

## ABSTRACT

### The Perceptions of Teacher Status and Impact on the American Educational System

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Despite the proven importance of teachers, teacher status in America is ambiguous, while many people have a nostalgic respect for teachers, current educational debates and reforms focus on holding teachers accountable, take away teacher autonomy, and deprofessionalizing the career. This research focuses on examining popular press and professional journals in order to be able to understand the status of American public school teachers and how that status affects the students and decisions made in the classroom. Both popular press and professional journals pointed to a need to raise teacher status in order to create the quality education that the United States needs. Raising teacher status involves multiple components, but most important is that teachers themselves raise their voices beyond the walls of the teachers' lounge, to involve themselves in educational decisions and instigate change.

THE PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER STATUS AND IMPACT ON THE  
AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication . . . . .	iii
Chapter 1 . . . . .	1
Chapter 2 . . . . .	16
Chapter 3 . . . . .	36
Chapter 4 . . . . .	47
Bibliography . . . . .	59

## DEDICATION

To my parents, who have always encouraged me to pursue my calling.

To Dr. Talbert, who mentored me, pushed me, and inspired me.

To Mrs. Hooker, who changed my life and the lives of innumerable students.

To Mrs. Kiser, Mrs. Gracie, Mrs. Small, Mr. Bullock, and Ms. Clifton:

Thank you for teaching.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *The Beginning of a Question*

My senior year of high school was very exciting and also very illuminating; I was so close to stepping onto the path towards my dream job and I was becoming more aware of the nature of the world I was about to be entering. Much of what I was beginning to notice was involved in how people responded to the career I had chosen to pursue. I was a very successful student in high school, and people had certain expectations for what I was going to do with my life. However, whenever I would tell people that I wanted to teach high school English, I found them comparing my career path to the chosen paths of my peers, and somehow mine didn't stand up under the scrutiny. In discussing my future endeavors, I would frequently receive the response of "Oh, you're *just* going to be a teacher?" and through the frequent usage of *just* I gained the impression that my chosen vocation was, somehow, perceived as beneath me, that there were some who thought that a life spent teaching meant squandering talents in a mediocre field. These responses surprised me because so many people seemed to have a low regard for a career which I saw as a noble pursuit. This is when I began to wonder where exactly did teachers fit in American society and what exactly was the public opinion of the career of teaching. For if the negativity I had encountered early on was an instance isolated to me, or an

opinion belonging to a very small minority, then there was little reason for concern. However, if the low regard for teaching was something that all teachers encountered, then perhaps this negativity towards teaching was a matter of concern that needed addressing, an undercurrent affecting more of public education than often realized.

America's public education system plays a vital role in the functioning of our society. The United States is unique in its large-scale compulsory education system and its commitment to providing every child a quality public school education, an education which is very much a defining element in determining a person's success in the U.S. Many of a person's earliest memories will be formed in the classroom, and the things learned in the classroom come to serve as a launching point for future endeavors. Educating and enlightening students so that they can fulfill their myriad of potentials is a tremendous task, and it lies in the hands of teachers to fulfill. It seems, however, that teachers themselves are in a quagmire concerning the public opinion of their vocation.

Teachers and students form the two critical elements of the education system. While this is an obvious statement, in the process of experimenting with education reform and seeking the best for our students, the basics can often be overlooked. The teachers have the closest and greatest direct impact upon the students within the education environment; the role of the teacher has the potential to determine either the success or failure of a student. While a great teacher can inspire his or her classes to pursue their dreams, and can effectively equip his or her students with the knowledge that their futures require, a poor teacher can just as easily convince students of the futility of their endeavors and

can fail to prepare the students with even the basic knowledge and skills they will need.

The influence of a teacher comes early and will have lifelong effects as it is integrated into the student's experiences. A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research examining the effects of teachers based on their "value-added" ratings, or teacher evaluation ratings based on student performance, showed that the "students assigned to higher value-added teachers are more successful in many dimensions. They are more likely to attend college, earn higher salaries, live in better neighborhoods and save more for retirement" (Bennet, 2012). This study shows how a teacher's impact lasted further than the classroom, and would later be connected with the quality of life for those students.

Despite the proven importance of teachers, many people do snub or disrespect the occupation, perceiving it as a lesser line of work. Sarah Brown Wessling, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year, in her address spoke about the problem of teacher status, stating that it was a problem that she and her successful colleagues were considered *just* teachers. The author of the article about Ms. Wessling reflected that "the word *just* serves as a reminder of a subtle mindset among some in the United States that a career in K-12 teaching, while considered noble, is nevertheless somehow seen as beneath the capacity of talented young men and women" (Sawchuk, 2012). This was the mindset that I had begun to notice when I graduated from high school. Likewise, a *New York Times* article on teacher-pay reforms opens with a similar confession from teacher Erin Park, who has received such judgments as "Oh, you pathetic

teachers...You are glorified baby sitters who leave work at 3 p.m. You deserve minimum wage” (Gabriel, 2011). This article went on to point out the incongruity of what seems to be an American mindset, that “Americans glowingly recall the ones who changed their lives, but think the job with its summers off is cushy” (Gabriel, 2011). It is a problem that the American attitude toward educators is so ambiguous, wavering between admiration and condescension, thus making it difficult to pinpoint what the status of teachers in America really is.

### *The Issue of Teacher Status*

The disjunction in the status of teachers goes beyond these anecdotal experiences, to also being evident in more concrete or measureable ways. For one, teacher status can be examined through society’s voiced opinions of teachers, through mediums such as the news, media, or surveys. The issue of teacher status can also be explored by examining what economic class teachers fall in. Furthermore, comparing teaching to other occupations and professions offers yet another insight into teacher status. In these three areas – the social, economic, and professional – there are serious ambiguities and gaps in determining the status of teachers within American society and culture.

Therefore, teacher status is one of the crucial topics that must be considered when discussing our education system. The perceived status of educators serves as indicators of how a society values education itself and whether it values education at all (Fwu & Wang, 2002). Furthermore, our perceptions of teachers have an influence on how the education system works,



how much responsibility and trust we give to teachers, and how we reform the education system. In addition, if quality teachers are necessary for a quality education system, then teaching should be an occupation which is capable of drawing an excellent work force, and teacher status affects the attractiveness of a teaching job. For students, the attitudes that they are taught, especially attitudes towards teachers, are brought into the classroom and have an influence on the learning environment. Teachers, this basic and essential element in the system, have a widespread impact, and the attitudes towards teachers reach even further.

### *Defining Status*

So far, status has been used as a broad overarching term to describe several interrelated elements which come together to influence the perception of teachers. By status, I'm referring to a person or group's relative position, the hierarchy in which people or groups are placed based on the degree to which they possess certain attributes, in this instance examining the social, professional, and economic factors which work together to form our perceptions of a specific group: American public school teachers (Benoir-Smullyan, 1944; Status, 2013). Often these elements are addressed in isolation from the others, but they also have similarities and overlaps, and it must be understood that status, as discussed in this context, is multidimensional.

### *Social-Cultural Indicators of Status*

One aspect in considering status is the general regard or esteem toward teachers in American society. Some indication of the social and cultural attitudes towards American teachers has already been witnessed through the personal experiences of the teachers previously mentioned.

The treatment of teachers in the American media also reflects and influences our perception of teachers and their status in our culture. Within the news, we see increasing concerns with the “call to standardize educational outcomes and evaluation,” calling into question “current teachers’ identities as professionals who are knowledgeable about and responsive to the contexts in which they practice” (Cohen, 2006-2007). While education is a hot topic in today’s newsrooms and newspapers, the calls for reform frequently focus on standardization and measuring progress and involve little teacher input or concern for the influence of individual teachers in the classroom.

