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Philosophers of Education Seminar

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Listening to Teachers: What We Can Learn about What Works and What Doesn't for America's Teachers

In July of 2014, sixteen accomplished and thoughtful school teachers gathered for a three-week seminar at Boston University. The seminar, Philosophers of Education, was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the NEH Programs in the Humanities for School and College Educators. This group was unusually diverse and well-credentialed, including people with doctorates, doctoral candidates, and people with masters degrees from elite universities. Several of the participants were second-career teachers, having left successful careers in other fields like architecture, finance, law, nursing, and university teaching. Some had passed through prestigious and selective programs like Teach for America and Teaching Fellows. They taught in a wide range of schools—elementary through high school, public, charter, private, urban and rural—and with students from every rung on the economic ladder.

Needless to say, this group of teachers was far from typical—not least because they chose to apply and were selected from among some 200 applicants—to spend three weeks of their summer studying the history and philosophy of education. While not statistically representative of the profession, these teachers, are the kinds of highly educated, idealistic, and motivated people we WANT teaching in our schools. We should be listening to what they have to say about the profession. How do they feel about their jobs and their motivation for being teachers? What would they change if they

could? What can we learn from them about the job conditions that work and don't work for teachers?

I took advantage of the occasion of this seminar to question these seventeen teachers about their feelings about their jobs and the profession of teaching. I was interested in finding out their reasons for going into teaching and whether their expectations for going into the field were met in their current jobs. I wanted to know what gave them satisfaction, and what their sources of dissatisfaction were. I asked them what they would change about their jobs, and how much autonomy they had to teach according to their own personal pedagogical philosophies. To that end, I devised a questionnaire, to which most responded in writing online; a few were interviewed in person. The first five questions asked about educational background, time teaching, and the kinds of schools they taught in. Below is a summary of the results.

What degrees have you completed?

- 4 had doctorates
- 3 were ABD
- 4 had professional degrees in other fields: J.D., M.Arch., DNS
- One had an MFA
- All had at least one masters in education or another field. Several had more than one masters degree.

How many years have you been in K-12 teaching?

- 1 - less than 2 years
- 7 - 5 to 10 years
- 5 - 11 to 15 years
- 4 - 16 to 20 years

What kind of school do you teach in?

- 10 taught in public schools
- 3 taught in charter schools
- 4 taught in independent schools

Is your school urban, suburban, or rural?

- 11 taught in suburban schools

- 5 taught in urban schools
- 1 taught in a rural school

What is the income level of most of your students?

- 4 taught students who were most lower or lower middle income
- 11 taught students who were mostly upper or upper middle income
- 3 taught students mostly middle income in students.

Clearly the educational level of this group far exceeds the average among American teachers. They have been teaching, on average, for 10.9 years (range: less than 1 to 20 years). Most taught in public schools, but a larger minority than in the nation as a whole taught in independent or charter schools. A greater percentage taught in upper or upper middle income suburban schools than in the profession as a whole, but urban and lower income schools were also represented.

How satisfied are you with your current job?

The responses to this question, shown on the left side of the table below, mirrored fairly closely the results of a survey of 1000 public K-12 teachers conducted by MetLife in 2012 (shown on the right of the table).¹ According the MetLife’s 2012 survey, teacher satisfaction declined from 2008, when 62% reported being “very satisfied” with their jobs, to 2012, when that number fell to 39%. While that decline is troubling, what MetLife did not highlight was that 82% still expressed being at least “somewhat satisfied” with their jobs.

¹ The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership (MetLife, 2013), p. 53, 103. <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf>,

Present survey		Met-Life Survey of Teachers 2012	
Very satisfied	5 (29%)	Very Satisfied	39%
Mostly satisfied	8 (47%)	Somewhat satisfied	43%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3 (18%)	Somewhat dissatisfied	3%
Mostly dissatisfied	0 (0%)	-	
Very dissatisfied	1 (6%)	Very dissatisfied	4%
		Unsure/no response	2%

While the two surveys are not directly comparable, since the response choices were slightly different, the results are similar, keeping in mind the much smaller sample in my study. The majority of teachers in my study were “mostly” or “very satisfied” with their jobs. My study uncovered no strong correlations between job satisfaction and any of the demographic indicators, such as type of school. Teachers in public schools were generally no more likely to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction than teachers in independent or charter schools, for example. However, while the sample size is certainly too small to support broad conclusions, it is interesting that of the five teachers who described themselves as “very satisfied,” three taught in independent schools.

Why Did You Go Into K-12 Teaching?

Most responders mentioned more than one motivation for going into K-12 teaching. Seven teachers cited practical considerations (“There was little else to do with an MFA;” “job security”). Half cited the enjoyment teaching gave them, using words like “meaningful” or “joyful” about teaching.

