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The Aesthetics of Disillusionment: Teachers' Narratives of 'Disillusioned Transformation'

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Abstract: This article explores the emotional transformations of teachers since the pandemic, shifting from idealised passion for their profession to a more balanced, self-preserving approach to their work and mental well-being. Through four case studies of teachers from Hong Kong, Australia and France, this paper examines how teachers navigate emotional wisdom in response to trauma and burnout and how such wisdom informs their ability to recognise when to prioritise their mental health over job prospects. The idea of disillusioned transformation will be explored: when teachers who are initially invested in a set of ideals in their roles become disillusioned and disengaged, but through which find emotional balance and the resilience towards new sources of professional fulfilment. Central to transformative learning theory, this study highlights how trauma (moral injury, systemic trauma) and emotional wisdom contribute to teachers' critical reflection and self-preservation. The article seeks to delineate the intersection between emotional wisdom, aesthetic emotions, and trauma recovery and to understand how teachers transform their professional identity in response to emotional distress, fostering a more sustainable and healthy approach to teaching.

Keywords: aesthetic emotions; disillusioned transformation; emotional wisdom; moral injury; systemic trauma; transformative learning

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many changes to the teaching profession. Prolonged remote work disrupted teachers' daily routines, offering many their first experience without the pressure of commuting and adhering to school schedules. At the same time, educators had to rapidly adapt their teaching methods to an unfamiliar online teaching environment. These changes were sudden, full-scale, and overwhelming, all unfolding simultaneously amidst a global public health crisis. As schools transitioned between remote, hybrid, and in-person teaching, many teachers found themselves emotionally strained. Literature has confirmed that issues of burnout and fatigue have long been present in the profession (Madigan et al., 2023). We explore how the pandemic gave teachers an unprecedented opportunity to pause, reflect, and recognise the extent of their exhaustion. Caught between institutional demands, expectations from administrators, and the moral imperative to support their students, teachers have been under immense stress and pressure. The physical distance imposed by the pandemic paradoxically created just enough space for them to reconsider their well-being and professional values. While much research has focused on teacher burnout and attrition, as exacerbated by the pandemic (Minihan et al.; Westphal et al., 2022), this study shifts attention to the emotional transformations teachers undergo when they reassess their professional identity and priorities. For the teachers in this study, this period of reflection led to a fundamental shift in values, moving away from idealistic dedication toward a more self-preservational stance.

This article introduces the concept of "disillusioned transformation" to describe this process—where teachers, once deeply committed to their profession, become emotionally detached from apathy but as self-protection.   We do not view this harmful or undesirable. This article interprets it

as a form of "emotional wisdom" and defines it as the ability to recognise emotional limits, in spite of challenging authoritative circumstances, reassess priorities and respond adaptively . Emotional wisdom in this sense is not only about managing emotions, but is defined by one's understanding of when the right time of engagement and detachment is, and when an emotional experience has reached its aesthetic completion. This concept is borrowed from John Dewey's aesthetic emotions in transformative experiences (Dewey, 2005). Despite the increasing discourse on teacher well-being (Spilt et al., 2011), there remains a gap in understanding how teachers navigate 'trauma' and emotional exhaustion, and how that leads to lasting changes in their professional and personal identities. This article interprets teacher burnout from the overwhelming expectations of school leaders and society as a systematic trauma and emotional labour that teachers have born as moral injury. It seeks to understand and explore how teachers' redefined relationships with their work is a manifestation of emotional wisdom and how they constitute disillusioned transformation.

The intersection of trauma, aesthetic emotions and transformative learning will be examined in this study, hoping to contribute to the ongoing discussions about the evolving nature of teaching. It offers a fresh perspective that neither romanticises nor condemns disillusionment but explores it as a complex and potentially necessary process of adaptation, especially in our post-pandemic era. Understanding this transformation is critical for policymakers, researchers and educators to develop more sustainable educational environments that recognise and support the emotional realities of teachers in our (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) VUCA world (Shields, 2018).

John Dewey's Aesthetic Experience

When we think of art, we tend to think of art as objects, but Dewey advocates that this is a mistake (Henning, 2022). Art is the experience that encapsulates the rhythm of intake and outtake. There are several qualities that make an experience aesthetic (Tom & Puolakka, 2021):

I.   'Phased accumulation'— an aesthetic experience builds progressively;

II.   Intensity and condensation— emotions are condensed into a unified, powerful moment;

III. Resistance as growth— resistance is an essential, productive force that drives development and deepens the experience;

IV.   Sense of rhythm— the experiencer feels a rhythmic flow and internal momentum throughout the process;

V.   Continuity and direction— seamless progressive and distinctiveness is created through a natural flow;

VI.   Purposeful closure— the experience concludes meaningfully by releasing built-up energy or reaching fulfilment.

From a Deweyan perspective, an aesthetic experience follows a roughly structured progression. It is typically initiated by specific stimuli such as having a meal, glancing at a painting, watching a movie, etc. Aesthetic experience unfolds over time, the initial stimuli do not remain static, they constantly evolve and blend with subsequent moments, thereby forming increasingly complex interrealations with earlier and later phases of the experiences. When these evolving parts cohere into a distinct, developing unity that stands apart from the general flow of everyday experience, the resulting encounter is aesthetic. In other words, the enemies of aesthetic experiences are habitual, chaotic, and submission to convention, as well as rigid abstinence and coerced submission (Dewey, 2005, p.306). In Dewey's words, "routine, caprice and submission to convention" (Dewey, 2005, p.40).

Aesthetic experiences are not just about passive appreciation, but they involve a dynamic and emotionally charged engagement or interaction between an individual and the environment.

Emotions in aesthetic experience are not raw or chaotic; they are organised and intensified as the experience develops. Dewey argues that emotions give coherence and direction to aesthetic experiences; they are the "thread that runs through the sequence of acts and objects, knitting them together and giving them significance" (Dewey, 2005, p.44). Most importantly, they emerge when the parts of an experience flow together meaningfully. In other words, aesthetic emotion is not an addition to form, but is integral to the experience's rhythm, tension and release, it is the emotional quality of an experience that makes it aesthetic. It is also noteworthy that Dewey believes emotions are embedded in the complexity of an experience.