Furthermore, television portrayals of teachers place them in stereotypes, either acutely negative or over-simplified, which skew the public perception of teachers’ job demands and roles to extremes that have little foundation in reality. Leslie Swetnam explores the various misrepresentations of teachers in film and television that modern viewers would also still recognize as standard portrayals of teachers, noting that “without personal knowledge about schools and teachers, people form their attitudes based on fictional media representations” (Swetnam, 1992). Frequently, television and film reinforce the idea that anyone can teach, having characters become teachers with little preparation or forethought, show classrooms to be places in which learning is always easy and fun, no matter how

unrealistic that idea is, or portray “witty” exchanges between students and teachers which in reality would be considered rude or as back talk. They also tend most often to make teaching appear to be a cushy job, by showing small class sizes and secondary teachers that have only one class, never showing teachers doing paper grading, planning, attending in-service or extra meetings, or the various other duties which add to the difficult demands of teaching.

Regarding the characters themselves, television and film tend to either portray as clownish, ineffective, autocratic, charismatic, or miracle workers (Swetnam, 1992). These representations waver between showing teachers to be completely incompetent or completely gifted in solving every student’s problem; neither show teaching to be the rigorous vocation it is, with long hours, little income or resources, nor addressing the insurmountable task of preparing today’s young people for a successful future.

The relationship between media and social status is intriguing, for the media both reflects and defines the ideas and stereotypes present in the culture. Without the first-hand knowledge, much of public opinion is formed based on the portrayals seen in the media. On the other hand, the media also builds upon ideas and stereotypes which are already present in the culture, often promoting the negative stereotypes that were handed to it. If teaching is portrayed as an easy job and teachers are shown to be bumbling imbeciles, then it cultivates a low public opinion of teachers and a low regard for the role of teachers in society. Furthermore, if we continually characterize teachers as deserving a low regard, it reflects that, as a society, we already determined teachers to have a low status.

### *Economic Indicators of Status*

Salary and income levels are also often used as key indicators of status, with these usually correlating with the perceived social and professional rankings, and therefore providing a measurable insight into teachers' status. One way of looking at teacher pay as a gauge of the status of teachers is to see how the pay of American teachers compares to the earnings of teachers in other countries. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, show that in 2007 the average salary of a veteran elementary teachers was \$44,172 where as the average for other participating countries was \$39,426, placing the U.S. teacher slightly higher in earnings. However, that \$44,172 salary level "was 40 percent below the average salary of other American college graduates" (Dillon, 2011). In comparison, Finland's veteran teacher salary falls only 13 percent below the average for their college graduates (Dillon, 2011).

While teacher pay in the United States may appear to be fairly good as compared to other countries, the truer indicator of teacher status within this country lies in comparing the average teacher salary to other college graduates, examining salaries as economic indicators of where industries and professions lie in the U.S.'s priorities. If the gap between our average teacher salary and the salaries of other college graduates is so much wider than in other countries, such as Finland mentioned above, then perhaps we value teachers and our education system too little.

### *Professional Indicators of Status*

Regarding the use of professional aspects as an indicator of status, sociologists have devised a professional model, or “a series of organizational and occupational characteristics associated with professions and professionals and hence, useful to distinguish professions and professionals from other kinds of work and workers” (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). These characteristics include “rigorous training and licensing requirements, positive working conditions, an active professional organization or association, substantial workplace authority, relatively high compensation, and high prestige”(Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). For example, the traditional professions have included law, medicine, university teaching, architecture, science, and engineering (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011).

Based upon these characteristics of professionalization, Richard Ingersoll and Elizabeth Merrill examined the teaching occupation in order to “define and describe teaching’s occupational status” (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). In their findings, they determined that while elementary and secondary schools nearly always exhibited some characteristics of a professionalized workplace, they almost all lacked or fell short on the major characteristics of professionalization, showing that “teaching continues to be treated as, at best, a ‘semi-profession”” (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). Notably, unlike other traditional professions, teaching has alternative routes to credentials, a de-emphasis on specialization with teachers holding jobs outside their expertise, significantly lower compensation, a small ration between start-pay and end-pay, and that in regards to prestige, teachers fall in the middle – less prestige than lawyers but more than janitors (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011).

### *Teacher Status and How Education is Valued*

Teacher status is an important subject to consider when evaluating America's education system. In comparing different countries, evaluating the status of teachers as determined by wealth, prestige, and authority reveals "the significance attached to teaching and the amount of respect reserved for teachers"(Fwu & Wang, 2002). Furthermore, teacher status is an indicator of the importance and significance of education to each society (Fwu & Wang, 2002). In societies or areas where teachers are highly esteemed and well rewarded, it correlates that teaching and education are highly valued and very important to those people. The reverse would likewise be true; low regard for teachers correlates with a low opinion of the value of education. Based on teacher pay, Americans ranked 22 out of 27 countries "with teachers earning less than 60 percent of the average pay for full-time college-educated workers" (Murray, 2011).

Furthermore, the notion that teaching is somehow a second-rate profession "is virtually unheard of among countries such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea that top the charts on high-profile international assessment" (Sawchuk, 2012). While there are several different factors accounting for the success of the educational systems in these countries – mainly that they are more homogenous in regards to wealth, race, and culture than the United states – as our economic competitors, they provide in insightful contrast to the disparities in our own system. Jari Lavonen, the director of teacher education at the University of Helsinki, Finland, said "teaching is a similar career to a lawyer or a medical doctor. It is an academic profession, an independent profession. There is lots of

decision-making at the local level, and teachers enjoy freedom and trust. They work as real experts” (Sawchuk, 2012). However, as discussed by Ingersoll and Merrill, the same claim cannot decisively be made for American educators as teaching positions often do not meet these descriptors (Ingersoll & Merril, 2011).

### *Impact on Education System and Reform*

In the midst of the various popular debates and education reforms, it is important that we know where the American public school teacher stands. Teachers are a crucial part of the system and in overlooking the ambiguities concerning teachers, we may be overlooking the consequences of our perceptions of teachers.

For one, the perception of teachers affects the structure of the system. The surmounting increase on emphasis in raising standards, accountability, and standardized testing brought about in the years since the installation of No Child Left Behind cultivates a system in which teachers are expected to meet specific and detailed requirements while taking little actual ownership in the system. In Texas, TEKS, CScope, and administration – while aiming at creating high standards – dictate what the teacher addresses in the classroom (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, 2013; Dallas Morning News, 2013; TEKS Resource System, 2013). Determining which is the effect of the other – the reluctance to trust teachers in the classroom or the push for standardization– is its own complicated issue. The structure of many schools is now stuck in a cycle in which authorities have a low regard for the capability of the teachers in the school and attempt to

compensate through scripted lessons, pre-determined teaching units, and lesson objectives, and an over-emphasis on simply getting students through school and to pass the mandated tests.

Also, the perceived status of teachers affects the quality of the workforce that the education system will attract. For all of the changes made to the nature of the educational system, high quality teachers remain the key to higher student outcomes, as evidenced in the OECD report previously mentioned. Countries such as Korea, Singapore, and Finland – top scoring countries on the Program for International Student Assessment – “recruit only high-performing college graduates for teaching positions, support them with mentoring and other help in the classroom, and take steps to raise respect for the profession” (Dillon, 2011). Too often, teachers enter into education for its intrinsic rewards and its positive influence on young people, but leave because of factors related to the low regard for teachers (Dillon, 2011).

### *Teacher Status Examined through Popular Press and Professional Journals*

Understanding teacher status is an issue that must be addressed because of the significant influences of teachers within the American education system. Teachers are crucial to the functioning of the education system and have a lasting impact on their students beyond the classroom. The current perceptions of teachers affect how the education system is structured or changed, and affect the quality of people drawn to the teaching workforce. Furthermore, teacher status must be considered as an interrelation between the social, economic, and



professional aspects of status in order to gain a holistic view of the effects of these ambiguities around teacher status.

### *Purpose of the Research*

Taking these issues revolving around teacher status – the ambiguities and misconceptions – I wanted to know how this issue affected our schools, classrooms, and students, as seen through the dialogues of popular press and professional journals. In examining an issue in education, it is important to maintain focus on the two crucial elements of the education system: the teachers and the students. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore how these different elements of status – the social, economic, and professional – either correlate or dissociate regarding public school teachers, and through that to be accurately able to describe the perceived status of teachers and its effects on the students, schools, and teachers themselves.

