

*The Realities of Teachers' Work: Never a Dull Moment.* Sandra Acker. London and New York: Cassell, 1999, 242 pages.

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Sandra Acker's rich sociological ethnography of an English primary school and its teachers may be read in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Her stated intention is to write about "teachers' work ... at this time, in this place, in this constellation of political, demographic, economic influences.... To think about teaching and teachers' work" (p. 198). She encourages our thinking by means of a series of linked chapters about various dimensions of life and organizational culture at her research site.

Although one chapter, "The Teacher and the Class," offers "classroom snapshots" as a starting point for a discussion of teacher-student-class, the author gives most of her attention to dimensions of school life that extend "Beyond the Classroom" (Chapter 5). They include leadership, career development, a culture of caring, and school-community interactions. Any of these chapters might profitably be read on its own, and indeed several earlier versions of several chapters appeared as free-standing articles elsewhere. Taken together, though, the chapters and appendix provide us with a nuanced account of Hillview teachers' work lives in "this place" called Hillview Primary School, described as a lively and popular "centre [but not inner] city school" (p. 7).

"This time" actually spanned a period of over 10 years from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. The author's primary onsite data collection began the year before the passage of the 1988 Education Reform Act in the United Kingdom and continued to the end of 1990. Acker has wisely chosen to acknowledge and discuss the changing professional landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) associated with the implementation of that legislation, without allowing those changes to become the central topic of her book. She discusses this decision about her own focus, given a widespread shift to research that was investigating the implementation and impact of the reforms themselves. As an academic conducting research in a Canadian province that has recently experienced a series of government-mandated school "reform" initiatives, I found Acker's references to her own situation and decisions about her own orientation interesting and helpful. That said, Acker's analysis of the effect of government policies on teachers' work lives in a primary school such as Hillview (Chapter 11, "Change at Hillview") is a strong addition to the literature on school reform. Her discussions of intensification and of "overconscientiousness" are especially valuable for how she takes gender into account.

The study participants for whom this time and place formed the context were the 10 or so teaching staff members at Hillview. During the primary period of data-gathering (1987-1988), the teaching staff comprised a head teacher, a deputy head, five full-time, and three part-time teachers. Although

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the 200 students were from a mix of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, all but one of the teachers were white. The teachers' ages ranged from the late 20s to the 50s, and most were married with children. Subsequently, five of the six younger teachers (including those who were part time in 1987-1988) moved on to administrative or other formal leadership appointments. Which brings us to the topic of educators' careers.

Acker's scholarly discussions about careers are always thoughtful and balanced; her treatment of the topic in this book is no exception. She notes that "career as a concept is at once an individual construction and a structural constraint and approachable at several points in between" (p. 153). Throughout this book, but particularly in Chapter 10, "Teachers' Careers," she amplifies her agency-structure conceptualization, especially in her descriptions of the career development of Hillview's teachers. For example, she observes that "The tendency to look at one's own experience rather than analyse structural constraints led some teachers to highlight 'mistakes' they had made in the past" (p. 157). Acker elaborates several themes that "illustrate ways in which careers combine elements of chance, intention, and experience" (p. 155). Of particular interest are two sections, one about the role of chance and another about women's careers. Acker concludes Chapter 10 by describing careers as "provisional, kaleidoscopic constructions ... surrounded by dimly perceived structural constraints and characterized by change" (p. 166). I agree!

In addition to the other strengths that I mention, *The Realities of Teachers' Work: Never a Dull Moment* is a readable "ethnographic story" (p. 198). I will recommend it to graduate students as a well-crafted account of ethnographic research conducted from a sociological and feminist perspective. The appendix is a companion commentary that offers sophisticated reflection on several methodological issues that have pertinence for any of us who are engaged in contemporary qualitative research. This section also provides a more personal take on the author's experiences of conducting and reporting this study.

Overall, then, I believe that Sandra Acker has provided us with a vivid picture of "the teachers' workplace culture at Hillview" (p. 191). This book is a thoughtful contribution to the literature on teachers' work lives and careers in the context of schools as ever-changing workplaces. Part of Acker's contribution is her skilful integration of her own analysis with a wide range of scholarly literature from several countries. She manages to avoid bland generalizations while reaching beyond description of individual cases and specifics. Her interpretations are not the captives of a single ideology—she has declared commitments, but her perspective remains "critically open." This book is both a good read and a good reference for new and experienced educational researchers alike.

#### Reference

- Clandinin, D.J., & Connelly, M. (1995). *Teachers' professional knowledge landscape*. New York: Teachers College Press.