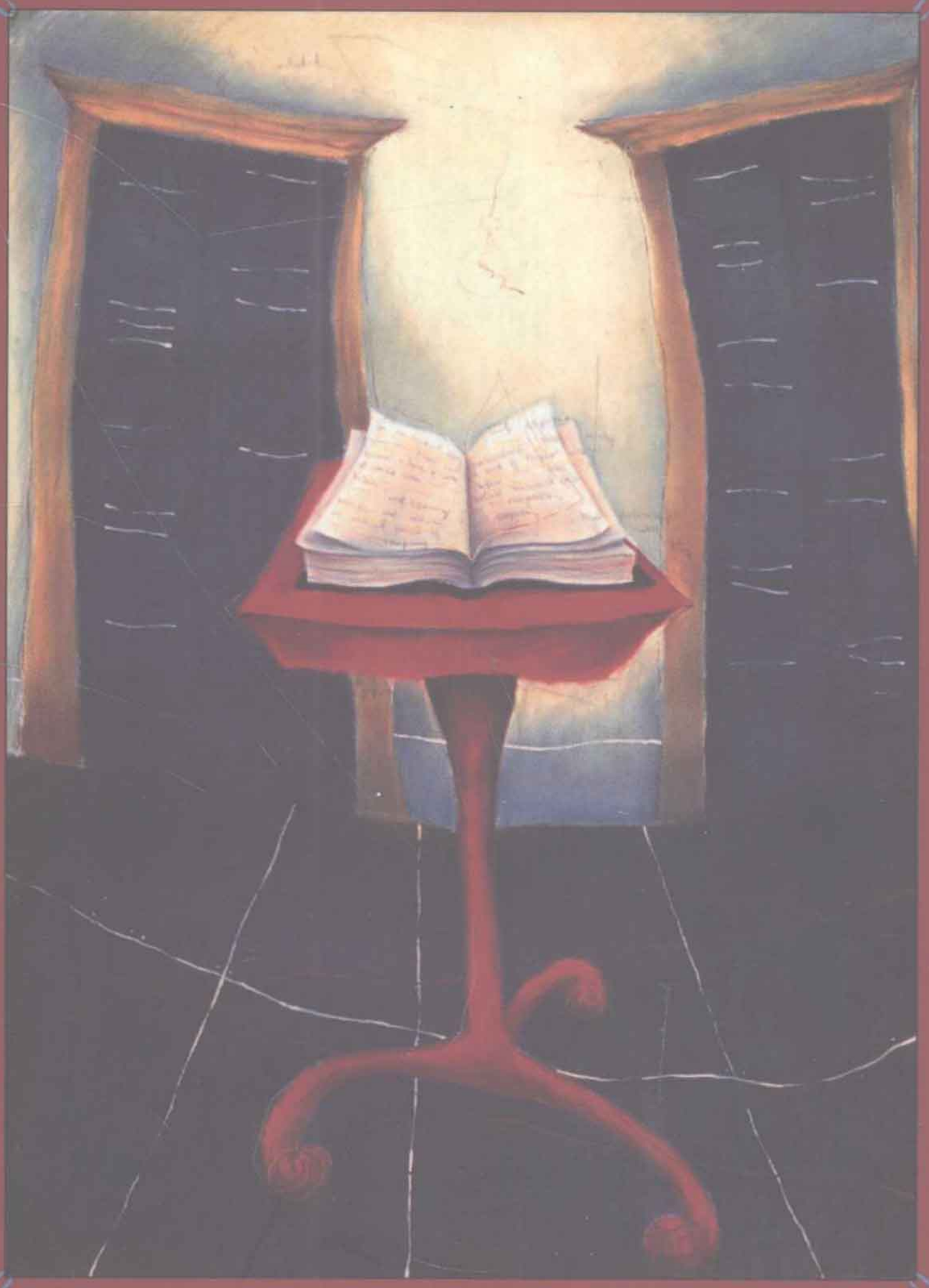
TEACHING IN AMERICA

THE SLOW REVOLUTION



GERALD GRANT AND
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Teaching in America

This book has been awarded Harvard University Press's annual prize for an outstanding publication about education and society, established in 1995 by the Virginia and Warren Stone Fund.

To Those Who Taught Us
Especially Judith Dunn Grant, David Riesman,
and James Sipe Fleming

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1

Two Professions?

