

## Introduction: The Work and Lives of Teachers

One teacher works with 40 students a day, another with 150. One stands austere on a raised platform in an unadorned cinderblock room. Another weaves around a brightly decorated classroom, laughing and chatting with small clusters of students. One teacher saves up her meager salary for months to replace a broken washing machine. Another spends weekends in her second home and collects shoes. Across the globe, being a teacher means very different things: poverty or affluence, low status or prestige.

At the same time that these vast differences exist, rhetoric about education and reform, in the United States and around the world, hardly takes the working and living conditions of teachers into account. Policy-makers, corporations, politicians, and curriculum reformers focus on everything but how the reforms they propose will affect the viability of the profession, its appeal to the best and brightest. Today, charter schools, standardized testing, and accountability are the catch-phrases for reform. Thirty years ago, it was site-based management and essential skills. In the neo-progressive 1970s, the answer to failing schools meant an open curriculum and elective choice for students. Two decades before that, it meant back-to-basics and intelligence testing. In whatever era one looks, the one variable that would make the most difference is the one that is consistently overlooked: the teacher, her attitudes about herself, and her place in the larger culture.

Some years ago, I collaborated with my husband, Sam, a veteran urban high school teacher, on a book about school reform entitled *Teacher-Centered Schools: Reimagining Educational Reform in the 21st Century*.<sup>1</sup> The book was predicated on a commonsense thesis: if America is really interested in reforming and improving its schools, it needs to attract a talented workforce and, even more important, retain those teachers over the course of a career. There is an extraordinary body of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, showing that great teachers change lives. Even

accounting for parental income and differences in cultural privilege, the number one factor in improving student achievement on any measure of success – including standardized test scores – has been continuously shown to be the intellectual skill and preparation of the teacher.<sup>2</sup> In that earlier study, we argued that to truly transform society, America needs to make the work of teaching so desirable that every brilliant, creative, and idealistic young person graduating from college will automatically gravitate to that profession, considering teaching as a first choice – not a last-ditch fallback when other options fail. And in order to attract the very best and brightest into the field, and retain them over time, schools need to rethink their priorities, to focus their energies and support not only on the students but on the teachers. If we could build a system that afforded professional prestige and prioritized the needs of teachers – many of whom, if we are lucky, will remain in that system for thirty years or more – we will have found the most effective way for saving failing schools.

This book tests that theory in a global and comparative way. For the last three years, I have been looking at how teachers around the world perceive their profession and their place in the culture. What is the state of teacher prestige internationally? Do teachers around the globe see themselves as American teachers do? Are their complaints the same? Are their views about the meaning and value of their work the same? And what are the implications of those teacher attitudes for the twenty-first century world? I try to answer those questions here by tracing the experience of teaching in seven different cultures, documenting that work through the eyes and words of individual practitioners.

#### A HISTORY OF SECOND-CLASS STATUS

To understand the changes that are taking place in the profession around the world, it is useful to begin at home. The history of the teaching profession in the United States offers interesting parallels to evolving attitudes in other countries. Teaching in America is not a high-status occupation, and it has never been one. Since the very first years of European presence in the New World, the teacher's place in the community was always secondary at best. Historians have ample, concrete evidence of this. We know, for example, that teachers in the seventeenth century were assigned the duty of sitting up with the dead, sweeping out the church, and other tasks that were eschewed by clergy. Records show that early teachers were often paid in grain or, if a community decided they

were dissatisfied with the outcomes of their children's education, they were simply not paid at all.

