

Gaslighting a profession

On moral purpose, teacher knowledge and the role of trust

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Abstract

This paper explores the demoralisation of teachers caused by systemic ‘gaslighting’ that undermines their professional knowledge and moral purpose. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, Mockler argues that education policy and public discourse often devalue teachers’ expertise, framing their work as mere content delivery and promoting standardised, externally produced solutions. The author critiques the rise of ‘evidence-based’ practices that sideline professional judgement, warning that such trends erode trust and creativity in teaching. Ultimately, Mockler calls for renewed societal trust in teachers, recognising the complexity, humanity and moral responsibility at the heart of the profession.

Keywords: gaslighting; moral purpose; professional judgment; teaching

Teaching at its core is a moral profession. Scratch a good teacher and you will find a moral purpose.

Michael Fullan¹

Demoralization occurs when teachers can no longer engage in what they consider good work.

Doris Santoro²

These two statements about moral purpose and the teaching profession were written 25 years apart. The first is from 1993, which happens to have been my first year of teaching, and was published in the professional journal *Educational Leadership*, in an article entitled ‘Why teachers must become change agents’. There was a lot of professional talk amongst teachers about educational change and transformation in the 1990s: the anticipation of what schools would look like, feel like, be like in the 21st century; the expectation that the ‘information revolution’ would leave schools changed forever; the prospect that access to the then-nascent internet would fundamentally change teachers’ work and finally make education-as-transmission a thing of the past.

There were certainly struggles and tensions, many of which would not be unfamiliar to beginning teachers now. But my prevailing memories of my early years of teaching are of encouragement from more experienced colleagues to take pedagogical risks,

to connect my practice to my own sense of moral purpose, to embrace the creative potential of the classroom and to really hone my craft. This was long before we expected beginning teachers to pop out of university fully formed,³ before we bent toward the grammar of 'classroom readiness'.⁴

My 23-year-old teaching self would be equal parts shocked and horrified to be beamed into 2026 and find, a quarter of the way into the 21st century, that schools actually look and feel, in many important ways, a lot like they did in 1993. Despite the knowledge explosion, or perhaps because of it, curriculum is arguably more locked down than ever before; assessment has become more rather than less standardised and high stakes, nationally and internationally; and debates about teacher-centred or scripted pedagogy that we thought were long ago put to bed have taken on new life, transformed as minor battles in larger culture wars.

The education systems of the 21st century have been described by Doris Santoro as creating a sense of *demoralisation* for many teachers, who find themselves unable to access the 'moral rewards' of teaching by 'doing what is right in terms of one's students, the teaching profession, and themselves'.⁵ Santoro argues that while we are experiencing a teacher shortage on an international scale often attributed, at least partly, to burnout, that categorising demoralisation as burnout, which locates the problem within the individual, 'fails to address the root cause of exhaustion, frustration, and sense of futility' that abounds when teachers are prevented from enacting their moral purpose by accretions of education policy.⁶

The devaluing of teachers' knowledge and expertise at the hands of 'common sense' solutions to intransigent educational problems, often manufactured by commercial providers, and the associated deprofessionalisation of the teaching profession is a leading cause of demoralisation for teachers.⁷ And this devaluing is largely made possible by the near-universal experience of having been to school and thus undergone what Dan Lortie coined in 1975 'the apprenticeship of observation'. Of this phenomenon, Lortie noted: 'Students do not receive invitations to watch the teacher's performance from the wings; they are not privy to the teacher's private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events ... they are not pressed to place the teacher's actions in a pedagogically oriented framework'.⁸

In other words, students, and the adults they grow into, do not have access to the bodies of specialised knowledge that teachers draw on every day in their work. Every politician, bureaucrat, business leader, journalist, think tank policy officer and so on with strong views about teachers' work but no history of access to teaching knowledge is drawing, to a greater or lesser extent, on their own apprenticeship of observation. It informs the 'common sense' about teaching that proliferates in the public space, resonating with and reinforcing people's own apprenticeships. And it fuels the kind of contempt for teacher education that produced 101 reviews of

initial teacher education in Australia between 1979 and 2007 and scores more since, internationally.⁹ At the heart of all of this is a lack of understanding, at best, and a blatant denial, at worst, that teachers' work is about more than practical 'delivery' of content and/or student results.

