

The Dangerous Teacher: Competent, Confident and Difficult to Manage

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Abstract

This research-informed reflective practice brief examines a recurring tension in school organisations: dependable teachers may become the default recipients of additional work when redistribution is easier than addressing the conditions that produced the work in the first place. Drawing on professional reflection across more than sixteen years in education and scholarship on organisational justice, role overload, organisational citizenship behaviour, employee voice, psychological safety, poor-performer management and teacher turnover, the article develops the “competence penalty” as a practitioner lens rather than a formal theoretical construct. The concept overlaps with emerging research on high-performance punishment, but focuses specifically on the organisational pattern through which reliable performance becomes a rationale for repeated workload migration, particularly when unresolved underperformance or planning failures sit upstream. The brief distinguishes temporary collegial support from patterned over-reliance, and separates established research findings from professional interpretation and propositions arising from the competence-penalty lens. It also considers how leadership responses to confident professional voice may shape whether expertise is used, resisted or silenced. A contemporary practitioner example is used illustratively rather than as academic evidence. The article concludes with practical questions for school leaders seeking to audit workload distribution, accountability, development opportunities and receptiveness to challenge. It reports no human-participant research.

Keywords: teacher retention; educational leadership; competence penalty; organisational justice; employee voice

Approach and Reflective Positioning

This article is a research-informed reflective practice brief, not an empirical study. It draws on professional experiences accumulated across more than sixteen years in education in four national contexts, including substantial periods in which I have worked simultaneously as a classroom teacher and educational leader. Those experiences are used as prompts for reflection rather than treated as research data, and no former colleague, school or workplace is presented as a participant or case study.

The scholarship is used to interrogate, complicate and sometimes restrain those reflections. Rather than conducting a systematic literature review, the brief draws purposively on peer-reviewed research relevant to the recurring themes that emerged from practice: workload distribution, organisational justice, extra-role work, role overload, burnout, management of poor performance, employee voice, psychological safety and teacher retention. Meta-analyses and established empirical studies are used where available. Public practitioner material is included only as illustration of how some of these ideas appear in contemporary school leadership practice. Throughout, I distinguish among findings established in prior research, interpretations arising from my professional experience, and propositions generated through the competence-penalty lens.

The Competence Penalty

There is a peculiar phenomenon in education that nobody puts in the staff handbook: the better you become at your job, the greater your chances of eventually doing somebody else's.

Nobody announces this, of course. There is rarely an email from leadership saying, "Dear Pieter, congratulations on consistently meeting deadlines, building strong relationships with students, supporting your colleagues and generally knowing what you're doing. As recognition of this achievement, we have decided to give you Karen's work as well. Karen is struggling. Kind regards, Leadership."

It happens far more organically.

"We know you'll get it done."

“You’re just so good at this.”

“We really appreciate your adaptability.”

Ah, adaptability.

After more than sixteen years in education across four countries, I have learned that “be adaptable” can mean many things. Sometimes it means adapting your teaching because a student needs something different. Sometimes it means responding professionally when circumstances genuinely change. And sometimes it means we planned this badly and have selected you to experience the consequences.

Years ago, while leaving a school in China, I wrote rather colourfully about adaptability being used to compensate for poor planning and decision-making. I was equally unimpressed by capable staff repeatedly carrying additional responsibilities because addressing underperformance elsewhere was apparently the less attractive option. Younger Dr Bosman had thoughts. Older Dr Bosman still has thoughts. He has simply acquired more qualifications and learned to reference them.

What I was describing then is something I have since come to call the competence penalty: the point at which reliable performance becomes part of the rationale for repeatedly allocating additional labour to the same person, especially when redistribution is organisationally easier than addressing why the work was not completed elsewhere. I do not present this as a new formal theory. It is a practitioner lens for recognising a pattern that sits alongside several established areas of organisational scholarship.

The overlap is important. Bolino and Turnley (2005) found that high levels of individual initiative, a form of organisational citizenship behaviour, were associated with role overload, job stress and work-family conflict. Later work on “citizenship fatigue” showed that employees can become worn out by sustained extra-role contribution, particularly under less supportive conditions (Bolino et al., 2015). Vigoda-Gadot (2006) also theorised “compulsory citizenship behaviour” to describe extra-role activity shaped by pressure rather than genuine voluntarism. Most directly, Bari, Khan and Di Virgilio (2025) examine “high-performance punishment”: additional work placed on high

performers without corresponding recognition or compensation. In their multi-country IT sample, high-performance punishment was associated with greater knowledge hoarding and hiding, with deviant silence partially mediating those relationships.

