Teacher Demoralization, Disempowerment and School Administration

Kwok Kuen Tsang [1] & Dian Liu[2]

1) School of Social Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education, Hong Kong.
2) Norwegian Centre for Learning Environment and Behavioral Research in Education, University of Stavanger, Norway.

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Kwok Kuen Tsang
Caritas Institute of Higher Education

Dian Liu
University of Stavanger

Abstract

Teacher demoralization is a concept describing the negative emotional experiences affecting teachers' well-being and quality of teaching. However, since the dominant discourse about teacher demoralization is influenced by psychological perspectives, especially the theory of burnout, most of effort to promote teachers' well-being and quality of teaching reply on psychological approaches. Nevertheless, teacher demoralization is more socially constructed other than psychologically constructed. Thus, this study aims to identify the potential social causes instead of psychological roots of teacher demoralization. Using in-depth interview data, the study illustrates that school administration may, from teachers' perspectives, structurally demoralize teachers by disempowering teachers to control over labor process of teaching and to appreciate the instructional values of work and working condition. Thus, school reformers are recommended to empower teachers to exercise control over labor process of teaching and to appreciate the instructional values of their work and working conditions.

La Desmoralización del Profesorado, el Desempoderamiento y la Administración Escolar

Kwok Kuen Tsang
Caritas Institute of Higher Education

Dian Liu
University of Stavanger

Resumen

La desmoralización del profesorado es un concepto que describe las experiencias emocionales negativas que afectan al bienestar y la calidad de la enseñanza del profesorado. Sin embargo, ya que el discurso dominante sobre la desmoralización del profesorado está influenciado por las perspectivas psicológicas, especialmente la teoría del agotamiento, la mayor parte de los esfuerzos para promover el bienestar y la calidad de la enseñanza dan respuesta a enfoques psicológicos del profesorado. Sin embargo, la desmoralización del profesorado es más una construcción social que no sea psicológicamente construida. Por lo tanto, este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar las posibles causas sociales acerca de las raíces psicológicas de la desmoralización del profesorado. Utilizando la entrevista en profundidad, el estudio pone de manifiesto que la administración de la escuela puede, desde las perspectivas del profesorado, estructuralmente desmoralizar a los maestros, quitándolos el poder en el control de proceso de trabajo de la enseñanza. Esto supone que dejen de apreciar los valores de instrucción y condiciones de su trabajo. Por lo tanto, se recomienda a los reformadores de la escuela capacitar al profesorado para ejercer el control de proceso de trabajo de la enseñanza y para que aprecien los valores de instrucción y las condiciones de su trabajo.

Palabras clave: desmoralización; desempoderamiento; interpretación; objetivo en la enseñanza; administración escolar

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Teachers are reported globally as demoralized in the context of school reform (Nodding, 2008; Santoro, 2011; Wang, 2013). According to Clarke and Kissane (2002, p. 733), demoralization is the experience of being unable "to cope, together associated feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, subject incompetence and diminished self-esteem." According to this definition, demoralization is similar to the concept of burnout describing the negative emotional experiences people may possess towards their jobs. In other words, teacher demoralization is similar to teacher burnout that may affect both teacher well-being and teaching quality (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). However, Santoro (2012) points out the distinction between burnout and demoralization lies in the causes: burnout is caused by psychological factors such as individual personality, mental health and coping strategies, whereas demoralization is caused by social factors such as the occupational and organizational hierarchy. Since the dominance of the concept of burnout remain in the field of educational research, the attention to social causes of negative emotional experiences of teachers have been undermined (Lau, Chan, Yuen, Myers, & Lee, 2008). Thus, this study aims to explore the social causes of the negative emotional experiences of teachers through the lens of teacher demoralization. In the following text, this article will review the relevant literature and then respectively present and discuss the research method and findings.

