to act" (p. 2). Teachers' practical knowledge enables them to effectively respond to the unpredictable and complex nature of the teaching profession. Practical knowledge is not overtly taught to teachers but is developed through experience. Nash (2022) notes that at a time of increasing deprofessionalization where many teachers are dealing with emotional burnout, social and emotional factors play a crucial role in teachers' professional development experiences. Professional development serves the purpose of the longevity of teachers staying in the profession by improving effectiveness and self-efficacy through appropriate and differentiated professional development (Rose & Sughrue, 2020). Ynon et al. (2023) note that "there is no doubt that the education system needs to examine its plans for retaining teachers and connecting them to

the education system and the knowledge and resources required to support the necessary change...Teachers' sense of professional meaning and efficacy must also be addressed" (p. 24).

Addressing a teacher's professional meaning and purpose will reveal the emotional dimensions of the profession. Additionally, it is essential to teach educators how to be resilient, as teachers need time and support to develop psychological and emotional resilience and specific strategies to maintain health in a demanding profession (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019). Professional development opportunities are critical for improving teachers' practical knowledge by equipping them with affective-reflective skills. Bleakley et al. (2020) note that "affective-reflective skills are an integral component of classroom pedagogy, providing teachers with emotional understandings and confidence that can improve overall classroom performance (p.1)."

Teaching involves an extensive degree of emotional understanding to teach well. Teachers require opportunities to develop their practical knowledge through experiences like professional development. Doing so will allow teachers to sharpen their reflective and emotional understanding skills. It is critical to note that there is limited training for the emotional dimensions of their job (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, professional development should allow opportunities for teachers to work on skills to navigate the emotional dimensions of the profession.

Professional Learning

To mitigate teacher disengagement, a broader understanding within the research community is emerging that teacher education is a career-long continuum of perpetual learning (Arnsby et al., 2023). Teachers require opportunities to work together with other professionals and colleagues. Yin et al. (2017) note that colleagues cultivate supportive relationships between teachers. Professional learning is social, and it is beneficial for teachers to experience collaboration (Nash, 2022). Therefore, the link between teacher emotional intelligence and professional learning is critical to improving teaching and sustaining teachers (Bleakley et al., 2020).

Santoro (2018) argues that teaching should shift towards viewing the teacher profession as a vocation. Other scholars have argued that "teaching is a moral vocation. It is moral because it seeks to develop not only comprehension but also commitment; it influences and shapes not only the intellect but also the will; it involves the cultivation of not only the mind but also the heart... it is a vocation because it is a calling not simply a job" (Rhodes, 2001, p. 67). This notion of teaching as a vocation profoundly impacts the educational reforms policymakers enact.

Professional development opportunities should allow teachers to collaborate and form support communities to deal with the emotional dimensions of the profession. Santoro (2018) describes professional communities as "other professionals who give meaning, purpose, and direction to teachers' work" (p. 128). Teachers must nurture their sense of growth to avoid feelings of burnout and demoralization. This is essential as teachers require opportunities to cultivate their growth and access the moral rewards in the teaching profession. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) highlight the importance of sustained, collaborative, and practice-focused professional development linked to student learning outcomes. Continued professional learning among teachers will cultivate a sense of community and purpose among professionals. Professional learning is most useful for teachers with a common goal.

Collaboration Reforms

Working in collaboration with teachers can aid in developing the skills and practice needed to excel in the profession. Bleakley et al. (2020) note that an emerging body of literature has developed to display the importance of teachers' emotional literacy and supporting collaborative teacher professional learning. Therefore, a teacher's emotional competence is better created when collaborating with other teachers. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) argue that teachers require solidity and solidarity; collaborative professionals need better tools, deeper trust, stronger cultures, expertise, enthusiasm, and knowing what and how to work together as professionals.

Building positive relationships with colleagues will help create motivation and support and influence retention and job satisfaction (Rose & Sughrue, 2020; Xie et al., 2021; Xu & Patmor, 2012). Collaborative work between professionals can help develop collective efficacy among teachers and support teacher confidence (Lofthouse, 2019). Collaboration competence among teachers is crucial for the effectiveness of schools in supporting students' social and academic success (Duisenbayev et al., 2024). Most importantly, teachers' trust in external knowledge and resources is

declining, as teachers want to learn from their colleagues because they perceive them as possessing “real” or “relevant” knowledge and open to change (Yvon et al., 2023). The research strongly indicates that teachers must be provided opportunities to work and learn from each other. Within their study, Bhatnagar and Many (2022) highlighted that “teachers also mentioned the importance of self-care and collaboration with colleagues to reduce stress and fatigue and create a support system” (p. 525). Having support systems can help alleviate teachers' stress within a challenging profession. Collaboration can allow for emotional understanding to take place between teachers and students. Hargreaves (2021) argues that “the work of teaching draws on the social and moral support of colleagues in the school building” (p. 838). Therefore, the emotional dimensions of teachers' inner lives need to be explored by researchers to ensure educational reforms allow teachers to access morally rewarding work in the teaching profession that does not compromise their love for teaching.

Conclusion

Teachers leaving the profession is a significant societal problem. Not only does it impact the quality of schooling for students across Canada and countries worldwide, but it also degrades the teaching profession. Teaching during education reforms that are market-oriented places substantial burdens on teachers, often compromising their well-being and ethical and moral principles. Therefore, educational reforms must address both cognition (the head) and emotions (the heart). Understanding how these reforms impact teacher well-being is essential for developing retention models that prioritize the emotional aspects of teaching. It is vital that teacher education, in terms of preparation, training, and certification, encompasses the emotional dimensions of the teaching profession.

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