

Teachers' work

*Individuals, Colleagues,
and Contexts*

*Judith Warren Little
Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin
Editors*

TEACHERS' WORK

Individuals, Colleagues, and Contexts

Edited by

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Foreword

This volume is part of the Professional Development and Practice series, which seeks to present books whose insights are drawn from contemporary work on the transformation of schools, the reinvention of teaching, and the rethinking of teacher education. *Teachers' Work: Individuals, Colleagues, and Contexts* examines teachers' work in relation to a central tension of their lives in schools: teachers as individual "artisans" who are members of a professional community. Within the current context of school reform, although policy initiatives encourage teachers to participate more in their own growth and change, they also encourage greater control over teachers' practices. This book is powerful and significant in that it involves us as partners in attempts to deal with these contradictions.

At this time of continuing pressure to restructure schools, there is unprecedented agreement on the part of policymakers, reformers, and school people alike that the teacher/student relationship is at the heart of any authentic school change. There is agreement, too, about the necessities for greater collegiality among teachers, for development of a community of learners, and for establishment of concurrent standards at the district, state, and national levels. Although we have gone a long way toward identifying our collective concerns about the importance of better schools for all students, we have fallen far short of understanding how to bring such schools to life, what that means for the role of the teacher and the school community in general, and the specifics of what that looks like in different communities.

Teachers' Work: Individuals, Colleagues, and Contexts takes on particular significance as it delves deeply into two central issues of school and classroom life: the tension between teachers' individual and collective autonomy, and the growing movement to understand the meaning of professional community and its connection to a changed concept of student learning. The press for teachers to work together as colleagues is strong, but so also is the desire or perhaps necessity for teachers to feel that they have the freedom and autonomy as individuals to construct classrooms that make sense to them and their students. Are individual autonomy and collective autonomy in conflict? What conditions allow for and support both views of what it means to be a teacher and a colleague? How much collegiality can or should an individual be expected to participate in? What constrains or encourages collegiality and community?

We have a tendency in educational reform circles to latch onto a single idea or concept and reify it so that it appears to be *the* answer to all our

troubles. So it has been with the concept of collegiality. No one will argue the need for teacher isolation to be broken. However, how, under what conditions, with what supports, and for what purposes can teachers be colleagues? Difficult questions such as these are illuminated by the authors in their convincing descriptions of teachers, their students, the subjects they teach, and the varied communities to which they belong.

The concept of community itself is analyzed, critiqued, and developed. Challenging a monolithic notion of community, the authors show the variety of forms that community takes (for example, departments, subject matter collaboratives, and magnet schools) and how community differs from school to school, responding to the many local conditions that shape and create opportunities for development and participation by and with teachers.

The contexts within which teachers work (made up of students, subject matter, departments, districts, and a variety of communities) are not seen as a kind of matrushka doll, a rigid wooden structure with all pieces fitting smoothly together. Instead, these contexts are seen as a dynamic interaction of constituent parts with powerful effects on the nature of their participants and on how teaching and learning are carried on. This becomes the power of the book: It teaches us to embrace and struggle with the contradictions of the individual needs and the collective needs of teachers, while making us aware of the varied possibilities for engagement in professional communities that exist inside and outside the school.

Ann Lieberman
Series Editor

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Introduction

Perspectives on Cultures and Contexts of Teaching

This book embraces a central theoretical and practical problem: to chart the multiple and complex dimensions of teachers' cultures and contexts and to do so in a manner that realistically anticipates their consequences for teaching and schooling. The papers are part of a cumulative literature that relates issues of teachers' individual or collective autonomy to the public or institutional requirements of schools. They are also part of a policy context in which teachers encounter both widened professional opportunities and expanded control over their work.

The book has its origins in an escalating interest in the conditions and circumstances of teachers' work. In the studies that inform these papers, we found ourselves grappling in unexpected ways with the tensions among teachers' independent pursuits or perspectives, their institutional workplaces, and their participation in a wider professional community. These emergent tensions between choice and constraint, between individual initiative and institutional imperative, link papers that are otherwise varied in their theoretical origins and empirical bases.

For the past decade, we have witnessed a virtual campaign to break the bounds of privacy in teaching. It is a campaign waged less often by teachers themselves than by those who would reform their work and workplaces. On the basis of small-scale case studies of collaborative schools,

advocates of reform have trumpeted the anticipated benefits of increased collaboration among teachers. However, these same case studies detail the ways in which the social organization of schools makes genuine interdependence among teachers rare. Reform initiatives have pressed teachers toward collaboration and collegiality with a fervor that far outstrips our present understanding of the conditions, character, and consequences of such relationships. As the number and types of experiments in collaboration have grown, so, too, have the opportunities to expand our understanding of their possibilities and limitations.

