INTRODUCTION

I didn't disagree with the letter. It was more . . . the disappointment in myself for having become a teacher I didn't like.

—Carla, a twenty-three-year teaching veteran, in tears as she describes the letter of reprimand she was issued by her principal.

You play ball or leave with your ethics.

—Reggie taught for ten years. He resigned in 2015.

As a teacher, my job is to answer questions for kids. As a teacher, it's my job to make my students feel safe, cared for, and part of a community. They're nine years old. They have certain adults in their lives that they're supposed to be able to trust and that they care for. The fact that [my student] felt that she was hurting me in any way, shape, or form by not being able to perform [on a test] was wrong . . . I had words and actions of things that I wanted to be as a teacher, and I was able to enact them until this point. And at this point, no longer

am I allowed to be that person that I know I want to be. I have to be this other person who feels monstrous, actually.

—Diane, who has taught for twenty-one years, recalls first administering a high-stakes test.

I wish Arne Duncan [former US Secretary of Education] would come to my living room. [I would tell him] I really cared about kids and I wanted to connect with them. I don't think I wasn't who [accountability proponents] wanted me to be. I think I was the teacher they would've wanted, you know. And yet they broke me . . . And so the only people that you really damaged were the people who were already invested and caring and dedicated.

—Gina, a National Board certified teacher with thirteen years of experience, was Teacher of the Year for her state. The following year she took a disability leave as a direct result of the increased workload associated with accountability measures mandated by her school.

There were always these people that were the type of teachers—the June, July, August teacher—counting the years to retirement teacher. You run into that in any field. So, I was like, alright, I'm definitely not that kind of teacher . . . I'm going until I'm blue-haired, you know, as long as I can still be funny and make it fun, I'm good. And I see more teachers who would never say ["I'm leaving teaching."], talking about retirement. In my worst moments, I say I'm never going to make it to retirement. I'm never going to have a pension . . . I wanted to make enough [money] and I wanted to be happy and love what I do. So I worry that more teachers, good teachers, who wouldn't be leaving, are leaving earlier.

—Vanessa entered teaching after a career in marketing and has been teaching for nine years. She works in a nationally recognized suburban school district.

It is not hyperbole to say that the teaching profession in the United States is in trouble. Teachers are leaving the profession at rates that outpace retirements. Surveys indicate a high level of dissatisfaction, with only a slight majority saying they remain enthusiastic about their job. Teacher retention in public schools—a potential solution to the current teacher shortage crisis—has been on a decline since the late 1980s.

Research is incontrovertible on this point: experienced teacher turnover disrupts schools and negatively impacts student learning. Yet little is known about why experienced teachers leave, and conversely, how to keep them in the classroom.

Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay challenges the common explanation of burnout to explain why experienced teachers leave their schools. It also offers lessons for teachers, school leaders, and policy makers about thinking more strategically about how to harness their talents to make a difference in the lives of students.

Drawing on ten years of research on teachers' moral concerns about their work, this book presents an argument that some forms of teacher dissatisfaction are better understood as demoralization. Demoralization offers a more precise diagnosis of experienced teacher dissatisfaction. Demoralization is rooted in discouragement and despair borne out of ongoing value conflicts with pedagogical policies, reform mandates, and school practices.

Not all teachers will experience demoralization. Some will not encounter situations that pose value conflicts between their job expectations and their vision of good teaching. Their values will be closely aligned with the pedagogical polices, mandates, and practices of their schools and districts. Some teachers approach their work from a perspective that does not emphasize the moral aspects of their job.

The preceding quotes provide just a sample of the types of moral concerns that contribute to dissatisfaction in experienced teachers who come to their work with moral motivations:

- failing to embody the values that have guided their practices for years
- complying with mandates that compromise their professional ethics
- contributing to student distress by following policies and procedures
- understanding that policies designed to support students render teachers expendable laborers
- realizing that the profession has transformed in ways that make career longevity unsustainable and unrealistic
- experiencing isolation when standing up in the name of professional ethics

While researchers show that teacher attrition is a process, not an event, most studies examine the experiences of beginning teachers and reveal only the earliest stage of the process. This book addresses the dearth of research on experienced teacher dissatisfaction and attrition. It draws on teachers' narratives as a means to raise questions about the concepts that are used to explain dissatisfaction among experienced teachers. These narratives offer insight into teachers' concerns that disrupt the common discourse of experienced teachers as resistant to change and primarily self-interested. Indeed, I show how these concerns are rooted in professional values of "client responsibility" and "craft performance" identified by sociologist Daniel Lortie and the desire to do "good work" as posited by Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon. Throughout the book, I chart how the feminization of teaching impacts the ability of teachers' moral concerns to be heard as ethical claims, rather than simply self-interested forms of resistance.

