

PART I

Introduction

Why do people choose teaching as a career? What is it that entices them to spend their days engaged in learning with other people's children? Why do they decide to go into what are frequently demanding situations, sometimes in poorly funded and rundown schools? Why do they choose teaching rather than other professions that would give them better compensation, higher status, and more respect?

Today, these questions take on greater urgency than ever. The rapid turnover of new teachers, the changing demographics in U.S. classrooms, the widely touted "achievement gap" between White students and students of color, and the national insistence on "highly qualified teachers" all contribute to a situation where retaining the best teachers and encouraging others to enter the profession are essential. In the end, the answers to these questions say a lot about who we are as a nation, what we value and believe in, and how we educate our young people.

Although for over a century our nation has advanced the ideal that a high-quality and excellent public education is the birthright of all children, our schools cannot fulfill this ambitious and noble purpose unless all of us—parents, policymakers, and the general public—commit ourselves to sustaining education as a public trust and a promise to future generations. Teachers are at the very center of this matter and it is only by understanding the motivations and inspiration of teachers that, as a nation, we can hope to accomplish the lofty goals of public education.

The intention of this book is to focus on what teachers think about the issues that define teaching in today's classrooms. In Chapter 1, we address the conundrum of teaching by first considering the current context of education.

Public Schools and the Work of Teachers

There are approximately 3 million teachers in U.S. public schools. They work in grades kindergarten through high school, and they teach everything from art to science to physical education and reading; some teach all of these things or some combination of them, and many see more than 100 students a day. They teach in small schools and large, in urban, rural, and suburban schools, in racially and culturally diverse schools, as well as in less diverse settings. They have from zero to 40 years of experience, and most, if given the chance, would choose teaching all over again.¹ When asked, many say that they became teachers for reasons that sound old-fashioned and that seem at odds with the current national obsession with bureaucracy, accountability, and high-stakes testing: In general, they view teaching as a “calling” and they are driven by a sense of service. For instance, in a survey of nearly 1,000 new teachers (with 5 years’ experience or less) conducted by Public Agenda, 96% said that they loved teaching and 72% declared that contributing to society and helping others was paramount to them. In most cases, they became teachers out of a sense of mission, for love more than money. Their responses, taken together, define an idealistic group of people who share at least one significant quality: They have a passion for teaching, a quality that, according to the report, is “palpable, vastly unappreciated and a valuable asset that money can’t buy.”²

Teaching is hard and stressful work, and it provides relatively low compensation and, in most cases, little autonomy or support. Teachers work countless hours in the classroom and out: The average teacher spends 50 hours a week on all teaching duties, more

than those in many other professions, and they get an average of 32 minutes for lunch. They spend nearly \$500 a year of their own money for classroom supplies, and their salaries are less lucrative than those of other professionals requiring similar credentials.³ They teach too many kids, and they have too little time to do so. They sometimes face unresponsive bureaucracies, listless students, and seemingly disinterested parents. *Why do they do it?* This is the question at the center of this book.

A SHIFTING POLITICAL CONTEXT IN EDUCATION

To understand why people become teachers, we first must understand the context they enter. These are hard times for public education, which increasingly is characterized by a mean-spirited and hostile discourse, one with little respect for teachers and the young people they teach. Currently, the most common buzzwords in education are borrowed shamelessly from the business world: The school is a “market,” students and families are “consumers,” and teachers are “producers.” In this discourse, “accountability” is proposed as the arbiter of excellence, teacher tests are the answer to “quality control,” and high-stakes tests are the final judge of student learning. As a result, public schools are challenged by countless privatization schemes, including vouchers, tuition tax credits, “choice,” and charter schools, even though such alternatives traditionally benefit students who already enjoy economic and other privileges, while they further jeopardize those who do not.

In the current context, there is also an increased focus on schooling as job training, and education as a vehicle to serve limited self-interests and consumerism. Less attention than ever is paid to education as a way to expand the human spirit and create a better world. Moreover, public schools are no longer viewed as the one place where children of all races and social classes can expect to be educated—however imperfectly schools ever did this, at least in the past, there was a shared vision that schools had the *responsibility* to educate all children.

Paradoxically, while these are challenging times for public education, they are also hopeful times. In fact, two current and competing discourses concerning public education are evident: One is

the “official” discourse, embodied in the language of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation and other mandates with a focus on accountability, standards, credentials, and testing, accompanied by punitive measures meted out to students and teachers for failing to live up to them. The other is what one might call the “discourse of possibility,” a way of thinking about teaching and learning embraced largely by teachers and others who view public education as, on the whole, an elusive and unfulfilled but nonetheless significant goal in the quest for equality and social justice.⁴ This “unofficial” discourse is visible in many schools as well as in books and articles that focus on the positive and uplifting work that teachers do and that champion teachers who defy the current damaging climate in education.⁵

These, then, are difficult but also promising times for those who view public education as the last and, in many cases, the only hope for fulfilling our society’s stated ideals of sustaining democracy through public education. Schools can serve this purpose, however, only when all children have access to teachers who are competent and caring and in schools characterized by fairness, enthusiasm, and high expectations. It is little wonder, then, that a great deal of attention has been focused lately on the quality of the teaching force. But what does it mean (to use the language currently in vogue) to be a “highly qualified teacher”? Given the rapidly changing student body in our classrooms, this question needs to be addressed with an understanding of the changing demographics in our nation.

A CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Our country today is a far different place than it was even half a century ago. As of the year 2000, people of color made up 25% of our total population, a 5% increase from just a decade earlier. The growing racial and ethnic diversity has been accompanied by a growing linguistic diversity: Currently, 18% of U.S. residents speak a language other than English at home, with Spanish the language spoken by half of these.⁶ Also in 2000, the number of foreign-born or first-generation U.S. residents reached the highest level in U.S. history, 56 million, or triple the number in 1970. And unlike previous immigrants who were primarily from Europe, only 15% are now from Europe, with over half from Latin America and a quarter from Asia.⁷

Not surprisingly, the nation's public schools are also very different from what they were just a few decades ago. Although not yet a majority, the number of children in our public schools representing backgrounds other than European American is growing rapidly: Whites still make up more than half of all students, but it is a dwindling majority at just 61.2%. Blacks now make up 17.2%, Hispanics 16.3%, Asian/Pacific Islanders 4.1%, and American Indian/Alaska Natives 1.2% of students in public schools.⁸

Regardless of the growing diversity in schools around the country, and despite the desegregation movement that began over 50 years ago, racial and ethnic segregation is on the rise. Students in U.S. schools are now more likely to be segregated from students of other races and backgrounds than at any time in the recent past. In fact, according to researcher Gary Orfield, for Blacks, the 1990s witnessed the largest backward movement toward segregation since the 1954 *Brown versus Board of Education* decision, and the trend is continuing. Moreover, Latinos now have the dubious distinction of being the most segregated of all ethnic groups in terms of race, ethnicity, and poverty.⁹

Poverty too continues to be a serious problem in our nation. Due to a booming U.S. economy, the percentage of people living in poverty improved later in the 1990s from its low point of 14.5% in 1994. But poverty is again on the increase, and it is especially bleak among people of color: While Whites represent just over 9% of the poor, Blacks are over 22% and Hispanics over 21% of those living in poverty.¹⁰ These numbers also point to a chronic problem in terms of teacher retention: The turnover rate for teachers in high-poverty schools can climb as high as 50%, creating even more uncertainty and unpredictability in such schools.¹¹

At the same time that the number of students of color, those who speak languages other than English, and those who live in poverty has increased, the nation's teachers have become more monolithic, monocultural, and monolingual. The percentage of White teachers actually *grew* from 88% in 1971 to 90.7% in 1996, while during those same years the number of Black teachers decreased from 8.1% to 7.3% and the number classified as "other" decreased from 3.6% to 2.0%. By 2001, the number of teachers of color was still less than 11%, with Black teachers at 6% and those classified as "other" at 5%.¹² Complicating the issue further, al-

though there is a crucial need for teachers of all backgrounds to teach poor students of color in urban districts, fewer than 6% of education graduates nationally express a desire to teach in such districts.¹³ Given this situation, it should come as no surprise that researchers point to a major gap in the research on how best to prepare teachers to teach students of diverse backgrounds.¹⁴

WHY TEACHING MATTERS

It is now an established fact that the quality of teaching matters, and it matters especially to the most vulnerable young people. One widely cited study found that students who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in a row have significantly greater gains in achievement than those assigned to less effective teachers, and that each teacher's influence has effects that spill over into later years.¹⁵ Yet Black and Latino students, who could benefit greatly from having qualified teachers, receive a disproportionate amount of poor teaching and are much less likely to have certified teachers than are White students, among many other disadvantages.¹⁶ Consequently, in a review of dozens of studies in the late 1990s, researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and Beverly Falk suggested that until schools address the enormous inequalities in students' access to qualified teachers, other reforms would have little effect on student achievement.¹⁷

Given this reality, we need to think about what it means to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers to work with students who in most cases are vastly different from them in background and experience. In this book, the focus is on teachers *not* because they alone are responsible for either all the good or all the bad that happens in public schools. It would be simplistic in the extreme to believe this was the case. Indeed, if we were to place all our hope—or all our blame—on teachers, it would be tempting to overlook the deeply entrenched structures, policies, and practices still prevalent today, not only in schools but in our nation as a whole, that caused the problems of inequality in the first place. Problems of economic inequality, institutional racism and other biases, poor and inadequate health care and housing, underfunded schools, and insufficient instructional materials also need to be confronted, and teachers are

not responsible for these problems. We might even say that without structural changes in schools and in society in general, teachers can have only a limited impact.¹⁸ But as a nation, we cannot afford to sit around and wait for these structural changes to take place. They do not appear to be happening any time soon and, in the meantime, too many young people are being lost. The times call for working on what *can* be done to help keep the most caring and committed teachers in our public schools, and this means looking carefully—and skeptically—at what it means to be a “highly qualified teacher,” to use the current discourse.