My research will focus on a content analysis of popular press and professional journals, comparing and contrasting the perceptions and treatment of teachers through each source. By analyzing the commonalities and differences between the treatment of teachers in popular press and their treatment in professional journals, I hoped to address my main research questions: 1) what do these different sources show about the status of public school teachers, and 2) what effects does the status of teachers have on the public schools, students, and teachers, and the decisions made in the schools.

In order to address the issue, we must first understand the facets of the problem, preparing a broad and involved understanding of teacher status as an issue and then examining the effects and influences of teacher status on the schools. If we hope to improve our educational system, to create reforms that offer our students, our futures, the best opportunities and which cultivate growth and learning, then we must develop an understanding of where teachers stand in our society and of where they should be in order to create the best system for our students. Again, the perceived status of educators indicates how a society values education, influences the structure of the system, and affects the quality of the teachers within the system. It is highly important to develop an understanding of teacher status in the United States and how it has affected actual teachers, and examine its repercussions in the classrooms and schools.

Knowing that teachers are crucial to our schools and society, and that our value of teachers is related to how much we value education and structure education, I sought to understand how this issue affected teachers and their students – the structure of the class and the decisions teachers made related to their classes. In the following chapters, I will go further into depth in examining and explaining the elements of status through reports and literature relating to education in the United States, explain the details of my research, and report and analyze my findings.

Teachers remain a very important and influential group in our society, and the key component in a successful education system. However, there are multiple disjunctions concerning the actual status of teachers in the US; while perhaps given lip-service, often the statistics and portrayals of teachers show

that they perhaps aren't as highly valued as they should be. Too often do we hear stories, like those at the beginning of this chapter, of teachers who feel disrespected and underappreciated, and too often do aspiring graduates, like me, feel that their chosen career is perceived as a lesser path or a waste of intellect. If we wish to give our students an excellent education, to equip them for the future, then we must understand where their teachers fit, what their status is exactly, in order to produce change for the better.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

In seeking to understand the status of the American public school teacher, to understand how our public school teachers are viewed and valued and how that influences our educational choices, there are many broad concepts and contexts which must be taken in to account and clarifications that must be made in order to frame this picture. As stated, part of this perspective involved keeping the focus on teachers and recognizing that our views of teachers have the potential to influence decisions that affect our students, either for the better or for the worse. Another part of this perspective, as discussed in Chapter 1, is taking status as a multi-faceted term, with indicators in the social, economic, and professional realms.

Also involved in understanding the issue is understanding the educational climate around the topic of teacher status. Much of the current climate around education can be traced back to *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*, a report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, published in 1983, which spurred much of the educational trends seen today. Additionally, the No Child Left behind Act is the legislative act which has supported and enacted the standards-based education reform and the push for accountability in our nation's schools. Each of these pieces came up frequently

throughout my research and provides important insights into the current issue of teacher status.

### *A Nation at Risk*

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, created by the Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, in 1981 was directed to investigate and report the quality of education in America. This report became *A Nation at Risk* and spurred many actions and debates about reforming our schools, lasting into the twenty-first century. The Commission's charter included:

assessing the quality of teaching and learning in our Nation's public and private schools, colleges, and universities; comparing American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations; studying the relationship between college admissions requirements and students achievement in high school; identifying educational programs which result in notable student success in college; assessing the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last quarter century have affected student achievement; and defining problems which must be faced and overcome if we are successful to pursue the course of excellence in education (Gardner, 1983).

The resulting report was bleak, within the first page stating that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament" (Gardner, 1983). The report also emphasized the importance of providing a quality education, presenting the idea of the world as a global village

with the United States living among other strong and well-educated competitors (Gardner, 1983). In this world, “knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce” and “learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the ‘information age’ we are entering” (Gardner, 1983). The Commission also expressed confidence that “the American people, properly informed, will do what is right for their children and for the generations to come” (Gardner, 1983).

The report highlighted many different risks and shortcomings in the American education system. Among these findings, the Commission learned that on 19 academic tests, American students never in first or second, and on seven of these tests, Americans came in last. Furthermore, the Commission found that 23 million American adults were functionally illiterate, thirteen percent of 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate, 40% could not draw inferences from written materials, only one fifth could write a persuasive essay, and only one third could solve a multi-step mathematics problem. According to the report, this marked the first time in American history that the current generation was not surpassing or even meeting the previous generation in educational skills (Gardner, 1983).

As America was swept into the information age, the Commission saw young people emerging from high school unprepared for college or future careers. However, the Commission also saw many “tools at hand” with which to bring about the needed change, among these “the dedication, against all odds, that keeps teachers serving in schools and colleges, even as rewards diminish” (Gardner, 1983).

The commission found numerous risks and fallings within all aspects of the system, though for my purposes here I will briefly mention their findings and recommendations regarding teachers. The commission observed that teachers had too little input – in textbook writing or in critical school decisions; for teachers, professional working life – compensation, preparation, and autonomy – was “on the whole unacceptable.” Too few academically able students were being attracted to teaching, key fields were experiencing a shortage of teachers, and teacher preparation programs were failing to prepare teacher candidates in significant areas (Gardner, 1983).

After seeing the deficits throughout the system, the Commission developed many recommendations for reform. These recommendations included strengthening state and local graduation requirements, that schools, colleges, and universities adopt “more rigorous and measurable standards and higher expectations,” including colleges and universities raising admission requirements, and giving standardized tests at major transition points with the purpose of certifying student credentials and identifying needs for either remedial or accelerated work (Gardner, 1983).

For teachers specifically, the Commission recommended that the requirements for teaching candidates be raised to higher standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching and competence in academic discipline, and that teacher preparation programs be judged on how well their graduates meet these more rigorous criteria. It also recommended that teacher salaries be increased to be “professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based.” In the report, the Commission stated that salary, promotion, tenure, and

retention decisions ought to be tied to an effective evaluation system, which included peer review. Other recommendations included adopting an 11-month contract for teachers, developing a career ladder for teachers, creating programs to recruit math and science teachers, providing incentives such as grants or loans to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession, and having master teachers involved in designing teacher preparation programs and supervising beginning teachers (Gardner, 1983).

*A Nation at Risk* propelled America's educational issues into the national agenda; 30 years later, despite the push for reform, raising standards, and accountability, little seems changed (Graham, 2013). All states have adopted more rigorous academic standards, forty-five now ascribing to the Common Core State Standards, yet much of our student achievement remains stagnate, and many other risks and recommendations remain unaddressed (Graham, 2013). In 2008, the Department of Education published *A Nation Accountable: Twenty-five Years after a Nation at Risk*, a report documenting America's progress, or lack thereof, in addressing the issues presented in 1983. This report offered its thanks to the standards and accountability movement and to the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* for enabling Americans to have a comprehensive look at our schools and providing reliable data to "evaluate student performance and address weaknesses in our schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008)

Many of the areas that have remained unaddressed are related to teachers, both in preparation and compensation. Despite the recommendation for 'professionally competitive' salaries, the average teacher's salary shows little significant change; in today's dollars, the average salary in 1983 was \$46,700 and



in 2010, teachers averaged \$54,900 (Graham, 2013). Additionally, critics of current reform trends claim that “budget cuts and the obsession with standardized testing have narrowed the curriculum, and handcuffed educator’s ability to utilize creative supplemental programs to support and engage their students” (Graham, 2013).

In regards to improving teacher preparedness and effectiveness, Congress sought to address the *ANAR*’s recommendations through the enactment of *NCLB*’s Highly Qualified Teacher provision, and while most teachers have gone through the required means in their respective states to meet the definition of Highly Qualified, “there is little evidence to conclude that this provision has led to notable increase in the requisite subject-matter knowledge of teachers or to increases in measures of individual teacher effectiveness” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). *A Nation Accountable* mentioned no other significant measure to address *A Nation at Risk*’s recommendations regarding teachers.