Experience as Rupture

Disorientation is a key concept in Mezirow's theory and in many experiences of literature and other artistic experiences. Dewey, according to Morse (2011, p. 22), has a "philosophy of rupture." In making meaning Dewey asserted that "settled states are 'undone,' and this 'undoing' is the primary force in the meaning- making process" (Morse, p. 16). Rupture "is an important part of Dewey's philosophy" (Morse, 2011, p. 13), and meaning in life is achieved through antagonisms and disruptions. Dewey held that discord (rupture) brings a creative force to the pursuit of meaning, even an antidote to despair (Morse, 2011). There is no such thing as a final settlement, a final definitive meaning because every settlement introduces the conditions for a "new unsettling" (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Dewey is associated with the continuity of experience (Author 1, 2021, 2022b), and parallel to this continuity of experience he gives fundamental priority to the experience of rupture as part of the process of making meaning. This is a relatively unexplored concept in TL and even when it is explored (Cox & John, 2016; Scully-Russ, et al., 2022; Teen, Roberts, & Challies, 2020; Watkins, 2019) there is no reference to its origins in Dewey. We learn from Mezirow (1991) that transformation is achieved through rupture - as in a disorienting dilemma. These unsettling experiences are akin to the puzzling experience one often finds in engagements with art. However, not all experience is a source of disequilibrium or rupture, or indeed of transformation.

Having what Alma (2020, p. 34) calls "an experience" can elicit a problematic response and an experience may result from encountering a work of art. In the rhythm of everyday life, most of our experience is inchoate; we only become aware of what Dewey calls an experience in "problematic" situations that are beyond implicit understanding. We are no longer part of an event or situation in a taken for granted way. We are conscious of a rupture (Alma, 2020, p. 34). Experiences of art (Alma, 2020) are particularly effective ways of confronting us with rupture, as frames of reference tilt out of balance by the attempt to make meaning of an aesthetic experience. It may prompt a disorienting dilemma. Alma (2020) insightfully asserts that "all art depends on friction with what we take for granted" and "breaking through our habitual ways of looking at the world" (p. 39). According to Adorno (1977) encounters with great art make "recipients lose their footing" (p. 244). The idea of being off-balance in this way may be a better way of understanding the now over-used concept of disorienting dilemma.

Pandemic as Aesthetic & Transformative Experience

The COVID-19 pandemic is a complex aesthetic experience marked by disruption, emotional intensity, and reconfiguration of meaning. It has the ordinary experience and offered many teachers a sudden break from the habitual life of everyday teaching. This disruption begins with disturbance

and has triggered uncertainty and heightened emotional awareness, consistent with how Dewey contemplates the beginning of aesthetic experiences (Dewey, 2005). From a Mezirow perspective, TL often begins with a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000), and the pandemic played this role. As a disorienting dilemma, the pandemic disrupted educators' assumptions about teaching, productivity and well-being. In both frameworks, disruption is not an endpoint but the beginning of a transformative experience. As the pandemic unfolded, individuals moved through adaptation phases, including lockdowns, remote teaching, and anxieties about health, forcing teachers to rethink their priorities. These connected and interrelated emotional layers shaped a continuous experiential arc, a process infused with emotions. Like Dirkx (2006; 2012) and Tisdell et al.'s (2013) framework of TL, emotions are essential to transformation. In this case, the emotions central to the organisation and unity of experience, such as sorrow, awe, and fatigue, are the aesthetic emotions that became meaning-making tools to these individuals, prompting reflection and value reorientation.

Echoing the third quality of aesthetic experience defined by Dewey (2005), resistance is an essential and productive force that drives development, and a smooth trajectory is unlikely. When teachers face challenging emotions such as fear and despair, they prompt or encourage? hope and reflection in the rhythm of pandemic life, such as waves of lockdowns and social isolation, infections and death coupled with different types of vaccines—these internal moments of momentum, tension, and release become necessary components of the aesthetic experience. These aesthetic experiences unfold with an internal rhythm, with its own inception and resistance, bringing development and fulfilment (Dewey, 2005). The TL framework is also a non-linear process that requires time, oscillation, and space to reflect. Alhadeff-Jones (2017) reminds us that time has an intricate relationship with learners', and often, such rhythm is constrained, limited and shaped by institutionalised schedules. These teachers have managed to break through the constraints and rediscover their transformation with their own rhythm. They experienced emotional journeys through the pandemic consisting of moments of clarity, burnout, quiet joy and realisation, which also mirrors the rhythms of aesthetic experiences and TL.

The pandemic is not truly 'over'; many are still experiencing a kind of existential culmination, and many teachers, in particular, have reevaluated life, work and relationships. Instead of closure, teachers have experienced a meaningful resolution, which makes the experience aesthetic. The sense of completeness or direction after re-orientation corresponds to the integration of new perspectives and a redefined sense of self in the TL framework (Kreber & Cranton, 2000). For these teachers, the pandemic was a catalyst that enabled the shift that challenged their coerced submission to their supervisors and the systems. It forced them to pause their habitual and rigid flow of remaining as dutiful caretakers and instead allowed their aesthetic emotions to dye this unity of experience. In the end, it enabled them to take on the new role as emotionally wise practitioners who prioritise their own well-being. The aesthetic emotions are not just the chaotic ones, it is more than fear and grief, but beauty in slowness, care, solitude, and silence (Dewey, 2005; Henning, 2022). These emotions are not just an add-on for these teachers, but they are the essential substance that binds experience together in a meaningful way.