In the earliest years of the Republic, when grammar school teachers were mostly men, popular stereotypes emerged of teachers as brutal and incompetent, effete or effeminate. Depictions found in the memoirs of people such as Bronson Alcott and in short stories by Washington Irving and Philip Freneau show teachers as superstitious, dim-witted, and obsessed with their meager salaries. Sadistic and bullying, these characters are often depicted as having entered the profession under duress, remaining in it on sufferance and exiting as soon as something better came along. One particularly vivid example of this vision can be found in the work of the eighteenth-century scholar and poet John Trumbull, who documents the making of a new teacher in a poetic satire aptly entitled, "The Rare Adventures of Tom Brainless." After charting the progress of his moronic teacher protagonist through Harvard, where he sleeps and cheats his way to a diploma, Trumbull presents us with a portrait of the teaching candidate:

Few months now past, he sees with pain  
His purse as empty as his brain  
His father leaves him then to fate  
And throws him off as useless weight:  
But gives him good advice: TO TEACH  
A school at first . . . and then to preach.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching, in short, was depicted as the default profession for fools and scoundrels. Indeed, for ordinary Americans in the early nineteenth century – farmers and cattle-rangers, millworkers and miners – deep biases existed against those who did not engage in manual labor. Teachers were seen as idlers, individuals who were too frightened or lazy to engage with the "real world."

This stereotype of the disengaged teacher changed with the feminization of the profession, a shift that began with the rise of the common schools in the early nineteenth century, and then quickly became endemic by the 1870s. An exploding population, combined with new mandates for universal public education, created massive teacher shortages. In an effort to fill classrooms, reformers such as Horace Mann and James Carter argued to initially resistant communities that women were actually superior candidates for teaching positions. Unlike men, women were naturally modest, self-sacrificing, and subordinate. Women could be paid little without complaint. Women's piety and self-abnegation, they argued, would serve a Christian nation in ways

that could only be healthful to the moral development of children. The feminization campaign was presented as a win-win prospect: hire women for the moral uplift of your community and save money in the process. Mann and Carter proved to be fantastically successful: at the start of the nineteenth century, roughly one in ten teachers was a woman. By the first decade of the twentieth century, almost 90 percent were women.<sup>4</sup> Teaching became a “calling” – a term not found in eighteenth-century descriptions of the profession but pervasive in popular magazines, newspapers, and novels by the second decade of the nineteenth century.

This yoking of teaching with self-effacement and service can be found in the earliest writings addressed to female teachers, often, ironically, from other women. It reaches its nineteenth-century apotheosis in Catherine Beecher’s famous 1846 injunction to educated women to abandon the idleness of class privilege and devote themselves to the service of children. In her address entitled “Evils Suffered by American Women and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy,” Beecher lays out a scenario for the feminization of the American teaching force that formally cast the work in explicitly religious terms:

The plan is to take women already qualified intellectually to teach, and possessed of missionary zeal and benevolence, and to send them to the most ignorant portions of our land, to raise up schools, to instruct in morals and piety, and to teach the domestic arts and virtues . . .

Beecher had an almost messianic view of the profession. She goes on to imagine the teacher in her Western home as follows:

If our success equals out hope, soon in all parts of our country . . . the Christian female teacher will quietly take her station, collecting the ignorant children around her, teaching them habits of neatness, order and thrift, opening the book of knowledge, inspiring the principles of morality, and awakening the hope of immortality. Soon her influence in the village will create a demand for new landowners, and then she will summon from among her friends at home, the nurse, the seamstress, and these will prove her auxiliaries in the good moral influences, and in Sabbath school training.<sup>5</sup>

Feminization, then, allowed for service and sacrifice to become the prevailing metaphor of the work, and by the early twentieth century, the cult of service was deeply embedded in public consciousness about the profession. Indeed, the earliest comprehensive sociology of the profession, published in 1932 by Barnard professor Willard Waller, shows how successful that campaign had become by the twentieth century. In this early ethnography

of teaching, Waller described a job where the concept of professional service has devolved into servitude or even slavery. A teacher's contract, reproduced in Waller's volume, documents a level of community control that is almost impossible to believe:

I promise to take a vital interest in all phases of Sunday-school work, donating of my time, service, and money without stint for the uplift and benefit of the community.