Among its various claims, *A Nation Accountable* expressed confidence that “we have transformed ourselves from a nation at risk of complacency to a nation that is accountable and at work on its educational weaknesses” and that “the standards and accountability movement has resulted in new transparency in student achievement” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The report also reiterated the importance of effective teachers to the improvement of education and that effective teachers “[demonstrate] mastery of the subjects that they teach” and “deserve to be compensated for excellent results in their classrooms” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Yet, the report offered no current recommendations for achieving these measures, stating that “we do not yet know

as much as we could like about how to develop these great teachers or the best way to allocate our teacher resources to do the most good” but that “a growing body of research and innovative pilot efforts...are being pursued on these topics” (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

As we explore this issue of teacher status, it is important to keep in mind that this climate – a climate instigated by *A Nation at Risk* – is the climate that our students and teacher are working within. Schools and administration are operating within this fear of failure, especially when, 35 years later, the state of our education system still seems so desperate. In the midst of this, the question remains: where do teachers stand? Are teachers valued as integral parts to the system, experts prepared to fix our problems, or are teachers seen as adversaries, a flawed labor forced which the system must overcome? The changes that have come after *A Nation at Risk* offer considerable insight into understand the status of American public school teachers. As seen in *A Nation at Risk* and *A Nation Accountable*, little has been done to address the original recommendations regarding teachers, as is also seen in *No Child Left Behind*, an act created in response to these fears brought up in *A Nation at Risk* and under which our current education system operates.

### *No Child Left Behind*

The rather depressing academic performance of American students on international exams continued, and in 2001 Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind*, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No

Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (2002)). The act opened by stating early in the document “although education is primarily a state and local responsibility, the federal government is partly at fault for tolerating these abysmal results. The federal government currently does not do enough to reward success and sanction failure in our education system” (No Child Left Behind, 2001). As already seen through the discussion of *A Nation at Risk*, No Child Left Behind is closely tied to our current educational climate.

Generally, the document laid out an “educational blueprint” for a system that will “increase accountability for student performance, focus on what works, reduce bureaucracy and increase flexibility, and empower parents” (No Child Left Behind, 2001). The priorities included “improving academic performance of disadvantaged students, boosting teacher quality, improving academic performance of disadvantaged students, moving limited English proficient students to English fluency, promoting informed parent choice and innovative programs, encouraging safe schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and encouraging freedom and accountability” (No Child Left Behind, 2001).

Spurred on by the fears from *A Nation at Risk*, and as seen in *A Nation Accountable*, No Child Left Behind stressed accountability and high standards, enforcing a policy in which states must have a system of sanctions and rewards for low and high performing schools, annual academic assessments, and consequences for schools failing to educate disadvantaged students. As part of NCLB’s policies, it is also emphasized that all students must be taught by quality teachers, with state-provided access to quality professional development, though, as mentioned earlier, it remains a debate whether the highly qualified teacher

provision made any effective difference (No Child Left Behind, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

While offering recognition of the need for highly qualified teachers, NCLB did little to effectively improve teacher quality. In examining teacher status – understanding what status teachers hold in the United States and what implications that has for the education system – No Child Left Behind is a prime example of creating ways to measure teachers and hold teachers accountable without also embodying a trust of teachers and respect for them as experts. Raising teacher quality, a component of status, was brought up without actually being defined, leaving the state of teacher quality and needed improvements ambiguous. Although *A Nation at Risk* placed a large emphasis on the necessity of good teachers, brought to light many glaring problems in the teaching field, and called for changes in the profession, in the decades since, and in No Child Left Behind, little effectual change has occurred, furthering the ambiguities around what is needed in the teaching and placing teachers as a low educational priority. *A Nation at Risk* and No Child Left Behind hold further implications for teacher status, as will be examined through popular press sources and professional journals, as the call for accountability and the environment which this creates both reflects our ideas of teachers and affects the teachers themselves.

### *Research Literature*

Between the Department of Education reports and the current legislative debates and shifts, America's educational successes and failures have been pushed to the forefront of the current issues and hot topics today. In the midst of the reforms and debates, the question remains: where do teachers fit in the American educational system and in American society? The importance of effective teachers has been established, yet in the flurry of raising standards and creating accountability, the status of teachers still seems undefined, and thus the importance of examining this issue of teacher status.

For my research, I focused on examining teacher status through popular press and professional journals, or comparing the views of those outside education – the news, general populace, and media – to those within the educational world – the teachers and educational experts – to see how each of these sources addressed and portrayed teachers, with the ultimate goal of being able to describe the status of American public schools teachers within the current context and describe the effects of that status of the teachers, schools, and students. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to giving an overview of the literature used in my research and chapter 3 will be dedicated to the analysis.

### *Popular Press*

For my popular press sources, my research focused on recent articles – at least within the past 10 years, most of them within the past five – from major newspapers in the United States and focusing on education related events in New

York, California, and Texas. Much of this literature involved coverage of the hot topics in education, many of them carrying on the same themes as discussed with *A Nation at Risk* and No Child Left Behind within the 21<sup>st</sup> century context.

### *Standards and Testing*

While our competitors continue to surpass us in international exams, one effort to boost academic performance in the United States is the push to adopt the Common Core State Standards, establishing skills and standards that states can choose to ascribe to as their instructional focus, “things that Americans recognize that our schools need to teach” such as critical thinking, communication skills, collaboration, and character building (Blow, 2013). These standards have been received with mixed feelings: on one hand, many view the implementation as being rushed, enacted before teachers could be adequately prepared with the tools and resources to help their students meet these standards. On the other hand, other reports declare, “teachers say that the new learning standards now being implemented in most states will improve students’ thinking skills” (Toppo, 2013). Throughout the articles, there were also many general criticisms of No Child Left Behind, with its emphasis on keeping accountability through students testing, as “underinvested in curriculum development and teachers training, overlooking the approaches that the other nations use to help teachers get constantly better” (Times Editorial Board, 2013).

### *Topics Specific to Teachers*

Throughout the various education-related articles and scattered in with the various teacher related scandals, one educational concern is that of teacher retention – more specifically, how to attract and keep the quality educators while getting rid of the bad ones (Baker, Bumpy Start for Teacher Evaluation Program in New York Schools, 2013). Beginning in fall 2013, New York City schools implemented a new teacher evaluation system which incorporates classroom observations, student growth on state exams, and locally developed measure to rate teachers as “highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective” and opens the possibility for firing teachers who are rated ineffective for two consecutive years (Baker, Bumpy Start for Teacher Evaluation Program in New York Schools, 2013). However, there has been opposition to using the standardized test scores as part of evaluations, especially considering that teachers are still adjusting to the new Common Core standards and do not have all the necessary resources at their disposal for the new standards, leading lawmakers to propose a two year moratorium for that aspect of the new evaluations (Baker, "Cuomo Says Education Board's Plan Dilutes Teacher Reviews, 2014).

Virginia is undergoing a similar phenomenon with a new evaluation system; the new program will have 40% of teacher evaluations based on students' academic progress measured by standardized test results. Patrick Welsh, an Opinion contributor for USA today and a teacher in Virginia, observes that this push for connecting teacher evaluations to test scores, spurred by the Race to the Top grant program, at face value seems reasonable, but doesn't play out as realistic in an actual classroom, as research shows that “a teacher's test results

can vary so much from year to year, and even from class to class in the same year, that test results can tell little about the quality of the teacher” (Welsh, 2013).

In California, teacher protection laws are coming under criticism as part of a lawsuit claiming that “California’s teacher protection laws unconstitutionally deprive students of equal access to quality education” (Times Editorial Board, 2014). One editorial piece covering the lawsuit observed that “state laws that make it nearly impossible to fire even the worst teachers make for poor educational policy” and that “the same is true of laws that require layoffs to be decided on the basis of seniority, and that give principals only a year and a half to decide whether a new teacher deserves the extraordinary protections of tenure” (Times Editorial Board, 2014). The authors of the article affirmed that teachers need protections – from vengeful firings or from being fired simply because they earn higher (Times Editorial Board, 2014).

Teacher recruitment is an issue that has also reached the attention of several major papers as people realize that many current teachers will soon be retiring and that there will not be sufficient incoming teachers to fill their places. Yet, one article observes, “with so much teacher bashing, who in the world would want to teach?” (Rich, 2013). The Department of Education in 2013 released a public service campaign “aimed at recruiting a new generation of classroom educators” (Rich, 2013). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stated that he wanted to see us follow the model of several other academically successful countries that “pull their teaching corps from the top tenth to top third of college graduates.” Conversely, many teachers feel that their jobs are made more



difficult through Department of Education policies and that the “overemphasis on testing has stymied teacher creativity (Rich, 2013).

