

# TEACHERS

## THE MISSING VOICE IN EDUCATION

Marilyn M. Cohn

&

Robert B. Kottkamp

with a foreword by Ann Lieberman

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# Teachers

## *The Missing Voice in Education*

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Marilyn M. Cohn

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Number one, you just have to have teachers more directly involved in education. Teachers feel they're the last ones to be asked. . . . You just don't get the teachers' input into these things. It always comes down from the administrators, from the politicians, from the union, from the public, whatever, but it always comes from the top down. It rarely gets from the bottom up. It's like teachers aren't respected, so why should they have their word? And you just get to the point that you really just don't care about it. . . . Most teachers feel that they are continually being pushed in every direction, and there's no support from anywhere for them these days. Students, parents, press, high administration, government, nothing seems to be on the side of the teachers.

— A Dade County Public School Teacher

*SUNY Series, Teacher Preparation and Development*  
*Alan R. Tom, editor*

*To “Karen” and her teacher colleagues everywhere  
who continue to give their best measure in the face of  
great challenges.*

## Foreword

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Reform movements are not new to American education; they have occurred almost every decade since the beginning of the century. What is new about the current reform movement is the increased attention to teachers and students as both the *primary* objects and subjects of change. This has caused us to examine the prevailing values that have driven change strategies over the past twenty years, and the impact they have had on the teacher and the teacher/student relationship. While much has been written on school reform, no single book has combined the gathering of "objective" empirical data from outside with the voices of teachers on the inside attempting to deal with these questions.

In 1975 when Dan Lortie's book, *Schoolteacher*, was published, the educational world was surprised to learn about the "endemic uncertainties" that teachers felt about what they taught and what they hoped students learned. The field was equally surprised when Lortie explicated the meaning and significance of the "psychic rewards" that teachers received when students learned, and their disappointments when they didn't. Exploring the "real world" of the teacher, her isolation from other adults and her total dependence on a "good" and enabling principal, revealed a much more complicated world of schools and teachers than had been known before.

Lortie's book was subsequently followed by other studies that explained the complexities of schools as cultures (with their patterned ways of organizing work) and the difficulties of making piecemeal changes instead of dealing with the school's culture as a whole. Changing schools and their practices, we were beginning to realize, was not just a matter of mandate or program but, rather, a joining together of such complex and varied things as teachers' commitment and motivation, opportunities for teachers to learn new ideas, to meet, to discuss and plan with other teach-

ers, and to receive continuous support from enlightened leadership as new practices were implemented in the classroom. The teacher's sense of her own efficacy in relation to her students, the importance of a supportive culture for her continuous learning, and her increased understanding of the change process all were necessary conditions for change. It was important, then, that policies created at sometimes a great distance from the schools also enabled teachers to engage in these kinds of practices at the school level.

Within this context this book allows us now to hear the voices of contemporary teachers struggling to create rich learning environments for students. That this is occurring within an increasingly fragmented society with obvious deleterious effects on students, and during a period when prescriptive policies that continue to erode the kinds of conditions needed to support change for schools and teachers are still being enacted, heightens the pertinence and poignancy of this book.

No one will be able to read *Teachers: The Missing Voice in Education* without empathizing with and feeling the agony of Karen, one of the teachers whose personal and professional lives we come to know well. As Karen struggles to teach all of her students, we begin to see the powerful influence of the school with its uniform mandates, constricting the possibilities for dealing with the variability of today's students. Understanding Karen's particular problems helps us to understand more fully those of every teacher.

This book does not romanticize teaching, however. Rather, this is a book that provides an important social, political and cultural analysis of school reform, bringing to the surface underlying tensions that exist in our schools and in our society. These tensions include pressure for reform that favors bureaucratic control over professional control, external control over teacher control and autonomy, standardization—often confused with a need for standards—which would discourage the need for teacher flexibility to deal with increased student variability, and concern for competence that is prescriptive (what everyone should know) as opposed to encouraging excitement about learning (what motivates and interests students).

While the data in this book anticipated the current quest for restructuring schools and teacher professionalism, the book supports this quest, joining these ideas with the necessity for teachers to be engaged, active, and key players in transforming schools. This book educates us not only as to why we must change our



schools, but it also shows us how, and under what conditions. In this informed analysis, dispassionate—in its meticulous collection and interpretation of data—and passionate—in its strong conviction that the teacher's voice has been missing—we have the book that we need to help us move forward.