Teacher Demoralization in the Context of School Reform

Teachers are the crucial agents having profound impacts on students and hence our future society, thus how to improve the effectiveness of teachers and teaching has been an important theme in the realm of school reform (Darling-Hammond, 2009). In order to enhance the effectiveness of teachers and teaching, different perspectives of school reform have emerged. Among these perspectives, centralization and decentralization are two prominent but competing perspectives (Bray, 1999). From the perspective of centralization, reformers view that schools poorly managed would result in ineffective teachers and teaching (Kim, 2004). Therefore, this perspective suggests the centralization of school administration as the panacea for school education. On the other hand, the decentralization perspective argues that the threat to the effectiveness of teachers and

teaching is too much top-down control instead of poor school management which erodes teacher autonomy. Thus, this perspective sees devolution as a significant means to improve the effectiveness of teachers and teaching (Herath, 2008). Nevertheless, as Bray (1999) observes, there is no pure form of centralization or decentralization of school reform in reality. In most cases, reformers apply both the strategies of centralization and decentralization to reform schools (Mok, 2003). For example, Hong Kong attempted to improve the quality of school education by decentralizing the authority from the central government to local schools and teachers through school-based management initiatives in 1991 and 2000 respectively. At the same time, the government was worried about schools would perform poorly if they were free from any control, so it attempted to centralize control through accountability measures such as performance indicators (Education Commission, 1997). This hybrid process of school reform is called as centralized decentralization (Watkins, 1993).

   Studies show that centralized decentralization has negative impacts on educational system (Fink, 2003). A significant impact is teacher demoralization (Santoro, 2011). For instance, since the wave of educational reform has centralize-decentralized school system in Hong Kong, more and more Hong Kong teachers have been reported as being stressful, dissatisfied, anxious, exhausted, and depressed (Cheng, 2009). A prominent explanation to the phenomenon is that the process of centralized decentralization leads to bureaucratization of school administration which legitimatizes top-down control over teachers (Robertson, 2000). In Hong Kong, for instance, evidence shows that the school reform initiatives, such as school-based management, significantly bureaucratize school administration (Pang, 2002) and in turn eliminate teacher autonomy in teaching (Cheung & Kan, 2009; Wong, 1997). Similar patterns are found in other counties such as US, UK, Australia, Canada, Japan, and Korea (Ball, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003; Helsby, 1999; Ho, 2006). Research indicates that the disempowered teachers tend to feel demoralized because they are incapable to refuse those duties which they disvalue (Ingersoll, 2003). Accordingly, teacher demoralization in the context of school reform may be caused by centralized decentralization which structurally disempowers teachers to control the process in teaching.

Teacher Demoralization, Interpretation of School Context, and Goal in Teaching

However, the above viewpoint disregards teacher agency in the construction of teacher demoralization. According to Lumsden (1998), teacher morale is the feelings or emotions teachers have about their job based on the extent to which the school context is viewed as meeting teachers' goals in teaching. Thus, teacher demoralization may occur when teachers interpret the school context as not favoring them to fulfill their goals in teaching (Santoro, 2011). In other words, teachers may still be demoralized once they interpret the school context as unfavorable, even though school reforms have not disempowered them, and vice versa.

To some extent, this observation is supported by the studies conducted by Frenzel and her colleagues (Beck, Keller, Goetz, Frenzel, & Taxer, 2015; Frenzel, 2014; Frenzel, Goetz, Lüdtke, Pekrun, & Sutton, 2009). According to their studies, teachers' emotional experiences are determined by whether the teachers preceive their teaching environemnts or outcomes match with their instructional goals. Moreover, Lee and Yin (2011) and Yin and Lee's (2011) studies provide further supports to the observation. They found that high school teachers in mainland China were empowered by the national curriculum reform, but the teachers perceived the national curriculum reform created many constraints that discouraged them to effectively educate students. This situation made them feel frustrated and depressed.

