Chapter 4: The Life and Work of Teachers

IVOR GOODSON

University of East Anglia and University of Rochester

THE TEACHER’S LIFE AND WORK

Writing in 1975, at the end of what Hobsbawm has called a ‘golden age’ for Western society (Hobsbawm, 1994), Lortie (1975) summarized the relationship between teachers and educational research studies in the U.S. Whilst those were very different economic and social times, his judgement stands up well today:

Schooling is long on prescription, short on description. That is nowhere more evident than in the case of the two million persons who teach in the public schools. It is widely conceded that the core transactions of formal education take place where teachers and students meet.... But although books and articles instructing teachers on how they should behave are legion, empirical studies of teaching work — and the outlook of those who staff the schools — remain rare. (p. vii)

In general, the point that Lortie makes has continued to be in force in the research discourse as related to teachers — a good deal of prescription and implicit portrayal but very little serious study of, or collaboration with, those prescribed to or portrayed. However, whilst there is continuity, there is also change over time which exists at the intersection of the educational enterprise with social, political and economic history.

A decade after Lortie, in the book Teachers’ Lives and Careers, Ball and I (writing in 1985) argued that British research on teachers had moved through a number of contemporary phases in the last forty years. At the beginning of this period, in the 1960s,

...teachers were shadowy figures on the educational landscape mainly known, or unknown, through large scale surveys or historical analyses of their position in society, the key concept in approaching the practice of the teaching was that of role. (Ball & Goodson, 1985, p. 6)

Thus, in that decade in most research studies, teachers were present in aggregate through imprecise statistics or were viewed as individuals only as formal role

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incumbents, mechanistically and unproblematically responding to the powerful expectations of their role set.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s new approaches were well underway which sought to address some of the limitations of these paradigms. Case study researchers began to scrutinize schooling as a social process, focussing their work on the manner through which school pupils were 'processed.' 'The sympathies of the researchers lay primarily with the pupils, working class and female pupils in particular, who were the 'under dogs' in the classroom, teachers were the 'villains of the piece' (Ball & Goodson, 1985, p. 7). By the 1980s we saw a further shift where attention began to be directed 'to the constraints within which teachers work.... Teachers were transformed from villains to 'victims' and in some cases, 'dupes' of the system within which they were required to operate' (p. 7).

Crucially in terms of the orientation of this chapter, the latter characterization of teachers opened up the question of 'how teachers saw their work and their lives.' Writing in 1981, I argued that researchers had not confronted the complexity of the school teacher as an active agent making his or her own history. Researchers, even when they had stopped treating the teacher as numerical aggregate, historical footnote, or unproblematic role incumbent, still treated teachers as interchangeable types unchanged by circumstance or time. As a result new research methods were needed:

The pursuit of personal and biographical data might rapidly challenge the assumption of interchangeability. Likewise, by tracing the teacher's life as it evolved over time - throughout the teacher's career and through several generations - the assumption of timelessness might also be remedied. In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is. Our paucity of knowledge in this area is a manifest indictment of the range of our sociological imagination. The life historian pursues the job from his (sic) own perspective, a perspective which emphasizes the value of the person's 'own story.' (Goodson, 1981, p. 69)

Unfortunately, whilst studies of teachers lives and careers now began to be more generally pursued in the educational research community, political and economic changes were moving sharply in the opposite direction, and this was reflected in the kind of studies undertaken. The development of patterns of political and administrative control over teachers have become enormous in the 1980s and 1990s. In terms of power and visibility in many ways this represents 'a return to the shadows' for teachers who face new curriculum guidelines (in some countries like New Zealand and Britain, an all-encompassing national
curriculum), teacher assessment and accountability, a barrage of new policy edicts, and new patterns of school governance and administration.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR STUDYING THE LIFE AND WORK OF TEACHING

Recent work by qualitative researchers suggests innovative and interesting ways to address the goal of understanding teachers’ personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1989). The addition of the personal aspect in this formulation is a positive development, hinting as it does at the importance of biographical and personal perspectives. Other traditions have focussed on the reflective practitioner, on teachers as researchers of their own practice, and on phenomenological approaches to practice. Personal experiences thus are linked irrevocably to practice. It is as if the teacher is her or his practice. For teacher educators, such specificity of focus is understandable, but broader perspectives might achieve even more, not solely in terms of understandings, but ultimately in ways that feed back into changes in practical knowledge, public policy, and intimately broader theoretical understandings.

There are similar reservations about the ‘reflective teacher’ or ‘teacher as researcher’ mode of teacher education. The ‘teacher as researcher’ approach suggests a number of problems. Stressing that the teacher becomes the researcher of his or her own practice appears to free the researcher in the academy from clear responsibility in this process. But in my view, such researchers have a primary but somewhat neglected responsibility for sponsoring and sustaining the teacher as researcher. Hence, new traditions are developing which oppose the notion that the focus of the teacher as researcher should be mainly upon practice. In some ways, this focus on practice is the logical outcome of the ‘teacher as researcher,’ for its converse is the ‘researcher as teacher.’