ANN LIEBERMAN

Teachers College, Columbia University

## Preface

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### *The Missing Voice of Teachers*

The importance of education is an unassailable axiom of our national ideology. As a people we believe that education is a bulwark for preserving our political and economic system. We believe that education is the basis for solving current and future problems. We say that in the long run, the effectiveness of our schools is more important than that of the military. Our President symbolizes the centrality of education by saying he wishes to be remembered as the “education president.”

Our accomplishments have not matched our beliefs and aspirations. For the past decade, this nation has had a growing sense that our educational system has failed us. We have appointed expert commissions to figure out why; others have appointed themselves to do the same. We have debated the question with a rhetoric of crisis. We have looked for causes, and because we tend to think in concrete terms—especially in terms of persons—we have sought villains to blame for our problems: We have found them in our two million teachers. First we publicly denounced them. Then we designed policies to make teachers “toe the line” and prod our students to perform better on standardized tests. But still we have the nagging sense that education is in trouble—that perhaps it is even getting worse.

This book is about the teachers who live at the center of the maelstrom of rhetoric, vilification, and conflict over making our educational system better. They have been expected to “shape up” and implement the reforms that others have developed. They have been treated more like uninformed hired hands than professionals to whom we entrust our most precious asset. They have been the last to be consulted when we consider what is broken and how to fix it. Their voices have not and still do not inform the actions taken to rectify what reformers believe to be the matter with education in the United States.

The absence of teachers from the dialogue and decision-making on reform has been a serious omission. It has yielded faulty definitions of the problem, solutions that compound rather than confront the problem, and a demeaned and demoralized teaching force. Efforts to improve education are doomed to failure until teachers become respected partners in the process. If reform is to be successful, their voices and views must be included in any attempts to improve and alter their work. Although their involvement cannot insure success, their absence will guarantee continued failure.

In this book, we hear the views of contemporary teachers, in their unity and division, in their complexity and simplicity. We listen to what they say and take note of what they do not or cannot say. We feel their joy, but also their pain. We make public their side of the story.

Their accounts are compelling and illuminating. Their vivid images portray teachers as victims rather than villains. We learn of the staggering challenges they face. We are reminded that teaching and learning are interpersonal processes. We come to understand how well-intentioned attempts to make teachers accountable have essentially ignored the human side of the equation. We begin to see with increasing clarity how reform policies and practices are leading us away from, not toward, our educational aspirations. We recognize an urgent need for a break in the existing paradigm of reform—a rethinking of school improvement and how to achieve it. For us, this complicated process begins with reexamining our educational purposes and problems from a new perspective, that of the classroom teacher.

### *The Dade County Study: The Perspective of the Classroom Teacher*

The teacher voices and perspectives in this book were collected in a study, "Teacher Work Rewards and Incentives: 1964-1984," funded by the National Institute of Education (NIE) and conducted by Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., Marilyn M. Cohn, and Robert B. Kottkamp during 1984 and 1985 in Dade County (Miami), Florida. Gary N. McCloskey, O.S.A., joined the project during the summer of 1985. The major purpose of the study was to explore how powerful social changes over two decades had affected teachers and wrought a decline in their rewards and incentives. Its overall design, however, permitted a much broader

examination of the meanings teachers construct from their work.

The benchmark for assessing change in the experience of being a teacher was Dan C. Lortie's *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (1975). His 1964 study of the "ethos" of teaching was based on 6,539 surveys of public school teachers in Dade County and 94 interviews with public school teachers in Five Towns, five school districts in the Boston metropolitan area. Twenty years later, we sought a basis for comparison by surveying 2,718 and interviewing 73 teachers in the Dade County Public Schools. In the NIE study, we replicated many of Lortie's survey and interview questions to permit direct comparisons over time. We also developed new questions to probe teacher perceptions of contemporary educational issues and school reform efforts. The timing of the study caught detailed reactions to Florida's comprehensive educational reform program, one that had started earlier but was characteristic of the first wave of reforms triggered by *A Nation At Risk* and other reports on the deficiencies of American education. Our Methodological Appendix contains the details of the setting, sample, survey, and interview questions, and the methods of data analysis, as well as discussions of generalizability, limitations, and other technical matters.

