

Demoralization and Remoralization: The Power of Creating Space for Teachers' Moral Centres

DORIS A. SANTORO
Bowdoin College

JULIA HAZEL
Portland Public Schools

In this collaborative analysis, we (a philosopher of education and an experienced public school educator) examine the experience of demoralization and remoralization in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We overlay the context of the pandemic with the context of institutional racism and their interwoven impact for educators of colour. We use one educator's narratives about teaching during the pandemic as a launching point about where philosophical research on teacher demoralization needs to go next. We argue that the pandemic presents an opportunity for teachers to gain clarity about their moral centres and for school and district leaders to create space for teachers to enact their professional values and thus access the moral rewards of their work. Teachers of colour encounter distinct challenges in having their moral centres recognized, but their prior experiences with moral friction may present them with unique resources in these challenging times. Teachers' energy and agency are squandered, leading to demoralization, if they are not given sufficient space to enact their professional values.

Authors' note: We collaborated on this analysis, using Doris's theoretical research framework and Julia's classroom teaching experience to capture and analyze demoralization and remoralization during the specific context of the pandemic. We begin by developing the school context, then give some background on ourselves and Doris's previous research and how we are using the term "demoralization." We then explore new understandings of the dynamics of demoralization and remoralization brought to light by the pandemic. Throughout, italics indicate places where Julia is describing scenes from her teaching practice.

In late May 2021, I had been teaching my full fourth-grade class for only a month. For the first eight months of school, students had attended two days a week in a cohort group hybrid model. Uniting the groups after April vacation meant doing the work of building a classroom community typical of September and October in the warm days of spring. Our day remained shortened, to avoid the challenge of serving lunch, and the day included new regimens of handwashing, sanitizing materials between students, reminders to physical distance, and snack outside no matter the weather. Always, it seemed, safety was on our minds.

The usual academic pressures of elementary school were tempered by an acknowledgement from our leaders that we needed to prioritize physical safety above all else. We pared a lot from our schedule because of time constraints. I found myself recognizing that while this urgency around ensuring physical safety from COVID-19 for students was new, the practice of always holding student safety in the forefront of my mind was very familiar – safety for students of all genders, races, nationalities, and abilities. As I layered on our practices for health safety, I held tightly to what I knew was necessary to create emotional safety for my students. That could not be sacrificed or rushed, despite our tighter days.

Late in the month, pulling our wagon laden with extra snacks, hula hoops, balls, and buckets toward the school building, I noticed my fifth-grade student, Alin, was crying.¹ Glancing at my watch I saw that we had 10 minutes until we were supposed to begin our standardized state assessment. Under my mask, I grimaced. Then I took a breath and looked at my kiddo, whose shoulders were shaking with his sobs. Alin was my even-tempered kid who got along with everyone – something serious had happened. I had a decision to make. I could just forge ahead, get us inside, and start the standardized test, or I could allow my values to guide me, confident that I would have the support of my building leaders. My assistant principal walked by and reminded me of the assessment starting soon. “I know,” I replied. “We’re going to start a bit late.” While she didn’t know what was going on, she trusted me enough to let me make this choice.

This was remoralizing – to be granted this level of autonomy and trust by my leader. She knew that I understood the significance of the assessment, and that I was making a thoughtful choice. In other schools I’ve worked in, there hasn’t been that trust, and I have been forced to act in opposition to my values, leading to deep demoralization – the demoralization that comes when, over and over, the agency to act from my moral centre was taken away. The heaviness of that demoralization can make it feel impossible to continue.

Teacher demoralization existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic; it also existed long before Doris defined it as “consistent and persistent frustrations in accessing the moral rewards of teaching” (Santoro, 2011, p. 3). She categorized these rewards as the moral (other- and craft-regarding) and ethical (personal flourishing) goods internal to a practice that teaching can offer (Higgins, 2011; Hansen, 1995; Green, 1985; MacIntyre, 1981). She has also argued that demoralization occurs when teachers’ moral concerns are not recognized as moral (Santoro, 2017).

Likewise, institutional racism existed long before the pandemic, and long before it was named. Yet the pandemic has uniquely revealed the interplay between demoralization and institutional racism. Pandemic teaching has stripped away the everydayness of the work to reveal the significance of the moral rewards of teaching for teachers and the dire consequences for public schools when they become unattainable. The COVID-19 pandemic has awoken some who did not see the everydayness of institutional racism and revealed its starkness in the lives of those who are racialized.

We argue that teacher demoralization and institutional racism cannot be untangled for educators of colour; any discussion of pandemic teaching also needs to contend with the omnipresent experience of racism. Our current project examines the ways that institutional and interpersonal racism impact teacher demoralization. Although the research began prior to the pandemic, and is resuming as teachers regain the capacity to re-engage, its emerging lessons are all the more relevant today.² The members of the research team each bring distinct perspectives and expertise to this work. Julia is a Black queer educator who has spent 16 years in classrooms at the middle and elementary school level. She now serves as the director of BIPOC³ Career Pathways and Leadership Development. Doris is a White philosopher of education and former teacher who has been studying teacher demoralization for over 15 years.

