

## *Chapter Seventeen*

# The Political Position of Teachers

Teachers of students in low-poverty schools were about 60 percent more likely to report that they have adequate access to instructional supplies that were the teachers of students in high-poverty schools . . . this basic, and potentially easily solved problem continues to hamper instruction in high-poverty schools.

—U.S. Department of Education<sup>1</sup>

This “easily solved problem” mentioned here in a federal study of Chapter I schools continues year after year. Teachers working with poor children, whom the Department of Education calls “high-poverty schools,” are more likely to work without adequate resources.

Where does this lack of resources originate? Why can’t teachers order the resources they need, just as lawyers order dispositions and subpoena witnesses, and just as doctors order diagnostic tests and write prescriptions?

Some writers believe that the political space where teachers live and the authority they have in this space may be the largest barriers to the development of literacy in city school systems. For example, a newcomer to the United States may wonder how it came to be that a teacher with a salary of \$50,000 or more with a 30 percent benefit package on top of that does not have the personal authority to order books—the building blocks of literacy. But how did this happen? What factors have contributed to this situation? A number of sociologists and historians have commented on the political authority and the political position of teachers in their organizations.

This lack of the basic resources may be a result of the political position American teachers face—they are at the bottom of very traditional hierarchies. Researchers Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker write that American teachers work in a system of “coolie” labor. They explain that teaching as an occupation was shaped during the industrial period when labor was thought to be stupid and line workers such as teachers were not be trusted with any decisions. They believe that the United States “built a system of ‘coolie labor’ surrounded by a managerial, technical, and support elite.” They admit that “coolie is, of course, a loaded word.”

We have used it deliberately to help the reader gain a perspective on the system, a perspective that might be hard to get in another way because we are all so much a part of the system that it is hard to imagine how things might work differently. We do not mean to imply by the use of the word that management or anyone else now bears responsibility for the way things turned out. Labor, as we noted, did little or nothing to change these features of the system, nor did government.<sup>2</sup>

The sociologist Daniel C. Lortie argues the nature of teaching has led to its highly bureaucratic nature today. Since teaching had to expand in the early twentieth century to reach a mass audience, it became a mass occupation. In manufacturing and agriculture, technology made it possible for fewer people produce more goods, but in education, this could not happen, Lortie said. The school system was required to maintain “a more or less fixed ratio between teachers and students” so the only way to expand education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was to hire more and more teachers. “Mass schooling has inexorably produced a larger and larger occupation.”

He also notes that the large number of women in the occupation in its early years influenced working conditions today.

Continued growth of the public school system required the services of thousands upon thousands of young, single women. The pool of personnel has never produced a high proportion of teachers ready to commit many years to work outside the home; and the problem of turnover was compounded by school board policies which ruled out the employment of married women. (Such restrictions prevailed well into the twentieth century.) In short, teaching was *institutionalized* as high turnover work during the

nineteenth century and the modern occupation bears the marks of earlier circumstance. During many crucial decades of its development, teaching required annual infusions of many new members in order to meet the demand created by expansion and high turnover.<sup>3</sup>

The need for so many new members pushed schools to an “egg carton” or cellular organization with teachers working alone with little contact who could be easily replaced with new teachers, rather than a “team” organization where departures would disrupt a team, Lortie believes.

### WEAK SOCIALIZATION EXPERIENCES

Lortie also fears that the early socialization of teachers into the profession, which he believes is quite weak, will not give them a enough sense of connection to the field or enough scientific information to overcome their personal attitudes and orientation.

Contrast, for example, pathways to full participation in the Jesuit priesthood, quarterback status in professional football, or diamond cutting on the one hand with beginning work as a waitress, factory worker, or taxi-driver on the other. Among the observable differences are the time it takes to qualify, the arduousness of the preparation, and the complexity of the skills and knowledge needed for full membership.

The comparative impact of initial socialization makes considerable difference in the overall life of an occupation. Where such socialization is potent, the predispositions of newcomers become less important through time; the selves of participants tend to merge with the values and norms built into the occupation. The opposite holds where socialization experiences are weak; in that case, the attitudes, values and orientations people bring with them continue to influence the conduct of their work. The internal structure of an occupation is also influenced by the potency of socialization arrangements. Occupations with highly developed subcultures—that is, with rich, complex bodies of knowledge and technique—differentiate entrants from outsiders, laying the basis for a special sense of community among the initiated. The reverse also holds; where the content of initiatory stages is sparse, the significance of guild is low. Contrast, for example, the internal relationships found in medicine and in retail sales, in airline piloting and in driving delivery trucks, in certified public accountancy and in routine office work.<sup>4</sup>

What Lortie brings to the debate about literacy is the realization that the socialization to a profession matters, that the willingness to identify with the technical side of the profession of teaching matters. It matters if teachers are willing to dig into the *Journal of Reading* or the *Reading Research Quarterly* because they identify themselves as reading teachers and want to add to their knowledge base. Lortie reminds us that attitudes toward the profession may matter a great deal to the willingness of teachers to develop their skills over the years. Weak initial socialization may limit the willingness of a teacher to dig in and acquire the skills needed of an effective teacher rather than a check collector in a bureaucracy. The social studies teacher who is working close to home in order to be able to spend as much time as possible with his or her young children is still responsible for the literacy of the 150 to 165 teenagers as well. Developing the literacy of these teenagers may require strategies that were not acquired during teacher training in a university. Rewards need to be in place to encourage this individual to read the journals, to read the research, to be a member of a profession rather than to be simply a cipher in a bureaucracy.

