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Good Work in Pre-Collegiate Education: An Initial Map of the Terrain

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Background

For more than ten years, the GoodWork Project® has investigated a variety of professions and professionals. Our goal has been to illuminate "good work"—work that is high quality *and* socially responsible. We have conducted in-depth interviews with more than a thousand individuals in journalism, genetics, higher education, philanthropy, law, medicine, theater, and business in an effort to ferret out these professionals' beliefs and values, goals, perspectives on work, and ethical dilemmas. In our various publications (see www.goodworkproject.org) we delineate how personal traits and professional conditions support or stifle an individual's ability to carry out "good work" during a time of fast-paced technological innovation and powerful market forces.

With funding from the Ford Foundation[1], we have begun a small-scale study of "good work" in precollegiate education. Our goal is to understand how teachers carry out exemplary work in challenging contexts—specifically, within economically disadvantaged communities in urban areas. Put differently, we want to uncover the factors that allow teachers to do exemplary work when external conditions work against them. In carrying out this study, we plan to interview approximately thirty teachers in three different schools, each school nominated for its success against the odds. Half of the teachers will be identified as models of good work and half will form a more representative group. This latter group will help to contextualize the findings from the exemplary teachers. We hope that our findings will prove valuable to scholars, policymakers, and educators who want to promote good work in precollegiate education.

Mapping the Terrain

Informants

To identify exemplary teachers in precollegiate education, we first spoke with a group of professionals working in the field of education. These experts had expertise in a variety of areas, including school reform, educator training, urban education, and school governance. Our informants include leading reformers, leading figures in non-profit and for-profit educational

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institutions, as well as professors of higher education who were formerly teachers and superintendents. Though almost half of the informants are from the greater Boston area (several affiliated with the Harvard Graduate School of Education), we also spoke with experts based in California, Ohio, New York, and Washington D.C. We chose these individuals for their diverse backgrounds, current positions, and varying perspectives.

Surprisingly and gratifyingly, all selected informants responded back to our request for a brief conversation, and we spoke with almost all of them (n=16). In some cases, these informants recommended others with whom to speak, and we followed up on these leads as well. Most of these conversations went beyond the initial time requested because of informants' eagerness to share ideas with us. As we expected, these individuals were committed to their own perspectives; we were impressed by the time and thoughtfulness each gave to this endeavor. Specifically, we asked informants for 1) nominations of successful middle and high schools affiliated with reform networks in urban areas; 2) criteria for successful schools and teachers; and 3) reform initiatives that they admired.

Preliminary Findings:
Our interviews with leading experts elucidated deep divides about the purposes of education and the methods used to improve its quality. While the major stakeholders of education—administrators, educators, superintendents, parents, government, school reform experts, academicians—are committed to improving the educational system, they do not agree fundamentally about the most pressing priorities. The informants' theories for change can be classified into three broad categories: 1) structural change in schools (how schools are organized and run); 2) quality of instructional practice (teacher training and curricula); and 3) engagement of students and relationships between educators and their students. While the media suggest that inadequate funding, excessive drop out rates, and inconsistent teacher incentives are among the most important challenges that schools face, the disagreement within the field about needs and strategies causes considerable tension. In the section that follows, we discuss the insights that emerged among the stakeholders in our preliminary conversations.

• There are different perspectives on what is "good" teaching—informants maintain different expectations and standards for teachers' work and their success in meeting students' needs.

Considering the various goals for schools in urban areas, it is no surprise that there is little agreement about how teachers should approach their work—the strategies they should use—as well as the desired outcomes of their work. One informant who runs a reform organization that trains educational leaders mentions that the major problem in identifying good teaching is that there is "no common commitment to a model of what good teaching is." Even among teachers, he explains, there are different notions of what they consider to be good teaching. He adds that the only consensus for teaching standards are those listed in the National Board Certification; however only a tiny fraction of teachers are certified.

Informants place different emphasis on teachers' responsibility to provide academic instruction and the need to nurture the motivation and engagement of students. Two well-known educators, both professors at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, exemplify these different emphases. Specifically, one professor explains that there is a "science" and methodology to teaching—there is knowledge of instructional practice that teachers must be trained to use. He firmly believes that in order to be successful, teachers must have technical knowledge about how to teach content to students. Teachers have a professional responsibility that goes beyond a commitment to keep students engaged in the classroom. This responsibility includes passing on knowledge and skill of particular content areas. Many teachers and students (and schools) "feel good," he believes, but the instruction is in fact "lousy."

On the other hand, a practitioner of school reform who developed a theory for change subscribes to a different notion. If you put together the "right" conditions and the "right" people in a school, you can take a step back and let teachers carry out their work in their own way. Rather than believing there is a "science" to teaching, he sees teaching an "art." In other words, he believes that there is not necessarily a prescribed set of strategies teachers should use; instead students and their individual curiosities, interests, and needs best determine what a teacher covers in the class. Building meaningful relationships, he argues, is vital for students to understand and make meaning of specific content information.