This article takes Julia’s interpretations of demoralization and remoralization in her teaching career as the launching point for our reflection about where to go next with philosophical scholarship on teacher demoralization. We argue that the pandemic presents an opportunity for teachers to gain clarity about their moral centres and for school and district leaders to create space for teachers to enact their professional values and thus access the moral rewards of their work. Teachers of colour encounter distinct challenges in having their moral centres recognized (Santoro, forthcoming), but their prior experiences with moral friction may present them with unique resources in these challenging times. Teachers’ energy and agency are squandered, leading to demoralization, if they are not given sufficient space to enact their professional values.

¹Alin is a pseudonym.

²The other members of our research team include Keith Benson, Alberto Morales, Dave Stieber, and Darryl Yong.

³Black, Indigenous, and people of colour

Is It Burnout or Demoralization or Racism? All of the Above in COVID-19

Doris introduced the concept of demoralization to contrast it with burnout, the most common explanation for why experienced teachers leave the profession. She wanted to build a new concept that would challenge depoliticized and individualized explanations for teacher attrition that rely on assumptions that teachers have a shelf life and that the cause of exhaustion is a failure to conserve or protect personal resources through professional pacing and self-care. Her goal was to show that if many teachers entered the profession as a result of moral (other-regarding) and ethical (personal flourishing) motivations, then it was also plausible that teachers became disheartened and might leave the profession as a result of their inability to fulfill their moral and ethical motivations (Santoro, 2011).

The events of the last 24 months make it clear that burnout and demoralization interact in even more complex ways both empirically and conceptually. For instance, how might the relentless addition of responsibilities lead to demoralization? How might aspects of the work that could be sources of moral goods become degraded within the context of the pandemic? Workloads in the pandemic have become untenable for many educators. Surveys have shown that teachers were already working more than 40 hours per week before COVID-19, and in the midst of the pandemic their work weeks increased by an additional 12 to 16 hours (Dilberti, Schwartz, & Grant, 2021; National Board, 2021). In these conditions, it is challenging for even the most morally motivated educator to be able to enjoy the moral rewards that their practice has to offer. Yet, as Julia's vignette above has shown, *with the right structural supports*, teachers can work from their moral centres in difficult situations (Santoro & Acosta Price, 2021).

Studies of teaching during COVID-19 reveal clear links between educators' working conditions and their ability to thrive (Kraft, Simon, & Lyon, 2021). Doris is in the process of analyzing teacher responses to fall 2020 surveys conducted at the beginning of the first full academic year of the pandemic by Virginia Commonwealth University's Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium.⁴ The thousands of teachers who responded to the surveys work in urban, suburban, and rural schools. Some were fully remote while others were hybrid. Some were utterly demoralized as a result of not being able to connect with their students, because of new initiatives required by their district leaders in the midst of the pandemic, and due to feeling as though their lives and those of their students were not valued as a result of what they believed were insufficient safety precautions.

However, also in this data set were teachers who reported finding *renewed* purpose and meaning in their work. They found new opportunities to reach students through digital platforms, they felt a sense of shared mission with their colleagues, and they recognized the significant role they had to play in keeping students connected during this difficult time. While the majority of respondents did not report demoralization, enough did to warrant us launching a study to better understand the conditions that enabled demoralization in the midst of a crisis.

Research on the experiences of educators of colour has revealed that they face extraordinary levels of institutional and interpersonal racism (Brown, 2019; Dixon, Griffin, & Teoh, 2019; Duncan, 2019; Miller, 2019; Pizarro & Kohli, 2018; Santoro, Hazel, & Morales, 2021). In spite of these experiences, many educators of colour want to stay in teaching and are driven by anti-racist goals that they need their institutions to share if they are to thrive (McDonald, 2021). Recent legislation in some American states and districts that seeks to ban the teaching of racism, LGBTQIA+ issues, and other so-called "divisive topics," as well as unreflective racial practices at many schools, present additional sources of demoralization in the midst of a public health crisis and ongoing institutional and interpersonal racism.

⁴ The research team includes Kasey Dye, Valerie Robnolt, and Jesse Senechal.

A Clarifying Opportunity: The Last 24 Months

Demoralization does not have to spell the end of a career, but it does require transformation. Examining the experiences of teachers through the lens of demoralization and remoralization enables us to see that these challenging conditions have also created opportunities for educators to become more aware of what Doris has called their “moral centres.” Teachers’ moral centres, she writes, are “guides that help teachers gauge their distance from and proximity to the ideals they aim to embody as educators” (Santoro, 2018, p. 35). Moral centres, while grounded in ideals that are recognizable to a community of educators, are never uniform. We use the term “moral centre” specifically to account for the diversity of legitimate moral motivations that teachers may bring to their work and that align with the overall purposes of schools in different ways. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many teachers to reassert their moral centres, as Julia’s experience illustrates.

