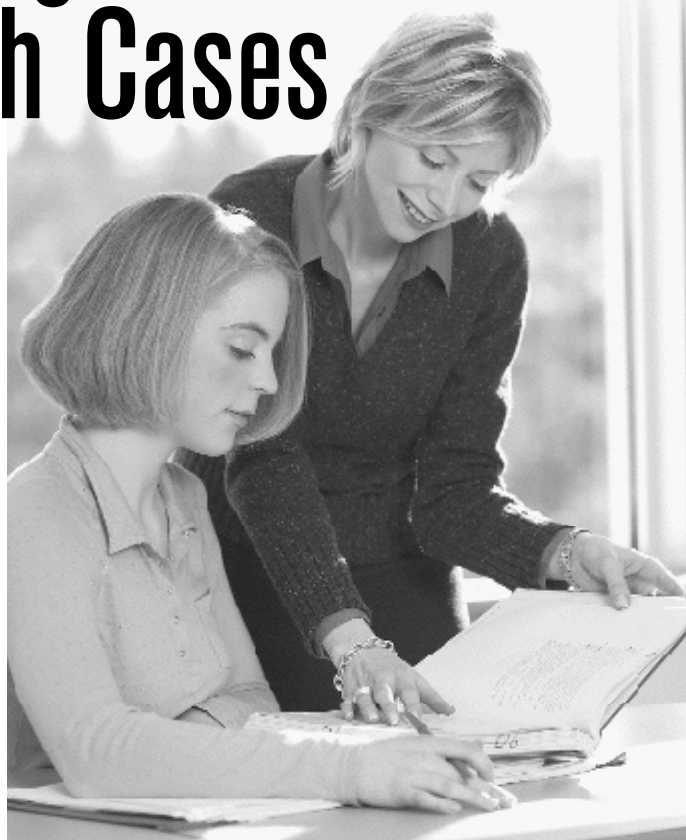


Changing the Image of Teachers Through Cases

by Patricia Goldblatt



choolmarm. One-room class. Dedicated. Lone practitioner. These words conjure up the image of the pioneer teacher. She lives at the edges of society, tirelessly working long hours with little communication with parents or community. Almost a martyr in the service of sacrificing herself for her students, this teacher embodies Benjamin Franklin's adages of "Waste not, want not," or "A penny saved is a penny earned." In unending days of devotion she instills values and ethics as well as imparting information. This lonely and lone ranger persists in the fantasies of the public as what a teacher should look like: selfless, committed, and inspirational.

Over time, the media have produced television series and films that have extended and altered the aforementioned portrayal. The 1970s television show *Welcome Back, Kotter* introduced high school teacher Gabe Kotter, always off bal-

ance, seemingly confused and befuddled at the antics of Vinnie Barbarino and Adam Horshack, just two members of his incorrigible "Sweathog" class. With few inroads made into purveying models of proper behavior or acceptable citizenship, Mr. Kotter appeared the outcast himself. Rarely reaching out to colleagues, but often reprimanded by a frustrated administration, Mr. Kotter received some support from his understanding wife at the end of a long and troubling day. Almost 30 years later, at the turn of the twenty-first century, studies continue to show that the neophyte teacher suffers from isolation and lack of support from the administration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1998; Lortie, 1975).

In the 1990s the title character from the film *Mr. Holland's Opus* reinforced the impression that hardworking teachers, whether new to the profession or well seasoned, also suffer alone. Mr. Holland's dreams are put on hold for too long; his reward for hard work and dedicated service is dismissal, for reductions in school funding have necessitated cutbacks in the arts. His once helpful and understanding principal, long retired, has been replaced by a number cruncher, indicating that old values of aesthetics, mastery of subject, commitment to student learning, and hard work are dead, out of sync with a new society. No one really cares that Mr. Holland has a difficult life financially and emotionally. Ironically, he cannot even share his passion for music with his son, who