Institutional gaslighting

The near-universal apprenticeship of observation makes the teaching profession a soft target for a form of systemic gaslighting known as citizen or political gaslighting, the act of 'leading citizens to hold beliefs disconnected from the available evidence'.¹⁰ Most often understood on a personal rather than public level, the issue of gaslighting has become a significant element in discussions of domestic violence over the past decade. In the words of Kate Abramson, personal gaslighting is: 'a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in another not only the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories, and/or beliefs are so utterly without grounds as to qualify as "crazy", but also the sense that she is incapable of forming apt beliefs, perceptions, reactions and so on'.¹¹

Systemic gaslighting works in a similar way on a broader scale, through the targeting of expert opinion and knowledge.¹² Beerbohm and Davis note, in their work on citizen gaslighting, that a particular focus tends to relate to questions of evidence: 'Our evidence about our evidence tends to have special vulnerabilities. Gaslighting can work by supplying higher-order defeaters, exposing the victim's beliefs as the upshot of a faulty process and leading victims to conclude that their attitudes were never justified in the first place'.¹³

Systemic gaslighting thus undermines victims' sense of confidence in their own knowledge and their faith in the evidence they employ in the exercise of their judgement, and indeed in their judgement itself. As an example of systematic gaslighting in education, Alyssa Dunn points to teacher 'self-care' mandates in the US during the Covid-19 pandemic as an example of the way that neoliberal schooling systems are designed to gaslight teachers, where 'self-care was often framed as a solution to the stressors that educators were facing, placing the onus for solving the stress on educators themselves rather than on fixing a system that was increasingly pressuring teachers and expecting too much'.¹⁴

Institutional gaslighting has been part of the cut and thrust of discussions of teachers' work for at least the past two decades, in Australia and elsewhere, and by way of illustration, I turn to two examples: first, ongoing debates about the role of teachers in curriculum work and the appropriateness of 'outsourced' curriculum materials;¹⁵ and second, continuing debates about 'what works' in classrooms and the rise of so-called 'evidence-based practice'.

Curriculum work and ‘lesson lottery’

Recently in Australia, one solution proffered to the problem of teacher workload has been the development of ‘lesson banks’, to relieve teachers of the ‘burden’ of curriculum planning. Stacey and colleagues provide an analysis of this policy ‘solution’, arguing that there is good evidence that teachers themselves do not see curriculum planning as part of their ‘admin burden’.¹⁶ Quite the contrary, in fact. In their survey of approximately 18,000 teachers in public schools in the Australian state of New South Wales, the researchers found that ‘planning and preparation of lessons’ was the most highly valued (as necessary/important) of teachers’ work activities, and one that over 88 per cent of classroom teachers reported engaging in every day.¹⁷ Clearly, planning and preparation is both a frequent but also critical part of teachers’ work. Participants in the same study reported needing more time for these activities to be built into their workloads, but that is a very different prospect to believing that this work constitutes an admin burden from which teachers should be freed.

Planning and preparing for learning is not an optional extra in the professional life of teachers: it lies at the intellectual centre of teaching. Furthermore, it is not only intellectual but also creative: using knowledge of the curriculum, knowledge of students and knowledge about how to teach to create the conditions for learning that fosters deep student understanding is a deeply creative process. It is not easy, but it is some of the most important and rewarding work that teachers do. Engaging professional judgement in curriculum work produces teaching and learning that is the absolute opposite of standardised, scripted lessons, and lies at the heart of what it is to be a teacher.

Casting curriculum work as busywork that can just as well be done elsewhere by someone else is an example of institutional gaslighting, whether the rationale is about reducing teacher workload and addressing time poverty, or the so-called ‘lesson lottery’ that students are subject to by virtue of their teachers using their expertise and professional judgement to develop curriculum materials.¹⁸ Consider this extract¹⁹ from an influential report published by the Grattan Institute in 2022: ‘Many Australian teachers are being left to fend for themselves, creating lessons from scratch and scouring the internet and social media for teaching materials. This has contributed to unsustainable workloads and a high degree of variation in teaching and learning from one classroom to the next. It creates a lesson lottery for teachers and students.’²⁰

