

Gaining Psychic Rewards by Aligning Expectations Across the School Community

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In the past few decades, elementary and secondary school teachers in the United States have faced increased expectations, even as the financial rewards of their occupation have declined relative to other college graduates. Those increased expectations could contribute to teacher stress, burnout, and even to departure from the profession. The effects on teacher mental health might be even greater if accompanied by the perception, by school administrators, communities, or teachers themselves, that teachers should be *exceeding* expectations. Portraits of exemplary teachers, in research case studies, in film, and in literature, often create that impression, portraying teachers as heroic figures who make substantial personal sacrifices to promote pupil success.

Seals offers guidance for how teachers can establish patterns of practice that meet the challenges of contemporary expectations in ways that are fulfilling, rather than overwhelming.¹ My response to Seals begins with a brief historical sketch of the development of expectations for teachers, which supports the significance of the issue Seals addresses. It then describes the argument Seals makes. This response concludes by suggesting how Seals's discussion could be extended to consider what should be expected of school systems and communities to make it easier for teachers to practice in ways that support addressing expectations over sustained and healthy careers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, expectations for teachers focused more on exemplary moral character and participation on community life. Teachers were expected to avoid alcohol and tobacco, dress conservatively, and, for women at least, avoid any appearance that would suggest participation in sexual activity (for example, evident pregnancy). A modest level of education was expected. Order should be maintained, of pupils in classrooms and of teachers in their places of employment. These early expectations have since been relaxed, with increased acceptance of a wide range of dress, adult behavior, and political

activity.

In many other respects, however, societal expectations for teachers have dramatically increased, particularly in recent decades. A recent report from the National Academies documents increased expectations for teacher knowledge, skill, and effective performance.² In core academic subjects, states have adopted standards for student mastery, standards that are typically higher than those in place when newly certified teachers attended elementary and secondary school. Teachers are now often expected to foster pupil social-emotional learning, along with traditional academic learning. As the mismatch has increased between the racial/ethnic profile of the teaching force and that of the K-12 student population, teachers are increasingly expected to master culturally responsive instructional practices that are best suited to students whose backgrounds are different from those they experienced in their own schooling. In short, expectations for teachers (and other educators) have increased dramatically in recent decades.

The contractual expectations for teachers are, however, narrower. The teacher contract for the East Lansing Public Schools, for example, specifies a work year of 183 days, with thirty-one work hours per week (some variation for different levels of schooling), including twenty-five hours and twenty-five minutes of “contact hours” (for instance, hours instructing pupils). The district contract also includes a detailed schedule of additional pay for various assignments to sports, arts, and clubs. District policy also describes criteria for the annual evaluation of teachers, involving the use of classroom observations and, for grades where state achievement tests are administered, a factor for pupil test performance.

State curriculum standards are specifications of what students are expected to learn, hence might be thought of as descriptions of expectations for teachers (for instance, expected to somehow get all students to meet these standards). State achievement tests linked to those standards could also be thought of as describing expectations for students and teachers, that is, that students are expected to score at “grade level” or above on the tests.

The expectations most important to teachers, however, may not be closely tied to those formal measures. Lortie's seminal study found that teaching is rooted in "psychic rewards," such as making a difference with one pupil or having a former pupil report on the difference a teacher made in their life.³ Although changes in the modes of instruction during the recent pandemic may have reduced such psychic rewards the joy that comes from the "joy in the smiles, the 'aha' moments, and the hugs" probably still plays a major part in teachers' motivation, outweighing the bread-and-butter rewards of salary and fringe benefits.⁴ As Seals says, teaching is more a "calling" than a job; people choose to teach because of what it means to them, not for what it pays. Because the rewards of teaching are psychic, rather than material, whether teachers feel successful in their work is tightly connected to their sense of whether they are doing enough. Hence, the importance of the expectations teachers have for themselves.

Seals's paper clarifies the connection between meeting or exceeding expectations and acting virtuously. Drawing on Aristotle, he argues that a key reward of teaching comes from the teachers' sense that they are acting virtuously. I contend that being, as Seals puts it, a "more complete moral agent," can be considered a psychic reward, one that goes beyond the feeling that comes from succeeding with one student.

How should teachers think about whether their practice is virtuous? Following Aristotle, Seals suggests that it should be subject to rational deliberation, that it should be based in a stable character, and that it should be part of a system of actions undertaken with others. These conditions will be met if teachers' practice is guided by a purpose that they remain committed to over time, and if they carry out that practice with others – colleagues, pupils, community members – who have compatible senses of purpose.

That will not be problematic if teachers' practice is constrained to their sense of purpose, and the purposes held by others. Problems arise, however, if their practice also includes work outside that sense of purpose, that is, extra work that is not contributing to central goals—busy work, unnecessary paperwork, and perhaps items such as monitoring lunch or buses. If teachers can

mold their practice to fit this framework for virtuous teaching, they may expend considerable effort, but enjoy commensurate psychic rewards that come from feeling that the effort is making them a more complete moral agent.

What this portrayal does not directly address is the issue created when work conditions conflict with the purpose that drives the teacher. When an accountability system presses for results that the teacher does not see as centrally important, for example, either the teacher will not be able to conform to the system of actions undertaken by others (for example, school administrators), or the teachers' decisions about practice will conflict with their own sense of purpose. Or if collegial relations with other teachers in the building are poisonous, the teacher will find it difficult to meet the condition of conviviality.

These issues might be addressed by extending Seals's framework to describe how administrators and school communities might themselves achieve the rewards of becoming more complete moral agents. If they could work towards achieving stable character in line with identified purposes of education and developed systems of action that engaged teachers with these purposes, they might receive benefits that paralleled the psychic benefits that flow to teachers.

Circling back to expectations for teachers, the positive path forward might be not to lower expectations for teachers, but to have high expectations that are closely aligned with central purposes of schooling. Burnout comes, not from having to work too hard, but from having too much effort put on extra work that does not contribute to core goals.

REFERENCES

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- 2 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *Changing Expectations for the K-12 Teacher Workforce: Policies, Preservice Education, Professional Development, and the Workplace*. The National Academies Press (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2020).

3 Lortie, Dan C. *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

4 Hargreaves, Andy, and Michael Fullan. "Professional Capital after the Pandemic: Revisiting and Revising Classic Understandings of Teachers' Work." *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 5, no. 3/4 (2020): 327-36; Bhansali, Margi. "Future Teachers Need to Hear the Good Stuff, Too." *Chalkbeat: Chicago*, February 21, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-06-2020-0039>