School leaders, policy makers, and teacher educators have been urged by researchers to inoculate and prepare teachers to withstand the perils of burnout with a strong dose of resilience.[1] While resilience is touted as a remedy to protect against teacher burnout, typically it entails adjusting to challenging situations by meditating, practicing mindfulness, and following other self-help recommendations. However, the process of demoralization occurs when pedagogical policies and school practices (such as high-stakes testing, mandated curriculum, and merit pay for teachers) threaten the ideals and values, the moral center, teachers bring to their work—things that cannot be remedied by resilience.

When teachers experience re-moralization—the ability to access and conserve the moral rewards of their work—it is through a more action-based approach that is tailored to the individual and the context in which they are working.

THE BACKGROUND

The seeds of this book date back to 2006 when a former coteacher sent me a copy of her resignation letter. Lisa had taught for twelve years, the last ten years in a large, comprehensive high school in San Francisco where I also taught for two years. We were both ninth-grade English teachers and collaborated frequently, eventually coteaching an elective together. I knew firsthand that Lisa was a fiercely dedicated teacher who was uncommonly effective in supporting student learning. Faculty members respected her, and she had assumed various leadership positions in the school and district throughout her tenure.

Having recently completed my doctorate, I read Lisa's resignation letter as a concerned friend and from the perspective of someone immersed in research on teaching. I noticed that Lisa's reasons for leaving did not fit into the categories typically used by scholars

and educational leaders to describe teacher attrition. Lisa was a successful and passionate teacher who adored her students. A year or so before her resignation, I had visited her at the school where we had taught together. I didn't know her classroom number, but I was able to easily identify her room as I scanned the doors in the hallway. The room was filled with student work hanging from every surface and the hum of students working together. Hers certainly wasn't the only room in the school that had these qualities, but it was one of the few. I have a hard time believing that the quality of her teaching had deteriorated significantly in the next two years. My sense is that she was a better teacher than many up until her resignation.

In 2006, I could find very little research that addressed why teachers with five or more years of experience quit the profession. The most common explanation, especially for teachers who work in demanding, high-poverty schools, like Lisa's, is burnout. As I read the research, I developed an unsatisfying image of burnout: a candle with a finite amount of wick and wax. If it is never snuffed, the candle will burn out. Teachers burn out, presumably, because they do not ever take time to themselves by blowing out the candle of their teacher selves. As a result, they have no more resources (wick or wax) to offer their students and colleagues. Yet, Lisa still had plenty to offer her students and colleagues; she had not been extinguished prematurely. I did not see burnout as offering a sufficient explanation for Lisa's resignation.

Professor Susan Moore Johnson's team studying what they call The Next Generation of Teachers argued that teachers' career cycles had changed and new teachers no longer viewed teaching as a lifelong profession.[2] They argued that teachers leave the profession when they do not feel a "sense of success." Again, these explanations didn't capture Lisa's situation. Lisa was a teacher confident in her abilities. She had described herself as a "lifer." She could

be heard warning her current students what she would reveal to *their* children when she was still working at the same school two decades hence.

Instead, Lisa explained why she was leaving the profession after twelve years this way: "I felt like I was becoming less good." For Lisa, this was a moral claim. Becoming less good did not mean that her pedagogical skills were waning. Rather, she offered an evaluation of who she expected to be as an educator and what she believed students deserved.

Lisa did not necessarily want to leave teaching, but she believed she could not continue to teach under the conditions she faced: a school that had once taught students in heterogeneous classrooms transformed into a rigidly tracked institution where students and teachers in the higher tracks enjoyed higher status and better resources; a small learning community that fostered teacher collaboration to provide supports to students was disbanded; scripted curriculum appeared on the horizon. The values of justice, inclusivity, and teaching as intellectually stimulating work that motivated her practice for over ten years could no longer be realized in the school that she also loved but that had changed so much over the last decade. She could no longer fulfill her vision of good teaching, even after making innumerable accommodations to new school and district mandates and organizational frameworks.

Lisa was leaving work she loved because she could not live up to the values that guided her practice. Working with the hypothesis that new federal policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), may be the reason that teachers like Lisa were leaving the profession, she and I embarked on a project in which we interviewed thirteen teachers with six to twenty-seven years of teaching experience in high-poverty schools who had taught before and after NCLB.