Framing the pandemic as a Deweyan aesthetic experience allows us to understand how the pandemic has the transformative potential that enables individuals to acknowledge the emotional depth amid the experiential rhythm. The pandemic is not just a public health crisis but an emergent curriculum composed of opportunities to transform, gain emotional wisdom, identity renegotiation, and professional transformation. Mezirow (2000) argues that recognising disillusionment and the reorientation toward self-preservation and emotional honesty are valid forms of transformative learning and counter prevailing understandings of TL. The Deweyan framework allows us acknowledge that the pandemic was not merely chaotic; it has its form, resistance and rhythm that ultimately contributed to some individuals' emotional fulfilment. Many teachers have had the space

opened up by the pandemic to feel, reflect, and make peace with their limits. This realisation is central to Freire's conscientisation, which is also crucial to the fundamentals of TL (Dirkx, 2006; Author 1, 2024; Zembylas, 2005). Instead of actions in the political sense, the conscientization addressed here is an internal. It is the awakening to the myths of professionalism and a deliberate turn toward emotional sovereignty.

Carol Gilligan's moral injury and systemic trauma

Moral injury refers to the psychic harm that occurs when individuals separate or split the functional aspects of their work from the emotional reactions or are forced to act against their own moral sense or when they are silenced from speaking the truth (Gilligan, 2014). Moral injury may occur in classrooms too, especially when teachers have to act against their beliefs and have their voices silenced. This kind of invisible injury stems from suppression of the authentic voice, the pain lies in how this suppression contradicts with the individual's moral beliefs (Gilligan, 2014). When a teacher could not provide one-on-one care to support individuals due to the overwhelming class size, learning gap and tight schedule, this could create feelings of guilt and frustration for teachers. Their moral compass guides them to pause and help students falling behind, but the institution and the system create a structure that does not give them the space and time to do so. These experiences of splitting imply internal conflict and emotional rupture, forcing individuals to mute their authentic voices (A.N Other & Author 1, 2022). Gilligan (2014) pointed out that over time, this silencing is systemic trauma, which is a pattern of emotional harm rooted in institutions, cultures and norms that devalue care and emotional expression (A.N Other & Author 1, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensifies challenges (Westphal et al., 2022) and created an environment that forces teachers to quickly adapt to rapidly changing circumstances: shifting between online and in-person teaching, switching between digital tools, updating remote lesson plans and more (El-Soussi, 2022). Many teachers feel powerless in an online teaching environment as they cannot provide the same level of personalised and emotional support they typically offered in the classroom (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023). When emergency remote teachers (ERT) first took place, not every student had access to the required resources such as a digital device, reliable Internet, quiet learning spaces, etc. (Ezra et al., 2021). Although teachers wanted to help, they were constrained by external limitations such as administrative procedures, bureaucracy, fundings, social distancing rules and lockdown. This inability to meet students' needs and to offer help intensified their feelings of guilt during ERT. Teachers experienced the ethical dilemma of working in potentially unsafe conditions (Will, 2021). Many were worried about their health and their families', especially if they live with children and the elderly. At the same time, it would not be fair to sacrifice the learning of their students who were also adjusting to online learning. Teachers faced the uncertainty of balancing their duty to educate and the responsibility to protect their community, leading to experiencing intense anxiety (Kush et al., 2022).

As ERT progressed, many teachers witnessed the pandemic's emotional and psychological impacts on students (Verstraeten et al., 2025). Many students seemed disengaged and isolated, and some suffered loss and trauma during that period of time, yet teachers were unable to provide the full emotional support desired by their students. Seeing their students struggle but being unable to intervene meaningfully contributed to a moral injury to many teachers (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2018); they felt inadequate and powerless. The prolonged nature of the pandemic also added layers of constant uncertainty, contributing to significant burnout for many (Westphal et al., 2022). The burnout issue is usually correlated with overworking, which has been a persistent issue in the teaching field for years   (Lavery & Dahill-Brown, 2024). The pandemic compounded the moral distress and moral injury of teachers. More importantly, the shift to teaching from home, created a

geographical and emotional separation for teachers from their own supervisors, colleagues, and support systems. This distance gave teachers some relief and freedom, allowing them to step back from constant evaluation or scrutiny. Teaching from home also allowed teachers to have autonomy over their methods, pacing and content delivery to meet the needs of their students. The effects of the pandemic are complex. It created more moral injuries; but also gave them space and freedom for teachers to rediscover their passion for teaching.

Trauma, disillusioned transformation and emotional wisdom

Trauma is understood as moral injury and systemic trauma in this article. The focus is on the intensification and the realisation enabled by the pandemic (Khan et al., 2021). While ERT granted teachers some autonomy, it is precisely this feeling of 'being freed from something' that exposed the constraints they have put up with. Many teachers embrace the freedom of ERT only to realise that other systemic issues such as inequitable access to technology, rigid curricula and administrative pressure, are not easily overcome by individual effort (Ezra et al., 2021). The first layer of disillusionment is marked here, the sense that they are trapped within a system and not much could be done to alleviate the issues, which quickly overwhelmed the initial excitement of autonomy.

The second level of disillusionment comes with more profound reflection. Some teachers have worked according to their supervisors' commands and followed through sets of ideals in the belief that their hard work will be recognised and rewarded, perhaps in the form of monetary incentives or perhaps through a promotion opportunity (Creagh et al., 2023). Until the pandemic disrupted the flow of such habitual submission, these teachers finally realised that their passion for their jobs lies in helping their students improve academically and become better persons. Job prospects and career development are secondary to them after experiencing such a challenging disruption. These teachers focus on the excitement of autonomy that comes with teaching from home and continue to innovate online teaching strategies and methods to engage their students better.

Following this disillusioned transformation is the emergence of emotional wisdom. This article defines emotional wisdom as the ability to recognise when and how to re-engage with these emotions in order to find closure and restore relational balance. It is not simply an outcome of experience accumulation; it takes on Dewey's concept of the unity of experience (Dewey, 2005). The flow of aesthetic emotions, including moments of epiphany and the perspective shifts that follow, are markers of the completeness of the experience (Dewey, 2005; Henning, 2022). Teachers realise their deep-rooted feelings of burnout and frustration. Emotional wisdom is found by those who can re-engage with feelings, both the exhaustion and passion for teaching; they can reset their priorities and restore relational balance. They still face the same stress from their supervisors, and ideals are still imposed on them. However, their priorities change, giving them more than courage— the perspective shift gives them the emotional wisdom to identify the most important aspect of their work (Zembylas, 2003). In the stories of the informants, their passion for teaching was reignited, and a strong sense of relief and satisfaction then occurred when they acknowledged the need to make the change. We call this "Disillusioned transformation". It is therefore beneficial for their mental health, but it also helps them become better teachers who respond to students' needs without institutionalised restrictions.

Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

This research uses qualitative methods in data collection and analysis. Five case studies were selected, and individual in-depth interviews (about one 1 hour for each case) were conducted. Table

1 contains the informants' demographic details and the similarities in their stories are outlined. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Two individuals were contacted via a teaching network in Hong Kong, and then snowball sampling was utilized and managed to interview one teacher in Australia. The other two teachers from France were referred from another research about European teachers' emotions (Insert a reference here maybe??). To reduce bias, each individual was only allowed to introduce only one other informant who did not work in the same school as themselves.

These 5 cases were selected for this research using homogeneous sampling strategy. This makes isolating subtle differences easier and helps understand causal mechanisms within a controlled comparative framework (Jager et al., 2017). Contextual diversity is incorporated to reduce sampling biases. While these teachers are from different countries, this enhances external validity of the research and provides a more comprehensive understanding of 'disillusioned transformation' (Andrade, 2018).

Table 1. Informants' demographic background and perspective shift.

Pseudonym	Teaching experience	Location & School type	Perspective shift
Beth	5	Hong Kong; government-funded secondary school	Fulfilling supervisors' commands -> caring for students' needs
Amy	5	Australia; government-funded highschool	Prioritising students' academic learning -> socio-emotional learning
Kate	10	France; government-funded primary school	Not trusting students' parents -> reliance on parent-teacher collaboration
Livia	8	France; government-funded high school (lycée général)	Prioritising students' academic learning -> students' well-being
Jay	7	Hong Kong; government-funded secondary school	Focus on gaining credits & getting promoted -> prioritising students' needs

Data analysis

Narrative analysis focused on the stories that individuals tell about their experiences. The close examination of their word choice, content, structure, and context of narratives helped gain an in-depth and proper understanding of their construction and interpretation of realities. Narrative analysis helped understand personal experiences and the meanings that individuals assign to them

(Herman & Vervaeck, 2015). In the context of TL, Cranton (2016) also pointed out that narrative inquiry and storytelling are necessary to understand individuals' transformation.

The study also uses thematic analysis as it provides a systematic approach to managing data and allows us to highlight the commonalities and differences across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Table 2 is created to denote details of the initial codes, themes and narratives based on interviews. Four key themes emerged, and they helped us understand teachers' experiences of burnout and how that relates to the development/attainment of emotional wisdom.

The integration of narrative and thematic analyses enables a more comprehensive exploration of the data. While narrative analysis provides depth capturing the richness of individual experiences, thematic analysis offers breadth as it highlights commonalities across cases. This combined approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of teachers' emotional transformation.

Table 2. Mapping the Thematic Analysis Process: From Initial Codes to Findings.

Initial Codes	Themes	Narratives/ Findings
Realisation of emotional exhaustion; reflecting on personal values	Moral injuries: concern for health vs students' interests; keeping schooling going vs ensuring learning is happening	Emotional clarity, Realisation of emotional labour and processing trauma
Feeling uncertain and pointless; unsure about ERT; can't rely on supervisors anymore	Intensified burnout and frustration: loneliness in the battlefield	Jadedness and disillusionment
Decided to make a change; students should be the primary concern; nothing else should matter more than health	Epiphanies: job prospects and promotion should not weigh more than health; educators should focus on students' learning rather than satisfying supervisors; primary concerns between policymakers and teachers are & should be different	Emotional wisdom and Disillusioned transformation

Limitations and future research

Four out of five teachers studied were women (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). This study does not aim to generalise conclusions universally but does represent the stories of these five individuals. This "gender imbalance" may be addressed in future research

The study focuses on the pandemic as a trigger point, but changes and developments in participants' experiences and perspectives may continue over time. This might limit the long-term impact of the pandemic on teachers' professional identities and well-being.

Findings: Distance brings clarity

The narratives shared by the five teachers reveal common threads in their emotional journeys during the pandemic. The most striking may have been the sense of relief many experienced when it seemed over. While some educators found ERT to be a significant challenge to their careers (El-Soussi, 2022), for these five teachers, it became a period of respite, allowing them to step away from the day-to-day pressures of their teaching roles. The sudden shift to remote work allowed them to distance themselves from the sources of stress at their schools, providing clarity about the underlying causes of their emotional distress.

For Beth, a secondary school English teacher in Hong Kong, the pandemic marked a pivotal moment in her career. Initially driven by her passion for teaching, she found herself burning out quickly and had been contemplating leaving her job for two years before the pandemic. Reflecting on her experience, Beth describes the intense emotional and physical toll that her job had taken on her:

> I love teaching. Or at least I thought I did. I think I do, but I would say the pandemic is the reason why I am still teaching. My school is very hierarchical; there're lots of people politics. I am not the type to engage in all that, and so I am constantly pressured to do the chores that nobody wants. Just the semester before the pandemic hit, I was once given 200 exam papers to mark within two school days, meaning I still had to teach during that time. That same year, I was given the class teacher role because it comes with lots of administrative work and duties, and I was exhausted every day from work. I was always crying the moment I reached home, and I could not even converse with my family. I was swamped with work; it felt endless. The pandemic saved my life; it gave me a break. It freed me from classroom duties, people politics, admin work, and grading all those papers within an inhumane deadline. Before the break, I did not hate my supervisor or colleagues; I actually didn't even realise that I was being exploited. I did whatever I was told because I could not say 'no' to them; that thought didn't even cross my mind. During the pandemic, I felt like a heavy weight was lifted from me; that was when I realised I was overworked. Then I had the time and capacity to process things and realised I was very angry with the people I work with.