is deaf. *Mr. Holland's Opus* is sentimental, offering nostalgia in the lie that teachers must die at their desks, fortified by having educated others. Mr. Holland's final tribute of having a piece of his unpublished music performed before he loses his teaching position only reinforces this depiction of the teacher's stoicism and self-sacrifice. States Jeff Doran in *Daily Meaning: Counternarratives of Teachers' Work*, "All my school life I've read fake stories about teaching and seen fake TV shows about teaching and I've known they're fake" (Neilsen, 1999, 17). Yet Jessica Harbour of *Pop Matters: Television* confirms that writers like Judith Shulevitz (at *Slate*) and Lisa Schmeiser (at *teevee.org*) continue to embrace these stereotypes, as do ordinary viewers (2003). Harbour quotes a teacher who obviously empathizes with the portrayal of her fellow professionals on the TV series *Boston Public*: "It's too heartbreaking to give so much and be respected so little."

In the twenty-first century *Boston Public* represents the most recent attempt to humanize and modernize the former myth of the heroic and long-suffering teacher; it offers a slick peek into the personal lives of teachers and students that nonetheless leaves the myth in place as a tarnished, perhaps unattainable ideal. Its portrayal of students derives from works like *Blackboard Jungle* and *Welcome Back, Kotter*.

Like Mr. Kotter's kids, students at *Boston Public's* Winslow High are far from angels. They lie and cheat, take drugs, mock their teachers, and videotape them in the lounge and classroom participating in adulterous acts. Some pupils even announce their crushes and stalk teachers to their homes. Educators, however, fare no better. Mr. Lipschitz, a noted racist, fathers an illegitimate son after engaging in a wild, but apparently tender, night of love before he goes off to war. Harry, a history teacher, fires a gun in class to attract his students' attention. Although he agonizes, sneers, and lectures on suicide and morality, he counsels runaways, harbors fugitives from the law in his own apartment, and reads the riot act to abusive parents. Tight-lipped Scott Gruber, the vice principal, hides in his office, conducting invisible musicians in order to forget the horrors of the halls. A strange, reclusive man, he copes by withdrawing or admonishing miscreants in sepulchral tones and patronizing language better suited to communication with students from an earlier century. Ronni, a former lawyer who has chosen teaching to give her life meaning, engages in sexual relations with a teacher several years her junior in the student lounge, a place raided for gambling and illicit student trysts. These teachers are hardly models of admirable behavior; none of the depictions truly honors the complexity of teaching or the demands made and required of teachers. If earlier portrayals glamorized teachers for sainthood, these stereotypes demonize teachers along with their students as malcontents, social rejects, and selfish misfits searching for personal fulfillment.

• • •

Thankfully, a fresh, new image of the teacher has recently emerged. Conveyed not in the media but in the standards of

the profession, the descriptors of the standards of practice extend the picture of a reflective practitioner, a collaborative, concerned member of a professional learning team and community. The standards of practice, divided into relevant domains or areas of teaching expertise, convey the disposition, attitudes, skills, and behaviors of teachers by answering the question, "What does it mean to be a teacher?" No longer is the educator portrayed hovering at the margins of society, closing her doors, solo on the prairie, barricaded and grim. Neither is she a victim or gunslinger in the urban jungle of school land. And unlike Mr. Kotter or Mr. Holland, this reconstituted practitioner draws support from her colleagues, establishing camaraderie at a variety of levels from peer to principal, and reaches out to the community and parents. Indeed, she plays a visible role in promoting and fostering leadership even beyond the classroom doors.

Most importantly, the real-life teacher speaks out and shares her teaching stories, engaging others in discussion in an attempt to overcome isolation and understand more deeply the work she does. Judith Shulman quotes Jenlink and Kinnucan-Welsch as saying,

Stories give meaningful form to experiences educators have already lived through and enable others to share and learn from their experience (706) [as] catalysts for pedagogical conversations among members of school communities. (Shulman, 1992, xv)

Stories are records of lived experience. Whether used as parables, fairy stories, myths from the ancient Greeks, or instructions from parents to prepare children to cope in society, stories present models of normative behavior because people remember and pass on their knowledge through stories (Bruner, 1986). By crafting stories into cases, teachers have found an avenue of expression for their lived experiences at school, in contrast to mass media portrayals of their work.