I promise to abstain from all dancing, immodest dressing, and any other conduct unbecoming a teacher and a lady.

I promise not to go out with any young men except in so far as it may be necessary to stimulate Sunday-school work.

I promise not to fall in love, to become engaged or secretly married.

I promise not to encourage or tolerate the least familiarity on the part of any of my boy pupils.

I promise to sleep at least eight hours a night, to eat carefully, and to take every precaution to keep in the best of health and spirits, in order that I may be better able to render efficient service to my pupils.

I promise to remember that I own a duty to the townspeople who are paying me my wages, that I owe respect to the school board and superintendent that hired me, and that I shall consider myself at all times the willing servant of the school board and townspeople.<sup>6</sup>

"Women teachers," Waller concluded, "are our Vestal Virgins."

#### A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROFESSION

In considering the history of the profession outside the United States, however, the story is very different. Globally, the work of teaching has been historically both prestigious and desirable. In Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, teachers were traditionally drawn from the educated elite, a status that drew veneration, not contempt. Countries such as China and Japan are built on cultural norms that venerate teachers and see their role as crucial to civilized order. A Chinese friend told me that from early childhood, he heard repeated the ancient mantra: "A teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime." China's most famous professional teacher was Confucius, the first to call for the education of the masses, to focus his teaching on "how to be good," on self-improvement and ethical living. Chinese still point to Confucius as a symbol of the profession and its link to ethical and spiritual principles. In the Islamic world, teaching has its own extraordinary history, a celebration of secular wisdom that dates back to the ninth century where teachers in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad taught

subjects ranging from agriculture to medicine, philosophy to mathematics. Even in Europe, where the earliest teachers were linked to the Church, the profession was held in the highest of reputes. Literacy and scholarship were seen as precious currency. Again, while teachers were not wealthy, they were among the most respected people in society. Teachers were among the elite, an attitude about the profession that persisted in many European countries throughout much of the twentieth century. In Soviet Bloc countries such as Poland and Romania, the rise of Communism did not dampen that historical respect; rather, it served to nurture it. As the instrument for socialization and indoctrination, the role of the teacher in Communist countries was critically important, carrying a kind of immovable authority. Impoverished countries in Africa turned to their teachers as symbols of hope. Any chance of future prosperity resided in the teacher and the tangible value of knowledge so closely associated with teachers.

Starting in the late twentieth century, that sense of the specialness of the teacher seems to have quickly eroded, spurred on by economic changes, globalization, and the Americanization of international cultures. As a researcher, I had begun to see evidence of this change by chance, through an earlier comparative project. In 2006, I began gathering classroom teacher narratives – lengthy personal stories – from veteran high school teachers all over the world. I was teaching a course on qualitative research in education and had gone looking for cases and examples beyond the American-based materials I had on hand. A local nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Institute for Training and Development (ITD), offered an ideal cohort for collecting and developing those materials. Each year, ITD had been bringing twenty to thirty English teachers from around the world to participate in a six-week summer program, where they learned about American culture through lectures and discussions, and then embarked on a mind-bending trip through the American West. Articulate and deeply engaged in their profession, the teachers who participated in these summer programs came from developed Western countries such as France and Germany, but also from some of the most remote places on earth. I began to gather personal essays from anyone in the groups who cared to participate, asking these international teachers to simply document their daily experiences in the classroom and to speak about how their work had changed over time. I was astounded by the descriptions that emerged. A teacher from Togo, in the South Pacific, described his community as so destitute that students took their lessons sitting in trees. A teacher from Tipo Tipo in the Philippines said that constant tribal warfare posed a daily threat to her life. There were also teachers from