The desire to be of service or make a contribution was cited by seven of the teachers. “To find meaning in my life, I have to give back to the world;” “I wanted to help kids;” and “to give back to the minority community where I grew up.”

Relationships with students motivated another large group (7 teachers): “I always enjoyed working with kids;” “[Teenagers] are a fabulous group—smart, interesting, but still very malleable.”

Four of the group cited their subject matter as a motivation, (“I love the subject of history;” “I love reading”), while two specifically mentioned particular professional challenges that influenced their desire to go into K-12 teaching (“I [was] interested in finding ways to help younger people develop historical thinking skills that I felt could allow them to make critical decisions today about politics, culture, and their place in the world, while helping to connect them to the lived experience of humanity across millennia”).

While their reasons were diverse, what did emerge loudly and clearly was that these teachers were committed and idealistic. Several had left much more remunerative and prestigious careers such as law, business, and university teaching to become K-12 teachers. None of the teachers mentioned money or summers off. Those who did mention practical considerations also mentioned more idealistic motivations.

Does your job meet your expectations?

What are the sources of satisfaction in your current job?

Teachers’ responses to these questions to some degree overlapped their reasons for going into teaching, but their responses were often more animated. Two main themes emerged. One group of responses focused primarily on the students—

working with them, guiding them to a love of a subject, the pleasure of seeing them progress or “get it,” seeing them grow in confidence. An elementary teacher found satisfaction in “joyful and excited kids;” another “when I make them laugh.” For a high school teacher, it was “when a lesson lands and they’re excited about the material... [when] they are talking about the lesson as they leave the room.”

To the degree that teachers felt freedom to teach or create learning opportunities for their students without interference, that autonomy was a major source of satisfaction. One teacher appreciated “the ability to innovate, the ability to find new ways of teaching and new things to teach.” Not surprisingly, teachers who worked in independent or charter schools were more likely to feel they had autonomy in their jobs. Said one history teacher at an all-girls boarding school, “There is a great deal of autonomy in the classroom, and I feel I am able to engage students in the type of learning I find works best.”

What gives you the most dissatisfaction in your current job?

Complaints about administration and bureaucratic interference were almost universal among this group as a source of dissatisfaction. “With each new administration comes news procedures and expectations that have to be learned.” A public school English teacher pleaded, “Just let us do our job. Give us absolute autonomy in the classroom, and trust us fully and wholly.” A teacher at an independent school complained about his administration’s resistance to innovations he had proposed: “Institutions tend to become risk-averse. ... Teachers' voices are not heard. ... Institutions tend to listen to outside experts much more readily than to their own teachers.” Other bureaucratic sources of dissatisfaction included AP requirements, “the

crazy number of meetings and committees formed for every little thing,” and the new Charlotte Danielson evaluation method “and all the mandatory supportive documentation required.”

In addition to bureaucratic requirements and interference, some teachers mentioned a lack of appreciation and support from administrators—“subtle ways in which teachers are pushed down [and] undervalued at my school,” in the words of one teacher. “I would have the people in the head office sympathize more with teachers rather than just worry about figures [money] and public image,” said another.

Surprisingly only one teacher mentioned parents as a source of dissatisfaction.

Another common complaint was the heavy workload, combined frequently with the lack of time for preparation and collaboration with colleagues. “The work load, at certain points in the year, can be truly frustrating,” said one young public school teacher.

As a group, teachers often have to be tough-skinned. In addition to problems with administrators, they deal with reactions of family or acquaintances to their career choice. One second-career teacher said, “Friends asked me if I was crazy.” A younger teacher complained, “My family, friends, and acquaintances just seem to bash whatever I’m doing: promoting a liberal agenda, pushing kids too hard, not pushing them enough, having summers off, being part of a union.” A teacher who left a law career for the classroom says his students ask him, “You’re a lawyer? What are you doing here?” The same teacher was asked to speak at a reunion of his Ivy League alma mater about his career choice—which obviously was unusual among his classmates. (After his talk was over, he was told by one of them, “Oh, you make me feel so guilty!”)

If you could change one thing about your current job, what would it be?

Answers to this question overlapped with the “Sources of Dissatisfaction” question, but time was the biggest wish among these teachers—more time to prepare and collaborate, less time in the classroom. “I was surprised by how little time we spent interacting with one another—and I don't think this is a problem unique to my school.” Other changes mentioned included fewer non-teaching duties (from two independent school teachers), less paperwork, smaller class size, more help in the classroom, more opportunities for intellectual challenge and opportunities for greater leadership roles in the schools.

In your current job, do you feel you are able to teach in a way consistent with your pedagogical philosophy?

