

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

# Stress, Control, and the Deprofessionalizing of Teaching

By Thomas Newkirk

Until fairly recently, psychologists accepted the common-sense view that job stress was directly related to the significance of the decisions being made. The top executive jobs, by this logic, were the most stressful because so much was riding on decisions. And the lower-level positions—the clerks, custodial workers, and receptionists—were less stressful because decisions had less impact. There was less to worry about. All this made a kind of sense.

But it was exactly wrong.

A longitudinal study of male civil servants in Great Britain, now referred to as the Whitehall Study, began to change this thinking 40 years ago. Researchers were surprised to find that mortality rates, as well as a range of stress-related illnesses, were *inversely* related to job status. Top managers were less likely than lower-status employees to suffer from high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease—and they lived longer. The result was puzzling to the researchers, since none of the employees was desperately poor, all were by definition employed, all had access to health care. One possible explanation was that lower-status employees were more likely to smoke, or to have less-healthy diets, but the results held even when these factors were taken into account.

So what explained the result? The researchers concluded that, contrary to popular wisdom, the lower-status workers experienced more stress precisely because they had less control over their work. In other words, those who could make significant decisions probably had a sense of their own agency and control, and this prerogative to *act* actually made their jobs less stressful than those of workers who largely followed the direction of others.

The Whitehall results are consistent with animal studies that deal with stress and control. Animals suffer when they are in stressful environments *and have no way to affect those environments*. This powerlessness affects their autoimmune systems and leads to a range of health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart trouble, and ulcers, to name only a few. There is even some evidence that in animals that sense they can affect their environment, the body may release a Valium-like chemical that helps increase resilience,

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**The closer you are to ground level in U.S. schools, the more you become aware of the deprofessionalizing power of complex educational systems**

much like the sense of well-being we all get when we decide to really tackle a problem.

**educational systems  
and programs.**

In the current rush to make educational decisions based on science, this evidence is significant. I realize that to speak of the psychological health of teachers—their happiness, their sense of being creative and in control of their work—might seem self-indulgent (or irrelevant) to many top-down reformers. The focus should be on student learning, they would say. But realistically, don't we all hope to be taught and cared for by professionals who are happy in their work? Do any of us want the frustrated, hurried doctor who is on the HMO stopwatch, or worse, the angry dentist?

The closer you are to ground level in U.S. schools, the more you become aware of the deprofessionalizing power of complex educational systems and programs. Often, especially in more-affluent districts, these systems pile up on one another, creating an indigestible, incompatible mess: Christmas-tree schools, with lots of ornaments. Programs for the responsive classroom, comprehension strategies, guided reading, direct instruction, leveled book, differentiated instruction, focused correction, and writing workshop jostle for teachers' attention, all claiming to be aligned with state systems of evaluation (and all, of course, "research-based").

A key word in the advertising copy for these systems is "easy." Check it out. There is the regular promise that by minutely directing instruction, these systems will relieve the teacher of the stress of planning and decisionmaking and create great results. Worried about how to introduce a particular lesson? Here's a script for you. As one area teacher complained: "Sometimes I think a monkey could do my work." But, as we have seen, even monkeys become depressed when they lose the belief that they can affect their environment.

It is a Faustian bargain. When teachers lose control of decisionmaking—when they prepare students for tests they have no role in designing (and often no belief in), when they must abandon units they love because there is no longer time, when they must follow the plans designed by others, when they are locked in systems of instruction and evaluation they don't create or even choose—they will not be relieved of stress. Their jobs are not made easier, they are made harder and more stressful. While some find a way to resist, others acquiesce, though they feel, as one teacher put it, that "the joy is being drained out of teaching."

It will surely be argued that I am too optimistic here, that only a small percentage of teachers can or will take on this more creative work. That there is not time in a school day. Not enough support. It is too haphazard and unsystematic. Too slow. That it is only realistic to rely on ready-made materials, rubrics, lesson plans, and scripts that will bring focus and consistency to instruction. That teachers appreciate the way various programs lift the burden of decisionmaking. That instruction in subjects like reading and math is just too complex, the frameworks of assessment too elaborate, for teachers to master.

I will only point out the incredible irony of this position—that some reformers insist on high standards for students, while they have such a low estimation of teachers.

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*most recent book is* Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones: Six Literacy Principles Worth Fighting For (*Heinemann, 2009*).

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