Teacher preparation programs at colleges and university are also coming under criticism to leaving new students poorly prepared and giving them tools with “little relevance to what they need to succeed in the classroom” (Times Editorial Board, 2013). Yet one journalist observes that “of all the competing claims on America’s education dollar – more technology, smaller classes, universal prekindergarten, school choice – the one option that would seem to be a no-brainer is investing in good teachers,” yet many programs remain weak, since acquiring a state teaching license is a very basic and unselective process (Keller, 2013). Others observe that, rather than talking about raising teacher effectiveness for the teachers already in the classrooms, efforts should be taken to “change the caliber of the people who enter teaching in the first place” (Kihn & Miller, 2010).

### *Professional Journals*

As with popular press sources, my research utilized sources from professional journals dating within the past 10 years, including the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Educational Leadership*, *Childhood Education*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, and *Urban Education*. Within my findings, professional journals showed a trend to cover topics connected to those highlighted in the popular press, such as teacher quality and the relationship between teaching and the accountability movement, again tracing back to the trends started by A

*Nation at Risk* and *No Child Left Behind*. In addition to these, professional journals included additional topics such as what motivates teachers, teacher autonomy, and the deprofessionalization of teachers.

### *Teacher Quality*

Ensuring teacher quality remains a key issue for education experts, as studies continue to show that teacher quality is a key determinant in a student's success and that teacher quality is not evenly distributed; the students in the most need of high quality teachers, those affected by poverty or those in schools with a high minority population, often have the inexperienced and underqualified teachers. *No Child Left Behind* sought to remedy this by its Highly Qualified Teacher provision, requiring that by 2006 "teachers of core academic subject...have a bachelor's degree, full state certification, and proven competency in the subject areas they teach" (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). In 2006, Linda Darling-Hammond and Barnett Berry were encouraged by the new provisions effects to trigger new efforts to attract and support new teachers in the profession and for drawing "much needed attention to the importance of ensuring equitable student access to high-qualified teachers" (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). However, these authors also observed that in over a dozen states, "up to 30 percent of teachers do not meet the law's definition of highly qualified" (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006).

Furthermore, the term "highly qualified" becomes flimsy and questionable considering that the federal rules permit states to label teachers as

“highly qualified” based merely upon their enrollment in a teacher preparation program. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Education encourages states to eliminate “bureaucratic hurdles” such as teacher education coursework and student teaching (despite research showing the benefits of traditional teacher preparation certification for students achievement gains), meaning that labeling teacher quality is based upon simply passing a test and earning a college major in an area “closely related” to the teaching subject (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006)

### *Teaching within the Accountability Movement*

Professionals and researchers within the field of education have also observed a variety of effects of NCLB on the schools and teachers throughout America’s public education system. One observed effect is the reallocation of instructional time from non-tested subjects, such as social studies, science, music, and art, to tested subjects, such as mathematics and reading; the time spent on these is often limited to “the relatively narrow set of topics that are most heavily represented on the high-stakes tests” (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Additionally, researchers have observed that NCLB has “led to an increase in the share of teacher with master’s degrees” and an “improvement in a teacher reported index of student behaviors” (Dee & Jacob, 2010). These researchers also observed that the theoretical framework behind NCLB directly implies a viewpoint in which “the interests of teachers and school administrators...are viewed as imperfectly aligned with those of parents and voters” (Dee & Jacob, 2010). The emphasis on

accountability implies that measures must be put in place to keep teachers in check with what parents and voters want and that teaching as a profession cannot be trusted to seek the same educational goals.

Meanwhile, others observe that, caused by the pressure of NCLB and the call for accountability, “mentors, supervisors, and administrators may interpret their role as enforcing mandates that frequently go against their own and their teacher’s best instincts” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Because of the emphasis on accountability, “most public schools now focus on and often times fear annual school scores based on aggregated results of state-developed indicators” (Olsen & Sexton, 2008). This narrowed curriculum and the limitations placed on teachers, in some cases going as far as to hand teachers scripted lessons, leads to new teachers finding “their personal and professional identity development thwarted, creativity and autonomy undermined, and ability to forge relationships with students diminished” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Often these new teachers are in “poorly performing schools... [Where] they see the school culture as too restrictive and the leadership unsupportive of their efforts to develop a personally satisfying teaching practice” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Those examining the relationship between the call for accountability and its effects on teachers say, “a balance must be struck between autonomy and accountability in devising scope for professional discretion over curriculum” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). The stress on accountability mandates, raising standards, and limited choices in curriculum and instruction have had great effects on teacher retention, especially on new teachers. Furthermore, these emphases imply a distrust of teachers which holds significant implications for the issue of teacher status, viewing

teachers as workers who must be kept in check and instructed in what to do lowers the status of teachers.

### *Teacher Autonomy and Motivation to Teach*

Professional journals also showed a trend toward examining teacher's motivations to teach, examining why they became teachers. While each teacher will have his or her own specific reasons, for the most part, researchers found that "they became teachers because they believe that education can open up new opportunities in life" (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Coming from this basis, this understanding that most teachers are seeking to bring about some sort of benefit for others, researchers also observed a strong connection between autonomy and teacher motivation, specifically that "the desire for autonomy among teachers [is] strongly related to their desire to do good work" (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). For highly qualified teachers, this leads to frustrations with the "diminished control they have over their classrooms, which erodes one of the only arenas in which they experience opportunities for decision making in a field in which teachers have little control" (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Furthermore, teachers "believed that good principals provided space for decision making and helped mitigate rather than enforce the pressure and frustrations brought about by the new regime of accountability" (Crocco & Costigan, 2007).

### *Deprofessionalization of Teaching*

In the midst of accountability, concerns with teacher retention and attracting new teachers to the profession, and worries about teacher quality, there is also a growing concern with the deprofessionalization of teaching, or worries that teaching is losing ground in the aspects that held it, however tenuously, as a profession. For one, the mandates, standards, and set curriculum lead to worries that “if public school teaching becomes known as a profession of following orders, only those comfortable with this kind of obedience will enter or remain in the profession” which some fear “would lower the quality and innovations in learning and democracy in the United States” (Olsen & Sexton, 2008). Furthermore, increasing teacher pay is not the sole way to bridge the gap between teaching and the other traditional professions; according to research, “factors such as school leadership, time for highly qualified professional development, and teacher empowerment” strongly affect both student achievement and teacher retention” (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). Decisions and factors influencing teaching credentials, autonomy, and prestige are all markers in deciding to what extent teaching is a profession. Currently, researcher’s findings show that teaching continues to be treated as a “semi-profession”; while schools do exhibit some “characteristics of professionalized workplaces...almost all lack or fall short on many of the key characteristics associated with professionalization (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011).

### *Examining the Literature*

Throughout the popular press sources and professional journals, it was clear that the current educational climate, created by No Child Left Behind and responding to the problems exposed in *A Nation at Risk*, holds significant implications concerning teacher status. Furthermore, the way popular press sources and professional journals address current educational issues, and the way they address teachers in relation to these issues, allows us to examine the status of American public school teachers and how that status impacts the education system. Popular press sources showed a concern with the movements to raise standards and with how student performance in the U.S. compares to our economic competitors, in addition to reporting concerns about the implications of new teacher evaluation systems, teacher preparation programs and teacher recruitment. Meanwhile, professional journals revealed concerns with teacher quality, also the underlying concern in the new teacher evaluation systems, but also included studies of how the accountability movement affects teaching and teacher motivation, as well as addressing issues with teacher autonomy and deprofessionalization of teaching. In the next chapter, I will examine the literature mentioned here for what can be determined about teacher status, analyzing where the popular press and professional journals agree or disagree regarding their treatment of teachers and seeking what can be understood, from these sources, about the status of American public school teachers.

## Chapter Three

### Analysis

Knowing the extent of the impact that teachers have on student success, as discussed in Chapter One, and knowing that American education is in a tense and evolving climate right now, in which the push to develop a successful education system is coupled with a fear of failure, and a fear of failure's implications for America's future, attention must be given to understanding the status of American public school teachers in this climate and to understanding how that status affects the students and classrooms. Between mandates, accountability, our own societal perceptions that have evolved over time, and the questionable aspects of teaching as it compares to the professional world, it is problematic that so many ambiguities lie around such an influential group.