This book is written against the backdrop of interviews that Lisa and I conducted between 2006 and 2008 with experienced

teachers who left the profession for moral reasons. I described them as conscientious objectors to teaching.[3] They could not continue to be complicit in practices that they believed denigrated the profession and that damaged students. In the analysis of the interviews, I developed the concept of demoralization—the inability to access the moral rewards offered and expected in teaching.

THE TEACHERS

The first set of interviews with conscientious objectors revealed that demoralization, like attrition, is a process. I hypothesized that if demoralization is a process, rather than an event, then teachers, school leaders, and their allies might be able to arrest or reverse it. I wanted to learn how teachers currently employed in public schools would describe the ways they managed moral concerns about their work. I wondered if the experience of demoralization need not conclude with teachers' resignations.

To better understand the process of demoralization and to find out if it could be arrested, I interviewed twenty-three teachers with five to thirty-five years of experience who had moral concerns about their work but who had not left.[4] I recruited these teachers via Twitter and through inquiries sent to teacher education programs, alumni networks, and associations such as the Consortium for Excellence in Teacher Education. While some of these teachers had only taught in the era of NCLB, all of them had experienced the introduction of the Race to the Top Initiative and the Common Core State Standards. Therefore, all the teachers in this study had worked through significant policy shifts.

The interviewees self-identified as having moral concerns about their work. As an exploration about professional ethics, I limited the interviewees to those who expressed moral concern about their

own behavior and their colleagues', and excluded those who focused on the morals of their students.

Although any teacher can be eligible for demoralization, this book focuses on the experience of educators who have taught in public schools for five to thirty years. My purpose is not to ignore or diminish the experiences of early-career teachers who may have much to share about the process of demoralization. However, by limiting the research to those who had demonstrated their commitment to the profession through longevity, I was able to clear away potential confusion between disillusionment and demoralization.

The teachers I interviewed are not intended to be representative of the profession as a whole. Instead, their selected narratives provide insight into some of the ways that teachers have difficulty accessing the moral rewards of their work. They are cases that illuminate the concept of demoralization and provide examples of possibilities for re-moralization.

I asked the experienced teachers in my study what they understood to be good work, when they were able to best embody their conception of good teaching, and what prevented them from fulfilling that vision of their work. Often, I acted as devil's advocate. I challenged the teachers to justify their concerns. I proffered unsympathetic interpretations of their moral misgivings and required that they better justify their actions. I made these rhetorical moves only after we had established trust. Nevertheless, the arguments that the teachers developed in response to my critical probing showed that they were able to support and stand by their claims. Their responses provided critical details that might have been missing in their first articulation of their moral concerns.

At the time of the interviews, I would characterize seventeen of the teachers as experiencing demoralization. They were engaged in practices or contexts that contradicted or threatened their moral

center as a teacher. However, I discovered that eight of the teachers had experienced re-moralization. They had been able to reestablish the moral rewards of their work without compromising their core values and ideals about teaching. All but one of the teachers were still teaching in 2017. Reggie was accepted into a prestigious doctoral program and resigned. All names, including those used in quotes, have been changed. Some identifying details have been altered.

I do not imagine a time when or place where teachers have no moral concerns about their work. The fact that teachers experience moral dilemmas in the conduct of their profession is not new, nor is it unique to teaching. However, the consistent finding from my research is that teachers' moral concerns about their work are rarely recognized as moral. As a result, teachers have few avenues though which to negotiate their dilemmas and no clearly identified resources to access in these challenging situations.

My hope is that this book generates discussion among educators about *their* moral concerns in teaching. More conversations about teachers' moral concerns will provide increasingly inclusive and wide-ranging insights into the many dimensions of demoralization and re-moralization in the profession.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In chapter 1, I argue that any attempt to resolve the current US teacher shortage is incomplete without recognizing the moral sources of experienced teacher dissatisfaction. Richard Ingersoll has long explained and now Linda Darling-Hammond's Learning Policy Institute concurs that teacher retention must be a priority for US public schools. Given that many teachers enter the profession for reasons that could be characterized as moral, and that many teachers explain that they remain in the profession partly

for the moral rewards, failing to understand the moral sources of teacher dissatisfaction presents a major gap in our understandings of teacher attrition. Teachers whose moral motivations sustain their work are susceptible to demoralization that may lead to attrition.

