

Emotional Labour, Accountability, and Bad PR: A Gendered Literature Review and Professional Reflection on Teacher Wellbeing by a Practicing Teacher-Academic

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I am a teacher. I am a counselor. I am a social worker. I am a coach. I am a parent. To many of the students I teach, I am all of those things. To the province of Nova Scotia I must be all of those things, all of the time. I am tired. We are all tired. What has caused so many teachers to become unwell, burnt out? The breadth and almost universality of this problem suggests that it is not a problem *with* teachers. This literature review and professional reflection will demonstrate that burnout is a problem *for* teachers because of the structural realities in which they function.

One of the themes arising from my conversations with fellow teachers is that they are tired of 'being on' all the time. We are told that it is not professional to express anger, frustration, or sadness. It is exhausting to do this day in, day out. It is inhumane. Based on interviews with flight attendants, Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (2012) examines how many employees display emotions they do not actually feel in order to produce a desired emotional state in their customers or clients. For Hochschild (2012), emotional labour has three characteristics: it requires face-to-face contact with the public; it aims to create some emotional state in the customer or client; and it permits the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise control over the emotional life of employees. Teachers are emotional labourers. We work face-to-face with students; are required to make every student feel welcome, appreciated, and safe in our classrooms; and, through professional development on classroom management and wellness and via teacher evaluation programs, our employers exercise control over our emotions. At a professional development meeting, administration introduced the book, *The Joyful Teacher: Strategies for Becoming the Teacher Every Student Deserves* (Gordon, 2020) and explained that it would be guiding our professional development on school climate. The use of this book is a direct example of how employers control employees' emotions via training. The message from administration is that teachers must be joyful (or at least act that way) because students (the clients) deserve that.

Hochschild (2012) distinguishes between two approaches used by emotional labourers - surface acting, in which they deceive clients about what they are actually feeling, and deep acting, in which they deceive themselves. In deep acting, by encouraging and then producing the desired emotions in themselves, employees begin to sincerely feel those emotions, however, "The danger...is that workers...must induce or suppress their own feelings in order to produce the desired feelings in the customer" (p. 49) - a process that can estrange the workers from their own feelings. Workers, and certainly, in my experience teachers, find themselves unable to discern between who they are as people and who they are as employees, and eventually they burn out. They are unable to depersonalize work and endure overwhelming levels of hurt, anger, and distress. Emotional numbness results.

Hochschild (2012) is critical of industrial labour practices and the power imbalances inherent in them. She points to the fact that most emotional labour is performed by women. In her analysis she critiques the control of (mostly female) workers' bodies by employers. One of the many instances of similarities between the experiences of teachers and the flight attendants discussed by Hochschild, is the directive to smile, even when you don't want to. Along with Hochschild's flight attendants, teachers also work under "taboo on anger" (p. 114). During the PD session referred to above, and inspired by *The Joyful Teacher*, administrators encouraged

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teachers to smile when we are feeling stressed and overwhelmed because when you look happy you will become happy. They pointed out that happiness is contagious, the message being that if the staff *look* happy they will *be* happy. This attempt to foster deep acting can be framed as a bid to control a mostly female-identifying workforce through exhortations to smile. From a feminist perspective, it is indicative of the systematic oppression of teachers in the patriarchal neoliberal educational complex.

Like Hochschild, Hargreaves (2001) explores the emotional aspects of labour. He conceptualizes the emotional work performed by teachers as emotional geographies of teaching - “the spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions and relationships that help create, configure and color the feelings and emotions we experience about ourselves, our world and each other” (p. 1061). Hargreaves (2001) points to five emotional geographies of teaching all relating to the actual and figurative distance between actors. For our purposes, I will focus on one - political distance. Hargreaves explains that emotions are political, immersed in people’s experiences of power/powerlessness. He examines the power relations between parents and teachers, characterized as ambivalent and contested. In many cases, including mine, teachers feel powerless to perform what they think is best for their students in the face of parental failure to support or back them up. Diminishment in power leads to feelings of fear and anxiety, anger at those who are responsible for this, shame if we consider ourselves responsible, and depression if the situation appears irreversible. As Hargreaves (2001) notes many teachers prefer to be politically superior to parents ... rather than experience parents having power over them When power plays are at work, interactions with parents can provoke fear, anger, anxiety, and other disturbing emotions. It is not surprising that teachers sometimes want to avoid, minimize, or stage manage these interactions” (p. 1073)

While most of my experiences with parents have been constructive, and some of them quite positive, I certainly know the feeling that comes over you when an email pops up from “that parent.” I have asked for administrators to sit in on parent teacher meetings in case of verbal or physical violence. I have been taught to keep the classroom door ajar when certain parents are in and to always have an escape route.