Judith Shulman, director at WestEd laboratories in California, has been involved for many years in using cases as a way to connect the overarching principles of practice to specific dilemmas described in teacher-written stories. Drawn from the verisimilitude of everyday life and retold in authentic voices, cases present an opportunity for exploring the rich multilayered realm of teachers' work, a world that encompasses conflicts from administrative fracas to the best way of handling the needs of special education students. Because not all details can be fully developed in a few short pages, some facts are intentionally vague so that openings, gaps, or omissions invite teachers to insert themselves and make connections between their own practice and the one depicted on the pages before them. Endings, particularly, are ambiguous so that teachers can critique or speculate on alternative solutions to the conflicts presented. This form of casework invites teachers to become involved in their own professional development.

Often teachers will gather to write or discuss cases. Educators

Continued on page 42

Split Decision

The Case

This is the staffing committee meeting that people care about. This is the one that matters. We're not here to talk about new couches in the staff room. We're not here to talk about recess treats on Fridays. We're here to talk about the class distribution for next year. People care, I later realized, because it is important to them. At this point I'm still naive enough to think they care because it is important to the school.

The school is Inglewood Elementary, a large K-6 in a lower-middle-class, culturally diverse area. Inglewood is full of new Canadians and only a handful of the students in my class speak English at home. I love the school—everything about it. And I'm not the only one. I've heard people refer to it as "an oasis." It's only my first year teaching, but I feel as if this is where I want to be for a long, long time.

The committee chair, Dave Dinsmore, begins the meeting by reminding us of what we already know: We've lost one and a half positions for next year, and Tim, our principal, has given us the task of figuring out how we can make it all work. If this were a movie, the quiet, foreboding music would have kicked in right about now. Someone's walking away unhappy from this meeting and everybody sitting at the table knows it.

We've all looked at the numbers, and there are only so many ways this can go. The principal has told us that library, guidance positions, English as a Second Language (ESL) and special education are not part of the negotiables, and are therefore untouchable. It's all a matter of how we distribute the classes.

The Grade 1 team gathers before the meeting, and we all agree that we would like to see five Grade 1 classes. Having fewer than that would push the class sizes too high. At the meeting, I speak for the team.

"We think it's best to have five Grade 1 classes next year. This will allow us to keep the classes small enough so that the kids can get the attention they need. Now, I don't want this to turn into a contest of whose grade is hardest to teach, but I think everyone will agree that, in terms of requiring teacher support, the younger students are the most needy. Having 24 Grade 6s in a class is a lot different than having 24 Grade 1s. Another issue we need to examine is special education. Currently, there is no full-time special education program for the Grade 1s. Look at your own grades and try to imagine what that's like. If you think it is hard to teach your class now, try adding two or three learners with special education needs

to the mix."

Dave interrupts me at this point. "We're not here to talk about the special education program."

"Not specifically," I say, "but you have to look at the effect it has on the classes. Imagine if Simon and Teo were suddenly dropped into your class tomorrow. Are you telling me that wouldn't completely change the environment of the class?"

There is a pause and I know Dave has conjured before his eyes Simon and Teo, two well-known and challenging students. Simon and Teo, in a junior special education class with five other students, are almost legendary for their behavioral and academic challenges. Their reputations throughout the school community are almost mythic, so I feel that all of the teachers get my point.

"Do you think that kids like Simon and Teo only became learners with special education needs when they reached Grade 2? Each of the Grade 1 teachers has kids like these two in their classes and each one needs a huge amount of our time and attention. It's one of the main reasons why we need smaller Grade 1 classes."

I have the sense that each teacher is pondering my explanation.

"Another point I want to raise is the testing issue. I know that Grade 3s sometimes get smaller classes so that the students will be well prepared for the EQAO [Education Quality and Accountability Office] tests. Personally, I don't think that should be an issue. I don't feel we should be structuring our classes around standardized testing. We should just consider what's best for the kids. If you are going to look at that, though, it's not as if what the kids learn in Grade 1 doesn't affect how they do after that. How they perform on the tests is not only a matter of how they're prepared in Grade 3. If anything, I'd suggest how they're prepared in Grade 1 is more important because it's a formative year, academically and in terms of shaping their attitudes toward school and learning."