The central thesis of this book grew out of a paradox. In the course of our research we have watched hundreds of teachers at work in grade schools and graduate schools. One of us is married to a fourth-grade teacher, the other to a professor of political science. During our research and at the dinner table, conversation often turned to the problems and challenges of teaching. We talked as equals, teachers and professors, about common problems, as if we were members of the same profession. The fundamental acts of teaching and the central questions all teachers confront are essentially the same. But professors and precollege teachers are not seen as members of the same profession. Why should that be?

The work is essentially the same, but the conditions, status, and pay of one profession are vastly different from those of the other. The work is institutionalized in different ways. Yes, professors have more training, and do more research. The fact that professors are mostly men and schoolteachers are mostly women is also a large part of the answer. Professors took charge of their teaching and research in an early-twentieth-century revolution that stripped college presidents of their powers to determine the curriculum and fire the faculty at will. The American Association of University Professors established the rights of tenure and academic freedom that gave the faculty essential control of the educational process at the college level. Schoolteachers remained locked in a hierarchical system in which they were treated as hirelings whose work was mandated by a male administrative elite. As schools

were urbanized and centralized in the course of the twentieth century, teachers' work lives grew more regulated. They followed detailed curriculum outlines and adjusted the teaching day to change subject matter when administrators rang the bells. Although teachers often complied only symbolically once the classroom door was closed since the supervisers couldn't watch everybody all the time, they were treated as functionaries, not as professionals capable of independent judgment.[1]

We use the term "slow revolution" to describe the gradual accretion of efforts by schoolteachers to take charge of their practice. At the end of the book we discuss whether this second academic revolution will culminate early in the twenty-first century, granting teachers the kind of autonomy that professors achieved early in this century. And if so, will this be a good thing for students and American society? We raise the possibility not only that the second revolution may falter but that there could be a reversal of the first academic revolution as professors in a "mature industry" are brought under new management and cost-cuttting controls. But we also see that the elements are at hand for a major transformation of the teaching profession.

In order to understand that transformation we should be clear about what constitutes the essential acts of teaching. Too many of the educational reform efforts of the late twentieth century have focused on organizational and management reforms. Teachers and the actual stuff of teaching have frequently been ignored. Certainly the factory model of schooling—processing students as if they were widgets on an assembly line—needs to change, but "restructuring" and "break-the-mold" organizational reforms have largely failed precisely because teachers themselves have too often played only a small role in their design. The ultimate test of any educational reform, including the reform of the teaching profession itself, must be whether it enhances or obstructs the essential acts of teaching, and thereby fires the imagination, deepens the competence, and touches the hearts and minds of children.

Note that we do not say the ultimate test should be whether reform raises students' achievement scores. We have plenty of evidence that scores can be raised by the worst sort of teaching for tests—often poorly constructed tests that do not adequately assess reasoning skills. However, evaluation is one of the essential acts of teaching, and although we applaud efforts to develop new forms of testing that assess a wider range of students' competence, we try in Chapter 2 to assess America's teachers by the results of the tests we have. Close examination of national

and international assessments of student achievement shows that America's teachers are doing better than the popular media would have us believe, but are far from achieving what we should hope and expect. While our examination of the data reveals significant progress, it also points up the continuing need for major reforms of teaching, reforms that are more successful in engaging students and turning them into active learners and problem-solvers.

Much of the talk of educational reform is hortatory and facile. It dispenses prescriptions to presumably ailing teachers who have hardly been observed. Before we talk of reform we should examine what it is that teachers really do. In Chapters 3 and 4 we analyze the essential acts of teaching and the fundamental questions that all teachers must answer. We enter classrooms in cities and suburbs, kindergartens and colleges, to show teachers struggling to master their craft. They are engaged in the acts of motivating, questioning, and assessing students' moral and intellectual growth. They are reflecting on their own growth as well, and confronting fundamental questions about how to strike a balance between expertise and nurturance, and whether to teach to transmit a culture or to reform it.

We must understand both the form and substance of these things before we attempt re-forms. Most educational reforms have been mandated from the top and most of them haven't worked. We believe a second academic revolution is necessary because good teaching cannot be mandated or prescribed in a manual. Teachers need the proper authority and autonomy to nurture and assess good teaching. Students will not learn to be creative analysts and problem-solvers if they are taught by teachers who are not trusted to analyze and work out solutions to the problems of their own practice. To win support for more autonomy, however, many teachers need better preparation in professional schools of education and more thoughtful mentoring in their first years on the job. Internships are just as important for teachers as for medical doctors. Neither the craft of healing nor that of teaching can be learned at the highest levels without such forms of induction into the profession. Teachers also need more substantial, intellectually challenging opportunities for professional growth throughout their careers, like those architects and professors now enjoy, such as sabbaticals and opportunities for research and learning new techniques.