Initial enthusiasm about the benefits of collegiality has been followed by increasing skepticism and by a closer look at the conditions, substance, and consequences of teachers' professional relations. This second look began with heightened scrutiny of teachers' collegiality. Little (1987) argued that much of what passed for collegiality did not add up to much, and she later observed that constructs of collegiality found in the U.S. literature have tended to be "conceptually amorphous and ideologically sanguine" (1990, p. 509; 1992). Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) coined the term "contrived collegiality" to describe occasions on which teachers were invited to collaborate on agendas devised by administrators and policy-makers. Indeed, most of the enthusiasm and much of the criticism have centered on project-based collaborations and other structured occasions of joint work, whether initiated and controlled by teachers (for example, some teacher networks) or by the institutions that employ them (for example, many curriculum development projects). The dynamic interplay of individual and collectivity is arguably different in the communities that arise from teachers' proximity and common circumstance, those that develop out of teachers' shared perspectives and mutual interests, and those that are imposed on teachers by others.

RESTORING INDIVIDUALITY AND INDEPENDENCE

Inevitably, perhaps, our reexamination of collegiality also leads us to take a fresh look at its counterpart: the expression of individuality and the norm of privacy. Converging portraits of the prevailing privacy in teaching, highlighted by Lortie's *Schoolteacher* (1975), stressed the negative aspects of the isolation of teachers in "egg-crate" schools. In Lortie's analysis, the isolation of teaching reinforces a culture of "presentism, individualism, and conservatism." Numerous reform efforts have been dedicated in part to altering the individualistic dispositions of teaching. But recent critics have taken the advocates of reform to task for their failure to recognize other functional aspects of teacher isolation (Flinders, 1988; Hargreaves,

1989). Their analyses are in some respects reminiscent of claims regarding the deeply embedded individualism of American culture (for example, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985)—and, some might reasonably argue, of Western societies more generally.

In sum, we believe that a large measure of the apparent disagreement over the limitations of privacy and the value of collegiality can be attributed to the theoretical flaccidity of the central concepts and to a failure to differentiate among various forms and occasions of teachers' workplace interactions. To date, the literature has achieved only a modest level of conceptual discrimination. Both privacy and collegiality have been framed in global, undifferentiated, and largely dichotomous terms. When we rely on categorical distinctions between a norm of privacy and a norm of collegiality, for example, we fail to distinguish between strong and weak forms of teacher interactions or to explore the character and consequences of individual practice. Discussions of collegiality often appear to assume that privacy signals the absence of collegiality rather than a relatively elaborate set of situated expectations for interaction and interpretations that define collegiality of a particular stripe. Consider, for example, that the norm of privacy is, itself, a form of collegial relation, with its own forms of mutual obligation and its own criteria for assigning respect (or contempt).

RECONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY AND COLLEGIALITY

A more robust theoretical conception of teachers' professional lives requires more systematic attention to the ordinary pattern of life in schools and the ordinary configurations of independence and collegueship among teachers. To specify the meaning of teachers' cultures, we argue, requires close attention to the contexts in which they are formed, sustained, and transformed over time. We thereby orient ourselves to situated constructions of independence and collegueship to challenge a number of assumptions in prevailing theory and policy.

LOCATIONS AND OCCASIONS OF COMMUNITY

The characteristic concentration on school-level collegiality obscures the multiplicity of salient reference groups both within the school and in the larger occupation. Teachers associate with colleagues in many settings or circumstances: in their department, groupings associated with instructional or cocurricular assignments, the school, district-level activities, and teachers' organizations. Teachers' affiliations with one another may be cir-

cumstantial, a by-product of a common teaching assignment; they may be induced, a result of mandated committee responsibilities, special assignments, or special projects; or they may be elective, an attachment to teachers' organizations, informally organized special-interest groups, and friendship nets. Each of these occasions and locations of teacher interaction provides a microcontext for collegial relations that may operate by quite different rules, focus on different issues, and carry different significance for teachers' lives and careers.