Here, Australian teachers are positioned as ‘being left to fend for themselves’, akin to toddlers in a dangerous world that they have neither knowledge nor skills to navigate. Interestingly, this positioning of teachers was taken up by the Commonwealth minister for education, Jason Clare, the following week, when he was reported in an editorial in *The Australian* as being deeply concerned about ‘rudderless teachers’.²¹ Additionally, teachers ‘creating lessons from scratch’, an integral part of teachers’ work, is cited

as evidence of a crisis, as are, here and elsewhere in the report, teachers conducting internet research to source up-to-date and relevant resources. Finally, a ‘high degree of variation in teaching and learning from one classroom to the next’ is positioned as evidence of a crisis in Australian classrooms, working to the detriment of Australian students and underwriting declining performance.

Embedded here are a number of commonsense assumptions about education and teachers’ work that are highly contested ideas. First, for example, that ‘consistency’ is a sound educational aspiration. Consistency, or standardisation across classrooms and schools, stands in stark opposition to key ideas that remain fundamental to the aims of education, around the differentiation of curriculum and learning.²² Second, it assumes that ‘lessons’ exist as decontextualised, neatly contained singular items that can be downloaded and plugged into classrooms regardless of their contexts or who is in them.

Good teaching and learning are built on the bedrock of good relationships,²³ and good relationships are as variable as the people involved. Further, these ideas assume that teaching is about transmission of content when this is in fact an enormously impoverished view of teaching. Good teaching is about creating the conditions for learning that enable students to meet clearly articulated outcomes and build deep understanding of important concepts, not ‘march[ing] through the curriculum and [hoping] that some content will stick’.²⁴ And, as skilled teachers know, in all cases, there are many, many possible pathways to this. The job is about sorting out what pathways are going to be best for any given group of students at that particular moment in time. Outsourcing planning and encouraging the uptake of ‘lesson banks’ as a solution to teacher workload is a dangerous business. And when it comes as a consequence of manufactured crises and corresponding commercially produced ‘solutions’ sold to teachers under the guise of ‘evidence-based’ or ‘best practice’ answers to problems of work intensity, it constitutes a particularly hazardous threat to good education.

‘What works’ and the undermining of teacher expertise

An old maxim says that anyone who tries to tell you there’s only one way to do anything in education is probably trying to sell you something. Perhaps this is more true than ever before, with the ever-increasing commercialisation of education that has occurred over the past two decades. The search for simple answers to complex educational questions and problems has been augmented in neoliberal times, where the underpinning ‘market fundamentalism’ likes to sort and rank, to identify winners and losers, and to settle on ‘what works’.²⁵

The question of evidence and of what constitutes good evidence in education is a critical one because so much of good teaching relies on teachers’ capacities to generate and understand evidence in and through their practice. And here too we find fertile

ground for systemic gaslighting, where teachers' professional knowledge and judgement is rendered inferior to preferred and privileged forms of evidence. Current dogma around 'what works', linked closely to the 'evidence-based practice' movement, can be traced to the late 1990s and a turn in education policy toward forms of evidence claimed to be objective and incontrovertible, which are invariably externally generated.²⁶

It is not the case that in education some kinds of evidence are intrinsically good and others intrinsically bad. Dichotomies are almost universally unhelpful in education and the truth is that the quality of evidence depends on a lot of things, including the conditions under which it is collected and whether it is fit for the purpose to which it is being put: evidence that provides a robust answer to some questions may be far less valid and appropriate when it comes to others. However, the real problem, as I see it, is that 'what works' is seldom the right question or the answer in education. In the words of Dylan Wiliam:

In education, 'what works?' is not the right question because everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere, so what's ... important in education is: 'Under what conditions does this work?' ... Teaching is all about knowing the conditions under which a particular technique is likely to work. That is why I say that you can't tell teachers what to do ... because the nature of expertise in teaching is not the kind of expertise you can communicate by telling people.²⁷

Wiliam brings this question of what works back to the issue of knowledge and expertise in teaching, and the need to get better at supporting teachers to develop and hone their professional judgement, which in turn helps them to get better at deploying evidence. The 'low variation' approaches to teaching and learning that have become popular in some parts of Australia, and which include scripted curriculum, are the opposite of this, encouraging teachers to mistrust their own judgement and 'variation' and to trust instead in the (mostly) commercially developed resources provided. The net effect of this sees teachers not only gaslit, but passively deskilled by stealth.