The competence penalty therefore does not claim that organisations have only now discovered the possibility of overusing capable people. Its practical value is narrower and, I think, useful for schools: it draws attention to a particular mechanism of workload migration. The question is not simply whether a strong employee has “a lot to do”, but whether unresolved work repeatedly travels toward the same dependable people because their competence makes redistribution convenient. In that sense, competence can become both an organisational asset and an exposure to further labour.

Organisational justice research gives this concern a second foundation. Colquitt et al.’s (2001) meta-analysis demonstrated that distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational justice are related to important workplace outcomes including commitment, citizenship behaviour, withdrawal and evaluations of authority. The competence-penalty lens asks leaders to look at workload through that fairness frame: not only “Was the task completed?” but “How was the burden distributed, why did it move, and what does that pattern communicate to the people carrying it?”

When Helping Becomes a Pattern

This distinction matters because not every redistribution of work is exploitative. Schools are collective workplaces. Colleagues become ill. Emergencies happen. Deadlines collide. A teacher may voluntarily take on additional responsibility because it develops expertise, supports a colleague through a difficult period or advances a goal they genuinely value. Sometimes the most capable person is, quite sensibly, the person best placed to lead an urgent piece of work.

The competence penalty begins to become useful as a diagnostic lens when the arrangement changes from temporary support to a recurring pattern: the same dependable people absorb additional work; the redistribution is weakly recognised or compensated; the original workload or performance problem remains substantially untouched; and reliability itself becomes the reason those employees are selected

again. The distinction is therefore not between “helping” and “refusing to help”. It is between reciprocal collegiality and patterned organisational dependence.

Every school has teachers who get things done. They meet deadlines. Students respond to them. Parents generally trust them. Their colleagues seek their advice. Give them a problem and they will probably solve it before the committee established to investigate the problem has scheduled its second meeting.

Leadership knows who these people are. Unfortunately, so does everyone else.

When somebody repeatedly fails to complete something, leaders have several responsibilities: establish what has happened, clarify expectations, provide appropriate support, consider contextual factors and, where necessary, address performance.

Redistribution may still be required in the short term. The danger is when redistribution becomes the management strategy.

The work does not disappear. It migrates.

Usually towards somebody competent.

Sometimes the problem is not that Kevin cannot do the work. Sometimes Kevin has simply learned that if he waits long enough, somebody dependable will eventually be asked to help.

Felps, Mitchell and Byington (2006) provide a useful, though not education-specific, account of how persistent negative group-member behaviours such as withholding effort can shape perceptions of inequity, trust and defensive responses within teams. More recently, Kim (2026) found in a public-sector context that the mismanagement of poor performers was associated with higher turnover intentions among coworkers, with affective organisational commitment helping to explain that relationship. Neither study demonstrates a competence-redistribution mechanism in schools. They do, however, support the more modest proposition that persistent underperformance and the way organisations respond to it can matter for the people working around it.

The lesson communicated by repeated redistribution may therefore be consequential.

The underperforming employee may learn that somebody else will eventually compensate. The dependable employee may learn that doing something well increases

the probability of being asked to do it again. And everyone watching may begin to wonder whether becoming indispensable is, professionally speaking, an excellent way to acquire additional duties.

Workload, Fairness and Retention

This is where causal restraint matters. I cannot claim from the existing literature that competent teachers burn out because they are carrying redistributed work from underperforming colleagues. That specific mechanism has not been established by the teacher-retention studies cited here. What the research does establish is that workload, burnout, organisational conditions, trust, support and fairness belong in the retention conversation.

Li and Yao's (2022) meta-analysis of 94 studies involving 39,508 teachers found burnout, workload and stress positively related to turnover intentions, while trust, professional identification and organisational commitment were important protective factors; job satisfaction, climate, justice and support also mattered. Gundlach, Slemph and Hattie (2024), synthesising 40 years of research across 185 studies and more than 3.2 million teachers, similarly show that teacher attrition, migration and retention sit within a complex network of antecedents and that intentions and actual turnover should not be treated as identical outcomes.

The competence penalty is therefore a proposition about one possible organisational pathway within that larger landscape. It asks whether some workload inequity may be produced not only by the quantity of work schools face, but by how unresolved work is distributed internally. That proposition requires further empirical testing. As a practitioner lens, however, it gives leaders something concrete to inspect before explaining burnout solely as an unavoidable feature of teaching or prescribing another resilience workshop to the people already doing three jobs.

When Competence Becomes Influence

There is another stage in the journey of the competent teacher. Schools quite rightly encourage professional development. We promote postgraduate study, professional learning, leadership development, mentoring, research, evidence-informed practice and

continuous improvement. Some teachers take this rather seriously. They study. They qualify. They research. They mentor. They lead. They become increasingly knowledgeable, confident and influential.

And then something curious can happen.

Development becomes utilisation. Utilisation becomes influence. And influence, in the wrong environment, can become uncomfortable.