The above studies implied that most of the teachers, if not all, hold a goal in teaching which can be called making a difference in students' lives. In fact, a similar goal of teachers in teaching has been identified by the literature. For example, in his classical study, Lortie (1975, p. 132) indicated that most of the American teachers wanted "to produce 'good' people – students who like learning – and they hope they will attain such goals with all their students". In another research, Hao and de Guzman (2007) indicated that Filipino teachers entered into teaching profession out of idealistic (e.g. educating a lot of people), liberating (being able to advise people who are lost and confused), and altruistic (e.g. inspiring others) reasons. Similarly, Lam (2011) found that many teachers in Hong Kong enjoyed teaching since teaching allowed them to positively influence the next generation. Although there are some other goals in teaching among

teachers (e.g. subject interest, realization of childhood dream, self-development, salary, social status, and occupation security), it seems that the most important goal shared by teachers is making a difference in students' lives (Hao & de Guzman, 2007; Lai, Chan, Ko, & So, 2005; Lam, 2011; Schiefele, Streblow, & Retelsdorf, 2013). In other words, it is possible that teacher demoralization is related to how teachers interpret the extent to which the school context favors them to make a difference.

Nevertheless, the question here is in what condition teachers interpret their school context as unfavorable to make a difference in students' lives resulting in teacher demoralization. In order to explore the answer for this question in a more detail, the present study examines what goal in teaching is the most important from the teachers' perspective, how they interpret their school context, and what the consequences of their interpretation.

Method

Accordingly, in-depth interview method is appropriate for the present study, because the method allows researchers to gather rich narrative accounts of teachers' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives on themselves and the social contexts (Seidman, 2006). Moreover, the present study was conducted and focused in the Hong Kong context, because teachers in Hong Kong have been demoralized since 1990s (Choi & Tang, 2009) when the centralized decentralization of school reform was implemented (Sweeting, 2004). For example, the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers (2011) found that nearly 30% of teachers in Hong Kong were unhappy at work and nearly 60% perceived teaching as a less rewarding occupation than before. Moreover, Cheng (2009) estimated that 50% of Hong Kong teachers felt under stress at work and over 25% were depressed and anxious and the ratio of teachers suffering from anxiety and depression has largely increased in Hong Kong due to the reform. Therefore, the Hong Kong case should be a window to investigate the social causes of teacher demoralization.

Participants

Since the first author of this article had worked in Hong Kong secondary schools for two years, we invited secondary school teachers to participate in

this study based on his personal networks at the beginning of data collection. Then, upon the agreement of participating in the interviews the first author asked the participants to refer other school teachers to join this study through their social networks. Initially, six secondary school teachers in Hong Kong with less than six years of teaching experience were invited to participate in the study. As these teachers may not be representative of more experienced teachers, seven more secondary teachers with teaching experience ranging from six to forty years were then invited to participate. Finally, as most teachers involved in this study taught language and art subjects such as English, Chinese, Chinese History and Liberal Studies, further interviews were conducted with secondary school teachers teaching in science subjects such as Biology, Chemistry and Integrated Sciences, and with teachers teaching such subjects as Mathematics, Business, Accounting and Financial Studies, and Tourism and Hospitality Studies. The sampling ended when data was saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Eventually, a total number of 21 Hong Kong secondary teachers were interviewed. Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants.

Table 1.
The demographics of participants[1]

Name	Teaching experience (age)	Contract	Managerial role	Subject	School		
					Name	Academic performance (private/public school)	Morale
Amy	9 months (31)	Temporary	None	Language Arts	A	Average (public)	Low
Crystal	6 years (28)	Temporary	None	Language Arts	C	Average (public)	Low
Olivia	2 years (29)	Temporary	None	Language	D	Average (private)	Low
Mandy	2 years (26)	Tenure	None	Economics Arts	E	Underperforming (public)	High
Emma	6 years (31)	Temporary	None	Language Arts	A	Average (public)	Low
Ken	5 years (27)	Tenure	None	Sciences	I	Elite (public)	Low