The unhelpful dichotomy between 'explicit instruction' and 'inquiry-based learning' that is widely peddled implies, first, that teachers who engage in explicit instruction do not use inquiry-based approaches at all, and vice versa; and second, that 'inquiry-based learning' is tantamount to a teacher expecting Year 8 students to discover Einstein's theory of relativity by chance in a Tuesday afternoon science class. Good teaching is never all one thing. And neither is it ever unscaffolded 'discovery' disconnected from deep knowledge and understanding.

Teachers need a large toolkit of strategies and approaches to use, according to their judgement, to support the learning of the children and young people in their care. They need to be supported to develop their capacity to gather evidence to inform their decision-making, and to gain confidence in their professional judgement. 'Solutions'

that try to eliminate or somehow bracket out teacher judgement in favour of the incontrovertible truth of ‘what works’, or to destabilise teacher knowledge and hollow out expertise by ‘telling teachers what to do’, is systemic gaslighting at its finest. It creates a false narrative about what teachers do and do not do, and seeks to undermine their specialised professional knowledge, and to exploit the vulnerability of, to go back to Beerbohm and Davis, their ‘evidence about their evidence’. It risks undermining and impoverishing not only the teaching profession, but the enterprise of education itself.

The future of teaching

So what’s to be done? Here we are, a quarter of the way into the 21st century, reconstructing many of our social systems in the aftermath of a global pandemic, and facing an international teacher shortage that is no doubt both related to but also independent of the pandemic. We appear to be at something of a crossroads, and the choices we make as a society will shape the teaching profession, and ultimately our education system and everything that depends on it (which is actually everything) into the future.

We can choose to accept the ‘truths’ about teaching produced by decades of systemic gaslighting: that teachers know no more about education than anyone else who has been to school for 13 years; that improving student learning and performance is a simple process best governed by the latest recipe for ‘what works’; that ‘low variance’ education is to be desired; that teacher professional judgement is untrustworthy; that teaching will be more manageable and sustainable if the creative and intellectual bits are carved off and outsourced. What we are likely to reap from such decisions is a teaching profession less vital and more demoralised than the one we have now, overseeing an impoverished education system that can never come close to even the muted and limited aspirations we hold for it.²⁸

A more courageous path would involve a collective decision to trust teachers. While teacher expertise is not inherently ‘pristine, neutral, and good’,²⁹ it nevertheless draws on a wealth of scholarly and lived experience that is currently undervalued. A concerted effort to trust and respect teachers on the basis of their specialised professional knowledge, led by politicians and journalists who shape so much of the public discussion about education and teachers’ work, would be a good start. If we are serious about raising the status of teachers within our society and making it an attractive profession that people want to join and remain in, we need more than regulation, more than marketing campaigns and summits on teaching that involve more politicians than educators and result in pithy press conferences but not much else. We need to think differently as a society about teacher knowledge and expertise.

Ultimately, this is about reclaiming an understanding of the complexity and humanity

of teaching, and seeing this not as an uncomfortable or inconvenient part of the whole, but rather as a necessity, if we want the work to be done in such a way that students and their teachers flourish together. In her inspiring book *Primary Teachers Talking: a study of teaching as work*, the late Jennifer Nias brought the question of teachers and moral purpose together with questions of teacher knowledge and the messy humanity of education:

Teachers have hearts and bodies, as well as heads and hands, though the deep and unruly nature of their hearts is governed by their heads, by the sense of moral responsibility for students and the integrity of their subject matter which are at the core of their professional identity ... Teachers are emotionally committed to many different aspects of their jobs. This is not an indulgence; it is a professional necessity. Without feeling, without the freedom to 'face themselves', to be whole persons in the classroom, they implode, explode – or walk away.³⁰

At a time when tales of teachers imploding, exploding and walking away are too common, we have some difficult decisions to make as a society. The question is whether we have the courage and tolerance for ambiguity to take a path that values teachers, their moral purpose, their humanity and their knowledge. The alternative is to continue to tighten the screws and hope that the kids will be ok.

And on that, the choice is ours.

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Notes

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