Research Note

The Emotional Toll of Obligation and Teachers' Disengagement from the Profession

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"Patricia" is a former teaching colleague and an experienced grade one teacher. "Devan" is one of her students. Frequently violent and uncontrollable, Devan has to be physically restrained until calm. In such moments, Patricia calls the office to send help. No one ever comes. Feeling shaken after each of these episodes, she worries about her distressed relationship with Devan, and about what the other children think when they witness such scenes. She worries about the safety of the students, the lack of support for Devan's family, how the other teachers and the principal judge her, and the curriculum that is not being taught. One afternoon, Patricia is rushed to hospital with chest pains. The diagnosis: badly bruised ribs, the result of Devan's head banging against her chest while being restrained. The prognosis: immediate stress leave, followed by Patricia's decision to leave the profession altogether. When asked about her motives for leaving, Patricia simply cites "job dissatisfaction." Devan and his classmates finish the year with an array of substitute teachers.

This true story illustrates how obligation, or the binding responsibility to respond to the other, both lends teaching its moral integrity, but also takes an enormous emotional toll on those who teach. Obligation is of particular importance today given that education is increasingly being restructured by ideologies of the market and managerialism that seek to minimize the moral integrity of teaching, and invoke feelings of self-doubt, guilt, anxiety, and shame in teachers (Ball, 2003). The effect is teacher burnout and greater attrition that negatively impact students (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

Our purpose in this two-year inquiry is to illustrate and explore how teachers experience and understand obligation; to unravel the complex relation between the emotional toll of obligation and teachers' disengagement in all its forms; and finally, to closely examine the profession's understanding and response to the anxiety of obligation.

Context

A starting point for our study is an investigation into discourses that frame research on teacher attrition. Typically, researchers characterize the reasons for teachers leaving the profession in terms of: a) poor working conditions (Clark & Antonelli, 2009; Smithers & Robinson, 2003); b) faulty teacher dispositions (Cohen, 2009; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Hong, 2012; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Nieto, 2003); or c) the fault of external conditions (Block, 2008; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Hostetler, Macintyre Latta, & Sarroub, 2007; Kostogriz & Doecke,

2011). Importantly, the research also demonstrates that teachers who leave do so in greater numbers from schools with vulnerable populations, thus negatively impacting students for whom teachers' emotional commitment is a critical factor in their success and well-being (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Day & Gu, 2010; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Steeves, Carr-Stewart, Kirk, & Prytula, 2013). Most significantly, however, recent research has begun to shift the discourse from teacher stress or burnout (Rudow, 1999; Travers & Cooper, 1996), to teacher demoralization, thus positioning disengagement as an effect of increased managerialism and as an *exceptional* situation (Santoro, 2011, 2013; Santoro & Morehouse, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Conceptually, we think of obligation as that which fixes us to a sense of responsibility and necessitates judgment (Caputo, 1993). Implicit in *good* teaching—that is, teaching that is morally defensible (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005)—is a teacher's obligation to students requiring judgement and responsibility. Yet, the obligation embedded in the demands of teaching invokes teacher anxiety: in recognizing one's responsibility in the first place, in the fear of failing to meet one's obligation, in the concern of responding inappropriately, and in the worry of reprimand. Obligation often leaves teachers seemingly situated within an irreconcilable tension of how to proceed—what Derrida (1990) terms an *aporia* of undecidability. Within the aporia of undecidability, the teacher is caught in a rupture; a space where the "universals" of managerialism, such as mandated curriculum outcomes or codes of conduct, fail to tend to the particulars of classroom moments, such as Patricia's. What to do with the distraught child, the abandoned lesson plan, the waiting children, and the parents who judge? As Caputo (1993) reminds us, these moments are visceral; requiring one to respond, void of anticipation, and enacted without forethought. In these moments requiring a decision, teachers become weighed down by the urgent needs of the other, seeking the right response, yet not knowing what it is. It is this uncertainty, residing in obligation which induces an emotional toll, dramatically illustrating teaching's occupational risk and reality (Britzman, 2006).

Methodology and Methods

With the intent of engaging the tensions between teachers' experiences and the prevailing discourses of obligation in the profession, we will conduct both in-depth phenomenological interviews (in British Columbia and Manitoba) with teachers who have left or have considered leaving the profession, and focus group discussions with other teachers and school leaders about the fictionalized narratives emerging from the initial interviews. Thus, the study structure is dialogic in nature in that it not only incorporates different perspectives, but invites educators to collectively confront and potentially reconsider the dominant discourses in the profession (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

Following on the exemplary theoretical work of Deborah Britzman (2006), we hope to present an enlarged view of teaching, and of what teaching does to and requires of teachers; one in which the emotional world of teaching is acknowledged and explored. Our intent is to contribute to a greater appreciation of what it means to work justly with and on behalf of vulnerable populations in an era of accountability and standardization. Finally, we will contribute to a richer understanding of teacher attrition by examining the link between the material conditions of teachers' work and teachers' emotional worlds. By combining

philosophical insights with empirical evidence, we hope that this study will provide fresh insights into the challenges facing teachers, offering considerations for teachers, their professional organizations, and school districts as to how these might be addressed.

Acknowledgements

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