Seeking to be able to accurately understand and describe current teacher status, I analyzed, compared, and contrasted popular press sources and professional journals, and in Chapter Two, I provided an overview of the topics covered in these sources. In examining these various sources from popular press and professional journals, comparing and contrasting how these sources treat teachers and to what extent teachers are important to them brings about some intriguing observations in this goal to answer the question of teacher status. While addressing many of the same trends and issues in education and with teaching, and often agreeing in opinions upon these different trends, journalists



and educational experts also differ in several key points in their treatment of and opinions regarding teachers.

In my analysis, while keeping in mind the overall goal of understanding the status of American public school teacher and its implications, I focused on the following primary issues. As one aspect, I sought to analyze the popular press and professional journals converge or differ in their treatment of teachers, examining elements such as the inclusion of teacher voices, what each source prioritizes concerning teachers, and the nuances of the language used to address teachers. Additionally, I sought to examine these sources for what could be learned about how teachers fit within current educational issues; for instance, examining what cultural mindsets these sources observed or believed to be the norm, and looking at how, as seen in these sources, teachers fit within current legislative pushes and changes. The rest of this chapter will explore and examine the common themes observed throughout these sources.

### *Teacher Voices*

In both popular press papers and in the professional journals, a significant amount of news articles and research gave some form of voice to teachers, something to indicate what teachers themselves thought about the topic, showing that both recognize the importance of hearing from the people affected by these many debates and decisions, though the popular press showed a higher tendency to go directly to teachers to discover how new initiatives, policies, and legislation were affecting them.

For instance, Al Baker's *New York Times* articles over the new evaluation system focused on relaying criticisms from teachers about the system -- namely, that it was implemented before they were provided with the resources to support the new curriculum -- and directly describes Baker's observations of different teachers undergoing the new evaluations (Baker, "Bumpy Start" and "Cuomo Says"). Similarly, another *New York Times* article on the quality of teaching profession begins by directly describing an observed, real class scenario and the journalist's observations of the class's teacher (Rich, 2013). An article on teacher compensation goes directly to Texas teachers to discover why so many are taking on second or third jobs outside of teaching (Stutz & Hobbs, 2011). *USA Today* even features an education columnist who is an English teacher in a Virginia high school and whose writing has been featured in *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Newsweek* (Welsh, 2013). Such aspects in these articles did show an understanding that teacher voices are important and valuable and that teacher input must be heard within these educational debates.

Similarly in professional journals, one study focused on reporting the responses of urban educators to the push for accountability, and while surveying a large number of people and reporting the overall responses, also included direct quotes from participants throughout the article, such as one teacher's response that "I am treated as if I do not know how best to attend to the needs of my students" (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Another study examining how teachers view their work within new policies focused on a small group within a high school, again reporting direct responses from teachers (Olsen & Sexton, 2008). However, most other reports in professional journals gave little to no indication

of teacher opinions within the various topics, or if they did, it was in the form of collected data, showing trends in teacher opinions but not providing direct input from teachers.

Observing the priority of teacher voices in these publications is one means to understanding teacher status, as it is evidence of the value that is placed on teacher opinions. To an extent, both popular press and professional journals placed a higher value on teacher voices, though as observed popular press showed a greater tendency to seek and share direct input from teachers. However, in both types of sources it was clear that teachers were frustrated that they weren't being heard and involved in educational dialogues, as evidenced in this section and as will be seen throughout this chapter, and that while researchers and journalists sought teachers out, the disjunction lies with both federal and state legislative decisions which do not involve teachers. Those who influence our perceptions of teacher in the public and professional realms showed a greater respect for teacher input than the policymakers whose decisions directly impact teachers.

### *Recognition of What is Already "Known" about Teaching*

Both forms of journals also tended to recognize common presumptions around teaching careers; specifically, acknowledging that teachers do more than is realized by the general public and that teacher bashing is a common pastime in American conversations. However, neither showed a significant interest in explaining why and how laziness and incompetence came to characterize

American teachers. Each time, the source would mention this characterization as this eternal but false assumption in American culture. A *Washington Post* article features a piece by Sarah Blaine specifically addressing the American assumption regarding teachers: “We all know what teachers do, right? After all, we were all students... We were students, and therefore we know teachers. We denigrate teachers. We criticize teachers. We can do better than teachers. After all: We do. They teach. We are wrong” (Strauss, 2014). Similarly, an article from a professional journal examining parent-teacher relationships observes that “parents....don’t trust teachers. They think that we’re lazy and that we’re largely responsible for a lot of the problems with their kids, and they’re wrong” and that, furthermore, parents have this nostalgia around their own education that “drives parents to press teachers to return to and reinstate “real schooling” for their own children... [challenging] teachers’ judgment and expertise when they deviate from what is familiar to parents” (Hargreaves, 2001).

It seems as if, when it comes to opinions among the general populace, journalists and education professionals agree that teachers have been assigned a lower prestige and social status than deserved, but neither side shows significant interest in investigating teacher status from that aspect, instead focusing on economic or professional means. While examining the economy and professional dimensions of status can have some effects in describing and improving social status, the articles and research still provided no answers as to how this low opinion of teachers – this tendency for Americans to bash teachers and say that “those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach” – came about. Yet, by acknowledging this mindset and pointing out these errors, in addition to

prioritizing teacher voices, both popular press sources and professional journals showed a concern with changing this mindset, correcting it by providing accurate information in regards to what teachers actually do and promoting the understanding that teaching isn't a profession that just anyone can do. Knowing this adds another layer to understanding and describing teacher status; the public misconceptions of teachers are recognized by journalists and researchers and, to a degree, both parties have shown attempts to correct these misconceptions.

### *Highly Qualified*

In both popular press and professional journals, a predominant issue was the recognition that highly qualified teachers were essential for student achievement and that too many students did not have access to highly qualified teachers. Furthermore, both forms of journals expressed concerns with labeling teachers as highly qualified who were not truly, or labeling teachers based on tests that could not accurately measure teacher competency. One article reporting a study on the value-added approach to examining teachers concluded “second only to parents, teachers are the most important part of a child’s education. Great teachers make a great difference; poor teachers hurt a child’s life chances. Isn’t that all we need to know to embark upon a serious effort to reward good teachers and encourage poor teachers out of the profession?” (Bennet, 2012). Likewise, studies reported in professional journals emphasized, “well-prepared and well-supported teachers are important for all students, but

especially for students who come to school with greater needs” (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). Both professional journals and popular press articles were agreed about the need for good, high quality teachers in every classroom. Between these sources, *A Nation at Risk* and *No Child Left Behind*, it is evident that multiple parties recognize the importance of high quality teachers for the success of every student, though it remains questionable whether sufficient steps have been taken to fulfill this need. While teacher importance is recognized, this recognition has not shown to lead to changes in teacher status or treatment.

### *Teacher Effectiveness vs. Teacher Professionalism*

While both popular press and professional journals showed a concern with improving teacher quality, whether through intensifying requirements for teaching credentials, improving professional development, being more selective about who is able to become a teacher, or other measures, popular press and professional journals showed a distinct difference in the language used to describe these things. Popular press articles, most of the time, left these topics in the realm of teacher effectiveness, as measures to improve the educational dollar. For instance, reporting on a new assessment for teacher candidates which requires them “to submit lesson plans, videos of them teaching real students, examples of students’ work, and their own reflection on how they might improve” in order for programs to “ensure that teachers are able to translate book learning into effective instruction” (Lu, 2013). Similarly, reports on a Los Angeles court battle regarding the rules for tenure focused on student access to effective

teachers and New York's new evaluation program focuses on improving effectiveness (Medina, 2013) (Baker, Bumpy Start for Teacher Evaluation Program in New York Schools, 2013).