The NIE project generated a varied and voluminous data base that could be analyzed along different substantive dimensions and from multiple philosophical, methodological, and academic orientations. Over several years, different individuals and combinations of the four-member research team wrote numerous articles, chapters, and conference papers that reflected their special interests and research methods. Some of these are cited extensively in this work. Two of the four researchers, Marilyn M. Cohn and Robert B. Kottkamp, have developed this book over the last several years. Although we have profited greatly from earlier years of discussion and collaboration with our co-researchers, Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., and Gary N. McCloskey, and have been influenced by their thinking and writing, this work represents our own particular approach to the data. It presents a unified argument not found in earlier writings, one that reflects a synthesis of methods, professional backgrounds, and personal experiences that are uniquely ours.

### *Our Perspective and Purpose*

We are former classroom teachers who now work at universities where we are engaged in preparation programs for teachers and administrators, and in research and writing on educational

issues. We are deeply concerned with the problems of American education, the general direction of school reform, and the lack of understanding of the challenges and constraints that contemporary teachers confront. With this book, we hope to contribute both to the scholarly literature on teaching and teachers and to the fields of educational policy and classroom practice. While these dual purposes are ambitious and serve to complicate our task, they also provide us with a *framework for selecting our focus, targeting what to include and exclude from our vast amount of data, and determining our style of presentation.*

Our focus is at the microlevel of the classroom and on the meanings teachers take from their daily work with students, parents, colleagues, and principals in their schools. We seek to determine what they are trying to achieve, the means they use to accomplish their aims, and the rewards they receive when they are successful. We endeavor to learn what supports and what blocks them in their attempts to help students learn. To understand their struggles and successes, we examine forces for stability and change that affect classroom thought and action. Forces for stability lie within the structure of the school and occupation and are deeply socialized into teachers themselves. Forces for change arise from the larger social, cultural, economic, and political spheres in which education is embedded. Teachers experience forces of change most directly from their students and parents and in political distillations of policy and law. These policies and laws result from interaction and conflict among multiple stakeholders with differing perspectives at local, state, and national levels. While we attend to varying perspectives and the changes they create, our interest remains in how teachers perceive and respond to these forces, not the outside views and forces themselves. Within the broader story of change and stability, our attention stays with the perspective of classroom teachers. We describe how their work has become more difficult and less rewarding, so that others might learn from and act upon that knowledge.

Given our aims, we rely heavily on interview data to tell the teacher's story at two levels. At the descriptive level, teachers often speak for themselves. The interview transcriptions are filled with graphic images, emotional reactions, and analytical insights. We use them generously throughout the first two sections of the book. Our goal is to portray vividly the experiences and ideas teachers shared.

Listening to teachers, however, we discover that while they can tell us in exquisite detail what is right and wrong with our schools,

they cannot easily tell us how to rethink them. As insiders absorbed in countless all-consuming daily interactions, they are far more adept at describing what succeeds and what fails within the confines of their own classrooms than at designing proposals to alter the entire system. To move toward a more analytical level requires interpretations from those who have experience with the inside realities, but who can also distance themselves from the immediacy of the classroom. In the third section of the book, we take on that interpretive stance. We work toward understanding the implications of what teachers told us to rethink current efforts to reform American education.

Although the key insights come primarily from interviews, the surveys make a significant contribution to our argument. The survey responses, which reflect the perceptions of a much larger sample, are useful in assessing broad trends and evaluating themes that emerged from the smaller interview sample. In presenting our findings, we sometimes start with survey data for a broad overview, and then use the interview data to explain and extend survey responses. Given our dual purposes, in describing and analyzing data from either source we attempt to communicate our findings in language accessible to teachers, administrators, policy-makers, and reformers, as well as scholars. Our intent is to present the missing voice of teachers with the clarity necessary for others to recognize the contribution teachers must make toward solving America's educational problems.

### *Organization of the Book*

To tell our story, we have divided this book into three sections. Part I, "Stability and Change over Twenty Years: Purposes, Means, and Rewards of Teaching," examines the general forces for stability and those for change, and their impact on three core components of teaching. Chapter 1 presents an overview of both the societal changes affecting schools and teachers and the continuities in school and occupational structures over two decades. Chapter 2 compares how teachers in 1964 and their counterparts in 1984 expressed their instructional purposes, and the means (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and qualities) required to reach them. Chapter 3 considers how teachers twenty years apart described the rewards they received when their aims were realized. On all three dimensions, teacher voices from both surveys and interviews revealed strong continuity.