The pandemic allowed Beth to step back from the daily grind, creating the space she needed to critically reflect on her situation. her workload and the toxic work environment had affected her mental and physical well-being (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2018). The relief she felt was not just from the physical break, but from the emotional distance that allowed her to process her feelings of anger and disillusionment.

Jay, a teacher in Hong Kong for seven years, also experienced a profound shift in emotional perspective during the pandemic. Like many others, he found the time away from the usual demands

of teaching to be an unexpected source of relief. As the pressures of commuting, administrative tasks, and his supervising teacher role were temporarily lifted, and he was able to recognise how these roles had contributed to his stress and burnout. His supervising role, which he had previously accepted as part of her teaching identity, became a point of contention once he was distanced from it. As Jay reflects:

> *I was actually quite relieved, happy and relaxed during the pandemic. I was free from the pressure of waking up early or heavy traffic, I was free from admin duties, and I was free from my supervising teacher role"* [What is a supervising teacher role?] *"It is basically the teacher who plays the bad cop at the school. I was in charge of students' manners and grooming, whether their hair is tied neatly, whether they wore any ear pins… that sort of things, our school cares about image and all that.*

The role of supervising teacher, which is responsible for policing students' appearance and behaviour, was a source of discomfort and frustration that Jay had not fully recognised until it was removed. He describes how his responsibility, focused on image rather than learning or student well-being, creating a sense of disconnection between himself and his students:

> *I did not know that I hated these so much until I did not have to do it, it was a waste of time and irrelevant to students' wellbeing and learning. It was the kind of thing that unnecessarily distanced teachers and students; it's almost like the principal wanted us to look for a reason to 'punish' students and call that discipline. I used to think I like it because it felt powerful, but I didn't feel worse after losing those duties, I actually felt closer to my students.*

The relief Jay experienced during the pandemic was not simply about time away from the classroom, it was also about the emotional distance it created, which allowed him to critically examine his role. He began to see how his supervisory duties as ineffective in aiding students' learning, and it was also detrimental to her relationship with his students. His professional identity had been shaped by tasks that, in hindsight, seemed misaligned with his values of student care and educational growth. This led him to a deeper understanding of his own emotional needs as an educator, emphasising the importance of roles that prioritise meaningful connection over superficial expectations.

The darkest hour before dawn

Amy, a teacher in Melbourne with five years of experience in a government-funded school, experienced profound disillusionment and frustration as the pandemic forced a rapid shift to online teaching. For Amy, the sense of disconnect between the expectations of school leadership and the realities of online teaching created a deep sense of isolation and helplessness. School leadership failed to acknowledge the depth of the issues involved in moving to online teaching.

> *I wanted my students to learn well online, very soon I know it is a lie, we simply cannot put everything we do offline to a remote environment, it does not seem or sound right. I felt the problem, my colleagues did, our students did, but not my principal, not my supervisor. The ones who don't actually have to teach can say*

> *whatever they want, they assume things kept going because it looked like it, but no, nothing was going!*

Amy's highlights an important emotional turning point, where the disconnect between the needs of her students and the decisions of the leadership became impossible to ignore. Despite recognising the detrimental effects on her students, especially those with specific learning needs like dyslexia, Amy felt powerless as school leaders remained indifferent to the challenges she and her students faced.

> *My students were missing out a lot, two kids in my class are dyslexic, it is for sure most challenging for them. My supervisor did not do anything, nor did my principal, they think and I quote, 'there is nothing to be done.*

This moment of emotional clarity was Amy's "darkest hour" before she found a way to articulate the deeper issue: the disconnect between the priorities of leadership and the needs of teachers and students. Amy's realised that the interests of school leadership and the teachers who are in direct contact with students were fundamentally misaligned.

> *The problem is not online teaching, or support from teachers or the school, the problem is that the ones leading the school and the ones who are in direct contact with students have very different interests. I care about my students' wellbeing, academic progress comes second, but the school cares about overall grades and results, they think progress is always measurable, they can't be more wrong, it really is nothing like that in teaching.*

For Amy, the pandemic created a pivotal moment in her emotional and professional growth. It was during this darkest hour that she came to realise how the values she had been striving to uphold, which include focusing on well-being and whole person development of students. But they were at odds with a school system fixated on grades and quantifiable outcomes. This deepened her frustration and also made her recogniSe that she could no longer rely on her supervisors for support, as she experienced the loneliness of being largely on her own in navigating the challenges of teaching.

Livia, a teacher in France, faced a deeply frustrating and emotionally taxing transition between remote and in-person teaching during the pandemic, a shift that left her feeling disconnected and unsafe. At the heart of Livia's darkest hour was the fear and confusion that came with being forced back into in-person teaching before the pandemic was truly under control. Livia's frustration with the lack of care from school leadership mirrored the broader issues of misalignment between teacher priorities and the decisions of authority figures.

> *I told our principal that we should just stay remote until the pandemic was really over, but then she insisted. I was not worried for myself, I live with my mother-in-law, she is 90 year old, what if I make her sick? I am sure many students face something similar too, they live with their grandparents or younger siblings. It was risky for everyone.*

While Amy was dealing with the emotional exhaustion of an ill-prepared transition to online teaching, compounded by a lack of support from school leadership. Livia was grappling with the physical risks of returning to the classroom.

The problem was we didn't know there was going to be a second lockdown, so I was unsure, but I did not insist further to stay at home. In retrospect, I think the government, the school, and our principal did not really care so much about teachers and students. They push for learning and resuming normal, but it was not the right time, things were not normal yet, and that was just risky for everyone. I think I see our principal differently after the whole thing, I lost respect because I think he doesn't care about our well-being.

Livia lost respect for her principal because of his disregard for teacher and student well-being. For both Amy and Livia, the pandemic shattered their trust in educational leadership, and were forced to re-examine their teaching realities without the support of each other on which they once assumed they could rely. These painful realisations marked the beginning of a more self-reliant approach to teaching embedded in heightened self-awareness of their roles in the systems.