Whole-school studies have tended to overemphasize the school as a site for professional community and to define community as originating in school-level goal consensus (for example, Rosenholtz, 1989). Within the school environment—in even the most collaborative of schools—teachers can and do embrace multiple views (for example, Nias, Southworth, & Yeomans, 1989). They can and do align themselves with one another in multiple and sometimes shifting configurations. And out-of-school collegial groups can modify the significance of school-level groups or collegial subunits and provide yet another standard of professionalism or colleagueship. Strong subject area networks, for example, may provide the collegial context most salient to some secondary school teachers. In one mathematics network, teachers' active engagement in the construction of new practices and their involvement in the broader professional community of mathematics educators are highly valued and supported (Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1991; Little & McLaughlin, 1991). Such energetic participation earns teachers "good colleague" status in the network but sometimes brings disapproval in their schools or departments. Teachers faced with a conflict between external and internal reference groups tended to develop and insulate strong ties to the extra-school math network and to hold only weak ties to their workplace collegial context. Thus, because teachers typically hold multiple memberships in collegial groups, a teacher may be a "good" and "bad" colleague simultaneously, depending on the group norms by which that value is assigned (for example, when teachers find themselves caught between the policy stance of a union and the situational dynamics by which agreements and loyalties are forged within a particular school).

The occasion, location, and boundaries of collegial interaction cannot be taken for granted. Yet few studies take account of all of the ways in which groups are constituted or of the manner in which "group-ness" or "we-ness" provides a template for interaction and thus an important lens through which to view a school's culture or cultures. Subgroup analyses may reveal not only differences in perspective and practices but also different points of institutional leverage for productive change in educational policies and practices (Scott, 1989). Who are the culture bearers who most

visibly communicate broad norms of practice? To what extent are the norms, values, and expectations of a school's various subgroups congruent or at odds? Answers to these questions trace maps of power and influence within the school setting and provide a reference for the evaluation of collegial behavior within that context.

THE PUBLIC GOOD AND THE GOOD COLLEAGUE

Recent policy initiatives and the studies of collaborative cultures by which they are sometimes justified (including some of our own) have tended to assume that collegiality constitutes a public good and that more of it is better. Under this assumption, teachers working together will work in the best interests of children. Yet collegial interactions or notions of a good colleague in some settings may conceivably diverge from accepted notions of what is good for children, what is good practice, or what is good for the education enterprise more generally. Nearly a decade ago, Hammersley (1984) and Woods (1984) described staff room interactions that demonstrated a high level of mutual support among teachers but subverted the conceptions of good practice or professionalism held by society at large. In these staff rooms, teachers employed the resources of humor or information exchange to enhance their own sense of identity at the expense of students. In Bruckerhoff's (1991) more recent analysis of two faculty cliques in a high school social studies department, both the Academics and the Coaches reinforced collegial norms that, although different from one another, are equally troublesome when set against a standard of student benefit. In these two groups, norms of appropriate collegial behavior and judgments about good colleagues supported the expenditure of minimal teacher energy on teaching and on students. These instances underscore the limitations of theoretical and empirical work devoted primarily to collegial forms and processes that give comparatively superficial attention to the content expressed: the beliefs that teachers hold singly and collectively about children and learning and the professional expertise that teachers admire (or do not admire) in their own and others' teaching.

THE SHAPE OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

Until recently, constructs and measures of teachers' professional relations have remained relatively global or flat (for one example of an effort to differentiate the concept in scale measures, see Smylie, 1988). Underlying the papers in this volume—particularly those in the section entitled Community in Context—are three largely unexplored dimensions of teacher-to-teacher interactions.

The first we term *intensity*, expressed as the distinction between strong and weak ties among teachers with respect to professional practice and commitment. Compared with other sources of identity and community, do fellow teachers matter? On the one hand, intensity reflects the respective pulls of individual judgment and preference versus institutional or collective obligation as teachers establish a justification for their professional practice. The strong professional ties—those with multiple demonstrable links to classroom choices and to the meanings that individuals attach to being a teacher—are exemplified by the “collaborative cultures” that Nias, Southworth, and Campbell (1989) have described. Strong ties, Huberman and Hargreaves would argue—and we would concur—are rare.

A second dimension of culture or community can be expressed as *inclusivity* of teachers' collegial groups. This attribute highlights the membership boundaries of teachers' groups and underscores the importance of multiple reference groups, an aspect of school life that tends to be obscured by a focus on the school as a unit and by efforts to link norms of collegiality to goal consensus. As recent work on the nature and significance of subunits in organizations would suggest (Scott, 1989), the various parsing of the school organization creates substantively different microclimates with substantively different micropolitics and notions of collegiality (Ball, 1987; Hoyle, 1988). Thus, we explore the boundaries of community by examining the dynamics of occupational versus organizational affiliations and the dynamics of multiple subgroups within schools.

