

**Experienced Teachers' Perceptions of the  
Influences on their Teaching: An  
Ethnographic Study.**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree  
of MEd(Hons) of the University of New England

March, 1995

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



## **Acknowledgements**

With the completion of this thesis I would like to give my sincere appreciation to my initial supervisor, Dr Elizabeth Hatton, and to my later supervisor, Dr Tom Maxwell. I have benefited from their knowledge and encouragement.

Although the participating teachers in this study must remain anonymous, I wish to thank each one individually for their time, and the sharing of their expertise, while I tried to come to terms with the methodology and their complex but caring working lives.

I am grateful to my family for their support, encouragement and love.

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## **Abstract.**

Why do teachers teach as they do? Is it because of personal and idiosyncratic reasons, or are they constrained to some extent by factors in the workplace? The literature is divided on this issue. Zeichner and Gore (1990) report that teachers have been portrayed as “prisoners of their past” through the documented effects of anticipatory socialisation, or alternatively, “prisoners of the present” through pressures they experience at the workplace. Similarly, studies such as Clandinin (1985) or Nias (1987, 1988) present teachers as active practitioners. This thesis poses the hypothesis that a middle ground exists between portraying teachers as wholly constrained by structural and situational factors in their work, or, that teachers have complete autonomy to practice their preferred pedagogy.

In pursuing this question, eight experienced teachers from two different school contexts were selected to provide the data for this discussion. An ethnographic approach was taken for data collection. Three methods were used. First, classroom observations of the teachers, with pre-and post-observation conferences were made. Second, school documents were collected and analysed to provide background information about the school contexts and the work situations of the teachers. Third, each teacher underwent several extended personal interviews in order to collect biographical details and information regarding their personal views of the influences on their teaching.

The school contexts provided examples of different workplaces in which to observe the influence of school structures. St Lukes was a traditional, academic, church school. The Community School was an example of a more democratic, open school where teachers were expected to give equal priority to the social and character development of students, as the academic role. Differences such as class sizes, attitudes to competition and child centredness, and school organisational structure

were documented and the inter-relationships between the teachers' personal views and these situational contexts were highlighted.

This study found that teachers' work was complex and there were many factors influencing teachers at the classroom, institutional and societal levels. Teachers brought personal characteristics and views which also influenced the work they choose to emphasise. A simple exploratory model was attempted to illustrate these influences.

Teachers indicated that they were pressed for time, that their work was intensifying, and their roles extending. Some structures promoted teacher satisfaction. The teachers at the Community School benefited from structures which encouraged collegiality, goal sharing and teacher support and involvement. St Lukes' hierarchical structures limited teacher involvement and collaboration in school decision making. Both groups of teachers emphasised the importance of the relationships with students as a factor contributing to their work satisfaction.

The Community School was attempting to promote change in its structures and teaching methods. This had consequences for the teachers. Teachers at St Lukes were also facing the need to change their practices through, for example, imposed curriculum developments, and changes in school clientele. The teachers approached these challenges differently. All the teachers were well intentioned and responsible professionals. A variety of personal characteristics and situational supports contributed to facilitating these changes.