Without an accurate assessment of the problem, it is impossible to design appropriate solutions. In chapter 2, I distinguish demoralization, its causes and symptoms, from the phenomenon of burnout. Drawing on sociological and philosophical research, I show that the two main categories of teacher moral concerns are those that relate to harming students or denigrating the profession.

In chapters 3 and 4, I look closely at the two main categories of teachers' moral concerns: harm to students and denigration of the profession, respectively. The teacher narratives reveal the ways that teachers experience and negotiate moral concerns. In most situations in chapter 3, teachers are expected to follow policies and practices that they believe outwardly harm children or violate the trust that they have established with students. I also include two situations in which teachers are accused of physically harming students, and it is their school leaders' handling of this assumption that causes them moral distress.

Moving from a focus on students, chapter 4 homes in on teachers' responsibility to the profession. This chapter explores teachers' moral concerns about denigrating the profession, such as colluding with colleagues on dishonest grading. Another example involves a teacher who finds that she has unwittingly contributed to the martyr-teacher narrative that is so professionally and personally destructive. Members of a profession are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the profession. This chapter analyzes examples of teachers who feel they have failed to uphold the conduct required to fulfill this duty.

The call to cultivate resilience can often be understood as an expectation to better handle the adverse conditions that teachers

encounter in their work. Chapter 5 offers specific examples of actions that the teachers took to re-moralize their work lives. Demoralization can be reversed, but re-moralization often involves transforming situations rather than accommodating them.

This chapter shows that teachers at any stage in their careers can become re-moralized. At times, re-moralization occurs partly as a response to the luck of new opportunities and changes in school leadership. Most often, re-moralization involves a meaningful connection with authentic professional community. The strategies that re-moralized teachers' work were almost never only an "inside job" that altered the educators' outlook or energy. Instead, almost all the teachers' experiences leading to re-moralization involved taking some form of outward action. However, these actions need not be *activist*. There are strategies available to those who are risk-averse, classroom oriented, or introverted, just as there are strategies that will appeal to those who are open to taking a public stand.

However, teachers are not the only persons responsible for their workplace. Chapter 6 provides examples of school leaders causing demoralization as well as serving as sources of re-moralization. School leaders need to be aware of the moral motivations that bring teachers to their work and provide opportunities for educators to articulate and navigate their moral concerns. A significant source of teacher demoralization occurs when school leaders refuse to recognize teachers' moral claims as moral.

Chapter 7 reveals the ways that teachers' unions can also be a means for re-moralization and the cause of demoralization. Uniquely poised to protect the integrity of the profession, unions can help teachers amplify their moral concerns and provide a collective voice for the significant moral work of teaching. Unions can connect teachers with an authentic professional community and provide outlets for taking re-moralizing action.

In chapter 8, I discuss the difference that demoralization makes. Reframing teacher dissatisfaction that stems from a moral source as demoralization enables educators to better understand and potentially transform their experiences. Naming the moral source of teacher dissatisfaction enables teachers to identify the origins of their concerns and to make clearer claims about their troubles. Mainly, the identification of demoralization versus burnout reveals that the problem is with the conditions of the work rather than with the teachers themselves. The book concludes with recommendations for systematic research that better isolates the moral sources of teacher dissatisfaction.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For teachers who are troubled by their work, this book offers a new way to make sense of concerns about their practice and their profession. I provide action-based and collaborative examples of remoralization that can be set into motion by an individual teacher, groups of like-minded faculty, union organizers, or school leaders. Teacher educators will be able to use this book to discuss the common pitfalls and challenges practitioners will face in trying to live up to their commitments to teaching in the short term and over the long haul. Finally, I call upon educational researchers to fine-tune their inquiries to better capture the moral dimensions of teacher attrition and retention.

Research is incontrovertible on this point: experienced teacher turnover disrupts schools and negatively impacts student learning. *Demoralized* offers lessons for teachers, school leaders, and policy makers to attenuate the moral sources of teacher dissatisfaction. The book offers the following insights and recommendations illustrated by the narratives of experienced teachers:

- Teacher demoralization is often confused with burnout. The misidentification of the problem leads to ineffective remedies to address it.
- Moral concerns in teaching need be understood as matters of professional ethics rather than personal dilemmas.
- Demoralization in teaching threatens the moral commitments and values that sustain many teachers' careers.
- School leaders and unions can exacerbate and alleviate demoralization.
- Well-resourced, suburban schools are not exempt from reforms and mandates that have demoralizing consequences for teachers.
- Re-moralization is possible; most frequently, it entails cultivating an authentic professional community.