Heads nod. Frances, the teacher in the room next to mine, gives me a thumbs-up, but I notice several teachers are avoiding eye contact with me as I scan faces. I wonder if they will support my position.

Yet I sit down satisfied that I've made the case for smaller Grade 1 classes. A few seconds later, my feeling is confirmed.

"That all makes sense to me," says Christina Ross, an experienced second grade teacher. "I think we're probably going to have to have a split Grade 4/5 class."

On the heels of Christina's comment I hear, "That's what we were thinking." It's Sam, one of the kindergarten teachers. "It just seems to make sense with the numbers."

A few more of the other grade reps nod their heads in

agreement. At this point there are no combined classes in our school. It's something the school has tried to avoid wherever possible. Here, unfortunately, it seems pretty clear that we're going to have to have a combination of some kind. I'm glad it's going to be a junior class: having a younger split grade seems like a really bad idea to me.

I'm momentarily satisfied that we have reached a consensus and the most vulnerable in the school will be exempt. The beat of my heart slows, and I begin to relax a bit.

"There's still the question of who's going to teach the split class, though," continues Dave, sitting at the head of the table. "I don't know if anyone is willing to do it."

Again, my adrenalin starts to rush as I sense that the issue is once more open to debate. "I don't think we should look at it that way," I interrupt. "We're here to figure out what's best for the kids, not the teachers. Pretend you don't know what grade you're teaching next year, and ask yourself what you think is right. If Tim, the principal, tells me I'm teaching a Grade 6 class next year, I'll still feel it's right to have smaller Grade 1 classes. If we agree that a split Grade 4/5 is the way to go, let's leave it at that, and let Tim decide who will teach the combined grade."

It's too late now to repeat my concerns. My earlier moment of triumph has vanished, and the meeting centers on the question of who is willing to teach a Grade 4/5 class. We've moved from the philosophical to the personal issue here. The meeting drags on, and on, and on, and I intuit that somehow this discussion will not turn out right.

Finally, Anna, one of the other Grade 1 teachers, says she doesn't see what the big deal about a combined grade is, and that she is willing to do a split Grade 1/2 class. And suddenly—I hardly blink or gasp—that's that. Dave puts it to a vote, and almost all of the teachers agree with the 1/2 combined class.

I'm in shock. A few minutes ago, most people agreed that five Grade 1 classes would be the best thing for the school. How quickly things change with the slim possibility of some kind of personal sacrifice.

After the meeting, teachers from different grades gather around me and say that they agreed with what I said, but they didn't want to hurt their team, or they didn't want to end up teaching a combined grade. Then they walk away. I sit here in disbelief, wondering how much of this oasis is really just a mirage.

Group Inquiry

What are the Facts: Who? What? Where? When?

Analysis: Analyze the problem(s) from the viewpoints of

the different people in the case using the reflective questions following the case as a guide to explore, extend, or discover information.

Evaluation: Examine critically the teachers' strategies for handling the problem(s).

Alternative Solutions: Generate alternative solutions to the ones presented in the narrative. Take into consideration the risks and benefits as well as the long- and short-term consequences of each proposed action.

Principles of Practice: Formulate some generalizations about effective practice. Remember that the standards of practice and the ethical standards are guiding principles for teacher action.

What Is This a Case Of? Link this case to more general categories. Rich cases are by nature "of" many things.

Changing Opinions: Who or what has caused you to consider a new way of thinking? How strongly do you still feel about your previous assumptions?