Time for change

In the midst of the pandemic, these teachers' reflections reveal a transformative shift in their professional identities and approaches to teaching. The pandemic became a catalyst for change, forcing them to reassess their roles, priorities, and relationships with students, parents, and school leadership. For each teacher, the challenging circumstances of remote learning and the upheaval of their routine prompted a fundamental redefinition of their approach to teaching, resulting in a more balanced, student-centered, and emotionally fulfilling practice. Each teacher has a different perspective shift which is unique to them in their case, for this reason, this will be introduced separately by case.

Kate's Realisation: Parent Collaboration and Personal Growth

Kate is a primary school teacher in France,for her, the pandemic illuminated the potential for closer collaboration between the school and parents who were also working from home. She no longer viewed parents as a source of conflict or pressure but as partners in her educational efforts.

It was easy for me during the pandemic because the parents were very helpful. My students are young, their parents had to work from home, so everyone was there. We kept everything light but I put up progress and extra learning materials on Padlet. The parents took care of everything, the students did not suffer from learning loss I would say. Some of them even showed improvements. That made me think about the role of a teacher, perhaps it should have always been that way. Parents usually expect a lot from us, but when they know they can help as well, it seems they are willing to and are able to.I completely changed my approach with parents after the experience. I communicate openly with them, I set up goals with students, one by one based on their personalities, characters. Those goals become their goals at home too, and it was very effective, many of my students improved overall, not just their studies but their characters as well.

Kate experiences a shift in power dynamics: isolation is replaced by collaborative teaching. Through empowering parents to take an active role in their children's learning, she improved academic outcomes and strengthened the students' personal growth, making a clear departure from traditional teacher-parent dynamics, involving   the mutual benefit of working together.

Beth's Empowerment: Reclaiming Autonomy and Purpose

The pandemic allowed Beth to reclaim her personal autonomy rejecting the pressures of office politics. No longer willing to sacrifice her well-being for professional advancement, she chose to focus on building stronger relationships with her students, emphasizing trust and long-term emotional investment over short-term career gains.

> *I figured I should not try so hard at work, in the office, I now dare to say no. I am not sure what changed, I will still be the last person to be promoted because I don't play their games, but at least now I don't have to be played. I don't have to cry from work anymore. I focus on my relationship with students, they are good kids but they are not the very bright ones, so working on building trust and good relationship really helps them, it motivates them. It is something that takes a lot of time and efforts, but I finally have the time to do that now. That is a lot of work, but it is work that doesn't exhaust me. This is why I said earlier, I love teaching. I am sure I do, even more now.*

Beth's transformation from seeking approval and avoiding trouble to prioritise students' emotional well-being illustrates a fundamental shift in her professional identity. She now sees teaching as the creation of a supportive environment where students feel safe and valued. The changing narrative involved less reliance on external validation, more focus on internal fulfillment.

Jay's Shift in Priorities: Moving Beyond Career Advancement

Jay's story also reflects a similar evolution, albeit through a personal loss. Prior to the pandemic, Jay was focused on career progression and building credibility. However, after losing his uncle to the virus, Jay underwent a reassessment of what truly mattered in his life. He chose to let go of extra duties and instead concentrated on teaching and creating a positive learning environment for his students:

> *I cared a lot about getting promoted, getting credibility and taking up more duties are the way to climb the ladder. It is an interesting experience for me because all along I thought that was most important to me. Well, I lost my uncle to the pandemic, I guess that made me stop and think, as well… I gave up those extra duties as soon as I could, and now I only focus on teaching, and helping my students do better. I even draw comics and personalise notes for each class to make teaching and learning more fun. When my students enjoy the lesson, they learn well and perform better in the exams. That becomes my priority now.*

During the pandemic Jay rediscovered his love for teaching joy of learning rather than external markers of success. His shift from careerism to student-centered learning echoes a larger theme of personal growth and clarity that came from the chaos of the pandemic.

Amy's Authenticity: Teaching on Her Own Terms

Amy's story, like Jay's, highlights the emotional and personal growth that came from the pandemic's challenges. She realised that the system was unlikely to change, but that she could still change herself and remain true to her values as a teacher:

> The system won't change, the principal won't change, but things can be changed if it starts from me. I don't want to rush my students or pressure them, I want them to learn and blossom in their pace and based on what they are able to. I just do my own adjustments now and I don't try to convince or negate my principal or the supervisors. I am on a permanent contract anyway, so they can't do anything. But to myself, at least I am finally true to myself and doing something that is genuinely good for my students. I think that feeling beats anything.

Amy's newfound confidence and authenticity as a teacher reflect how she shifted away from systemic pressures to a deeper commitment to her students' well-being. She chose to embrace her own teaching style and focuses on individual student growth, she no longer feels the need to conform to the system's demands. For Amy, this personal decision to align her teaching with her values brings a sense of fulfillment that outweighs the pressures of her institution.

Livia's Reflection: Health and Well-being Above All

Prior to the crisis, health and well-being were not Livia's primary concerns, but the pandemic forced her to reconsider her priorities, she now places greater importance on their mental and physical health, recognising that true success in teaching cannot solely be measured by academic outcomes.

> I did not care so much about health and wellbeing before. The pandemic made me think a lot about these. As a teacher, I face at least one hundred students each year, I ask myself what do I want best for them, I want them to be healthy, physically and mentally. I think that is what their families want most as well, for their children to be healthy and happy. I still try my best in class when I teach, but it does not bother me as much anymore when my students are not getting high marks and so on.

This change in focus towards holistic care for students, prioritising their happiness and well-being over academic performance, marks a significant transformation in Livia's teaching philosophy. Her admission that she is no longer overly concerned with her students' results.

> Maybe that does not make me a good teacher anymore, but it makes me a happy person   who is able to bring happiness to my students and the school as well.

The statement reflects the struggles that teachers feel when letting go of external expectations and instead seeking to nurture a healthy, supportive learning environment. By recognising that true success in teaching is not defined by test scores but by the well-being and happiness of her students, Livia has embraced a more compassionate and balanced approach to education.