Teacher effectiveness is certainly an important priority, but the difference between popular press and professional journals is that journalists only reported on these different scenarios as issues with effectiveness, while professional journals also saw these as indicators of teacher professionalism. Not only are autonomy, rigorous programs and selective credentials a means of improving teachers, they are markers of the extent to which teachers belong in the realm of traditional professions, and losses in these areas were viewed as indicators of deprofessionalization of teaching. For instance, one journal observes NCLB's effects as "the silencing and marginalization of women teachers' voices through the overall deprofessionalization of education practitioner" (Aldridge, Kilgo, & Emfinger, 2010). Another journal article examining the issue of teacher status and comparing American teachers to those of other countries emphasized that Canada, when faced with a similar issue to America's problem with teacher status, "wanted an approach that was respectful of teachers as professional educators, as opposed to assuming that they needed to be slapped into line in some kind of way" (Sawchuk, 2012). Richard Ingersoll and Elizabeth Merrill devote an entire paper to examining whether teaching is, indeed, a profession (Ingersoll & Merril, 2011).

In summary, journalists seem to speak of improving teacher quality as an issue of improving a labor force, while educational experts add more nuance to these measures, not only being concerned with the quality of teachers but also

with improving the profession of teaching as a whole or ensuring that the status of teaching is raised so that it can be securely classified as a profession.

### *Benefits of Improved Teacher Quality*

Popular press and professional journals similarly showed differences in their view of the benefits of raising teacher quality. For most news sources, improving the quality of teachers served economic benefits; better-qualified teachers mean a better usage of our educational dollars. Op-Ed Columnist Bill Keller states that “of all the competing claims on America’s education dollar – more technology, smaller classes, universal prekindergarten, school choice – the one option that would seem to be a no-brainer is investing in good teachers” (Keller, 2013).

Professional journals, again, took a more nuanced approach. While the assumptions seen in popular press were true, professional journals spoke less about strict economic benefits of improving teacher quality and more about empowering teachers to create an environment which would best serve the students. As Stephen Sawchuk observes, “the prestige associated with the teaching profession, as many teachers volubly remind policy makers, comes from more than just higher salaries. Teachers enter the profession for its intrinsic rewards, such as influencing young people. Their reasons for leaving the profession often have to do with feeling as though factors outside their control are impinging upon that goal” (Sawchuk, 2012).



For professional journals, improving teacher status – encompassing those markers of professionalism such as autonomy, more selective credentials and rigorous requirements, and improved compensation – held more than economic benefits. Raising teacher status benefits the teacher themselves, by improving working conditions and teachers’ own satisfaction in their work, as well as benefitting the education system and society as a whole. Again, popular press tended to speak of teachers as a labor force, whereas professional journals tended toward giving teachers at least some of the prestige of a profession, implying that there should be a certain level of quality and satisfaction within teaching, inherent to that career path.

### *In Summary*

Both popular press and professional journals made it clear that education is a preeminent issue today, and that teachers are a critical component of fixing the problems within America’s education system. Both saw raising teacher status as an issue that must be addressed in order to improve the teaching quality within American schools, though defining teacher status, and reaching the how and why, were approached differently. While both demonstrated a valuing of teacher voices, especially within popular press, and both showed concerns with American’s mindset regarding teachers, they diverged in their treatment of the occupation itself. Journalists tended to examine teachers specifically as they addressed economic benefits – improving a workforce to benefit society – while education experts and researchers, in addition to benefits in efficiency, spoke of

improving teaching as an issue intrinsic to the profession and spoke of raising teacher status as a necessity because good teachers deserve recognition, compensation, and to be satisfied in their work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusions

With the increasing problems rising in American educational reform and the increasing challenges facing our public schools, our view of teachers – the status with which they are ascribed – becomes increasingly relevant in light of these changes and shifts in public education. As discussed in Chapter One, the value which we give to teachers correlates to how much we value education. As discussed in the second chapter, *A Nation at Risk* sought to report the state of America's educational system in such a way as to make Americans aware of how desperately the system was failing and to invoke change, making education a priority in the many issues which the nation must address and No Child Left Behind sought to improve the education system in such as us as to address the fear and worry instigated by *A Nation at Risk*. Yet, today American education still has many of the same issues with little notable change, except that we now have standards and are able to test students within the system to hold schools accountable. Few of the issues and solutions presented in *A Nation at Risk* regarding teachers were addressed through NCLB, and improving teaching remains an issue as states and districts seek means to improve the teaching workforce to meet the standards that have been set forth for the students (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

In the midst of this educational climate, I sought to examine teacher status to describe how our nation views teachers and the implications of this perception of teachers. My research involved examining articles from popular press sources and professional journals, analyzing how teachers were portrayed and spoken of in each with the goal of answering these questions: 1) what do these different sources show about the status of the public school teacher and 2) what effects does the status of teachers have on public schools, students, teachers, and the decisions made in the schools?

### *The First Question: Teacher Status*

It remained evident through both the professional journals and newspapers that teachers are viewed as important; teachers have strong influence on our students through classroom interactions and have an impact on the success of students in the classroom and beyond. In addition to research measuring the impact of teachers on a student's life, the news articles and their varying opinions on the demand for teacher evaluations, improving teacher quality, and the necessity of every students having a good teacher are all indicators of an agreement that teachers are important and that the occupation deserves notice, attention, and improvement because of this importance (Bennet, 2012). However, recognition of importance does not correlate with a higher status, nor does it reflect the attitudes directed toward teachers.

In fact, this recognized importance highlights the disjunction in teacher status; although teachers are seen as important and necessary, they often are not

spoken of or treated with the level of esteem, autonomy, compensation, or prestige indicative of a higher status.

One part of this is problem seen in the decisions made around teacher. Whether it is new legislation, or decisions made at the state, district, or campus level, educational decisions frequently involve little to no input from educators who are actively in the classroom, knowledgeable of the needs of students, and experts in the methodology and expectations that actually work (Gabriel, 2011). Furthermore, these decisions – especially the stress on accountability and standardization and the mandated curriculum and lessons – are seen by many as a lack of confidence in the abilities and expertise of even “highly qualified” teachers. Such decisions, in which teachers are told what to do and how to do it with no voice of their own, end up promoting and encouraging the idea that teachers lack the capabilities or intelligence to do the job for which they have prepared. As one study in New York City schools observed, under such imposition “new teachers find their personal and professional identity development thwarted, creativity and autonomy undermined, and ability to forge relationships with students diminished” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Under these mandates, new teachers often found themselves and their mentors enforcing practices that went against their best instincts – going against either the education they received in their teacher preparation programs or the knowledge gained after many years of experience in education (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). These educational decisions undermine the voice and expertise of teachers, effectively lowering teacher status.

Further evidence of this lowered regard for teachers is seen in the language used by popular press in speaking of teachers. While stressing the importance of teachers and the need to improve teacher quality and teacher satisfaction, there was an overwhelming tendency to speak of teaching as a workforce which needs improved for the best usage of our educational dollar. The improvements called for often mirrored those called for in professional journals, but were required for different reasons; aspects such as increasing autonomy and teacher satisfaction, improving professional development, and creating more rigorous teacher training were advocated by popular press as a means to fix the system and to help the system meet more rigorous standards. Professional journals often advocated many of the same changes, but with the understanding that teaching is a profession made up of experts, not a just workforce of laborers who can just be trained to do their job better, and that such measures are needed to improve teacher quality in ways that are best for all parties involved: the students, the teachers themselves, and the profession as a whole (Sawchuk, 2012).

Professionally, teaching exhibits few characters of a high status occupation. Compensation for teaching is not competitive with other professions requiring similar years of preparation and multiple other aspects leave teaching as a semi-profession. Educational experts and researchers see accountability, curriculum mandates, and lack of autonomy as evidence of the deprofessionalization and call for action to be taken to raise teaching's professional status, bringing with it the benefits of a higher prestige (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011).

While professional journals displayed a higher regard for teaching, both professional journals and popular press articles pointed to the reality that teachers have a low status in our society as related to other comparable fields and the degree to which a society that values education should value teachers. While the importance of teaching is recognized, it remains at the level of lip service, with little being done to actually display confidence in teachers as the experts or to raise the status of teaching as a profession.