Name	Teaching experience (age)	Contract	Managerial role	Subject	School		
					Name	Academic performance (private/public school)	Morale
Bonny	2 years (30)	Temporary	None	Sciences Economics Arts	E	Underperforming (public)	High
Leo	1 year (26)	Temporary	None	Sciences	E	Underperforming (public)	High
Peter	9 months (27)	Temporary	None	Arts	H	Underperforming (public)	Low
Jack	11 years (36)	Temporary	None	Language	B	Underperforming (public)	High
Isabella	9 years (34)	Tenure	Subject panel	Arts	E	Underperforming (public)	High
Eva	15 years (37)	Tenure	Subject panel	Sciences	F	Underperforming (public)	High
Tom	12 years (34)	Tenure	Subject panel	Language Arts	G	Underperforming (public)	High
John	9 years (39)	Tenure	Subject panel	Economics Arts	G	Underperforming (public)	High
Flora	12 years (35)	Tenure	None	Language	G	Underperforming (public)	High
Rex	20 years (42)	Tenure	Subject panel	Arts	J	Elite (private)	High
David	40 years (59)	Tenure	Committee leader	Language	G	Underperforming (public)	High
Paul	26 years (46)	Tenure	Subject panel	Economics Arts	G	Underperforming (public)	High
Connie	30 years (51)	Tenure	Committee leader	Language	G	Underperforming (public)	High
Sally	30 years (50)	Tenure	Subject panel	Language	G	Underperforming (public)	High
Sam	25 years (49)	Tenure	Committee leader	Sciences	F	Underperforming (public)	High

Research Procedure

The first author of this article conducted all the interviews. One of the reasons was that the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, but the second authors did not know it. The second reason was that it was easier for the first author to develop rapport and trustful relationships with the participants because many participants were his friends or ex-colleagues. Such relationships might make the participants feel more comfortable to disclose themselves in the interviews and to give more trustworthy data to our project (Esterberg, 2002).

All interviews in this study were semi-structured. When the interviews started, the first author firstly explained the research purpose. In order to avoid basing the participants, he explained that the research aimed to study the work experiences and conditions of secondary school teachers in Hong Kong without a specification of teacher demoralization. During the interviews, participants were asked to introduce themselves briefly, stating what subjects they taught, their teaching position, as well as their teaching experience. They were then asked to talk about their work and working condition/ school administration, motivation of teaching/ aspiration, feelings about their work and work conditions/ school administration. Each participant had been interviewed for 1.5 hours on average.

The interviews took place between February and June 2012. It is noted that this was a busy season for secondary teachers in Hong Kong. During this period, teachers had to prepare senior high school students for the public examination taking place between April and May. Moreover, many secondary schools arranged their final internal examination in June, thus teachers were under a lot of stress, preparing school examination papers during the time. Additionally, secondary schools might also carry out teacher appraisal in February and March, so teachers might also have to spend substantial amounts of time and energy on preparing for the appraisal. Given the above context, the participants in this study might have been very busy, and stressed during the data collection, leading to greater negative emotions and feelings than normal towards their work during the interviews.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the first author. The first author coded the data by using open coding and then focus coding using Nvivo7 was performed. In both coding processes, he used the constant comparative method to enhance the credibility of analysis by comparing incidents in data with other incidents, incidents with themes, and themes with other themes during the coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The themes were emerged from the data, including goal in teaching, definition of teachers' work, and school administration, which was divided into three sub-themes, namely strength and goal of supervision, mode of communication, and trust and consideration. By using NVivo7, the first author ran matrix coding in order to find the pattern of teacher demoralization by comparing the participants' emotional expressions toward their work and work condition in different school contexts. In addition, he also employed member checking to improve the credibility of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Results

Goal in Teaching

In this study, all participants reported that their major goal in teaching was to make a difference in students' lives. They generally said that they taught because teaching was a meaningful occupation, which gave them opportunities to nurture students' overall personal development and growth. However, not all participants had entered the teaching profession for this goal. Some of the participants mentioned that they could not find a better job, or that teaching was a stable, reputable, and highly-paid job in Hong Kong. However, after they had experienced interactions with students during teaching, they learnt that teaching meant caring for students and discovered that teaching was a meaningful occupation. They therefore gradually changed their original goal to make a difference in students' lives. For example, when David was young, he did not want to work as a teacher. However, he lost his job when he was 19 and chose to be an English teacher for the time being while he looked for other opportunities. After a few years of teaching, he perceived that his students needed his help and guidance in

their studies and personal growth. What's more, students were grateful for his teaching, and he had developed and maintained close relationship with students. All these made him feel that teaching was a rewarding and meaningful occupation, spontaneously, as he expressed in the interview, he was reluctant to leave the profession and had stayed for 40 years. The case of David shows that teachers may become more aware of their responsibility to students through their interaction with the students, in which they discover the students' needs and problems. If students express their appreciation, teachers may feel more positively about the teacher-student relationship. As a result, they may aspire to nurture students' learning and personal growth, even though making a difference was not their original sense of goal.