Reflecting on the Case

1. What are the facts of the case?
2. The teacher is self-described as "naive." Consider the teacher's skills, knowledge, experience, and attitudes. What word might you use to describe the teacher?
3. What is the central dilemma? Evaluate the team's recommendation for reorganization. Differentiate the players and their concerns.
4. What role do Simon and Teo play in the discussion?
5. How should special education, assessments, and EQAO results impact on the teachers' decisions?
6. Although some decisions sound fine in theory, applying them to practice is another matter. Why does the actual implementation of the proposed solution raise new issues? What are the pressure points in this case?
7. Evaluate the ultimate solution to the problem. Who has lost and who has won? What long-term results might occur with this decision?
8. Were there alternate solutions to the problem? How might the teacher have prepared for success in this situation?
9. What is this a case of?
10. Formulate some generalizations about good practice in group decision making.

"Split Decision" originally appeared in *Casework Inquiry for Educators, Booklet One* (pp. 7-9), published by the



in case discussion posit new strategies for difficult situations, suggesting informed decisions and examining long- and short-term consequences for each recommendation. Rather than lone practitioners struggling with on-the-spot solutions, these involved and concerned teachers have the leisure of time outside their classrooms to pose reflective questions and to make sense of their own practice by discussing another's. Participants make themselves vulnerable, revealing and recalling the mistakes or oversights in their own professional lives in order to offer revelations that will facilitate a colleague's improved practice. Analyzing a colleague's case stories strengthens the relationships among members of groups of learners and creates tightly bound communities (Jenlink & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2001). Those who write or those who discuss cases never shed their identities as teachers because they understand their stories and their reflections are, indeed, teaching tools. Beyond educating students, teachers are educating one another.

During the process of case discussion, teachers, by referring back to the standards of practice, realize that theory—that is, generalized principles—are bound to practice. Cases are a bridge that causes teachers to see the connections between specific, concrete details and generalized teaching principles that subsume effective practice. Thus, the concepts and the language of standards of practice extend common threads of the teaching profession as a framework for diagnosing and remediating as well as for identifying areas to celebrate in the classroom. By discussing, evaluating, or vicariously experiencing another's practice through authentic stories, teachers develop an awareness that teaching stories exemplify a larger pattern and that cases are a case "of" something (Shulman, 1987), be it classroom management, professional knowledge, or insights into student development, for each dilemma resonates with a principle that changes according to the contextual elements of a particular educational setting.

As a platform for discussion, cases prompt the participation

of teachers knowledgeable about the elements described. With a shared understanding of language and facts, there is no stifling conversation. Rather, teachers are eager to trade insights, rely on national standards or standards of practice that underpin classroom conflicts, and comment on the elements that their peers have caught in their descriptions of familiar tensions in education climes. If the purpose of case analysis is to prepare teachers for facing unexpected classroom scenarios and contemplating change in practice, case discussion does, in fact, fulfill that function of professional development in terms of transformation: a way to build new information onto established ways of coping; a way to think about practice; and a way to become cognizant that there are areas of gray, no single right or wrong answer in responding to an educational dilemma:

People make these fundamental transitions by having *many* opportunities to be exposed to the ideas, to argue them in to their normative belief systems, to practice these behaviors that go with these values, to observe others practicing these behaviors, and most importantly, to be successful at practicing in the presence of others. . . . The most powerful incentives reside in the face to face relationships among people in the organization, not in external systems. (Elmore, 2000, 31)

Similarly, Hall and Hord (1987) describe how new strategies are implemented into practice. First, there must be an awareness of something new. Next, the learner gathers information, aware that he or she must act on that information. The teacher is prompted to reflect on personal practice by asking, "How will this knowledge affect me?" Once engaged, the teacher postulates how new materials or information can actually be used. Again, the reflective practitioner speculates on the impact on student learning, even planning how to achieve maximum impact. What emerges is the notion that teachers collaborate and work together in order to improve practice and take control of their own professional growth. They are reflective and responsive, eager to contemplate the outcomes of new knowledge personally and professionally.