Discussion

Disillusionment: Reassessment of moral injuries

In the TL framework, critical reflection is crucial to the learner's next steps, the usual interpretation is that the learner will gain new perspective and experience a shift in frames of reference (Cranton, 2016; Author 1, 2024; Mezirow, 2000). In this case, these teachers' perspective shift is demonstrated in their stronger convictions in their values, rather than a change in their values. Different from the other cases of transformation, this reassessment is triggered by their moral injuries, the moments where teachers' ethical convictions about student care, equity, and meaningful learning clashed with what they were being asked to do (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2018). These moral injuries were tolerated in silence before, but the pandemic created space and distance to gain some clarity of emotion and perspective. In this study, such injuries were not merely episodic but systemic, they are embedded in hierarchical school cultures, unrealistic administrative demands, and the prioritisation of superficial metrics over genuine student development, which leads to systemic trauma (Gilligan, 2014).   These are reflected in the five teachers' stories.

Beth's emotional collapse prior to the pandemic, such as crying daily after work and feeling emotionally disconnected from her family, was mislabeled as 'burnout' or 'stress' by herself. The interesting part is how she had been thinking about quitting for two whole years but did not take any action and still kept agreeing to the extra workload given to her. She did not have the luxury to gain clarity about these issues until the enforced pause of ERT gave her the space to reflect (Smart, 2013). What she initially interpreted as stress became exploitation, she recognised how the school and her colleagues had disregarded for her emotional labour and well-being. This process of realisation, intensified by the physical and emotional distance from her work environment, led to a re-evaluation of her commitment to institutional expectations. Her transformation began with disillusionment; an affective turning point for her. Jay's relief during the pandemic was not about teaching per se but about being freed from duties that served institutional image rather than student learning. Before the pandemic, he interpreted it as an empowerment, but when the duties were lifted, he realised the emotional and relational distance between him and his students were created by those duties. The temporary removal of this role not only brought relief but also sparked a critical reflection on the implicit values embedded in school discipline and his complicity in upholding them (Arcidiacono & Aber, 2017). Jay's disillusionment is seen in his recognition that such practices were "a waste of time and totally irrelevant", and he decided to forego gaining credibility for better promotion opportunities and use his time and efforts in catering for his students' needs. This disillusioned transformation shows how moral injuries are not simply endured but become catalysts for moral clarity.

Amy's story adds another layer to this moral dissonance, her frustration stemmed from the clearly identified disconnection between school leadership and classroom realities. Her account exposes how institutional denial (when she was told that "there is nothing to be done") constituted a sense of abandonment for herself and especially for students with special learning needs. It was not only the workload or the crisis that was distressing but the deafness and refusal of acknowledgement from her supervisors in the face of nuanced, ethical challenges of teaching during the pandemic. Her disillusionment with leadership marked a point of rupture, a recognition that solidarity could no longer be expected from above. The moral injuries fuelled this disillusioned transformation, but this rupture sharpened her sense of autonomy and moral clarity in her teaching practice. These cases demonstrate how moral injury and disillusionment can evolve into emotionally complex but generative turning points. The distance granted by the pandemic, both emotionally and physically (via remote work), helped teachers gain emotional clarity about what they value and can no longer accept. This clarity initiated a reassessment and redefinition of their professional selves, away from institutional compliance and towards a more emotionally sustainable, student-centred ethos. It is precisely in the confrontation with betrayal and burnout that the seeds of emotional wisdom begin to emerge.

Emotional wisdom: paint in a new light

The disillusionment experienced by these teachers implies the loss of trust in institutional systems, the disillusioned transformation occurred not from a sense of destruction or relief, but the re-entry into environments that now felt ethically compromised. Their decision to stay as a teacher comes from their reignited passion for teaching, and this enthusiasm has made room for deeper emotional and moral awareness.

The accounts of Amy and Livia are especially salient here; both found themselves at odds with school leaders whose decisions reflected institutional priorities over teachers' and students' needs. Amy's experience signalled a rift between educational leadership and the realities of teaching; this is more than a type of disagreement or conflict, it is an ethical rupture. Zembylas and Bekerman (2018) wrote about the 'difficult knowledge' of educators and argued that institutional pressures can provoke moral disorientation and a sense of moral injury in teachers. In Livia's story, her trust in school leadership deteriorated during the chaotic transition between online and in-person teaching, especially in her principal's insistence on returning to the classroom. It fractured her sense of shared purpose because the school was seen as a community of care, but the decision reflected that it had other priorities over the wellbeing of teachers and students. The realisation marked a critical threshold in transformative learning, where the learner's previous meaning structures collapse, urging the learner to reorient themselves morally and emotionally (Taylor, 2008).

Mezirow's TL tends to frame critical reflection as a rational process which undermines the affective and relational dimensions of transformation (Taylor, 2017). As Zembylas et al. (2014) pointed out in their study, educators' emotional experiences and memories are co-produced and regulated to reflect broader cultural and political discourses. This implies that teachers' emotional experiences can catalyse both personal insight and collective consciousness. These teachers' feelings of disillusionment and jadedness help them understand their pain not as personal failure but as systemic failure, a distinction that is critical for ethical clarity and professional growth. This sense of clarity and realisation in particular, marks the emergence of emotional wisdom, a deepened understanding of one's values in teaching, though forged through grief, betrayal and moral disorientation, now gains assurance within the individual. Instead of confrontations, Amy realises the importance of acting ethically on her behalf and within her sphere of influence, she no longer expects any systemic change from above, but she does not give up chances of making the situation better. Livia also shifts her focus from institutional loyalty to a renewed commitment to the wellbeing of her students. These insights are not merely outcomes of conventional professional development, they signal the transformation coming from disillusionment, which has altered these teachers' orientation from power to care and responsibility.

The 'darkest hour' was not simply about the despair these teachers felt, it was the necessary passage they had to go through as they confronted the dissonance between their values and the clash from their working conditions. This confrontation brought feelings of discomfort, anger, and frustration, but the pandemic also brought them peace because it bought them time and distance. This distance gave them the chance to orient with clarity, and the recognition of the disillusionment deepens the transformation, allowing them to move from insight to ethical stance, from critique to actions that are consistent with their own beliefs. The pain of moral injuries became the ground for a more rooted, emotionally attuned and conscious reflection of their identity, marking the disillusioned transformation. They become more aware and conscious about this clarity and the need to see clearly and act accordingly; this ethical commitment without drowning in the emotional baggage is where emotional wisdom is evident.