Some informants speak of a delicate balance of maintaining more rigorous instructional practice while at the same time being open to what can naturally occur in the classroom. The informants identify many criteria for good teaching and vary with respect to those they perceive as most important. Often cited are: 1) developing positive relationships with students (e.g. knowledge of adolescent development, getting to know students on a personal level); 2) engaging students in the learning process (getting students interested in the content, making topics relevant to their own lives); 3) developing the social skills of students (trust, responsibility, respect); and 4) focusing on rigorous content (building students' skills and understanding in reading, math, science, etc.). Informants also discuss specific personal traits that are important to "effective" teaching, such as maintaining a balance of being challenging and comforting to the students, working well with diverse populations, and exerting positive energy and "electricity in the classroom".

From these discussions, we infer that the role of a "good" teacher is being redefined by the field. This redefinition involves an increased responsibility for students' learning, as well as responsibilities to improve instructional practice continually, to reflect on effective practice, and to become an active participant in a learning community (e.g. sharing ideas, strategies, and materials). It will be instructive to note if teachers allude to this emerging "definition" when we speak to them about their work.

Without agreement on what "good" teaching is, it is hard to see how a school can effectively promote and support teachers in their work. Recognizing the inconsistencies within schools, two of the leading experts of educational reform speak about the necessity of a common and unified understanding about the mission of schools. A professor of school reform comments "we're highly decentralized, laissez faire, and goal free…schools should have clear goals and clear expectations—teachers should know what they are working towards ."

• *Varying weights are placed on the quantitative and qualitative measures used to determine the success of schools and teachers*.

When asked about how to determine whether a teacher and/or school are successful, informants cite a range of measures: standardized test scores, portfolios of student work, and student engagement. For example, a researcher and practitioner of school reform explains that one component of a successful school is the qualitative assessment of whether teachers and kids *want* to be there and if "people feel good." Informants who express this sentiment do not neglect the importance of instructional quality; but they foreground the engagement of students and their enjoyment in the learning process as a key factor in judging the outcome of an educational experience. One leading expert of school reform, on the other hand, spoke for nearly an hour about the necessity of gathering and analyzing data from students—for example from standardized tests—to determine the gaps in students' knowledge that teachers need to address. He also argues that a major problem with precollegiate education is that we do not provide teachers with the tools and knowledge for how to engage in "good instructional practice."

The ways in which informants discussed student achievement differed as well. For example, the head of a leading non-profit educational reform organization was one of many informants who spoke about the importance of using data from standardized tests to determine success. On the other hand, a principal of an urban pilot school argues against standardized forms of measurement, suggesting that determining academic achievement should occur on a more "individual basis." By this, she means that academic success is measured by students' improvement from one year to the next. She tries *not* to "hold students back" because of a low score on a test. She explains that she does not measure students "against one another," but rather looks at where a student started at the beginning of the year and where they "end up." She remarks that there are "real dangers" for a student's personal and emotional growth if she keeps students from moving to the next grade.

The different measures of student performance have implications for how educational reform is shaped and implemented. In asking for specific nominations of schools where we could find exemplary teachers, informants identified a range of schools that differ fundamentally in the kind of change they are trying to bring about. For example, whereas one informant advocates for schools designed to prepare urban students specifically for college, others nominate schools with a broad curriculum, or promote schools centered on the development of students as independent

and self-motivated learners. The range of types of schools complexifies the kind of change and reform that is necessary to improve the quality of education offered to urban students.

• *There are varying perspectives of what "reform" means and its role in schools and in teachers' work.*

Asking informants to identify promising reform networks turned out to be anything but a simple question. The probe usually led to a discussion of the definition of reform, skepticism about organized reform as well as the benefits in affiliating with on-going reform initiatives.

The informants describe and parse "reform" in three major veins: 1) *structure* of reform--the size of a school, number of content-based classes students take in one school day, the amount of time students spend in class; 2) reform of *instructional practice*--teacher competence, knowledge, and skills; and 3) the *culture* of reform--having a coherent mission, engaging students, forging relationships among teachers, students, and parents. A leading expert of school reform defined reform as a "strategy for change:" multiple sets of strategies including curriculum strategies, process-oriented strategies (e.g. ways of working), and support strategies (e.g. how to help teachers to achieve the goals of the reform).

When asked to identify reform initiatives they admire, many of the informants expressed skepticism with respect to reform, again, for various reasons. A former secondary teacher and now professor who prepares graduate students for teaching remarks that "things come and go, and there will always be the latest and greatest new thing." She comments that the only element that has changed is the language people use to describe a set of strategies. Historically, she explains, educators have been trying to break up large schools into smaller schools, but now it has a name (the small schools network) and a well-known funder (The Gates Foundation), which gives the trend more publicity and attention. A leading expert in school reform remarks that reform networks are "limiting" because "they are too entrenched in their own thinking." This expert stresses district-based reform, which is viewed as more accommodating to the differences among particular schools. One informant explains that in order for a school to be successful, it needs to have a level of autonomy, challenging to achieve in a large, bureaucratic system. An

educator and leading reformer criticizes many of the reform initiatives for not producing results. He explains, "reform fails because it is not explicitly demanded by the people being served."

