



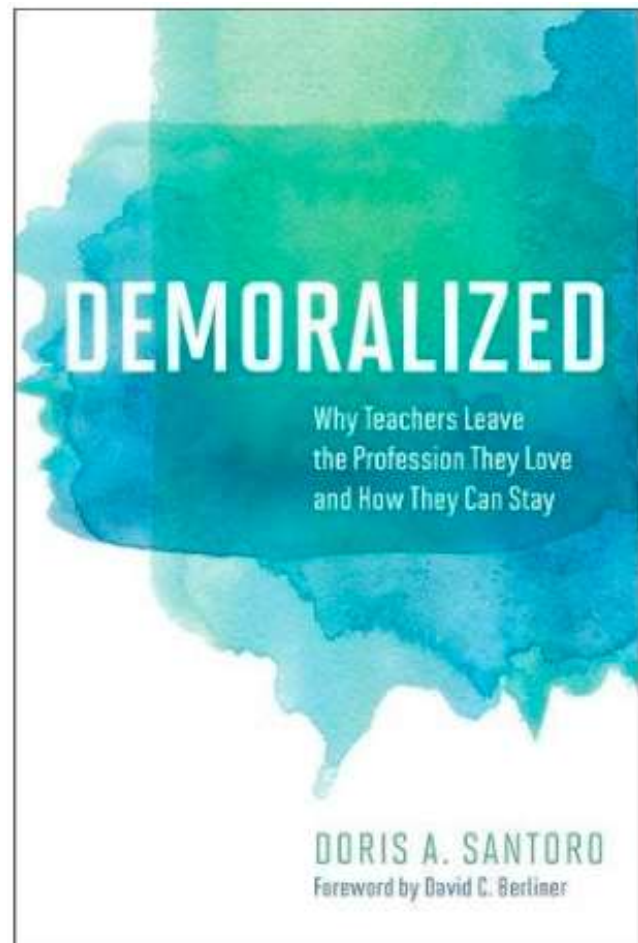
Santoro, D. A. (2018). *Demoralized: Why teachers leave the profession they love and how they can stay*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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In *Demoralized: Why teachers leave the profession they love and how they can stay*, author Doris A. Santoro challenges the widely accepted notion that burnout is the leading cause of teacher attrition among experienced educators. Instead, she proposes that many mid-career teachers leave the field not because their internal drive has been extinguished by the physical demands of the profession, but because they have become “conscientious objectors” (p. 8) to what the profession has come to demand of them. Many still hold an intense passion for the work of educating but have come to realize that they were being asked to compromise their moral beliefs to perform the tasks of teaching. Santoro names this state of conflict “demoralization.” Through a series of interviews with experienced teachers, she helps to distinguish their struggles from the commonly accepted explanation of teacher burnout and subsequent attrition. “For teachers experiencing demoralization, the moral dilemma is not what they should do to be a good teacher, but that they cannot do what they believe a good teacher should do in the face of policies, mandates, or institutional norms” (p. 43).



To her credit, Santoro structures the book to examine demoralization as a process, looking deeply into the causes, effects and possible solutions of teacher demoralization. From the book's foreword – a terrifically pertinent introduction to the problem of teacher attrition by renowned researcher David C. Berliner – the reader is challenged to reexamine the complex issues facing teachers from the teachers' perspectives. Each chapter contains excerpts from the author's extensive interviews with mid-career teachers struggling to reconcile the demands of the profession with their own deeply held morals. Hearing these teachers tell their stories of demoralization in their own words is perhaps the most powerful aspect of the book. An experienced teacher herself, the author expertly uses interview excerpts to allow the reader to see the problem through the eyes of the teachers. Their personalities and passion shine through their accounts and help to make real the struggle of teachers who love teaching but wrestle with what it means to be a teacher in today's schools. While Santoro does an outstanding job framing her arguments and supporting them with research, the centerpieces of the book are the ethnographic accounts woven seamlessly into the larger narrative.

In addition to the strength of the ethnographic accounts from the featured teachers, *Demoralized* is structured in such a way as to help the reader logically understand the moral pressures facing mid-career teachers. Early chapters are used to frame the problem fully and distinguish demoralization from burnout. After this groundwork is successfully laid, the author turns her focus towards examining the main sources of moral dissatisfaction for teachers: how current education structures cause harm to students and degrade the profession. The book tells us that teachers are, as a group, rule followers (p. 62). They also hold a deep love for helping students. So, when teachers are asked to follow rules and procedures they know will

not benefit their students, a serious moral conflict arises.