Disillusioned transformation: pathway to resilience and sustainability

The final stage of these teachers' narratives marks a powerful shift, not simply a recovery from exhaustion, but a transformation shaped through emotional clarity, moral reckoning, and aesthetic re-engagement with the teaching profession (Smart, 2013; Zembylas and Becker, 2018). These teachers' experiences reflect the movement from disillusionment to emotional wisdom, which is termed as 'disillusioned transformation' in this article. The transition from burnout to resilience was initiated in solitude and sustained through an inward turn that allowed each teacher to reimagine what it means to teach well.

According to Mezirow (2000), TL entails a shift in one's meaning perspectives, often prompted by a disorienting dilemma. The teachers in this study had experienced the disorienting dilemma in a complex way, it is the pandemic but also the ERT resulted from the pandemic. The chaos imposed on the educational systems was more than a disorienting dilemma to these teachers; it was the rupture that exposed the unsustainability of their pre-pandemic professional realities. It triggered critical reflection and reassessment of long-held assumptions, initiating a process that provokes disillusionment and emotional awakening. Their previously internalised values such as

performance metrics, institutional approval, and the pursuit of promotion were rendered hollow. Jay, Beth and Amy faced the confrontation of the emotional toll of their pre-pandemic roles and experienced a disentanglement in their professional identities and the fulfilment of institutional expectations. The emergence of emotional wisdom, which prmopted them to act on their ethical commitment is an aesthetic experience itself. Dewey (2005) would single out this affective unity of doing and undergoing as key to aesthetic experience since it engages the individuals in a meaningful way.

Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience enables a unique frame for understanding the changes and transformation that occurred in these teachers. When ERT freed these teachers from the relentless administrative tasks and punitive structures of schooling, they began to re-engage with teaching as a creative, relational, and emotionally textured practice. Jay began drawing comics to enliven his lessons; Beth focused on trust and relationship-building with her students; Kate collaborated deeply with parents. These were not utilitarian strategies but expressions of a reconfigured emotional style that is rooted in care, joy, and resonance. In Deweyan terms, it is an integration of emotion, intellect, and action, which is evidence of aesthetic emotions functioning as an organising force that rendered their teaching personally meaningful and experientially whole and complete (Dewey, 2005; Henning, 2022).

This aesthetic renewal was a result experienced by these teachers. Amy's frustration with inaccessible leadership, Livia's grief over health risks, Beth's realisation of institutional exploitation, these teachers were at some point emotionally and ethically drained and broken. However, they did not dwell on this brokenness, the rupture helped them gain emotional and ethical clarity about their own values. It gave them courage to reject institutional complicity, their reclamation of authority as moral agents in the classroom is also fueled by both courage and emotional wisdom. In the TL framework, transformation is never only about content or knowledge, it is existential and deeply emotional (Cranton, 2016; Author 1, 2024). Zembylas et al. (2014) suggested that teachers' emotional styles are pedagogical choices shaped by history, culture and affect. Perhaps we were unable to locate how these teachers' life experiences moulded their choices today.

These teachers are not just coping, they are reconstructing themselves through emotional wisdom. This is a powerful conscious choice not to revert to old norms, to go against the mainstream and decided to stay committed to sustainable practises which prioritised wellbeing, emotional authenticity, student-centred learning and teacher-students relationships. Their aesthetic reorientation allowed them to

reimagine teaching not as compliance, but as an embodied, ethical and expressive act that is in unity with who they are.

Conclusion

This study offers a timely and necessary reconsideration of how transformation unfolds in teaching, especially during and after crisis. Drawing from the emotionally rich narratives of these five teachers across different contexts, this paper has traced a movement from emotional rupture (disillusionment) to moral clarity and, finally, to sustainable re-engagement with teaching (engagement with aesthetic experience). These trajectories do not conform neatly to the traditionally "positive" developmental shift, yet it aligns well with the elements of TL which specifically relied on critical theory (Author 1, 2022a). The disillusioned transformation is marked by pain, moral injury, and through reflection and transformation, a profound aesthetic reckoning with one's professional values. These teachers gained clarity in the process of disillusionment, but this clarity did not lead to reconciliation into the system. Rather, it brought them away from institutional norms, but it brought them closer to their true self, and toward a more personally meaningful, ethically grounded, and emotionally sustainable practices.

One key implication of this study is the need to broaden the theoretical scope of TL to better understand how transformations can be rooted in disillusionment, if the person also experiences emotional clarity and acts with ethical resistance. These neglected forms of transformations are consequential and important to make sense of how teachers transform both personally and professionally after a crisis.

This study contributes to the growing discussion of moral injury in education. These teachers did not simply feel stressed or burnout, they felt morally compromised, because they were forced to comply with institutional expectations that conflicted with their moral sense of right and wrong. To address such injuries, as Zembylas and Bekerman (2018) argue, it requires not only personal healing but also systemic acknowledgment and the cultivation of spaces where moral repair can begin. As such, emotional and moral recovery should be seen not as private coping mechanisms but as forms of educational resistance and agency.

More importantly, the findings highlighted the value of aesthetic experience and emotional wisdom in bringing sustainable change. As Dewey (2005) reminded us, learning and living are at their most profound when they are felt, embodied, and creatively enacted. These teachers' post-pandemic practices, represent not only technical adjustments but they are the aesthetic reorientations to the craft of teaching. These adjustments are what it means to these individuals to teach with integrity, purpose, and care in the aftermath of disruption.

This paper calls for a reimagining of transformation in TL, one that makes space for the disillusioned, the emotionally wounded, and the morally awake. This study suggests the experience of and grappling with the possibility of burnout, or emotional collapse can become fertile ground for alternative forms of transformation, which are affective, relational, and ethically charged. These transformations reflect strength, and the capacity to stay in work with clarity, honesty, and humanity.

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