BECOMING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF ALL STUDENTS

What does it mean to be an effective teacher of *all* students? Put another way, how might we best characterize excellent and committed teachers, especially those who teach students who attend our nation’s most troubled and least supported schools? And how can we do so without falling back on clichés, stale formulas, or mechanical checklists? Tackling this puzzle may help us prepare new and continuing teachers more successfully to meet the challenges of teaching students of backgrounds that differ from the majority, the most rapidly and dramatically growing segment of our public school population. At the same time, exploring this question may in the end shed light on what it takes to help *all* students reach their potential.

In spite of the prevailing notion that teachers are simply technicians who know how to write lesson plans, prescribe prepackaged programs, discipline students, and evaluate them through rubrics, benchmarks, and tests, teachers are also professionals and intellectuals. This means simply that tests, checklists, or other such procedures cannot adequately determine what it means to be a good teacher; these systems are frequently incomplete and inappropriate. Instead, in this book we suggest that qualities of excellent teachers can emerge through reflection, investigation, collaboration, and study.¹⁹

Numerous educational researchers over the years have tackled the question of what it means to be a successful teacher of students of diverse backgrounds.²⁰ A synthesis of this literature suggests a number of common characteristics that describe highly qualified

teachers. These include, of course, strong subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical effectiveness, as well as excellent communication skills. In addition, in general such teachers:

- connect learning to students' lives
- have high expectations for all students, even for those whom others may have given up on
- stay committed to students in spite of obstacles that get in the way
- place a high value on students' identities (culture, race, language, gender, and experiences, among others) as a foundation for learning
- view parents and other community members as partners in education
- create a safe haven for learning
- dare to challenge the bureaucracy of the school and district
- are resilient in the face of difficult situations
- use active learning strategies
- are willing and eager to experiment and can "think on their feet"
- view themselves as lifelong learners
- care about, respect, and love their students

Taken together, these qualities define teachers as enthusiastic lifelong learners who are deeply involved in their work and who defend both their students' right to an excellent education and their own rights as intellectuals and professionals. Their own growth is clearly important to such teachers, yet less than 1% of all the money spent on public education is used for professional development, a situation that would never be tolerated in the business world.²¹ In spite of the comparisons between public education and business discussed earlier, research and development in the business world are of paramount importance, while in public education little consideration is given to the need for these activities.

In addition, far too few of the professional development activities in either university teacher preparation or inservice education—courses, workshops, field placements, and so forth—focus on the skills or qualities identified by researchers as characteristic of excellent teachers. Not many courses, for instance, help teachers learn

to challenge school bureaucracies, or teach them strategies for learning about the identities of the students they teach. And although issues of difference and bias are now more prevalent in teacher education programs than they were a decade ago, they are still left largely unexamined in many teacher education and inservice programs.²² Also, practicing and prospective teachers rarely have the opportunity to delve into research that considers the work of teachers and schools in a broader sociopolitical context, or that presents educational reform in a critical and comprehensive way.²³ Yet this is precisely the kind of research that could open their eyes to different perspectives and critical understandings.

THE CONUNDRUM OF TEACHING

Public education is at a crossroads today. Historically viewed as an essential partner in creating and sustaining democracy, today the link between the two is tenuous. Sadly, the words of John Dewey sound strangely out of place in this day and age: In 1916, Dewey wrote that our society, like every other society that has ever existed, was replete with inequality. He turned to the schools to help remedy this situation, writing, "It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them."²⁴ Yet today, many people are losing hope in the possibilities of public education. This hopelessness is understandable: Too many youngsters are being failed by schools, too many families are disappointed with the broken promises of equal and high-quality education, and too many good teachers are tired and burned out. They are overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated, and they rarely experience the support and public acclaim of other professionals.

Not all teachers are excellent, of course. Some should never have entered the profession, and some who remain in the classroom, for all intents and purposes, left it years before. Some teachers damage children, sometimes irreparably, and others are simply biding their time until retirement. But most people who enter the profession do so for unselfish reasons; they want to contribute to society and they view teaching as a good way to do so. This book is about those who stay the course or intend to, who care deeply about who and

what they teach, and who know that they touch the future. Some are experienced professionals, while others may appear to be naive and young. But all of them know that they make a difference. We can all learn from these teachers.

As you will see as you read the essays in this book, the core message here is one of hope, both for the teaching profession and for public education. The intent of the book is to focus on teachers who embody quintessential values of teaching, values that may help redirect our national attention away from such distractions as privatization and high-stakes testing to what really matters in teaching: not test scores, not rubrics or benchmarks or “best practices” or teacher tests, but students and teachers and the future of democracy in our nation.