We examine a large range of experiments—not all of them successful—to establish new forms of socialization in the profession. In a subur-

ban grade school we call Crestview, excellent results were achieved by a committee of teachers and parents who were empowered to design the school. Together they created a lively curriculum that made liberal use of computer technology; developed schoolwide commitments to new forms of instruction; hired the principal and teachers; and developed extensive partnerships with the community. At the end of seven years, teachers continue to collaborate across grade levels to foster student learning; joint teacher-parent governance of the school is unusually effective, and student achievement is above average.

Outcomes were more mixed in Rochester, New York, which was one of the first urban school systems to provide internships for all new teachers and to pay experienced teachers up to $70,000 for qualifying for new roles as lead teachers. We have looked closely at its experiment since its inception in 1987. The Rochester story dramatically illustrates the struggle of teachers who are trying to take charge of their practice. The teacher-reformers were sued by the administrators' union, which charged that the teachers were usurping administrators' powers, and attacked by the rearguard within their own union who did not believe teachers should take responsibility for rooting out incompetence. Adam Urbanski, the president of the Rochester Teachers Association, engineered the breakthrough contract in 1987 with Peter McWalters, then the superintendent of Rochester schools. The two were pictured arm-in-arm in all the major newspapers. By 1997, three superintendents later, members of a task force appointed by the mayor of Rochester and the County Executive had issued a report saying they would accept "no more excuses" for the failure of the schools, and the new superintendent threatened to have Urbanski arrested for pushing a security guard at a School Board meeting. Yes, the graph of student achievement scores was flat. But school budgets had been cut while more of the city's students fell below the poverty line. The teachers were scapegoated as they have been elsewhere, but our research shows that the Rochester mentoring program is a major improvement, and that teachers took significant steps to address the issues of teachers' quality and incompetence.

As we argue in Chapter 9, the second revolution will not be successful unless teachers convince the public that they have the will and capacity to make judgments about who is fit to teach and who should be dismissed for incompetence. Teachers must show that they have standards by which their peers can be judged as better or worse, and by which

some teachers can be promoted to higher-level responsibilities for mentoring, curriculum development, and school-site management. Success will also depend on whether teachers develop an equivalent to the bar exam for lawyers—an examination of fitness to practice that will be seen as fair by teachers and as rigorous by the public.

Any understanding of how such examinations came about draws on the theory of the professions. This is not a book aimed primarily at theorists, but it is grounded in sociological explanations of the rise of all professions. In America, the dominant theoretical position, established by Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, became known as the structural-functionalist school.[2] The functionalists took a benign view of the way stratification occurs and structures are shaped to carry out the necessary functions of any society. For them the rise of the professions was a necessary way of structuring the asymmetry of expertise between the professional and the client, and of using meritocratic means to select those most fitted to carry out the tasks of the profession. Those who applied the functionalist paradigm in a simple-minded way got into rating games, missing the complex logic of the functionalist analysis and its arguments about the way different institutions, including the professions, get differentiated and structured in modern society. That view was often popularized in checklists to be used to decide which occupations qualified as professions and which fell short. But the core of functionalist theory is about how trust gets established so that society has faith that different functions will be consistently carried out in various institutions. Society is naturally going to be more demanding about the performance of some functions (saving lives or deciding how property claims will be litigated, for example) than others (repairing shoes). A rational society will therefore stratify and select more rigorously for some pursuits than for others.

The functionalist explanation has been attacked by a variety of debunkers, including neo-Marxist and other conflict theorists who discount claims to specialized knowledge as mystifications or worse. Writing of medical education, for example, Randall Collins argues: "We can dismiss, I think, the proposal that this elite education is particularly laden with technical expertise . . . We know this because the actual technical skills are learned in medical practice; the content of medical schooling is largely background material in the sciences that have little bearing on actual performance. Scores in medical school bear no relation to professional success."[3]

In other words, inflated knowledge claims served to bamboozle the public, and to justify an elite that established a profitable monopoly over practice. Paul Starr presents a more complex view in *The Transformation of American Medicine*, describing the way that doctors shrewdly capitalized on scientific developments at the same time as they improved the quality of medical school training and exercised political muscle to stake new professional claims.[4]

Feminist critiques have raised our consciousness about how our conceptions of the professions are reflections of social structure in a patriarchy. Patriarchies have established professions as work that is hierarchically organized, controlled by men, based on a life and work style possible only for the "family-free man" who can give nearly total attention to his career. The feminist critique, as presented by Sari Knopp Biklen and others, asserts that women's work like teaching and nursing is devalued economically and structurally, although it may be overvalued in symbolic terms as motherly, caring, loving work that pays holistic attention to people, in contrast to the male-dominated occupational work that most values the abstract and distances the experts from the clients they supposedly serve.[5]