Also focusing on power relations, Apple (2012) contends that one cannot separate class and gender in the study of education policy, and his and Osgood’s (2006) conceptions of the proletarianization of female workers has been influential in the field of teaching as labour. Teaching is a female-dominated profession; according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 75% of primary and secondary teachers are female (2023). Osgood (2006) notes that as a result of recent educational policy reform, teachers have undergone an intensification of their workload stressing technical competence and performance standards similar to that of private industry. Aligning with neoliberal ideals, states demand from their teachers “accountability, attainment targets...and standardised approaches to their practice. All of which mark a sharp movement towards centralised control and prescription, which poses a potential threat to professional autonomy and morale” (p. 188).

Teachers are more likely to be proletarianized than those in male-dominated professions. (Apple, 2012). Whether this is due the tendency to care less about the working conditions of women or the historical relation between teaching and domesticity and the private sphere, or both, the teaching profession has undergone a process of control as evidenced by the use of prepackaged curricula and attempts at overpowering teacher resistance (Apple, 1988, 2012), such as the 2017 act that in a practical sense legislated away Nova Scotia teachers’ right to strike

(Nova Scotia Teacher's Union, 2017). The use of the guided reading system and alphabetized reading levels by Nova Scotia schools clearly illustrates the trend toward using 'teacher-proof' prepackaged curricula. In the name of rationalization and standardization, school regions across Nova Scotia require elementary school teachers to engage in daily guided reading sessions, using ready-to-teach resources and assessments created by developers whose interests lie not necessarily in student achievement, but in their profit margins (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2014, 2019, 2023). In my school, teachers are required to measure and report students' reading levels every six weeks. This data is monitored by regional staff. Needless to say, this involves an enormous amount of time and labour on the part of the teacher, inhibits wellbeing, and increases surveillance by leadership.

Teaching is care work. England's (2005) devaluation framework highlights the cultural biases that limit both wages and state support for care-work because of its association with women. Per England, "Cultural ideas deprecate women and this, by cognitive association, devalues work typically done by women. This association leads to cognitive errors in which decision makers underestimate the contribution of female jobs to organizational goals" (p. 382). Through this lens, female-dominated caring professions (like teaching) are particularly devalued because care has and continues to be an archetypically female practice.

Dillabough's (1999) examination of discourse around professionalism is also pertinent to care-work and teaching as a devalued profession. She asserts that the state-advanced standards and procedures of teacher professionalism, as technical processes requiring competency and quality control, work to devalue teaching. "[T]he reproduction of masculine ideals through the concept of 'teacher professionalism' leads to the devaluation of those gender codes which are typically associated with the 'feminine.'" (Dillabough, 1999, p. 379). For Dillabough (1999), teacher professionalism is predicated on neoliberal values such as rationality, reason, order, and hierarchy, typically masculine ideals that do not take anything coded feminine, like the importance of relationship, emotion, and nature into account. Thus, a dichotomy is set up between masculine and feminine ideals of "proper" education in which masculine constructs are prioritized as more conducive to the production of skilled workers and liberal democratic subjects. As such, "most women teachers are situated on the inferior side of the gender binary. This position ultimately leads to women's exclusion from the formal language [discourse] of teacher professionalism, yet simultaneously defines their inclusion on the basis of female subordination" (Dillabough, 1999, p. 381).

The devaluation of teaching permits public discourse that takes our work for granted. As the face of education, and I suspect because the majority of us are women, teachers are commonly the targets of people's dissatisfaction with the system. For example, during the pandemic, proms were canceled in high schools. On a local social media forum, parents and members of the community in which I teach blamed teachers and their lack of commitment to students, rather than Public Health regulations, for the cancellation. The principals of one of my schools were publicly labeled "Karens" and teachers were threatened when the school decided, on the basis of inclusion, to forgo a holiday concert and host a winter-themed celebration of student work in January instead.