Definition of Teachers' Work

The findings suggest that the goal of making a difference in students' lives may influence teachers' definition of their work and, in turn, their morale. According to the participants, there were two types of teachers' work: Instructional work and non-instructional work. They generally defined instructional work as work directly linked to teaching and learning, while the non-instructional work is linked to school administration and management. The findings showed that most of the participants were demoralized by spending a great deal of time and energy on non-instructional work, as they felt that non-instructional work did not benefit students' learning and growth, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> Sometimes I feel helpless … The most tragic thing is that I have to give the non-instructional work top priority. I feel uncomfortable about this. Like when we organize a big event, I wonder if its goal is meaningful for the students or just possibly related to the reputation of the school. It seems to me that the event, which requires strenuous effort, is not targeting the students. As teachers, we always ponder over our work… We really want to transfer our academic knowledge or life experience to the students, but does our work link up with our desires? I feel particularly uncomfortable because I have no idea whether the students can learn through the non-instructional work on which we have spent a great deal of effort. (Eva)

School Administration

School administration is an important aspect of school context influencing many dimensions of teachers' work (Ingersoll, 2003). Thus, there may be a large impact of school administration on teacher morale (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). In this sense, it is necessary to understand how the teachers interpreted the school administration and the consequences of the interpretation.

In this study, the morale of the participants was found to vary across schools. According to the results of matrix coding, we found that the morale of participants from schools B, E, F, G and J were generally higher than participants from schools A, C, D, H and I. Thus, in this article, the first group of schools is referred to as "low morale schools", and the second group of schools is referred to as "high morale schools". It should be noted that the use of the terms "high morale schools" and "low morale schools" do not signify that participants at the schools were actually either happy or unhappy in teaching. They were considered happy only when compared with participants from "low morale schools" and vice versa. According to the findings, the difference between "low morale schools" and "high morale schools" was related to the following aspects of school administration from the participants' point of view: Strength and goal of supervision, mode of communication, and trust and consideration.

Before presenting the findings about the difference between "low morale schools and "high morale schools", it is necessary to notice that the division into "low morale schools" and "high morale schools" was only based on the participants' perspective on their schools. Therefore, the findings only reflect the participants' subjective interpretations of schools. In other words, the "low morale schools" and "high moral schools" may not objectively exist. Nevertheless, the subjective interpretations of schools were still significant to investigate teacher demoralization because the subjective interpretations may influence how the participants feel in teaching (Santoro, 2011, 2012; Saunders, 2013).

Strength and goal of supervision

It was found that both "high morale schools" and "low morale schools" had different means of supervising and regulating teachers' work, yet supervision at "low morale schools" tended to be stricter than that at "high morale schools". Strict school supervision is believed to cause negative emotions such as dissatisfaction amongst teachers (Ingersoll, 2003). However, the relationship between school supervision and teachers' emotional experiences may be much more complex than this. In this study, some participants at "low morale schools" wanted more school supervision, especially for instructional work. For example, according to Eva, from School F, school administrators valued non-instructional work higher and thus strictly supervised and regulated non-instructional work, but loosely supervised and regulated instructional work. This practice meant that Eva had to spend most of her time and energy on non-instructional work, such as organizing school events, rather than on teaching, a situation she was very unhappy with. She felt that the school should pay more attention to supervising teachers' instructional work, rather than supervising non-instructional work. Similarly, Sally, who worked in School G, thought that the school should supervise and regulate instructional work more closely. She thought that too little supervision of instructional work might result in lazy teachers who were less enthusiastic in preparing lessons, so she hoped the school could keep a close eye on instructional work and make sure teachers were working on the right track, in order to maximize the benefits of teaching to students.