Finally, the ecological or jurisdictional argument has been advanced by Andrew Abbott in a brilliant book, *The System of the Professions.* Abbott's focus is on the competition among different occupational groups to establish the right to perform certain tasks or to engage in certain practices. His analysis is particularly ingenious in showing the way in which an occupation or professional group lays claim to a jurisdiction. He sees occupations/professions in continual competition for territory or jurisdictions, explains how they compete to fill a "vacancy," and how the structures of professions may advantage or disadvantage them in that competition. He shows that professions solve the problems of the division of labor in different ways—some by dividing the client groups, some by sharing control, some through advising, others through internal differentiation, as in the engineering profession. His book has the virtue of showing the shifting fate of professions in the context of complex factors that shape those fates in ways that cannot easily be predicted. In the ecological view, "Professions are diverse lots of winners and losers: Some never found a niche in the system at all." Hydrologists, Abbott explains, lost out to foresters; and solicitors in England lost out to the barristers, who appear in court and relegate to solicitors the mundane tasks of drawing up wills and prop-

erty-management transfers. Abbott's fundamental question is: How do societies structure expertise? And the answer he gives is that they set up rules for competition over jurisdictions.[6]

Each of these theories speaks to the role that knowledge claims play in justifying a profession. And all of them are at least partly true. What the public believes about the knowledge base of a profession does affect the power, status, and economic rewards of its practitioners. The high-status professions actually make very different claims about the connections between knowledge and practice. Both medicine and engineering claim a highly codified, specific knowledge base, Randall Collins to the contrary. Architecture and law, however, base their claims on teaching a way to think about the problems of practice that are not grounded in particular subject matters. Each of these professions, as Mary Kennedy points out in an intriguing essay, has a minority viewpoint that argues the other side. There have been experiments, such as those at Western Reserve University Medical School, that have moved medical education toward more healing with less emphasis on the hard sciences, but these have not lasted long.[7]

Each of these professions has succeeded in cloaking its work in perceptions of great expertise, presumably won at the cost of long and hard study. Each of them has elaborated a saga of endless effort and frighteningly difficult examinations preparing practitioners to work through the night in emergency surgery or to turn over every book in the law library to find the precedent that will win the day in court.

The public has been less willing to believe any comparable saga about teachers. There are no compelling images of students in education burning the midnight oil to master difficult theories or to figure out a prescription for a vexing educational problem. Thus we see the recent development by the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards of a rigorous assessment of teachers' expertise as critical to the evolution of the teaching profession. It is no accident that, like doctors, teachers who pass this advanced test will be board certified.

Even though we agree with the neo-Marxists that the claims to knowledge by doctors and lawyers are inflated, we disagree with their contention that there are only weak relationships of the formal course of study to levels of excellent practice, and reject the assertion by some on the left that professions are little more than monopolies of greed and power. Despite evidence of abuses of that power by doctors, lawyers, and teachers, we see the formation of the professions not only as vital

to ensuring high levels of practice but as a critical ingredient of the moral glue that binds together the society.

We agree with the feminists, however, that the high-status professions have neglected the moral aspects of practice and exaggerated the technical side. We can also learn from the ecological perspective how education, like all other occupations, competes for jurisdiction and how society structures expertise in that domain. The growth of voucher plans and wider school choice will intensify competition and threaten the quasi-monopoly now held by public school teachers.

In the end, however, it is not knowledge alone, or even knowledge principally, that determines the status or course of a profession. Even if there were an enormous technological breakthrough in education, the status of the teaching profession would still be affected by the sheer number of practitioners, the custodial aspects of the teacher's job that are not shared by other professions, and the perception that no agonistic struggle is involved in becoming a teacher.

Our research is both sociological and historical, and we hope it makes a small contribution to revising popular perceptions of the sweat and joy involved in, as well as the high intelligence required for, excellent teaching. The slow revolution has its roots in the formation of the teaching profession in the late nineteenth century. The school system in place today was largely invented then by the newly established educational administrators, who applied the principles of scientific management in order to build a massive educational enterprise. They were white Protestant males who assumed the leadership with religious fervor in the belief that only universal schooling could produce good citizens and effective workers for the maturing republic. Like the professors who gradually took control of the colleges, they had graduate training that certified them as the experts, while the teacher-workers with minimal training were expected to follow the manuals. Although partriarchal gender relations were undeniably a critical aspect of the story of the teaching profession—female teachers were paid far less than male teachers before World War II, and for many decades had been required to resign if they married—we do not want to caricature the complex history of its development by attending to only one theme. In fact, despite serious flaws, it was an enormously successful system, unlike anything the world had ever seen.