Somewhat surprisingly, eleven of the seventeen teachers felt they had a great deal of freedom to teach according to their pedagogical philosophy. “There is a great deal of autonomy in the classroom and I feel I am able to engage students in the type of learning I find works best.” “We develop our own classes, I am able to ‘teach my students as though they were my own.’” “Yes, I make it happen.”

But others expressed frustration over time constraints and district requirements. “Time constraints limit my ability to provide the sort of discussion-heavy instruction I am most comfortable with. I have sometimes resorted to direct instruction because it is easier to prepare.” “Everything has to be completely aligned. All assessments are exactly the same. All curriculum is exactly the same. Even our grade books have to be exactly the same.”

Listening to teachers: Suggestions for What Works

1) Trust teachers, and give them autonomy to create, to innovate, to teach.

Teachers who felt they were trusted to make decisions and be creative in their teaching cited it as among the most important factors in their job satisfaction, while those who didn't again and again expressed frustration. In her book, The Smartest Kids in the World, Amanda Ripley described the success of the education system of Finland, whose students score at the top of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. While clearly multiple factors lay behind Finland's success, Ripley points to the fact that Finland recruits the "best and the brightest" into the profession—and then lets them do their job without interference. In contrast to the American system of micromanaging and evaluating public school teachers to death, Finnish teachers are trusted to run their own classrooms.²

2. Give teachers more time—time to prepare, time to collaborate.

Time was the single thing most teachers would change about their jobs. According to a 2013 survey of teacher hours published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), American teachers spend close to 1100 hours in the classroom each year, more than any other OECD country, 200 more than the average, and almost 500 more hours than teachers in Finland.³ While one cannot conclude that less classroom time is the cause of Finland's or any other country's superior educational outcomes, it is clear that the greater number of hours

² Amanda Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World*, New York, 2013, p. 90.

³ OECD: Directorate for Education and Skills, *Education at a Glance 2013 - Indicators and annexes. Indicator D4: How much time do teachers spend teaching?*, accessed July 31, 2014, <http://www.oecd.org/edu/educationataglance2013-indicatorsandannexes.htm#ChapterB>

U.S. teachers spend in the classroom have not translated into better educational results for their students. They have, however, contributed to teacher dissatisfaction. And it seems reasonable that more time for teachers to plan, prepare, collaborate and reflect would contribute to better results for students.

3. Make K-12 teaching attractive to the “best and the brightest” by making entry into the profession more selective and paying teachers well.

This recommendation admittedly did not emerge directly from the survey. Yet after talking with these accomplished and dedicated educators, I strongly suspect that they were made better teachers by their superior intelligence and commitment to the life of the mind, as evidenced by their levels of education and accomplishment and their desire to spend three weeks of their own time studying philosophers of education. Recent research suggests that teacher quality may be correlated with graduation from more selective colleges and universities.⁴ Once again, the Finnish system of teacher selection and training may be instructive. In Finland, fewer than 20% of teaching candidates are accepted into one of the selective teacher training universities. According to Ripley, it is as prestigious to obtain a place in a teacher training program in Finland as it is to get into medical school in the United States.⁵ After an academically rigorous training, including a thesis based on original research, and a year-long

⁴ “Teacher Employment Patterns and Student Results in Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools,” *Center for Education Policy Research*. 2010. (Strategic Data Project, Harvard Graduate School of

Education), p. 16,

http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~pfpie/pdf/Teacher_Employment_Patterns_and_Student_Results_in_CMS_Feb_23_2010.pdf. However, Matthew Chingos and Paul Peterson found no such correlation in a study from June, 2010: “It’s Easier to Pick a Good Teacher than to Train One: Familiar and New Results on the Correlates of Teacher Effectiveness,” A Symposium sponsored by the *Economics of Education Review*, June 28, 2010, pp. 6-7. http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/MeritPayPapers/Chingos_Peterson_10-08.pdf

⁵ Ripley, pp. 84-85.

residency in a school, a Finnish teacher is paid well—with salaries much closer to the salaries of other college-educated professionals than in the United States.⁶

Include a summary paragraph?

In this study, I have attempted to survey the views of one group of teachers about their jobs. In the debate about the state of American K-12 education, it seems that everyone has something to say. Politicians, bureaucrats, corporate titans, hedge fund managers, and foundation heads have all weighed in.⁷ Less is reported about what the people closest to the classroom have to say. Idealistic, committed, and highly educated, they have sacrificed higher salaries and greater prestige in order to teach. They know intimately what goes on in classrooms and what our children need. It is time we listen to these dedicated professionals.

⁶ Ripley, pp. 87, 95.

⁷ Diane Ravitch, Reign of Error, New York, 2014, pp. 10-43.

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