It appears that teachers are concerned about the goal of school supervision rather than the supervision per se. If teachers perceive that school supervision is unrelated to, or even detrimental to, the quality of teaching and learning, they become demoralized by the school administration. This finding can be explained by teachers' major goal in teaching, as many of them aspire to make a difference for the students.

Mode of communication

The mode of communication between school administrators and teachers was likely to affect the participants' interpretations of school decisions and measures. The mode of communication at "low morale schools" tended to

be relatively limited and ineffective. In most "low morale schools", the decision-making power was centralized, with the principal and the School Executive Committee (SEC) being responsible for all decisions concerning the school. There was limited consultation and communication between administrators and teachers during decision-making processes. There also seemed to be few channels through which teachers could express their opinions to administrators. Participants from "low morale schools" often commented that they had insufficient communication with the school administrators when a school decision was made. Some mentioned that their school might occasionally consult them, but these consultations only focused on minor issues. Thus, most of them were excluded from any major decision-making process at their schools.

Limited communication made it difficult for the teachers to understand the reasoning behind school decisions and measures. Even though the school's decisions and measures may have aimed to foster students' academic, social, and moral development, teachers may not have understood the intentions or potential positive effects of the measures. For example, the principal of School E initiated the Ninth Lesson Policy. According to this policy, a ninth lesson was added to the teaching plan. It was not to teach any particular subject but all about students doing homework under their homeroom teacher's supervision. Although the intention of the policy was good, the participants from the school were unhappy because they did not see the policy generating any positive effects.

This reaction was the result of the school administrators not explaining the reasoning behind the policy or not discussing with the teachers how to improve the effectiveness of the policy. As a result, teachers felt that they were being forced to implement something that was ineffective in teaching and learning. For instance, one participant commented:

> I think the Ninth Lesson is not that beneficial to learning because both students and teachers feel tired. Students don't regard this as a formal lesson and just want to play around in this lesson. For me, I just found these policies unnecessary once I came to this school. (Bonny)

The following quotation from a participant from School F supports this argument.

> I think the reason why the teachers don't want to implement these measures is because they don't see their value. For example, when we organize some programs or incentive schemes, we really put much effort… these programs and schemes may generate many benefits to the students; however, we have to buy a lot of materials like art papers and awards; we have to call a lot of meetings; we have to do a lot of promotions…So…I can see the value of these programs and schemes. But the school may just state the value in a sentence or two in some of the documents, or somehow briefly mention their goal during staff meetings. Temporarily, we conclude that the school only set these targets mainly for promotion and admission. So, why should we still implement those measures just for promotion and admission? (Eva)

This quotation suggests that teachers had perceived some school decisions and measures as involving administrative value, such as school promotion, rather than instructional value. However, as Eva commented, although these decisions and measures may have instructional value, many teachers did not see this because of insufficient communication between administrators and teachers.

In contrast, "high morale schools" tended to practice an open mode of communication between school administrators and teachers. In School I, although school decisions and measures were also made by the principal and the SEC, the school administrators would deliberately consult and discuss with teachers during the decision-making process. After the discussion, administrators would reply and answer teachers' questions concerning the decisions and measures. At School C, similarly, teachers could easily get access to administrators and talk with them at school. Moreover, the administrators welcomed teachers' comments concerning school decisions and policies and would respond to them actively. As a participant from the school illustrated:

> In fact, we sit very close to our management team. If we have any questions, we can just knock on their door and they can give us prompt answers. For me, the current school culture…gives us a chance to discuss and speak up. We can all freely express our opinions whenever an idea comes down to us. Although they might

> not be able to make changes exactly according to the opinion of
> each colleague, they will at least give each colleague a response or
> a reason for whether the change can be made or not. I guess they
> have already tried their best to make the decision-making process
> more transparent. (Crystal)

This open mode of communication allowed administrators and teachers to achieve a consensus about decisions and measures. In addition, communication empowered teachers to learn about the instructional value, in addition to non-instructional, of decisions and measures.