Throughout my career, I have worked within very different approaches to educational leadership. In some environments, initiatives seemed to arrive with remarkable frequency: a new idea had been encountered, a framework discovered, and suddenly everyone was expected to implement it. Before one approach had necessarily been structured, evaluated or embedded, another was waiting in the wings. For someone like me — structured, evidence-oriented and irritatingly fond of asking why before enthusiastically asking when — this has not always been an ideal marriage.

As professional credibility grows, colleagues may also begin coming to you. They ask questions. They seek advice. They discuss curriculum, assessment, students and decisions affecting their work. That influence is not necessarily manufactured through a title. It develops through relationships, expertise and trust. This taught me an important distinction: authority is given by an organisation; influence is given by people. They are not the same thing.

My earlier temptation was to frame the next step too neatly: secure leaders welcome this influence; insecure leaders experience it as competition. The research supports a more careful claim. Fast, Burris and Bartel (2014) found that lower managerial self-efficacy could contribute to aversion to employee voice through ego defensiveness. Detert and Burris (2007), in a large study of employees and managers, found managerial openness more consistently related to improvement-oriented voice, with psychological safety helping to explain that relationship. Edmondson's (1999) foundational work likewise conceptualised psychological safety as a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking is safe and linked it with team learning behaviour.

Those findings make leadership receptiveness to voice an important issue; they do not license the conclusion that every leader who rejects an employee's suggestion is insecure. A leader may have information that the employee does not. The suggestion may be impractical. The timing may be wrong. The employee may be correct in substance and disastrous in delivery. Sometimes both leader and employee contribute to the conflict. The more defensible proposition is that leadership conditions can influence whether professional voice feels safe and whether expertise is invited into decision-making.

Schools can still make a spectacular mistake here. We recruit experienced teachers, encourage further study, ask them to mentor colleagues, expect them to lead improvement and tell them we value professional expertise — right up until that expertise produces somebody confident enough to question us.

Then the vocabulary can undergo an interesting transformation.

Experienced becomes opinionated. Confident becomes arrogant. Influential becomes intimidating. Questioning becomes negative. Challenging our thinking becomes difficult to manage.

Meanwhile, the person nodding enthusiastically in the corner may appear wonderfully easy to lead.

Apparently critical thinking is something we encourage mainly in the students.

But collaboration and compliance are not synonyms. Nor is dissent automatically wisdom. A valuable professional challenger is someone who can question decisions with evidence, professional respect and an orientation toward improvement, while still functioning within collective decisions once they are made. An employee who undermines colleagues, refuses reasonable direction or turns every disagreement into a referendum on leadership is not demonstrating courage merely because they are loud. The boundary matters.

The Dangerous Teacher Might Actually Be Difficult

I know something about being perceived as “too much”. When I left one school, I gave a farewell speech that was, shall we say, not the traditional expression of gratitude

followed by cake. I spoke about knowing exactly who I was professionally — lights on, lights off, spotlight or no stage at all — and concluded: “I will never compromise on quality — so if I was too much, maybe you’re just used to less.” Subtlety has never been my spiritual gift.

The person for whom much of the subtext was intended was not actually in attendance. Life does occasionally deny us appropriate dramatic closure.

The useful reflection came later. It is professionally convenient to interpret every disagreement as evidence that somebody else was threatened by my competence. Sometimes a leader may respond defensively to challenge; sometimes the person doing the challenging could have communicated considerably better. Sometimes both are true. And sometimes the confident employee really is being difficult. I have been in education long enough to recognise that possibility, including occasionally in mirrors.

I have also experienced leadership where ideas are considered before implementation, where structure matters, where professional disagreement does not automatically become interpersonal conflict and where expertise in the room is something to draw upon rather than neutralise. I did not become less qualified, quieter or less opinionated in those environments. What changed was the relationship between expertise and leadership. In the right leadership environment, the qualities that once made an employee seem difficult can become precisely the qualities that allow them — and the people around them — to flourish.

That contrast has reinforced perhaps the most important leadership lesson I have learned:

Strong leaders are not diminished by strong people. They build teams out of them.

Leadership does not require being the smartest, most qualified or most influential person in every room. One of its privileges should be surrounding yourself with people who know things you do not know, can do things you cannot do and occasionally have a considerably better idea than yours.

A competent teacher should never have to become less competent to make their leader feel more competent.

A Practitioner Illustration: Principal Lamb

A useful contemporary practitioner illustration comes from American educator Jared Lamb, known online as Principal Lamb. This material is illustrative rather than evidentiary: the scholarly claims in this brief do not depend on social-media content. Lamb has publicly advocated for leader visibility, teacher support and reducing unnecessary demands on teachers. BASIS Charter Schools describes his decision to replace a conventional office with a mobile cart to increase his presence and accessibility around the school (Licht, 2023). Treleaven (2024) also reported his argument that repeatedly asking teachers to perform multiple jobs contributes to attrition.