The work of Sara Ahmed (2017a, 2017b) has much to contribute to the study of the discourse surrounding teaching and teachers. I see myself, and my fellow teachers, as "feminist killjoys," Ahmed's (2017a) term for a person who evokes discomfort by refusing to refrain from asking questions, reveal necessary truths, and speak unpopular opinions about sexist systems of power. For Ahmed, "those who challenge power become sites of negation" and more likely to be

complained about, to become “complaint magnets,” receiving complaints because they made them (2021, p. 17, 151). The common trope that teachers complain too much seems to intensify during labour negotiations and educational crossroads - the pandemic, when inclusion policies were introduced and when teachers unions vocalized concerns about working conditions. Teachers’ happiness *within* schools often depends upon withholding complaints *about* schools. In one of my schools, teaching staff were told that complaining was no longer permitted in the staff room. Using Ahmed’s (2021) term, not complaining becomes a school virtue. In 2017 when Nova Scotia’s teachers invoked a work to rule mandate, governmental response denounced teachers for instigating unsafe conditions for students. Ahmed points out that this a common rebuttal to those who complain; when a complaint has been made those who are “deemed to be the origin of the complaint [are] treated by others as endangering others” (2021, p. 127). The inaccurate complaints about teacher’s summers off, short work days, lack of commitment to students, etc. work to “pathologize the complainer...What people say about you becomes part of what you have to deal with” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 127). It has been my experience that internalization of such discourse has a major role to play in diminished teacher wellbeing.

Based on my professional experience and a review of existing literature, I call for a reconceptualization of the education system from one based on patriarchal and capitalist ideals to one predicated on ethics of care. I suspect that a focus on reciprocal care relationships between teachers and educational leadership and between teachers and students (as opposed to a neoliberal focus on meeting outcomes, gathering data, measuring success, and high stakes testing) is what is needed to keep teachers in the classroom. Like Nel Noddings, I believe that “[r]elations, not individuals, are ontologically basic” (2013, p. xxi). “Taking *relation* as ontologically basic simply means that we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence” (Noddings, 2013, p. 4). Infusing the classroom with the joy experienced in a reciprocal caring relationship between teacher and student is one way that applying an ethic of care could ameliorate the exhaustion and burnout teachers face. One of care ethics’ powerful benefits to teachers’ wellbeing is its implications for strict adherence to standards and accountability. If the aim of education is to prepare happy, engaged and critical democratic citizens, and not individualistic skilled workers that fulfill the needs of the economy and industry, then in keeping with Noddings, schools should engage students in authentic student-centred learning opportunities. A move toward relating to students in a connected, curious, joyful community of learners would, I suspect, succeed in improving teachers’ working conditions.

I propose that the cultivation of face-to-face, direct caring relationships between teachers and administrators and department of education staff is essential, complex, and requires effort, commitment, and trust, particularly in light of recent conflicts between teachers and the provincial government. Noddings’ (2013) distinction between empathy as projective and engrossment as receptive is useful here. Traditional conceptions of empathy involve *projecting* one’s own understanding *onto another*. It does not necessarily focus on the relationship involved. Noddings adopts the notion of engrossment to describe the way that a carer *receives* the other *into themselves*, truly sees, and then feels with the other. There is a distinction between self-focused empathy and other-focused engrossment.

Noddings’ (2013) conception of a truly caring relationship as one in which engrossment, and not simply empathy, occurs is central to the premise that if educational leaders say they care about teachers, then they must feel along *with* teachers, not just empathize *toward* them. What is missing in the relationship between teachers and educational leadership is this true dialogue that

can only come about in a genuinely caring-based relationship. The flawed structure in which educational policies, initiatives, and curricula are imposed from above without consultation with relevant stakeholders is reflective of the individualism of the patriarchal neoliberal state, of which school boards and department of educations are a part, and the unequal power dynamics characterizing the relationship between teachers and their employers. If educational leadership and teachers could establish relationships consistent with the ethics of care framework, then perhaps teachers would not feel so forgotten, unheard, unaccomplished, frustrated, and inefficacious; so burnt out.

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