Eastern Europe who had lived through the dramatic cultural transformations of the last generation, describing their impact on schools in a way that was fascinating and sad at the same time. Teachers from Ghana, Nigeria, and other African countries described how their careers have spanned extraordinary economic and political changes. Indeed, virtually all the teachers who contributed narratives to the project had seen the nature of their work dramatically change. The general consensus was that teaching had become an increasingly undesirable profession. The basis of the status shift seems to derive from different sources, but for those teachers working in emerging or developing countries, the change was universally perceived as a transition to Western values – values that are defined as “anti-intellectual” and “relativist.” There were dozens of examples of this perspective in the essays. Anya, an English teacher from Poland for example, wrote bitterly:

The reverence for learning has been replaced with the West’s obsession with a quick buck. While it is still true, according to the Polish values, that one should not consider the financial aspect of a [career], this is changed in practice now after the communist system collapsed. Bright and resourceful teachers, once quite certain about their teaching vocation, leave schools after a couple of years, seizing the opportunity for . . . a better life. Schools attract those who have been losing everywhere else.

In most every narrative, the same complaints emerged again and again. Jeanette, a black teacher from South Africa whose essay is included in the volume, sees the shift in status happening – ironically – after apartheid. As a young teacher in an all-black school in 1991, Jeanette remembers feeling as if she was a respected professional. Though pay was low, teachers were venerated as examples of those who had “made it” in a segregated society where poverty was the norm. Now, as an administrator charged with developing curriculum in an integrated system, she sees the erosion of status among both black and white teachers. Alphonse, a teacher from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), wrote about his experiences over the course of a thirty-year career. His powerful description of life in the classroom presents a dark picture of the profession that has less to do with inadequate resources and more to do with shifting attitudes:

It is important to note that from the 1960s to the 1980s, the teaching profession was characterized by social, cultural, and intellectual prestige in the DRC. An English teacher was well paid. The work was a high-status occupation in a country where few were educated. Teaching a foreign and international language like English was considered to be an

extraordinary accomplishment for a person in a country where the rate of illiteracy was higher than 70 percent. English teachers could easily travel to English speaking countries on diplomatic and cultural/educational missions.

Starting in the early eighties, however, the conditions of teaching began to deteriorate along with the social status afforded to teachers. This occurred because of growing corruption, immorality, and general ill-governance on the part of those charged with managing the educational system. As foreigners left, conditions worsened, resources were worn out and not replaced, and curricula languished. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, the systematic deterioration of the schools has left its mark on those who remained in the field.

Today, the Congolese teacher's attitude toward his profession is generally that of dread, deceit, and shame. Although the teacher training period ranges from three to five years in a higher education institution, a trained teacher's salary is generally extremely low. For this reason, the teacher's social status has plummeted. Many are now as poor as those who are altogether illiterate. Indeed, English teachers in the Congo must often supplement their meager salaries by tutoring illiterate people in their own homes.

Daily work in schools is marked by deprivation: most teachers teach in overcrowded classrooms with insufficient resources, no benches, desks, or air conditioners. Typically, where desks or benches are available, pupils sit four or more to a single desk. It should be noted that all the teachers, male and female, receive the same treatment in the DRC. The poor treatment is meted out equally across genders.

There is no social security for Congolese teachers. The Congolese teacher has never benefited from the national health insurance. A sick or dying teacher is bound to rely on his colleagues or relatives for social or financial assistance. There is no retirement policy. Since retired teachers are left alone without any financial or social assistance, they often die shortly after they retire.

In a country where teachers' living and working conditions are deteriorating every day and where there is little to no professional development, it is hard to imagine that many will devote their careers to the work.

What has become increasingly clear to me through the course of collecting these narratives is that we in the United States are no longer alone in this dilemma of undervaluing our teachers. Just as America's best and brightest began choosing other work when it became available to them, so have those in the rest of the world. As economies grow, as expanding wealth



creates an acquisitive middle class, potential teachers will continue to be wooed into higher-paying and more attractive work. And with the teaching profession yoked as it is to the idea of service and sacrifice, the cachet of the work diminishes. The moral of the exercise seemed disturbingly clear: unless we listen to teachers' voices, worldwide, unless we heed their complaints, it will become increasingly difficult to fill the classrooms of the world with committed, intelligent teachers.