In a more recent post, Lamb listed practices his school had used to improve teacher retention, including turning unnecessary meetings into emails, asking teachers what they need, protecting planning time, setting boundaries with parents, following through with consequences and maintaining visible leadership (Lamb, 2026). My first reaction was admittedly sarcastic: Revolutionary. Someone alert Harvard.

My second was more serious. Why do these things sound revolutionary at all? Their value is not that a TikTok post proves a retention model. It does not. Their value is that they translate broader concerns about workload, support, fairness and leader accessibility into recognisable school practices. Sometimes the practical expression of organisational justice is remarkably unglamorous: a protected planning period, a problem actually addressed, or a meeting that had the courage to become an email.

Your most effective teacher probably does not need another exciting opportunity to demonstrate leadership. They might just need Kevin to do his own job.

Implications for School Leaders

These reflections have changed how I try to lead. When work is not being done, my first response should not automatically be to transfer it to the person I know will get it done; the underlying issue needs to be understood and, where appropriate, addressed. I try to

protect teachers' time, make expectations clear, hold people accountable for the work that belongs to them and create enough professional safety for disagreement without treating challenge as disloyalty. I do not always get this right. The temptation to give something urgent to the most dependable person in the room is very real. The question is what happens after the emergency.

For school leaders, the competence-penalty lens can be converted into a small set of practical checks:

1. Audit additional work. Over a term or semester, who repeatedly receives urgent tasks, extra projects, mentoring responsibilities, rescue work or “development opportunities”? Is the pattern broader than leaders realise?
2. Distinguish collegial support from structural dependence. Is the additional work temporary, voluntary and reciprocal, or has one person's reliability become the standing solution to another problem?
3. Address the source, not only the symptom. When work is redistributed because it was not completed elsewhere, what support, expectation-setting or performance response follows? If nothing follows, redistribution may be concealing rather than solving the problem. Sooner or later, that means having a real conversation with Kevin.
4. Interrogate the language of development. Would the employee still regard the opportunity as developmental if it were described plainly in hours, responsibilities and accountability? Recognition without resources can become a very elegant way of saying “more work”.
5. Audit professional voice. Whose disagreement is treated as useful information, whose is labelled negativity, and do leaders respond differently to influential challengers than to compliant colleagues? Psychological safety does not require agreement; it requires that professional challenge can occur without disproportionate interpersonal risk.

6. Review what happens after the crisis. Sometimes redistribution is unavoidable. The leadership test is whether temporary rescue work is later recognised, rebalanced and prevented from becoming the new normal.

Supporting teachers does not mean protecting them from accountability. Poor professional practice should be challenged. Deadlines matter. Curriculum matters. Assessment matters. Student outcomes matter. Professional standards matter. Teachers do not become exempt from reasonable expectations simply because teaching is difficult.

But accountability must travel in both directions.

If teachers are accountable for the quality of the work they produce, leaders must also be accountable for the quality and fairness of the conditions in which they expect that work to occur.

Conclusion: What the Competence Penalty Adds

The contribution of the competence penalty is deliberately modest. It is not offered as a validated theory, and it overlaps with established scholarship on organisational justice, role overload, citizenship behaviour, high-performance punishment, employee voice and retention. Its value as a practitioner lens is to name a pattern that can otherwise look like ordinary efficiency: dependable employees repeatedly absorbing additional labour because they are dependable, while the organisational conditions generating that labour remain insufficiently addressed.

For schools, the lens connects three questions that are too often discussed separately: Who carries the additional work? What happens to the problem that caused the work to migrate? And what happens to the professional voice of the people repeatedly relied upon? The research reviewed here does not establish a single causal chain from competence to overload to silence to departure. It does, however, provide good reason to take workload, fairness, poor-performer management, psychological safety, voice and organisational support seriously when thinking about retention.

Perhaps teacher retention is not quite as mysterious as we make it. Know your people. Protect their time. Back them when they need backing and challenge them when they

need challenging. Develop people who need development rather than quietly transferring their responsibilities to those already performing. Recognise expertise without exploiting it. Do not confuse disagreement with disloyalty, confidence with arrogance or compliance with leadership. And please stop rewarding competence exclusively with additional labour.

Because there is a plausible and professionally familiar trajectory when organisations fail to notice these patterns. Strong teachers may stop volunteering. They may offer fewer ideas. They may decide that challenge is no longer worth the effort. Silence can look wonderfully like harmony from a distance.

Then some of them leave.

And somewhere, in a meeting that absolutely could have been an email, somebody will inevitably ask:

“Does anyone know why we can’t retain good staff?”

Kevin probably does.

He’s got plenty of time.

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