Sadly, teachers are increasingly asked to take part in activities or perform tasks they see as being, at best, outside the scope of teaching or, at worst, damaging or degrading to their profession. Many interviewees expressed great frustration with the mixed messages sent through administrative evaluations of their teaching. Student learning was stressed as the top priority, but the copious amounts of paperwork and unhelpful feedback only served as a distraction from their time working with their learners and did nothing to improve the quality of their instruction. Other teachers described having their professionalism undermined by mandates to pass students who had not earned a passing grade in their course. These stressors are very real and weigh heavily on the minds of the teachers interviewed by Santoro. As these stressors build over the course of several years and are left unaddressed, teachers who still have a passion for their students and the resources to continue teaching may seek to leave the profession for moral reasons.

The second half of the book introduces readers to the concept of “re-moralization” – a hopeful-sounding term the author uses to describe how teachers can transform their situation inside the larger field of teaching by encouraging them to operate in harmony with their moral convictions. This concept of re-moralization includes five categories of strategies: “student-centered action, teacher leadership, activism, voice/writing, and professional community” (p. 116). These categories are overlapping and include actions as small as using a blog or social media to find catharsis or as large as running for public office and instituting educational policy changes. Central the idea of re-moralization is the idea that the combination of any one strategy with a supportive, professional community is critical to success. The author writes, “whenever strategies intersect with professional

community, they seem to provide a stronger and more sustainable base from which to act” (p. 124). The concept of re-moralization runs contrary to the beliefs that teachers must cope with all of the pressures of their career with more “resilience” and “grit.” In fact, the author argues that these beliefs perpetuate the falsehood that the problems with education lie primarily with the teachers themselves. Meaningful, systemic educational change is thwarted by the belief that teachers just need to toughen up and press on. *Demoralized* proposes that many teachers who leave the profession do so because their morals won’t allow them to compromise – this demonstrates strength, not a lack of resilience (p. 109).

Overall, Santoro does an outstanding job of portraying the nuances of the many challenges of teaching. Very few education problems are simple or yield to magic-bullet solutions. All of the featured teachers were pulled in multiple directions by their situations and the choices they faced, and the reader can feel that tension throughout the book. The author devotes two later chapters to the capability of school leaders and teacher unions to be either a source of demoralization or re-moralization. This balanced approach towards examining these extremely influential forces on teachers’ ability to do their jobs in harmony with their moral centers was bolstered by powerful accounts from teachers recovering from demoralization.

The book ends on an upbeat note as many of the interviewed teachers gathered with the author to discuss further their experiences and reflect on their journeys. The reader is reminded again through this touching encounter that the author truly identifies with these teachers. Over the course of her research, she built relationships with them and became invested in their successes and failures. The stories of the teachers are updated here and, in one of the great triumphs of this book, the reader finds themselves rejoicing with those teachers who found

renewal and mourning with those who were still broken. In allowing these teachers to tell their own stories, Santoro has invited the reader into their community, and the interaction between the text and the reader greatly benefits from this granted insider status.

The recognition that teacher burnout is actually a conquerable phenomenon is a key strength in *Demoralized*. As described by one of Santoro’s teachers:

If you can label it and talk about it, you can better address it and face it. Burnout is such a huge, nameless, faceless blob of a problem that it seems all-consuming...but re-moralization feels like it can be targeted and confronted. To “re” anything is to remind yourself of why you do what you do and for whom – it feels like there is an “again” coming. Burnout means the fuel/wick is spent and there is nothing more to give. When there is nothing more to give, there is no more hope, motivation, or struggle for self. YOU burn out, but it feels like re-moralization comes from other places, which means it can be addressed. (p. 184)

*Demoralized* delivers on its promise to explore in-depth the issue of mid-career teacher attrition. As an accomplished education researcher and former classroom teacher herself, Santoro discusses with authority the forces pressing on mid-career teachers. This book is a culmination of many years of interest, experience, and research in the field of teacher dissatisfaction and the consequences of attrition on American schools. *Demoralized* orients the discussion of teacher retention with a positive, solution-minded approach that seeks to better explain why experienced American teachers are leaving the students and the jobs they love and, most importantly, what can be done to address the problem. A book well suited for practitioners, education leaders, or researchers,

*Demoralized* serves as a much-needed supplement to the voluminous literature available on the subjects of beginning teacher attrition and established teacher burnout as it

offers insights into the interaction of teachers with the educational structures that they encounter and challenge daily.

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### About the Reviewer

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