Thus, the mode of communication had affected teachers' power to interpret the value of school decisions and measures. Teachers' power to interpret may be constrained by limited communication between teachers and school administration. In other words, at schools with limited communication, teachers may have thought that they only served administrative goals, even though school decisions and measures were intended to facilitate students' academic, social, or moral development,

This lack of power to interpret had constant implications for teacher demoralization or teacher morale. If they perceived decisions and measures as off instructional value, they would instinctively define the work as non-instructional (Tsang, 2014). When defining them as non-instructional, they felt that it was meaningless to carry out these decisions and measures. At the same time, if school administrators supervised and required them to do the work, they became dissatisfied with the supervision. In this way, the mode of communication affected the extent to which teacher demoralization occurs, through influencing their interpretation of school supervision and the value of school decisions and measures.

Trust and consideration

It was also found that the participants at "low morale schools" tended to think that their school did not trust them nor consider the difficulties they encountered in teaching. These teachers, as a result, naturally felt more frustrated and disappointed. In contrast, participants at "high morale schools" stated that school administrators always showed consideration and trust, and so they felt more positive at work. To some extent, trust and

consideration on the part of administrators may be related to the mode of communication and school supervision and regulation.

Participants working at "low morale schools" perceived that school administrators did not trust and care about teachers. They thought that one reason was that school administrators were unwilling to listen to their wishes and difficulties at work. For example, even though they were overworked or they did not have enough time to do instructional work, there were no chances for them to talk to the administrators, leading to their frustration and disappointment. For instance, School J set high targets for students' academic performance. In order to ensure that teachers met these targets, the school implemented strict teaching regulations. If the school noted that students' academic performance did not match the target, the school would investigate who the students were, and who taught said students. Moreover, Rex from the school mentioned that the school always inspected teachers' marking and observed teachers' lessons. Many teachers at the school were discontented with the situation, but when teachers tried speaking with school administrators, their voices were ignored, making them even more discontent.

In contrast, at "high morale schools", many participants perceived school administrators as trusting and considerate of teachers because their schools were willing to listen to them. For example, School H welcomed teachers expressing any difficulties in teaching. Another participant, Peter, from the school said that the principal was always in his room and welcomed teachers knocking at his door any time. If the principal noted that teachers were overworked, he would implement measures to reduce the pressure and stress. For example, the principal allowed teachers who taught many classes to do less non-instructional work and vice versa. Moreover, the data shows that participants at "high morale schools" perceived that they were trusted and cared for by their schools, as they were offered with autonomy and less supervision and work restricts.

Discussion

This study finds that teachers in some Hong Kong secondary schools tend to be more demoralized than their colleagues in other types of schools, because they perceive the supervision of school administration as inappropriate (e.g. too strict and detrimental to teaching and learning) when

the communication between school administrators and teachers is lacking and when there is mistrust of, and indifference towards, teachers on the part of the school administration. These administrative practices may be resulted from the centralized decentralization of school reform which reinforces the bureaucratic structure of school administration, such as centralization, impersonality, and enforcement of rules and regularizations (Hoy & Miskel, 2012). As literature suggests, these teachers are generally excluded from the decision-making process of schools and subject to administrative control (Ingersoll, 2003). Therefore, they tend to be disempowered by school administration in the context of school reform. This finding matches the expectation that teacher demoralization is related to the centralized decentralization of school reform which disempowers teachers to control the process of teaching. Since this kind of disempowerment emphasizes on the lost control of many aspects of work, it can be labeled as technical disempowerment.

In addition to technical disempowerment, from the findings we can also identify that school administration can also demoralize teachers by the deprivation of teachers' power to interpret instructional values of their work and administrative practices. This deprivation can be named as cognitive disempowerment. The cognitive disempowerment can demoralize teachers, because it may make teachers misinterpret the values of their work and school policies as non-instructional decided by the top of school hierarchy, even though the work and policies have instructional values in nature. For example, the emphasis on expiation performance, organization of big events for students, and the Ninth Lesson Policy may have positive impacts on students' learning and development (Kennedy, 2005), but the teachers in this study are cognitively disempowered so that they cannot identify the instructional values by the administrative practices of supervision, limited communication, and mistrust and indifference. Since they are cognitively disempowered to interpret the instructional values, they may perceive that their work and teaching environments do not match their major goal in teaching, i.e., making a difference in students' lives. Thus, as the existing literature suggests, they may be demoralized and feel negative in teaching (e.g. Santoro, 2011, 2012).