Cases instigate a catalyst for professional development. In case discussion, teachers are accepted as scholars of their own practice, not receiving advice from experts who only talk about or theorize about practice, but wrestling with and relying on themselves as informed, capable, and competent to provide direction to colleagues. Thus, they are empowered. Respecting teachers for their work experiences and insights into practice provides scaffolding for colleagues to construct new strategies or ways of thinking about old situations:

Simply asking practitioners to reflect on the stories they already tell can provide a natural

bridge to a serious inquiry about the deepest layers of value and belief that undergird the decisions they make. . .Involved in dialectics and dialogues, teachers are the authentic professional developers of their own practices, for dialogue is conducive to collective inquiry and learning that sustains the community. (Jenlink & Kinnucan-Welsch, 2001, 717)

The process of case discussion draws on one's peers' experiences. It reflects a flexibility and openness to question, a willingness to grow and challenge the established ways of being professional.

In the United States, the National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) has developed standards and assessment procedures in 30 subject matter disciplines organized around five major propositions. In one of the five domains, entitled "Teachers are members of learning communities," the standards suggest that teachers can develop expertise when they work collaboratively with colleagues on instructional policy, curriculum, and staff development: They are knowledgeable about specialized school and community resources that can be engaged for their students' benefit, and they are skilled at employing such resources as needed. Accomplished teachers find ways to work collaboratively and creatively (NBPTS, 1993).

At the Ontario College of Teachers in Toronto, Canada, the Standards of Practice and Education Unit has utilized the case inquiry method for two purposes: (1) to encourage awareness and deepen understanding of standards of the profession and (2) to create networks of communication that promote collaborative learning communities among practitioners across the province, thus forming cultures of inquiry. Aware of physical distances and feelings of isolation that plague teachers, the College has brought together educators so that a teacher from Moosonee can understand that teachers in Windsor or Sault Ste. Marie or Toronto all share similar problems. Coming together physically mirrors the coming together of minds that substantiates learning communities of inquiry, anxious to probe into problems teachers face every day at work. The words of those educators from Ontario speak to the effectiveness of using cases:

- *This helped me feel that I don't have to feel incomplete in this field. . .The things that I am doing are great. I have a role in teacher leadership in my school to help others grow.*
- *This space has improved my knowledge and has made me a better teacher, which, of course, can only impact on my students positively.*
- *Teachers have always been reflective practitioners, but maybe we have lacked focus. . .the standards and the case studies have given us focus where we can look at our teaching to see how it impacts on student learning. . .not just an assessment test but*

talk about the soul, aspirations and dreams and opportunities.

- *For me, it's the idea of community. . .coming here to be part of a community that is supportive, respecting, trustful and honest. I can take that back to the seven-year-olds that I teach.*

Some critics say schools have not changed over time: that students and teachers will always be the same, since the job of a teacher is to teach and that of a student is to learn. However, how we teach and how we affect student learning has changed. By promoting and supporting cultures of inquiry through cases by, for, and about teachers, we move from the passive to the active mode. We embrace change, excitement, and stimulation in charting our own paths, modeling our delight in learning for our students. Far from the lone and lonely teacher who squinted into the distance, ensuring that her students made it safely home, the new teacher sits at the table, one of the smiling, gesticulating stakeholders: colleague, learner, parent, community member, teacher, student.

References

- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Elmore, R. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute.
- Fullan, M. and Hargreaves, A. (1998). *What's worth fighting for out there*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hall, G. E. and Hord, S. M. (1987). *Change in schools: facilitating the process*. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press.
- Harbour, J. (2003). Review of *Boston Public. Popmatters: television*. http://popmatters.com/tv/reviews/b/boston_public.html
- Jenlink, P. M. and Kinnucan-Welsch, K. (2001). Case stories of facilitating professional development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17: 705-724.
- Lortie, D. (1975). *School teacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS). (1993). *Five core propositions*. Arlington, VA: Author.
- Neilsen, A. (Ed.). (1999). *Daily Meaning: Counternarratives of Teachers' Work*. Mill Bay, British Columbia: Bendall Books.
- Shulman, J. (Ed.). (1992). *Case methodology in teacher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shulman, L. (1987). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15(4): 4-14.

Patricia Goldblatt is a program officer at the College of Teachers in Toronto. She is co-editor of a recently published volume of case studies with commentary from Sage Publications, *Cases for Teacher Development: Preparing for the Classroom*.