But other factors also shape the lives of teachers as they spend years in the profession.

Stanley Aronowitz has quite a different look at the topic of weak teachers who are uncommitted to their craft. He argues that as teachers began to become trade unionists in the 1960s, they reduced their commitment to the profession. He states that in much of the push toward smaller work loads in education, the “real intention proves to be a reduction of professional commitment to the institution both emotionally and in time and effort.”<sup>5</sup>

Aronowitz writes that “teacher unionism was long overdue when it swept nearly all large Northern cities in the 1960’s.”<sup>6</sup> But this new unionism did not lead to a new “more intense search for excellence,” he notes. Instead, as the newly unionized teachers filled classrooms to gain the new credentials, which meant more pay (e.g., master’s degree, master’s degree plus thirty hours, master’s degree plus forty-five hours of graduate school), “this passion for additional schooling is not the same as the passion for learning.”<sup>7</sup>

Aronowitz describes teachers as ticket punchers, acquiring new credentials to increase their income rather than gain new information that might add to their skills as professionals. In his critique, teachers are not managers or owners trying to improve the enterprise but employees doing just what the union contract requires and little else.

But Aronowitz does not present empirical evidence to support his assertion that union membership has led to a ticket punching mentality. He does not bring in the documents from the political landscape to support his arguments.

What evidence now exists that teachers are shaped by their membership in unions rather than their identification with the profession of teaching? The first place to look is the union contract in our large cities. As many readers know, the large cities where public education is especially dysfunctional—New York, Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles—are all union towns where teachers are represented by the American Federation of Teachers. (In New York, e.g., the UFT is the city's local of the AFT.) Of course, union leaders and most social scientists would caution that union control of schools and the dysfunctional condition of these schools is not cause and effect. Rather, the poverty of parents shapes the achievement of children, the union would say.

Let's look now at how the central document of union membership—the contract between the union and the Board of Education—may shape teachers' attitudes.

### THE SENIORITY INCREASE

“Why should they learn anything new, or improve as teachers? We all get the same raise anyway,” is how a teacher in Brooklyn explained the weak teaching in his school. At the heart of a contract between a union and city is the seniority increase. Each teacher gets an automatic increase depending on years of service, not the quality of service. The weak teacher who assigns one or two essays a semester and keeps all reading assignments within the easily available textbook and the zealot who raises money to provide six or seven trade books to his or her class each year and ties biweekly writing assignments to these reading experiences both receive the same annual raise.

If one accepts Aronowitz's argument that union contracts have made a major impact on the commitment of teachers to their craft, then school reform would have to replace local union contracts with a national labor agreement. Seniority increases would end. One can imagine a system of individual performance reviews as used in industry rather than the current system of seniority increases which ignore individual excellence.

In an annual performance review, a chairperson could dole out raises depending on criteria that had been decided at the beginning of the year. The performance review process—if done well, by trained managers—should not be subjective. Completion of clearly defined goals is what should drive performance review. The faculty member who mentors new students and new colleagues receive a raise, the slackers who race to their cars at 2:40 P.M. would not. These raises would not need to be closely tied to test increases—a result always influenced by the quality of students in a particular class in a particular year.

The annual interview with a senior teacher (with quarterly check-ins) would not be difficult to imagine:

Which new colleagues did you mentor?

What do the syllabi of the new colleagues look like?

What were your criteria for evaluating their syllabi?

Are these goals synchronized with the school's plan for building literacy?

What were the reading assignments in their syllabi?

How many books did you assign this semester?

What were students' responses to the reading assignments in your own classes?

Are they just handing in the two typed pages you asked for, or did some of your books inspire five page responses?

What were the types and frequencies of the writing assignments? (Let's look at some sample writing portfolios both in your classes and in the classes of the teachers you are supervising.)

How many at-risk students did you mentor this academic year?

How many of those are still enrolled?

Which articles did you read in the research journals?

Which articles did you contribute to the faculty newsletter?

What did you learn about technology this year?

How did you help your students with technology?

All of these goals could be included in a teacher's performance review. Should Congress develop a performance review form in school districts where children are not being encouraged to read? When will the nation move the reward structure of teaching away from the seniority increase system at the heart of union contracts with teachers since at least the 1960s to

a performance-based approach? Could a Congress interested in education reshape teaching and make it less of a mass occupation with annual rewards based on seniority and more of an individual occupation based on individual skills and expertise as evaluated through annual performance reviews?