In Part II, "The Impact of Change in the Context of Schooling:

The Teacher's Story," the focus is on major changes in today's workplace. Chapter 4 describes changes that teachers perceive in the attitudes and behaviors of both students and their parents, and how these changes have made teaching more difficult and less rewarding. Chapter 5 explores changes that have arisen from public pressure through state-level reforms to hold teachers responsible for students' acquisition of basic skills. We hear how these changes have eroded the professional discretion of teachers as a whole, and then in Chapter 6 we look at some variation in effects related to individual teachers' beliefs and behaviors.

In Part III, "Interpreting and Acting upon the Teacher's Story," we move to an interpretive stance, and consider ways of reframing the problem of educational reform. In Chapter 7, we synthesize what we have learned from the voices of teachers, and conclude that in today's schools, the long-standing tension between learning and control is tipped heavily toward control at the expense of meaningful learning. In Chapter 8, we propose an alternative conception of learning grounded in teachers' views of the instructional process. Chapter 9 identifies three major domains of existing assumptions and the school structures reflecting them, which need to be reconsidered if our educational system is to be significantly improved. Chapter 10 concludes with a proposal for schools as centers of inquiry, where current assumptions can be examined, alternative assumptions and structures developed, and different practices implemented and studied. Our intent is to foster learning environments where teachers and other stakeholders in education can meet the challenge of change by generating new structures and strategies for reaching the students of today and tomorrow.

## Acknowledgments

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Our indebtedness is large; we acknowledge it gladly:

To begin with, we are indebted to the citizens of this nation. Their tax dollars made this project possible through funding by the National Institute of Education and Office of Educational Research and Improvement. While our perspective does not represent the position of the United States Department of Education, we hope our efforts through their earlier support will inform policy-making and contribute to the general welfare of this nation, especially of its children.

To “Karen” and the other 72 Dade County teachers who gave irreplaceable time to tell us their stories, and to their 2,718 colleagues and 177 principals who took the time to complete our surveys, we are most deeply appreciative. We hope that their faith in us has been justified and that we have fulfilled our promise by representing them accurately and by making their voices available to a wider audience.

To the Dade County Public Schools, and to the United Teachers of Dade (American Federation of Teachers), especially their leaders, then-Superintendent Leonard Britton and UTD Vice-President Pat Tornillo and their many colleagues, we express our most sincere gratitude. They provided us with access to teachers, helped us to test our research instruments, enabled us to get surveys returned, and offered overall support. Given the nature of our work and its antecedents, it was not possible to keep the site confidential. While it is possible to read certain aspects of our work as critical of these educators, that was not our intention. We found no villains, quite the contrary. We found openness, dedication to finding better ways to educate children amid incredible complexity and constraint, and a willingness to engage in responsible risk-taking demonstrated by the continuing experiments in this district. We only hope the trust in us that led to access to this school district and its personnel has been upheld with integrity.



We owe tremendous debt to Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., who created the original idea for the NIE project and included us in its development. With him, we constructed the survey and interview forms, collected the data, and wrote many of the earlier articles and papers based on the project. We learned and benefitted much from our years of association. In addition, we owe very special appreciation to Asterie Baker Provenzo. She and Gene allowed their home to become the central processing station for the NIE project and graciously hosted us as live-in guests for too many weeks over several years.

Gary N. McCloskey, O.S.A., initially assisted us by conducting several interviews and later joined the NIE project as a co-researcher. We are thankful for his many contributions, especially for his insights into legislated learning and for helpful feedback on our work.

Dan C. Lortie generously provided us with his 1964 survey data, much encouragement, and critical commentary on earlier analyses. At one point he gave us an entire workday away from interruptions to discuss analytical approaches, false starts and subsequent insights gleaned from his own work, and conceptual frameworks for uniting various types of data. To him we owe our largest conceptual debt, for his *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* is the very foundation of our work. Although we wrote a book that differs from his in many ways, he set a scholarly standard toward which we have continually strived.

We extend special thanks to James Steffenson for sponsorship in the early phases of the project, to the Phi Delta Kappa chapters at the University of Miami and at Rutgers University for important small grants, and to Allison Gooding for first-rate work in preparing the computer data and merging data sets. To our many colleagues at Washington, Rutgers, and Hofstra Universities, and to our friends and family outside the world of academe, who provided us with personal encouragement, we are deeply appreciative. Vivian Gellman and Alice Burgess, in particular, selflessly gave their time, assistance, and support, and Murray Bresler consistently lightened the burdens of travel.

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