Interestingly, a few of the informants mention that affiliating a school with a particular reform network or reform initiative enables individuals to carry out important work; however, the work (e.g. school structure, instructional practice, school culture) may not necessarily be in direct accordance with the specific elements of the reform initiative. A former principal and superintendent, now professor, comments that "reform is a cloak [for teachers] to do the work they feel will change the lives of children ." Other informants mention that, for the most part, teachers do not see themselves as a central part of reform initiatives because reform is not their focus. Rather, they are busy trying to meet their students' needs, in whatever form those needs happen to be manifest. Another informant mentions that teachers probably do not have a coherent set of responses about a particular reform initiative because each experiences it differently depending on his/her own goals and strategies. For these reasons, principals and superintendents negotiate with those who fund reform (the districts, the state, and foundations) about the kind of work they will agree to do under the name of a given initiative. Specifically, large high schools create smaller schools in multiple ways: splitting up the student body by theme (e.g. technology, arts, sciences) or by grade. Some small schools have different levels of autonomy depending on pilot or charter status; other small schools have been created based on various conceptions of where students should be upon graduation (e.g. specific career training, preparing students for college).

• *Many issues that seem central to the personal and professional conditions for supporting "good work" in education are not raised in conversation with informants.*

We are struck by many topics that we thought would arise, and that are stressed in the media. For example, the need for resources does not emerge as an issue. Only one informant explicitly mentions adequate resources as being integral to a "good" school. Though many informants mention charter schools, no one refers to the funding controversies around such schools. Only one informant (who works in for-profit education) mentions the need for financial incentives. The topic of funding and fundraising is not something that informants tend to speak about.

The relationship between schools and the wider community is also another issue that few informants address. Only one informant specifically mentions religious schools—pointing to Jesuit-sponsored schools and Jewish day schools as possible models of "good work." Only one informant, a leader in reform in a major metropolitan area, emphasizes the importance of family and community involvement, largely because he considers reform initiatives to be ground-up developments. He believes that his work in schools is "made good" by active parents and community stakeholders.

Few informants mention attrition of teachers. Concerned about how to train young people for careers in teaching, one respondent mentions that in California, half of the new professionals entering the field leave within five years. He also refers back to this fact in describing the state of flux of schools in his local area. The informant involved with a for-profit educational endeavor spoke about the importance of financial incentives in keeping skilled teachers interested in and committed to the job.

Perhaps the most surprising omission is attrition of students. None of the informants specifically mention the successful retention of students as an element of the "good school," even though some informants nominate schools which were formed, at least in part, to prevent drop outs and to prepare students for college. Nor did informants mention the drop out phenomenon as an important challenge. It will be interesting to see if teachers talk about the need to keep students in school as more of a priority in their work.

The fact that informants pay little attention to the issues mentioned above, while surprising, does not necessarily result from a general lack of interest in these issues. The diversity of other issues the informants do discuss does suggest, however, that these issues may not be their top priorities as they survey urban education and reform. As we develop the interview questionnaire for teachers and later analyze our data, we will pay special attention to whether teachers bring up these issues on their own.

Summary

Our purpose in speaking initially with experts in the field was to solicit nominations and find out how experts parse the domain. In selecting informants for this study, we aimed for a diversity of individuals in terms of perspectives on reform, participation in the field (e.g. practitioner or researcher), and political stance. We expected different opinions, but were surprised at how rarely our informants agree with one another. However, though the informants diagnose the problems in precollegiate education differently, they all believe in the need for change in secondary education. None of the informants is satisfied with the current state of teaching.

Ultimately, the question that we seek to answer is: How do teachers stay motivated to do "good work?" What keeps them inspired in their work when as one informant describes "…inner city schools have a lack of purpose, a feeling of fatigue amounting to fatalism, tremendous cynicism" We are eager to see if, in their interviews, teachers "in the trenches" speak to the misalignment we uncovered in our informant interviews and whether they find it problematic in their everyday work. We wonder how teachers remain committed to the field when there is little difference in the responsibility, recognition and reward between new and veteran teachers, or even between good and mediocre teachers? How do teachers stay satisfied when their jobs are low paying and there is little financial incentive to improve? Will the redefinition and broadening of teachers' roles in a school community that informants mention contribute to or alter teachers' own notions of "good work?"

This study represents just a first step in understanding the internal and external resources on which teachers draw that enable them to carry out "good work." Though we can base our responses to this central question on a small group of teachers, we hope to elicit instructive information about their beliefs and values, mentors, community connections, strategies, and ways of handling the apparent misalignment, that we have documented. The long-term goals for our study of precollegiate education are to identify early-career teachers who show promise of becoming good workers; to encourage these teachers to become educational leaders; and to help all teachers to improve the quality of their work. In addition to providing materials from which others in education can learn, we hope to compare our insights concerning teachers with findings from other professionals who also face tension in their work. The ultimate aim of our overall

GoodWork Project® is to encourage and promote strategies of "good work" across the professions so that as citizens, we can trust that professionals (including ourselves) are carrying out work that meets the needs of society as a whole.