The work of teachers is politically and socially constructed. The parameters of what constitutes practice, whether biographical or political, range over a wide terrain. To narrow the focus to ‘practice as defined’ is to make the focus of research a victim of historical circumstances, particularly political forces. In many ways, ‘the forces of the market,’ as articulated by the politicians of the New Right, is seeking to turn the teacher’s practice into that of a technician, a routinized and trivialized deliverer of a predesigned package. To accept those definitions and to focus on ‘practice’ so defined is tantamount to accepting this ideology. By focussing on practice in a narrow way, the initiative for defining the research agenda passes to politicians and bureaucrats. Far more autonomous and critical research will be generated if the research community adopts wider lenses of inquiry for the teacher as researcher. We need then to move well beyond the grasp of what I have called elsewhere the ‘practical fundamentalists’ (Goodson, 1995b, p. 145).
The new traditions that seek to broaden the focus of work with teachers ranges from life history and biographical studies (Goodson 1981, 1988, 1992; Goodson & Walker, 1991), to collaborative biography (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992), to teacher’s professional and micropolitical knowledge (Goodson & Cole, 1993; Russell & Munby, 1992), and through a wide range of interesting and innovative feminist work (Acker, 1989, 1994; Delhi, 1994; Smith, 1990). This work seeks to broaden the focus of teacher education and development to include the social and political, the contextual, and the collective.

In particular, life history studies seek to broaden the focus of work with teachers. This work takes the ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘action research’ modes as valuable entry points, but it moves to broaden the immediate focus on practice and on individual classrooms. Life history work is par excellence qualitative work. The pioneering work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) and other proponents at the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s is part of the qualitative legacy. Subsequent work, notably by Dollard (1949) and Klockars (1975) has continued the tradition of American scholarship. In Britain, the work of Paul Thompson (1988) and his use of life histories to study aging has continued to rehabilitate and develop the life history tradition.

In teacher education and teacher development, much pioneering work has been undertaken. The work of Sikes, Measor, and Woods (1985) is helpful in developing our understanding of teachers careers, as is the study, Teachers Lives and Careers (Ball & Goodson, 1985). The study by Hargreaves (1994b), Changing Teachers, Changing Times, adds a valuable contextual commentary to our understanding of the enormous global changes that are affecting the life and work of teachers (see also the chapter by Robertson in this volume).

Lawn (1990) has written powerfully about teachers’ biographies and of how teachers’ work has been rapidly restructured in England and Wales. The teacher, he argues, has moved from ‘moral responsibility’ — particularly with regard to curricular matters — to a narrow technical competence. Teaching in short has had its area of moral and professional judgment severely reduced. He summarizes recent changes in this way:

In the biographies of many teachers is an experience of, and an expectation of, curriculum responsibility not as part of a job description, a task, but as part of the moral craft of teaching, the real duty. The post-war tradition of gradual involvement in curriculum responsibility at primary and second level was the result of the wartime breakdown of education, the welfare aspects of schooling and the post-war reconstruction in which teachers played a pivotal, democratic role. The role of teaching expanded as the teachers expanded the role. In its ideological form within this period, professional autonomy was created as an idea. As the post-war consensus finally collapsed and corporatism
was demolished by Thatcherism, teaching was again to be reduced, shorn of its involvement in policy and managed more tightly. Teaching is to be reduced to ‘skills,’ attending planning meetings, supervising others, preparing courses and reviewing the curriculum. It is to be ‘managed’ to be more ‘effective.’ In effect the intention is to depoliticize teaching and to turn the teacher into an educational worker. Curriculum responsibility now means supervising competencies. (p. 389)

Likewise Susan Robertson (1993) has analyzed teachers’ work in the context of post-Fordist economies (see also Robertson, 1996, for a more extended analysis). She argues that again the teachers’ professionalism has been drastically reconstructed and replaced by a wholly ‘new professionalism.’

The new professionalism framework is one where the teacher as worker is integrated into a system where there is

(i) no room to negotiate,
(ii) reduced room for autonomy, and
(iii) the commodity value of flexible specialism defines the very nature of the task.

In essence, teachers have been severed from those processes which would involve them in deliberations about the future shape of their work. And while many teachers are aware that change is taking place and talk of the ‘good old days,’ few are aware of the potential profundity of that change even when it is happening in their midst. Clearly educators have been eclipsed by a core of interests from the corporate sector and selected interests co-opted in the corporate settlement. (Robertson, 1993)

These major restructurings of the work and life of teachers highlight the limitations of those methods which focus on the practical and personal worlds of teachers. Teachers’ personal and practical reminiscences and commentaries relate to their work and practice. So such data in the new domain described by Lawn and Robertson will be primarily about work where moral and professional judgement plays less and less of a part. By focussing on the personal and practical, teacher data and stories are encouraged which forgo the chance to speak of other ways, other people, other times, and other forms of being a teacher. The focus of research methods solely on the personal and practical is then an abdication of the right to speak on matters of social and political construction. By speaking in this voice about personal and practical matters, the researcher and teacher both lose a voice in the moment of speaking. For the voice
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