Leaving this recognition at the level of lip service does an injustice to teachers, diminishing their status by implying that teachers are important, but not important enough for drastic change to occur that would lead to better quality and more satisfied teachers who find their work respected and fulfilling. This lip service and lack of action sends the message to teachers and society that teachers are passive, weak-willed when it comes to decisions being made for us, and necessary but not really important enough to be respected.

### *The Second Question: Effects on education*

The low value which is ascribed to teachers has numerous effects on the educational system: the schools, teachers, students, and the decisions made in each of these areas.

For one, low teacher status is a contributor to the pressure felt within the schools themselves – to enforce mandates and meet the standards placed on them for accountability. At this point, the call for accountability is both a promoter and an effect of low teacher status, creating pressure within the schools

to meet standards and requirements and forcing many schools into the cycle of making fear-based decisions – threatening teachers and putting even further limitations on teacher creativity and autonomy.

As is to be expected, the low status of teaching impacts teachers themselves in many ways, most notably creating dissatisfaction among many teachers and often resulting in the loss of quality teachers when they find themselves too dissatisfied and undervalued within their chosen vocation to continue. In the New York study, teachers who saw “the school culture as too restrictive and the leadership unsupportive of their efforts to develop a personally satisfying teaching practice” often left the poor performing schools where they were needed most (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Within this current educational climate, “many teachers see demands to cut their income, benefits and say in how schools are run through collective bargaining as attacks not just on their livelihoods, but on their value to society” (Gabriel, 2011).

This low status also impacts the number of graduates seeking teaching a career; many who are interested or feel drawn to teaching never pursue teaching as a career path after seeing the extent to which teachers are disrespected, the lack of competitive compensation, and the lack of autonomy and creativity allowed in the profession (Sawchuk, 2012).

For students, teacher status affects the quality of instruction they receive. As teachers are trusted with fewer and fewer instructional decisions, students lose chances to receive instruction that is personalized to their learning styles and needs. In addition, teachers themselves feel that the latest trends in educational



decisions have resulted in their losing opportunities to build relationships with their students (Crocco & Costigan, 2007)

Low teacher status has had an impact upon the educational system itself, effectively decreasing the quality of the system and the quality of the instruction students receive. Rather than cultivating reforms, which will actually improve teaching and learning – benefitting both students and teachers – we have cultivated a climate which disregards teacher expertise and shortchanges students.

As addressed in Chapter One, teacher status serves as an indicator of the value that a society places on education (Fwu & Wang, 2002). By disregarding and devaluing teachers, Americans have said that education is important, but not important enough to enact change where needed. The low status of American public school teachers is having drastic effects on our system by decreasing the freedom that teachers require to address the needs of their students, causing many dissatisfied teachers to leave the profession, and leading to many talented young people never entering the profession because of how teachers are treated. We are effectively short-changing millions of students by not giving them the quality of education they have a right to – that they have been promised – by devaluing the professionals who will have the greatest impact on their success not only within their public schooling, but will ultimately affect the trajectory of each student's lifetime (Bennet, 2012).

### *So What Now?*

In order to effectively improve the quality of America's education system and provide our students with the opportunities for success which they deserve, ensuring that they have quality teachers who are invested in their work and empowered to do as they need according to what is best for the students, teacher status must be addressed and improved. There were multiple suggestions found throughout my research for how this can be achieved,

One part of improving teacher status is improving teacher preparation programs – making acceptance into such programs more exclusive and creating more rigorous preparatory studies – so that administrators and legislators have more faith in the new teachers entering the profession. Raising entrance and exit requirements would have several implications for teaching. For one, it would make teaching a more competitive field, ensuring that those who enter and succeed in teacher preparation programs are those who are committed to hard work, success, and a strenuous but rewarding career in education. Furthermore, the content of teacher preparation programs affects both public and professional perceptions of teachers. As I have seen myself while in college, undergraduates compare the difficulty of their course load to the difficulty of other majors, and by this are already formulating opinions about the status of their peers' chosen professions. Overall, college education courses lack the rigor and mystique of courses for other professions, leaving young professionals to enter their careers with pre-formulated ideas of what teachers do and how they should be valued.

Another method to improving teacher status is raising teacher compensation in order to make teaching more competitive with other

professions. Aspects such as working conditions, higher compensation, and “higher share of pay based on effort and performance all work together to attract people who are smart, hard-working, and want to make a difference” (Sawchuk, 2012). Raising compensation correlates with the idea that teaching is a competitive profession and that teachers deserve to be compensated for their training, experience, skills, and expertise just as with other high status traditional professions.

Other professions also have a level of autonomy which teachers do not enjoy, and increasing teacher autonomy is yet another piece of raising teacher status. Much of this involved legislators and administrators recognizing how essential teacher autonomy is to effective instruction and teacher satisfaction and that teachers themselves need the freedom to make classroom decisions (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011). As with these other pieces to the puzzle, increasing autonomy also correlates with making teaching comparable to other higher status professions, making teaching a competitive field that attracts quality candidates who are seeking a field where they can become experts and have the freedom to exercise their expertise in the classroom.

However, the majority of the recommendations that I found for raising teacher status all involved treating teachers as objects, dependent upon others and being acted upon within the decisions and processes, whether it is among college administrators and instructors, legislators, or public school administrators, to improve the status of their chosen profession. Remaining a passive object, something to be acted upon rather than taking action, is not indicative of raising status and does not truly solve the problems that low teacher

status has caused. While all of these pieces are necessary parts of raising teacher status and improving our society's mindset toward teaching, they remain limited in their scope and effectiveness as long as teachers remain passive objects waiting on others to deem them worthy of value.

Ultimately, raising teacher status depends upon teachers raising their own voices, becomes subjects rather than objects, active in decisions and dialogue; real change means teachers demanding more of themselves and their peers and insisting that they be heard in educational conversations. Part of this involves teachers themselves becoming more active and involved in educational research, contributing to professional journals rather than relying on professors and researchers, those who are no longer in the classroom, to make contributions for them. So often throughout the research explored in Chapters Two and Three, I found that teachers, when asked, expressed frustration that they were not being consulted within educational dialogues (Gabriel, 2011). Waiting on legislative leaders and researchers to approach teachers is passive; what is needed is for teachers to actively seek out every possible opportunity for them to be heard and to contribute. Furthermore, teachers must be conscientious of how they present themselves to those outside education, using language representative of experts. Again, when asked, teachers expressed frustration that some viewed them hourly workers or glorified babysitters (Gabriel, 2011). Yet, much of what the public knows about teaching is limited to how we teachers portray our jobs; if we limit our public conversations to complaining about work and don't engage in conversations about educational issues or even neglect to talk about why we teach, then they remain woefully uninformed. Teachers must become actively

invested in making their voices heard beyond complaints in the teacher's lounge, actively seeking means to become involved in educational conversations and legislative decisions, and speaking up when they are passed over.

### *Finally*

It is a false idea that my fellow teacher candidates and I are going to be “just” teachers. We are preparing ourselves to enter a field in which we can promote real change, where we can make a difference in student lives and through that, hopefully, make the world a better place. We know that we are entering an important work, not just because it is important to us, but because research has proven the importance of good teachers and that a teacher's impact lasts far beyond the classroom (Bennet, 2012). Yet, we are entering a field in which it feels like others do not understand our importance. I am going through training and preparation to be an expert in teaching, in identifying my students' needs and employing skills to address them. I am analyzing research, information, and knowledge with the purpose of using it in the classroom. Yet, I do not know how much of this I will actually be given the freedom to use. Based on what I have learned through this research, I know that limitations will be placed on me and that others will try to diminish my voice, to lower my status. Nevertheless, I also know that I must, somehow, make my voice heard. I also know that my fellow teacher candidates and I cannot shirk from conflict and issues, but that we must be active in making change happen. We teachers and future teachers must insist upon change, and we must call upon partners – researchers, legislature, administrators – to put the motions in place that will

raise teacher status, to improve the profession and the education our students receive. The problem of teacher status has lasted far too long, with far too many teachers letting their voices stay within the walls of the teachers' lounge, if even heard there. Teachers are important, teachers are deserving of a higher status than has been given, and teachers have value. Knowing this, we cannot remain complacent.

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