This would, of course, require a national debate, but given the condition of teaching and the importance of teaching, this debate is needed. In many areas, national authority has pushed local authority aside in the postwar period. Welfare reform is a recent example of a federal takeover when local initiatives had failed. Clean air and water standards were federal initiatives in the Nixon era that still shape local environments today. And after the tragedy at the World Trade Center in September 2001, Congress has already shaped a new expansion of federal authority in airport security where local standards have failed. But not all commentators on school reform see teacher union and teacher contracts as a barrier to better schools.

The fears of Andy Hargreaves, another prominent educator, about the lives of teachers, are somewhat different. He sees teachers not as victims of the union contracts but as a group being crushed from above by the bureaucracy, and with school reform adding even more bureaucratic pressures on teachers and their time.

Hargreaves argues that the current balkanization into departments in secondary schools severely limits the ability of teachers to learn what they need to be effective. He says balkanization is “characterized by strong and enduring boundaries between different parts of the organization, by personal identification with the domains these boundaries define, and by differences of power between one domain and another.”<sup>8</sup> He is not vague. He spells out the damage balkanization causes.

Secondary schools in particular are in dire need of some of the benefits that moving mosaic pattern of organization can bring . . . their balkanized, cubby-hole like structure often lead to departmental defensiveness, resistance to changes which threaten departmental identities and lack of opportunities for teachers to work or learn from colleagues in departments other than on their own. Balkanized staffing structures are deeply inimical to effective organizational learning.<sup>9</sup>

In his case studies of two high schools in Canada in chapter 10, Hargreaves describes the conflicts between the new student-centered model of

organizing ninth graders into cohorts, and the older, more common high school model when teachers are subject area specialists closely tied to a single department. These departmental teachers do not collaborate with teachers from other subjects and are reluctant to use themes in teaching that must cross departmental lines, Hargreaves writes.

He argues that attempts at public accountability may be counterproductive if these attempts at accountability reinforce the isolation of teachers into departments and subject areas that may be remote from the needs of students. But since his analysis is not directed at understanding the development of literacy, he does not provide details about how these two different organizations of schools might influence the literacy of the teenagers who are enrolled. Are opportunities to develop literacy more available in the new cohort-centered school? Are the themes designed to cut across department delivered just through class discussions and class note taking, or are considerable amounts of new reading in new range of texts also available? Were the older subject area teachers in his Canadian schools able to order large numbers of trade texts and paperback texts as supplements and even replacements for the standard textbooks?

Nevertheless, Hargreaves provides a framework for understanding the obstacles within a school, the obstacles that are the result of organizing schools into departments rather than making each teacher accountable for the carrying out the school's plan to build literacy in each child. Hargreaves makes the cost of this isolation into departments clear. If your only responsibility in a department is to teach social studies from the approved text and you are evaluated by a social studies chairperson who has spent an entire career doing the same time, why attend the English department workshop down the hall on the writing process or the ESL department's institute on Latino literature?

Hargreaves serves the debate by making the costs of balkanization of secondary schools into departments clear. In expensive seminars, business leaders preach the same message. They urge American corporations to create boundary-less organizations where employees can quickly collaborate on projects and "get up to the plate and take a swing at the bat." They try to construct organizations where initiative is possible and where contact with the external world (i.e., customers) is valued rather than the production of internal charts and reports.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, these same business leaders refuse—probably correctly—to provide any facile solutions to the current educational crisis. Merit pay is one

idea mentioned, but as Hargreaves, Lortie, Aronowitz, and others point out, the problem is more complex. Merit pay may not be enough to lower the boundaries of the departments, shine light into the cubbyholes of American classrooms, and radically increase the authority of American teachers. Until teachers as a group can have the same regular access to resources and training as doctors, lawyers, certified public accountants, and other professionals enjoy, it is difficult to see how changes in the development of literacy in the United States will occur. The next chapter looks at the issue of the training of teachers in more detail.

## NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Education, *Prospects: The Congressionally Mandated Study of Educational Growth and Opportunity: The Interim Report* (Washington, D.C.: Author, July 1993), 276. For more information on school spending tendencies, also see U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy and Planning, *Reinventing Chapter 1: The Current Chapter 1 Program and New Directions* (Washington, D.C.: Author, February 1993), 15–38; and Wayne Clifton Riddle, *Expenditures in Public School Districts: Why Do They Differ?* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, July 1990).
2. Ray Marshall and Marc Tucker, *Thinking for a Living: Education and the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 10.
3. Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 15.
4. Lortie, *Schoolteacher*, 55.
5. Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 314.
6. Aronowitz, *False Promises*, 314.
7. Aronowitz, *False Promises*, 313.
8. Andy Hargreaves, *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), 235.
9. Hargreaves, *Changing Teachers, Changing Times*, 66–67.
10. Jack Welch, "Keynote Address," TechLearn 2001 Conference, October 29, 2001, Orlando, Florida.