In the midst of COVID-19, my moral centre was guided by the principles of safety and cultural relevance. I had struggled with demoralization in recent years as a result of realizing that my schools were not safe places for me and my students. I felt isolated as I attempted to develop and teach a meaningful culturally relevant curriculum and foster a genuinely inclusive classroom community. As one example, I felt targeted by leaders whose lack of understanding of culturally relevant classroom strategies led them to view my thoughtful choices around transitions between activities and student defiance as shortcomings. In another, I felt overwhelmed by the palpable anti-Blackness and homophobia being expressed by White students that was invisible to or ignored by leaders. I witnessed students experiencing identity-related emotional and, at times, physical harm.

With the return to in-person school in the fall of 2021, there was an unprecedented emphasis on physical safety in my district. Yet as I absorbed the new set of stringent expectations around physical safety, I sought to integrate them with my existing beliefs and practices around creating emotional safety in my classroom. As a teacher who was accustomed to physically holding students with hugs or a hand on the shoulder, I found new ways to hold children emotionally while remaining physically distanced from them. I realized that precisely because of all the fears children were holding during the pandemic, more than ever, my classroom must be a place of love and tenderness, gentleness, and kindness. Teaching, modelling, and reinforcing these values became a strategy to create a haven amidst the constant undercurrent of pandemic-related anxiety.

I made space for students to express their emotions, to take breaks, to eat when they were hungry, to get help, to solve problems, and to play. These had always been important to me, but pandemic circumstances brought into focus how crucial they were to enable any learning together. I tended to my students as whole people, caring for their physical and emotional needs alongside their academic ones. My school’s emphasis on holistic safety allowed me to resist the often unrelenting pressure to speed up and accomplish more.

Demoralization and Remoralization After COVID-19

Black queer teachers, like Julia, have long had to navigate the conflicting moral messages of schools that generate some internal resistance or friction. When schools reinforce White supremacy and espouse a culturally homogenous set of expectations, it creates an environment that causes moral friction, especially felt by those not in dominant groups. Examples of moral friction include when required texts all portray White characters; when multilingual children’s home languages are denigrated and they are told to “speak in English”; when only White children participate in the discussion during a “model lesson” observation; when Black children’s expressions of anger are more harshly punished; when children being quiet is equated with good teaching and learning; and when Black and Brown children are not given access to challenging, grade-level materials. These manifestations of racism generate friction as the oppression rubs against the humanity of the educator, the students, and their families. Teachers feeling that friction may either submit to its pressure, or channel the heat of moral friction into a generative, creative resistance. Some teachers who have experience navigating these frictions may be more ready to use its energy to engage in principled resistance (see Santoro & Cain, 2018).

How can teachers develop a practice of using the heat of friction to motivate and remoralize themselves? The friction experienced during the pandemic may offer an opportunity for educators to

tune in to their moral centres. Despite the web of constraints on educators that has grown even tighter throughout this pandemic, there is often room for some agency, but this requires that there first be space in which to enact it (see Anderson, 2020). Julia was given this space, and, by the end of the 2020–21 school year, saw the benefits of teaching from her moral centre during the strain of the pandemic.

The End of a Pandemic Teaching Year

It was June, Pride Month, and of course, the final days of school. For the first time in my 16 years of teaching, my administration had organized a schoolwide Pride celebration, and had required that all teachers teach LGBTQ history during the month. It felt so different to be teaching this content knowing that every classroom was involved. I felt at ease, knowing that when my principal walked into my classroom and saw students creating art in response to a picture book about pronouns, there would be support rather than questioning.

I also felt supported by the district: four years ago our school board passed a Transgender and Gender Expansive Students policy that outlines a clear expectation that we educators will foster a learning environment that is safe and affirming for students of all gender identities, and that we will assist in the social integration and development of transgender and gender expansive students.

We sat in a rough circle in the grass behind the baseball backstop. To my left, buses growled as they pulled up to the curb, ready to take our students home on this last day of our challenging pandemic school year. As usual, I was down to the wire. I had a plan for these last few minutes, though. I raised my voice over the din of the engines. “All right, dear ones. What a year it’s been. I have so cherished knowing you and learning with you this year. We are going to do one final reflection together now. Choose one thing to share that you liked or learned this year.” As they went around the circle, watching the person speaking, listening, giving wait-time, creating a safe space like we had practised so often, I was full of pride and emotion, not ready to say goodbye to them. But it was hearing what they said that stunned me. Over and over, two things were repeated: “This class was kind” and “I liked learning about LGBTQ history.” I didn’t expect this level of earnestness and consistency in these final, somewhat rushed moments. I didn’t expect those to be the takeaways from this year of tons of remote learning and shortened days. I had done the work that I really wanted to do. The one stemming from my moral centre. The one that is about teaching my kids to be human above all else, to think critically, and to stand for justice.

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About the Authors

Doris A. Santoro is a professor in the Education Department at Bowdoin College, in Brunswick, Maine. She is the author of *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay* and editor of *Principled Resistance: How Teachers Resolve Ethical Dilemmas*. Her articles have been published in *American Journal of Education*, *Educational Theory*, and *Teachers College Record*, among others.

Julia Hazel is the director of BIPOC Career Pathways and Leadership Development for Portland Public Schools in Maine. She taught for over 16 years in middle and elementary schools in Brooklyn, New York, and Portland. She is a co-researcher on the Demoralization in Educators of Colour project.