The third dimension, expressed as *orientation*, combines aspects of teachers' value dispositions and depth of expertise. What beliefs are there about children, teaching, and learning that engender a “consciousness of kind” (Gusfield, 1975) among teachers? What views are held in common, whether explicitly acknowledged or tacitly held? What is the common or disparate rhetoric that unfolds in the staff room, hallways, offices, and meeting rooms? Embedded in this dimension are the criteria by which teachers judge one another and the concepts of collegiality by which teachers may judge more or less congruently the accepted notions of a good colleague.

CONVERSATIONS AND COMMITMENTS

Thus, concepts of the independent artisan and the good colleague are local, particular, and complex constructions. They are derived from shared circumstances and local values and are intertwined in ways we are only beginning to grasp. Global or situationally indiscriminate “shoulds” and

“oughts” about collegueship have little substantive significance in teachers’ lives and little to offer policymakers. The papers in this volume underscore the problems of aggregating to the school level to analyze the consequences of workplace factors for teachers’ performance and commitment, and also challenge monolithic notions of community as the basis of strategies for school reform. Contextualized understanding of teachers’ independent practice, their collegial relations, and the contexts in which both take shape is more than theoretically interesting; it has direct and important implications for reform policies. What are the consequences of particular professional communities with respect to teachers’ capacity and inclination for innovation in teaching? Are unions, in fact, a conservative force with respect to scrutiny of teaching practice? What about subject departments? Are informal teacher collaborations necessarily a force for innovation? That is, why and under what conditions would teachers or others with a fundamental interest in their work want to penetrate or preserve the independence of the classroom? Promote or suppress the formation of a professional community?

Our main contribution, as we see it, is to help define (that is, complicate!) the character of professional identity and community and to trace their biographical, organizational, and occupational roots. Our analyses of teachers’ worlds is shaped, too, by a concern for the integrity of the broader educational enterprise and for the vitality of schools as places in which children and adults work and learn.

These papers are the result of a conversation shaped by our intellectual curiosities and our professional commitments. They began formally with a series of symposia at the annual meetings of the American Educational Research Association from 1989 to 1991 and continued more informally as a kind of floating seminar that has spanned several years, many thousands of miles, and the varying contexts of schooling in Europe and North America. This book, we hope, will widen and deepen that conversation.

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Part I

INDIVIDUALITY AND COMMUNITY

The two papers in this section challenge conventional wisdom about the nature of individualism and collegiality among teachers. Huberman argues that the model of the teacher as “independent artisan” more accurately and persuasively fits the prevailing social organization of schools than do competing models derived from communitarian, effective workplace, or effective schools literatures. Hargreaves distinguishes between forms of *individualism* that weaken social unity and compromise the public good and patterns of *individuality* that supply initiative, creativity, and principled dissent.

In an important sense, these two papers question the pursuit of collegiality as a remedy for the isolation of the classroom. Discourse framed by an emphasis on teachers’ *privacy* tends to underscore various deleterious conditions of independent classroom practice: teachers’ apparent freedom from scrutiny, their isolation from sources of expertise or companionship, and their prerogative to remain aloof from wider organizational concerns. Casting the discussion in terms of teachers’ relative *independence* and *individuality*, Huberman and Hargreaves illuminate other aspects of individual practice: teachers’ latitude to forge intensely personal relations with students, engage in creative classroom practice (or at the least respond to the immediacies of classroom life), and pursue individually compelling avenues of intellectual growth.

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The Model of the Independent Artisan in Teachers' Professional Relations

The vision of the schoolhouse as a bonded community of adults and children is very much among us. On the face of it, it is an unlikely vision to transport into real life. Think of it: a sort of vastly extended family comprising at least a few hundred people, most of them unrelated to one another, all the children put together simply by virtue of living in the same neighborhood, and most of the adults coming together more by the vagaries of their career paths and the arbitrary assignments of the central office than by affiliation or community of purpose. More like a ship of fools, actually, than a gathering of kindred souls.

If such an exalted vision persists, then, it must correspond to some fundamental need. From the perspective of teachers, the lure of a community of peers is probably related to the sense of isolation and of creeping infantilism in the classroom, to the support sorely needed in times of real difficulty, to the availability of other minds in moments of uncertainty, and to the pleasures of working for at least part of the time with fellow adults on projects of common and abiding interest. From the perspective of school-level or district administrators, the temporary or long-standing missions of the school are better met when the practices, judgments, and engagements of the staff are pooled and articulated. From an administrative view, the more fragmented the working arrangements, the less the possibility of enacting a common set of objectives that can be translated