## METHODOLOGY

The seven teachers in this study are presented through the methodological lens of *ethnographic portraiture*, an approach to qualitative research that has a distinguished history in the work of twentieth-century scholars. The phrase itself – ethnographic portraiture – requires parsing, since each term carries with it certain distinct resonances. It is a kind of scholarship that moves between art and science, between the objective and the subjective, in ways that require explanation.

As an ethnography of the lives of seven teachers, my research represents an attempt to enter into the world of my subjects using the anthropologist's tool of participant observation. Unlike quantitative researchers, ethnographers are not concerned with forming generalizations or with parsing cause and effect. Their goal is simply to create a window into real-life experience. It is in this sense that my profiles are ethnographic. In developing these portraits, I spent my days immersed in the lives of my subjects. We shared meals and sometimes living space; we engaged in ongoing, open-ended conversations. I met friends and colleagues. I also supplemented my understanding of the work lives of these teachers by gathering artifacts that impacted their daily lives: schedules and curricula, government mandates, and school memos. This kind of triangulation – using the voices of subjects, my own first-hand experiences, and the material data available through institutions and archives – affords a rich mine of material for understanding a life.

I also refer to these chapters as *portraits*, something drawn or composed with an organizing aesthetic in mind. The notion of seeing ethnography as an art form dates back at least to the early 1970s in the work of seminal researchers and theorists such as Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Culture*, 1973) and John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972). Both of these scholars laid the groundwork for a form of interdisciplinary thinking and cross-field methodology that is fundamental to twenty-first-century research. In *The Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz speaks about the highly

interpretive nature of ethnographic work, even as the researcher works to remain true to the details and intentions of the social reality she is documenting. What I am calling portraiture, Geertz called “thick description,” a phrase that evokes the multilayered nature of the process, the building up of a realistic image through layers of metaphorical paint.<sup>7</sup>

Emerging more recently from this tradition is the work of Harvard anthropologist Sara Lightfoot, whose body of research walks the delicate line between art and scholarship. Lightfoot defends the portraitist’s stance in ethnography by analyzing the nature of artistic sight: “Portraits make subjects feel ‘seen’ in a way they have never felt seen before,” she writes, “fully attended to, wrapped up in an empathetic gaze.”<sup>8</sup> As a research strategy, portraits are designed to capture the richness and complexity of human experience in social and cultural contexts, honoring the perspectives and the voices of the people who are negotiating those experiences, blurring the boundaries between aesthetics and empiricism.

Qualitative research of this kind never pretends to be completely free from bias. Indeed, it seems inherent in the nature of the methodology that the researcher’s voice and vision should make themselves manifest to some extent. This is particularly true in research efforts that span cultures. By definition, the researcher is an outsider looking in. Adding a different nationality to that outsider status necessarily makes the work even more challenging. No matter how much research I do in preparation for my work, I will never be Taiwanese or Azeri. I can only bring my own empathetic gaze to what I see. Addressing the problem of objectivity and subjectivity, Geertz likens the work of ethnography to the playing of a Beethoven quartet where interpretation is inevitable, but the score is Beethoven’s. Berger, though writing specifically about visual art, also reinforces the profound impact of subjectivity on all human creative work. “The way we see,” he writes, “is affected by what we know and what we believe.”<sup>9</sup> One image, one action, one statement can be read differently depending on who is looking, when, and why. As Lightfoot and others have contended, the subjectivity that is inevitably present in ethnography can be seen in positive terms, as an enriching factor rather than a negative one. In order to successfully identify with another person’s perspective, Lightfoot contends, one must be able to experience and reflect on one’s own.

This subjectivity also operates on the level of the teachers profiled here. My intention, in this book, is not to develop portraits of the education systems in seven countries but to profile the way seven teachers experience their work. Those are two very different endeavors. It is relatively easy to