We attempt to explain the evolution of the teaching profession in all

its human complexity from its nineteenth-century origins to the present through the biographies of two teachers. The first of these draws on the diary and papers of Florence Thayer, a white woman who was born in 1874. She attended one of the nation's first normal schools for teacher training, established in 1867 in Brockport, New York, and eventually taught in Rochester. The second portrays the life of a black teacher, Andrena Anthony, who began her teaching career in the tumultuous 1960s, struggled to refine her craft in the midst of multiple social revolutions, and eventually became a mentor teacher in a large high school in Syracuse in the 1990s.

The essential acts of teaching, we believe, are the same for a kindergarten teacher like Vivian Gussin Paley as for a Harvard professor like Howard Gardner. This book includes voices of teachers we know and admire as well as those we have come to know vicariously through their own accounts of the teacher's craft. The book is both an appreciation of those teachers and an argument for reducing the gulf between those in the schools and those in the colleges. One of our fundamental aims is to write for those who feel a call to teaching and who want to know what teachers really do and what they hold sacred. We hope this book will inspire those considering the vocation of teaching and that all teachers who read it, especially those who have let us into their lives and classrooms, will say our account is true to their profession.

2

Assessing America's Teachers and Schools

Although there's a recognizable genre of the teacher-as-a-hero, stretching from Mr. Chips to Jaime Escalante in the recent film *Stand and Deliver*, the literature is dominated by images of teachers as beseiged, living lives that are pinched and mean, drab and doltish. Teachers are seen as at the mercy of their slovenly pupils, who are unmotivated to learn, if not abusive and threatening. Teachers are beaten down in a bureaucracy that scolds them for going up the down staircase. At the end of the day they are filled with guilt because they have failed to meet the legitimate needs of many of their pupils. They are overloaded with expectations by a society that has shrunk from more radical reforms and salved its conscience by directing teachers to achieve equality in the institution of the school, which is seen as the universal solvent of the ills of a democratic society. Aging teachers are portrayed as tired from working second jobs and having made too many compromises during the school day. Even the school is seen as a shopping mall where teacher-clerks sell their wares too cheaply and are reluctant to make demands on fickle customers. Teachers have been buffeted by the winds of social revolution. Weary and confused, they survey a radically altered educational landscape in which they are no longer sure of their place or of their authority. They are the victims of intrusive parents and educational reformers who announce a new fad every week.[1]

All of these images are, at least to some degree, accurate. Yet teachers at the end of the twentieth century—and there will be more than three million of them by the year 2000—are happier and more satisfied than

they have been in decades. They are better trained and doing a better job than most people believe. The profile of the teaching profession has undergone dramatic changes, and we believe these changes will accelerate in the next decade as major teacher turnover occurs. In this chapter we will look at a wide range of survey data and qualitative studies to assess these changes. We will attempt to answer the questions: Who chooses to teach? How qualified are teachers? What do they know and believe? How satisfied are they? And—perhaps most important and difficult to judge—how effective are America's teachers?

Who Teaches?

America's schoolteachers are overwhelmingly female and white. Well into the twentieth century, women were required to resign if they married or had a child. Now three-fourths of all teachers are married (nearly a third to another teacher) and have children. Teaching is a lifetime career, and the average age of a teacher is forty-three.[2] The fate of teaching is closely bound to the status of women. Seventy-two percent of all teachers, including those in private schools, are women. Even the high school faculties, once mostly male, are now predominantly female; 53 percent of the teachers are women, compared with 23 percent in Japan and 35 percent in France. The difference is more striking if one looks at the teaching of advanced mathematics. Only a quarter of those teachers are female in a survey of fourteen countries, but in the United States 48 percent of high school teachers of advanced mathematics are female.[3]

Teachers of both genders choose teaching for the intrinsic satisfactions and joy of the work. They feel whole and connected and engaged in meaningful work in a way that many in modern society do not. The leading reasons teachers say they chose the profession are that they like to work with children (66 percent), that they like the inherent meaning and value of the job (38 percent), and that they are interested in a specific subject-matter field (36 percent). Only one in five cited long summer vacations, while 17 percent said job security was a principal reason. Other surveys show that most teachers (87 percent) find their greatest satisfaction in reaching students and knowing that they have learned.[4]

Teachers of color are underrepresented in America's schools. While 32 percent of all pupils in kindergarten through grade 12 are African