It is noted that technical disempowerment and cognitive disempowerment may be two interrelated dimensions of teacher disempowerment. As a study shows, when the teachers are unable to

control over their work, they are likely to define the work as non-instructional whether it is objectively "true" (Tsang, 2014). If this observation is valid, further studies need re-conceptualize and re-operationalize the concept of teacher disempowerment and in turn examine the relationship between the two forms of disempowerment and their causes and consequences in education.

To sum up, the research findings imply that teacher demoralization is related to teacher disempowerment structurally caused by school administration. However, teacher disempowerment should not only refer to the deprivation of power to control over the process of teaching (technical disempowerment), but also the deprivation of power to interpret the instructional values of teachers' work and working environment (cogitative disempowerment). The first form of disempowerment makes teachers incapable to do what they want to do in order to make a difference in students' lives as their major goal in teaching, while the second form of disempowerment makes teachers misinterpret the values of their work or working environments as irreverent and even deleterious to fulfilling the goal in teaching. In other words, teacher demoralization may be co-constructed by social structure (e.g. school administration technically and cognitive disempower teachers) and agency (e.g. teacher interpretation of the school context and of the value of their work and working environment). Moreover, the two forms of disempowerment may be related to the school administrative practices of inappropriate supervision (too strict and detrimental to teaching and learning), limited communication, and mistrust and indifference.

Based on the research findings, it is suggested that school reformers are concerned about technical and cognitive empowerment in order to promote teacher morale and in turn teachers' well-being and teaching quality. Since how to technically empower teachers has been recognized and discussed by different scholars (e.g. Bogler & Nir, 2012; Quaglia, Marion, & McIntire, 1991; Stacy, 2013), the attention in this article is paid to cognitive empowerment. First, it is recommended that school reformers create more room and a safe environment for teachers to express their opinions to school administrators or to participate in the decision-making process of the school. This is because it will allow the school administrators to deliver the instructional values of school policies and the work decided by them. The administrative supervision should also be recognized and implemented as a

means of supporting teachers in helping students' learning and growth rather than as a means of keeping teachers under surveillance. This is because such a practice will make teachers perceive that the school cares about their aspiration to teach and supports them in making a difference in students' lives. Altogether, school administration which favors effective communication between school administrators and teachers and which supports teachers in making a difference tends to empower teachers to perceive their work as worthwhile in helping students to learn and grow. In other words, if a school leader wants to improve the teachers' well-being and teaching quality, he or she should adopt democratic, instructional and/or transformational leadership style rather than authoritarian and/or transactional leadership style leadership (Bass, 1990; Dowrkin, Saha, & Hill, 2003; Leithwood, 2004; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008).

One limitation of the present study is the sample size. As a qualitative research, we only interviewed a small number of secondary school teachers in Hong Kong in order to have an in-deep investigation of teacher demoralization. Although the findings may be theoretically significant (Smaling, 2003), it does not mean they are statistically generalizable. Therefore, further studies may test the findings of the present study by using quantitative methods (e.g. survey) with a large sample size selected by probability sampling methods.

Notes

[1]Pseudo names are used for all participants

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Kwok Kuen Tsang is Assistant Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the Caritas Institute of Higher Education, Hong Kong. ORCID, id: 0000-0001-7238-9156

Dian Liu is Post-doctoral Fellow in the Norwegian Center for Learning Environment and Behavioral Research in Education, University of Stavanger, Norway.

Contact Address: Kwok Kuen Tsang, School of Social Sciences, Caritas Institute of Higher Education, 18 Chui Ling Road, Tseung Kwan O, N.T., Hong Kong. Email: gkk1212@gmail.com