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Reply: Response to Kwok Kuen Tsang's 'Ideological Disempowerment of Teachers'

Liz Jackson

In this article Liz Jackson examines Kwok Kuen Tsang's article on the ideological disempowerment of educators and relates to it research on emotional labour in education. It also reflects on the educational implications of the observation of ideological disempowerment of educators. It emphasises the need for democratisation of education so that educators can be at the frontline of discussions and commitments to wellbeing, of students and educators alike, in education.

Keywords: accountability, alienation, democratic education, emotional labour, Hong Kong, power sharing, reply

Kwok Kuen Tsang argues that teachers are emotionally negatively impacted by ideological disempowerment. Ideological disempowerment goes beyond technical disempowerment, which is related to deskilling work, as educational ideologies reflected in an institution can alienate teachers' sense of the value of their work. Such disempowerment results from teachers not seeing their work as genuinely educational, but as prompted instead by institutional demands for accountability in terms of performance indicators.

While Tsang's work is based in Hong Kong, there is no doubt that such ideological disempowerment impacts educators around the world, as teachers report feeling alienated by discourses emphasizing standardized test scores and other measures for accountability that seem to distract from authentic teaching and learning experiences. While Tsang uses the concept of ideological disempowerment, alienation from labour can be another useful orientation here. As Hochschild has noted (1983) alienation from work is common in caregiving fields when one is supposed to care for others while at the same time achieving other goals that relate to controlling environments for the sake of the employer. Hochschild discusses flight attendants in particular, who have to smile at each customer, and work for their contentment in order to facilitate socially smooth flights. As she describes, the flight attendant loses the feeling of happiness that goes with smile over time, as they may feel overworked or mistreated by customers or employers. The smile becomes a part of the work but not a positive feeling.

Similarly, in teaching, one aims to care for children and young people, and ensure they have a positive experience. No one dreams of becoming a teacher for the administrative aspects of the job. In the situation Tsang describes, teachers engage in extracurricular activities with students that can be imagined to be educational and important for their well-being. However, the activities are to be performed at a high level of administrative detail at the same time, requiring extensive reporting, to show that the school cares about students' well-being. Students' well-being comes from a positive

relationship with their educators. This is something teachers learn about and often intuitively understand as they are trained as educators. But administrative requirements on teachers complicate the relationship. Like a smiling flight attendant, a teacher in such a case may feel compelled to express that activities are valuable for student well-being, when they are actually being done for other reasons. Like the flight attendant, a teacher may feel confused, as they care about students yet feel their sense of self efficacy is decreased by initiatives which are not genuinely engaged by the institution for real well-being.

What are the implications of Tsang's article? It is true, as Tsang writes, that more scholarship can uncover how disempowerment operates in schools. Yet the cause of ideological disempowerment in this case seems fairly obvious, and it seems to be similar to that of technical disempowerment: relational disempowerment of teachers, among other actors in education, such as administrators and parents. Professional teachers are experts in education, with developed views of what can help students. Yet their voices are missing from discussions, which is reflected in how they do not attach meanings favoured by administrators to their work, seeing some time-consuming tasks (like extensive documentation of extracurricular activities) as not instructional, in contrast with administrators.

Power sharing among parties more equitably should be strived for here, so that educators' voices are heard in discussions about how to enhance student well-being and growth. Furthermore, that teachers' own well-being is compromised in this situation is clear in Tsang's article, as they feel stress, exhaustion, and frustration, related to doing tasks they regard as not well aligned with their educational commitments. In the case of schools as institutions, a more democratic decision-making structure should be cultivated, wherein leaders (administrators) exercise vulnerability, open-mindedness, and humility in order to learn from teachers, who are on the front line with students (Jackson, in press).

Teachers may, for example, hide their exhaustion as a personal failing, when the view of administrators is counted as more important than the view of teachers. Yet exhausted and alienated teachers are hardly the most productive, particularly given that the well-being of students depends on their relationships with teachers. In this context, students should see teachers as role models for developing well-being: as well and content people, who can cultivate positive relationships with others. Yet when teachers are not treated well by their employers, and when their views of meaningful activities are not considered in designing and allocating work tasks, it can become alienating for teachers to promote institutional initiatives, and tax their emotional resources to the point of exhaustion. This situation is not good for any kind of teaching and learning, or for student well-being. While educators may perceive that parents want their children to participate in many extracurricular activities to benefit their well-being, parents also want their children to work with happy and healthy educators, not disempowered, demoralized, alienated ones. Thus, teacher empowerment and teacher well-being should be foregrounded in efforts to cultivate well-being through schools.

Accountability has a place in education. But this does not mean that schools do not need to also be accountable for cultivating positive experiences for teachers, as well as students. Teacher disempowerment and alienation are complex processes, but some of the ways to avoid them are fairly straightforward. The deskilling of teachers is relationally disempowering, while treated teachers as professionals is in line with their own hopes, and in line with the clear value of their work for benefiting the development and growth of students. Teachers should not be treated as tools

in a machine, but as people with educational commitments and convictions, and with an insider view of what makes education 'work', for well-being among other aims. Tsang's article is a powerful reminder in this context that there are many risks which get overlooked in education when educators themselves are overlooked. Alienated teachers are likely to struggle, while empowered teachers can cultivate their efficacy within more democratically organized school communities.

References

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liz jackson

Liz Jackson is an Associate Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Hong Kong. She is the President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia and the Director of the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong. She is the author of the books Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism (Routledge, 2014) and Questioning Allegiance: Resituating Civic Education (Routledge, 2019). Liz has worked in the USA, UK, Turkey, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and New Zealand.